

Bridging Moral Individuals and a Moral Society in Dasan's Philosophy*

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Abstract

According to Zhu Xi, individuals are transformed into moral beings through the cultivation of their character, and the increase of moral individuals therefore leads to the generation of a moral society. While acknowledging that moral success through such cultivation produces moral heroes, Dasan Jeong Yak-yong argued that inner cultivation alone could not produce moral individuals and a moral society because in reality humans have a myriad of conflicting desires and fluctuating volitions. Without confining morality to the purification of inner mind, Dasan considered both inner reflection and external practice grounded on free will to be necessary. Through both, he believed, individuals attain a personal sense of responsibility and preside over the entire process of morality. Although in reality there are personal differences, people can partake proactively in the construction of a moral society. In this regard, Dasan is credited with shifting the focus of Confucianism from the sage and his inner reflection to common people and practice.

Keywords: Dasan, Jeong Yak-yong, cultivating oneself and bringing peace to others, power of autonomy, Confucianism for action, moral individual, moral society

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Introduction: *Statement of the Problem*

Dasan's thought has been studied in four main aspects: ancient Confucianism, Zhu Xi's philosophy (Neo-Confucianism), Seohak (Western Learning), and modernity. As a positive and a negative position exist in each, there are actually eight stances on Dasan's thought. Specifically speaking, the four aspects examine: whether Dasan's thought is a representative of ancient Confucianism or not, whether Dasan's thought is post-Neo-Confucian or a Neo-Confucian continuum, whether Dasan adopts Western Learning or merely refers to it, and whether Dasan's thought is modern or not. As a matter of fact, these issues are linked with the evaluation of the history of philosophy, and this has, in turn, greatly helped shape his place in the history of philosophy.

It is not easy for a philosopher to maintain his/her position consistently throughout their lifetime. As long as thought has a characteristic fluidity, change is inevitable. According to Baik Min-jung (2007, 83-84), Dasan partially endorsed the *i-gi* 理氣 (*li-qi* in Chinese) theory of Yulgok Yi I and his followers in his twenties, but he later came to favor Toegye Yi Hwang's notion of *i-gi*, voraciously reading *Toegyejip* (Collected Works of Toegye Yi Hwang) in 1795 and writing *Dosan sasungnok* (Notes for Emulating Yi Hwang) and *Seoam ganghakgi* (Journal of a Meeting at Seoam to Discuss Philosophy). From his fifties on, Dasan exhibited a positive view of Zhu Xi in some of his writings, including *Noneo gogumju* (Ancient and Contemporary Commentaries on the *Analects of Confucius*). Because of this wide philosophical trajectory in his lifetime, one cannot have a full picture of his thought by just treating it as an opposite of Zhu Xi's thought, for example. The discussion in this article proceeds with a primary focus on how Dasan set a direction in his theorizing, rather than assessing his position in the history of philosophy.

Confucians claim themselves as thinkers who commonly share the combined goals of cultivating oneself and bringing peace to others. The framework assumes that there is a gap in reality between the people who are constrained by the existing conditions of life and the free-spirited people who seek to reach the ideal. Confucians are supposed to narrow or fill

that gap. Progression in the direction of filling the gap means cultivation, with the goal of realizing a grand unity.¹

If cultivation is achieved, people are transformed into moral individuals, and subsequently the community into a moral society. The Joseon dynasty proclaimed the realization of Confucian society as a goal in its inception and the Neo-Confucian literati seized political hegemony over the meritorious elites beginning in the sixteenth century. Under these sociopolitical conditions, the Joseon dynasty should have been able to achieve a moral kingdom by the eighteenth century.

The following parts of “Giminsi 飢民詩” (Ode to Starved People), a poem written by Dasan, illustrate whether such was the case:

Look how people live their meager lives
Thin and ailing, they look miserable
Unable to keep steady their boney weak bodies
Displaced are all I see on the streets
Wandering about with stuff on their heads and backs
They are wanted nowhere
Don't know where to go
What are they up to?
Can't even keep their families
Alas, family bond is going to fall apart.

Sly people tell only lies
Cunning *yangban* say a few words of worry
“Grains pile up in plenty like dirt mounds
But lazy farmers starve themselves!
How can we make everyone prosper, as many as plants and trees?
King Yao and King Shun made every effort to cure all diseases
But how would they salvage everyone in a lean year like this one,
Even if millet falls down from the sky like a flood?”
Pour another cup of wine
Lest the jest of spring evaporate under a high officer's flag.

(“Giminsi,” in vol. 1, bk. 2 of *Simunjip* [Verses and Essays])

1. On Confucian self-cultivation, see Ivanhoe (2000).

In this poem, people are shown to have nowhere to turn to for help and grapple with the most grueling situation of family disintegration. Scholars and bureaucrats, who are obligated to take responsibility for the situation of extreme starvation, instead blamed farmers for being lazy and treated the problem as something that even the most ideal kings like King Yao and King Shun in the ancient China would not have been able to solve, and focus only on their enjoyment of drinking. Of course, not all scholars and bureaucrats stood idly by. Zhu Xi's village granary law—which was also enacted in the Joseon—was designed to save people from hunger. But Dasan describes the village granary system, which was supposed to solve the problem, but only aggravated it, in another poem titled “Hail daeju 夏日對酒” (Before a Glass of Wine on a Summer Day):

Once the village granary program is disrupted, tens of thousands of
people go stray and cry in bitterness
Lending and borrowing requires mutual agreement
If it is forced, it only causes strain
Everyone shakes their heads and no one wants to borrow
Cause they should borrow one *mal*² of moth-eaten rice in the spring
and return two *mal* of freshly husked rice in the fall!

(“Hail daeju,” in vol. 1, bk. 5 of *Simunjip*)³

Reading Dasan's poem entitled “Aejeoryang 哀絕陽” (Alas, His Male Organ Is Cut Off), in which Dasan describes a case in which a child's genital organ was cut off in order to avoid the military draft, it can be assumed that Joseon in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was far from a moral kingdom. Magistrates pursued their personal interests and desires instead of self-cultivation, and community was a crucible of fury, instead of a place of comfort and peace.

In its foundation, Joseon proclaimed the construction of a Confu-

2. *Mal* is a Korean unit of volume for measuring liquid or grain; one *mal* is equivalent to about 18 liters.

3. See J. Kim (1991, 293-294).

cian society as a core principle from the sixteenth century, producing moral heroes. But by the eighteenth century, moral individuals were not visible and although there may have been a few, the image of a moral society was far from reality. Dasan's awareness of the problem began to form against this backdrop. Tracing the reasons why the 300-year-long plans for the construction of a moral kingdom failed, he sought to draw a new framework in order to rebuild it. His new design was not intended to produce individual moral heroes, but rather to enable the generation of a multitude of moral individuals, which would lead to the creation of a moral society. Instead of being content with the emergence of moral individuals, he hoped to find the way to bridge it with the advent of a moral society.

Taking this into account, the meaning and motivation behind his self-written epitaph, written at the age of 61, can be more easily understood.⁴

Dasan cultivated himself based on the Six Scriptures and the Four Books and governed the whole country based on his writings like *Gyeongse yupyoo* (Design for Good Government), *Mongmin simseo* (Admonitions for Governing the People), and *Heumheum sinseo* (Toward a New Jurisprudence), harboring both a core scheme and specificities. But not many people acknowledge it and many more denounce it. If Heaven does not allow it, it is fine to burn them off with a torch (*Jachan myojimyeong* [An Autobiographical Epitaph]).

In other words, the previous design was a crippled one, which was bound to fail, as it had neither a central framework nor specifics. Dasan seems to have written the books delineating his design and specific methods to achieve it in order to continuously produce moral individuals and ultimately a moral society.

4. See Ahn (2003) and Sim (2009) on the social trend of Confucian scholars writing their own autobiographies in late Joseon period.

Effective Mediation between the Internal and the External

Redefining Heaven as the Highest Level of Mind

In Eastern philosophy, there is no notion of the one and only god (Absolute Being) or the Creator. But nor does it conceive that things and phenomena occur through accidental clashes while engaged in interaction. Eastern philosophy posits existences that occupy a different status, or positional class, from things and phenomena—though not separate from them—and enable their creation and give them order, such as Sangje 上帝 (Lord on High), *gwisin* (ghost), *sin* (god), *cheon* 天 (Heaven), *do* 道 (way or truth), *taegeuk* 太極 (Great Ultimate), *i* 理 (principle), *gi* 氣 (material force), etc.

In the history of Eastern philosophy, two major issues have been raised in regards to “substance,” which is the source that brings order in this world by incessantly creating concrete things out of amorphous chaos. One is how to define the relationships of multitudes, which represent substance, and the other is how to define the relations between substance and phenomenon. The first issue may be converted to the question of whether one of the plural sets of substances is true substance, or how to differentiate different sets of substances. Each substance is supposed to be unitary in nature. When there is more than one, it cannot be substance. In order to give a firm standing to substance, philosophers should have chosen something that had been regarded as substance in ancient philosophy or proposed something new. But neither had happened.

Then, how did philosophers attempt to resolve the problem of multiple sets of substances versus a unitary substance? The Cheng brothers, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming brushed off the problem of the existence of too many substances and their clashes by thinking that each has its own role. The substance groups of Heaven, god, ghost, deity, and sky correspond respectively to form, presiding, adroit operation, wondrous operation, and nature. For instance, Heaven represents form and god refers to presiding. This approach was initiated by the Cheng brothers and adopt-

ed widely by Zhu Xi and his followers.⁵ As shown by the examples, they did not define substances as supernatural existences and instead contended that they are existences with various characteristics. Therefore, substances, while different from phenomena, are capable of regulating said phenomena. If substances are to be defined as supernatural existences, they should possess the ability to regulate phenomena beyond temporal and spatial constraints. Through their structuring, substances are differentiated from phenomena and also still capable of regulating them.

The second problem may be converted to the question of how substances intervene in the occurrence of phenomena and manage to generate and maintain order. The history of Eastern philosophy shows three approaches to this. The first approach is *ming* 命 (command) as seen in *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents) and *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean);⁶ the second approach is *sheng* 生 (life) as seen in *Yichuan* 易傳 (Commentaries on the *Book of Changes*) and *Laozi* 老子 (The Teachings of Laozi);⁷ and the third approach is *fen* 分 (division) and *pan* 判 (judgment) as seen in *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals).⁸

Each of the three approaches has distinct characteristics. *Ming*, as implicated in its meaning of issuing order, signifies the highest transcendental personhood in which substances intervene in phenomena. It reveals the way that the volition of substances surpasses rejection and conditions and is instead carried out without limitations. *Sheng*, as implied in the meaning of birth, features the origin in which substances create phenomena in plenty. In addition, *sheng* discloses the way that homogeneity is reproduced again and again, as substances and phenomena pass through intermediary stages without being directly linked. *Fen*

5. See the Cheng brothers' *Ercheng yishu* 二程遺書 (Posthumous Writings of the Cheng Brothers) and Wang Yangming's *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 (Instructions for Practical Living).

6. It is expressed as "Heaven's command" (*tianming* 天命) in *Shujing* and "nature called Heaven's command" (*tianming zhi wei xing* 天命之謂性) in *Zhongyong*.

7. "易有太極, 是生兩儀, 兩儀生四象, 四象生八卦" (*Yichuan*); "道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物. 萬物負陰而抱陽, 沖氣以為和" (*Laozi*, ch. 42).

8. "天地之氣, 合而為一, 分為陰陽, 判為四時, 列為五行" ("Wuhang xiangsheng 五行相生" [The Five Elements Exist in Harmony]), in *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露.

and *pan*, as implied in their meanings of “divide” and “judge,” demonstrate the trait of equality in which substances have a certain share in diverse phenomena. It demonstrates the mode that substances relate to phenomena through mediation and by undergoing infinite divisions. Here it is important to note Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji tushuo* 太極圖說 (Explanations of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate)—though its origin is in doubt—in which the relationships between substances and phenomena are synthesized by excluding *ming* and emphasizing *sheng* and *fen*.⁹

What was Dasan's approach to the two problems concerning substances and phenomena? Briefly put, he chose the notion of Sangje from the substance group, unlike the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi, who opted for their structuration and then explained the relationship between substances and phenomena with the notion of *gam* 監 (inspection; *jian* in Chinese), which falls under the group of *myeong* 命 (*ming* in Chinese).¹⁰ Dasan appears to place Sangje in the substance of the highest level of mind and closes the gap between moral individuals and a moral society with the transcendental personhood, which belongs to the group of command. This framework contrasts with that of Zhu Xi who excludes personhood through the structuration of substance groups.

Like the Cheng brothers, Zhu Xi tries to exclude personhood from substance by interpreting Heaven as *li*, not as Shangdi 上帝 (Sangje in Korean) (*Zhuzi yulei* [Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi], vol. 5). Zhu Xi places *li* at the center of the structuration of substance groups, but *li* cannot have the operations of feelings, measurement, or manipulation. Having a central position but no operationality, *li* cannot generate nor create

9. “無極而太極，太極動而生陽，動極而靜。靜而生陰，靜極復動。．．．分陰分陽，兩儀立焉。陽變陰合，而生水火木金土。．．．二氣交感，化生萬物，萬物生生，而變化無窮焉” (*Taiji tushuo* [An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate]).

10. The word *jian* 監 appears in “Jingzhi 敬之” (The Odes of Reverence), “Daya daming 大雅大明” (Greater Odes of the Kingdom, Great Brightness), and “Daya huangyi 大雅皇矣” (Greater Odes of the Kingdom, Great Heaven) in *Shijing* (Book of Odes). It is similar to *xing* 省 (introspection) and *lin* 臨 (engagement) in meaning. The word *xing* is used in “Huangyi 皇矣” (Great Heaven) and *lin* 臨 is used in “Xiaoya xiaoming 小雅小明” (Minor Odes of the Kingdom, Minor Brightness), “Huangyi,” and “Lusong bigong 魯頌闕宮” (The Praise Odes of Lu, Shrine for the Spirits).

things or phenomena. Generation is governed entirely by *qi*. *Li* is placed in *qi* when *qi* condensates (*Zhuzi yulei*, vol. 1). *Li* within *qi* achieves *xing* 性 (nature; *seong* in Korean).

Dasan believed that, because of those characteristics, *i* is unable to bridge moral individuals and a moral society. It then becomes necessary to look at the limits of what Dasan called “incapable *i*.”¹¹ *I* and *seong* do not give momentum or guidance that helps individuals work voluntarily and proactively to become moral beings. *I*, as a substance, can acquire its solemn status and ability; however, it cannot influence individuals directly. Of course, *i* is inherent in things to compose *seong*, the foundation that guides people to become moral individuals. Just like *i*, *seong* takes a central place in the structure of mind, but people cannot conduct themselves in unity with *seong*. Caught in the struggle between the moral mind, which leads them to become moral beings, and the human mind, which leads them in the opposite direction, people face the obligation to follow the former. In such a situation, they are pushed to make the right choice to become moral beings, but it is not easy to do so. What exists to help people overcome their individual differences and social conditions and leads them in the direction of morality? It was Dasan’s view that neither *i* nor *seong* had such power. Yi I tried to lessen the weight of resolute determination in the process of setting one’s will, outside of *seong*. Therefore, *i* does not exist by itself and only exists as an auxiliary riding upon *gi*.¹² Contrary to Zhu Xi’s conception, the status of both *gi* and *i* are reversed in Dasan’s conception.

In the place of the incapable *i*, Dasan attempted to establish Sangje in the group of command as a substance that bridges moral individuals and a moral society. Sangje is formless like *i*, but in other ways differs from *i*. One can feel the presence and engagement of Sangje, the way one can feel the presence of a spirit. Furthermore, Sangje has the ability to harmonize,

11. “夫理何物? 理無愛憎, 理無喜怒, 空空漠漠, 無名無體, 而為吾人稟於此, 而受性亦難乎其為道矣” (*Maengja youi* [Essential Meanings in the *Book of Mencius*], bk. 1).

12. “蓋氣是自有之物, 理是依附之品, 而依附者, 必依於自有者, 故纔有氣發, 便有理發” (*Jungyong ganguibo* [Supplement to the Discussion on the *Doctrine of the Mean*], bk. 1). On Dasan’s conception of the relationship between *i* and Western Studies, see Song et al. (2000).

preside over, and lay to rest all existences. While Sangje can see humans below, humans cannot see Sangje above. This arrangement of view is part of the complex scheme in which Sangje—placed above—makes people—placed below—build a bridge between moral individuals and a moral society. First, the asymmetry in their placement is extended to the asymmetry in their information, giving Sangje absolute power over people. Second, Sangje's absolute power induces people to submit. And finally, the asymmetric power relations make people march in the direction of morality and cross the bridge lying between moral individuals and a moral society.

Recalling the Responsible Individual

Dasan placed the active Sangje in the status of substance, in place of the incapable *i*. Accordingly, humans are located under the watchful eye of Sangje who oversees them at any time in any place. The active Sangje can lay a bridge between moral individuals and a moral society. Sangje's overseeing of humans may prevent humans from living immoral lives, but may not be able to lead them towards a moral life. That is, Sangje's gaze can enable passive morality, but not proactive morality. For instance, although knowing that Sangje is omnipresent, one may not want to harm others around, but may also not necessarily lend a helping hand to them.

As we have examined Dasan's conception of Sangje, it is now appropriate to turn to how Dasan understood humans because, despite the presence of the active Sangje, it is humans who produce moral individuals and a moral society and link the two.

For Zhu Xi, *li*, inherent in each individual, constitutes *xing*. Having the same characteristics as *li*, *xing* cannot operate by itself in people. But moral individuals can emerge only if behavior is in accordance or agreement with *xing*. Because of this, Zhu Xi had to explain the connection between the *xing* of substance and individual behavior. If this connection is explicated, *xing* becomes the foundation of moral behavior and its driving force. For the sake of such explanation, he posited that the mind consists of three different kinds of components: those in complete agreement,

in partial agreement, and in disagreement with *xing*. He also believed that the mind in full agreement with *xing* can lead to moral behaviors.

Dasan argued that Zhu Xi's nature represents virtues that humans should pursue and fulfill in theory, but in reality they cannot avoid psychological conflicts as divergent orientations of the mind are in constant conflict with one another. To a person whose actions do not stray from the right path even if he/she behaves as his/her mind desires, the psychological conflicts are something of the past and the memory, or are an evidence of immaturity. But to the one who has not reached that state, it is a very strenuous and exhaustive struggle to both the mind and the body because one can fathom in no way whether and how it would ever come to an end. Even if one's moral orientation wins, it is an unstable victory, as one cannot be certain that it will win again the next time. As the victory is unpredictable and unstable, nature cannot build a strong bridge to ensure the realization of moral individuals and a moral society.

In several parts in *Yeoyudang jeonseo*, Dasan emphatically repeats, "seong is a preference." Criticizing the view that Zhu Xi's notion of *xing* concerns the realm of body or form as biased under the influence of a particular doctrine, he argued that *Mengzi* (Book of Mencius) clearly teaches that *xing* is a system of preferences (*Jungyong jajam* [Moral Lessons Drawn from the *Doctrine of the Mean*], bk. 1; *Maessi seopyeong* [Verification of Mei's Book], bk. 4). Dasan stressed the operationality of *seong* by arguing that, at the forefront, *seong* is a system of preferences and guides each individual in a certain direction.

Seong, as a system of preferences, has the characteristic of movement and hence its distance from desire can be narrowed. According to Dasan, desire has the characteristic of moving from a state of insufficiency to that of fulfillment or satisfaction.¹³ Considering that desire has a negative or limited significance in *seong* as a substance, one should be careful of the short distance between *seong*—as a system of preferences—and desire.

13. “欲之爲字從谷從欠，谷者虛也，欠者欲也。凡物之虛欲者，常欲取他物以盈之，人心之有願欲，其象如此” (*Jungyong ganguibo*, bk. 1). Dasan's approach may be regarded as the origin of the modern-day term “natural desire.” For Zhu Xi, nature and desire cannot be closely related to each other, thus making the use of the term impossible.

While narrowing the gap between *seong* and desire or *id*, Dasan illustrates the reciprocal relationship between the two. *Seong* as a system of preferences has the operational quality of seeking good and shunning evil. Desire or *id* has the force of moving toward material wealth and morality and its impelling drive is so potent that it does not end until death. Interestingly, in describing people whom he observes as having no desires, he surmises that they can do neither good nor evil, appreciate no literary enjoyment, or hold no occupation to make a living, making themselves useless beings who deserve desertion (*Simgyeong milheom* [Private Examination of the *Classic of the Mind-and-Heart*]). This is probably a judgment he has made after observing many people in his lifetime. According to Dasan, in reality, people are a mass of desires, caught between the two extremes of desires for wealth and for morality, even risking their lives for such desires, while those without any desire are far from being moral and thereby useless.

Here, it is necessary to understand where preference and desire overlap and mutually affect each other. This point is not directly linked to the catastrophic situation that previous thinkers, who tried to structure *seong* as a substance, were so wary of and wanted to avert. It should not be considered a critical weakness of the theory of *seong* as a system of preferences, but as something that allows us to foresee the onset of a problem and prepare to resolve it. It is not an insignificant area to which we should turn a blind eye according to the logic of *Sollen* ("ought") in actuality, but rather a highly plausible danger, which we may fall into at any time. We should string ourselves up to pass the point unscathed.

This tension is not simply internal, like inner contemplation and reflection, but is inclusive of cool-headed choices to connect our preferences with certain types of behavior. The structured nature of substance groups may serve as a standard of judgment, but is never an object of judgment. On the other hand, *seong*, which attains operability and produces outcomes, makes itself an object of judgment rather than its standard.

Dasan urged people to become moral individuals by following their reflections and choices instead of being driven around by righteousness, in

order to be members of a moral society. *Seong* as a system of preferences presumes multiple directions, not a certain unitary direction. If people waver constantly and wander about, *seong* as a system of preferences cannot proceed to behavior and is trapped in the closed circuit of internality. Because *seong* as a system of preferences is combined not only with directions but also with the values of good and evil, people should exercise their ability of weighing various directions for action (*Simgyeong milheom*).

Dasan defined people's right to choose as the right of autonomy (*Maengja youi*, bk. 2). Indeed, if one is conscious of moral righteousness and behavioral principles, moral choices would be the mere play of people without moral knowledge. Dasan must have had a purpose in emphasizing the right of autonomy despite this skepticism. The right of autonomy postulates choosing subjects and presumes irresponsible beings. This may be interpreted as a warning to society in which morality is looked upon as a matter of knowledge, not choice, and moral failure is treated as a matter of chance and is not accounted for.

If moral success is viewed as a matter of recognizing the essence of morality, morality is confined to the realm of extraordinary people who are capable of such recognition, making moral failure an object of self-reprimand, not public judgment. In contrast, if moral success is seen as a matter of reflection on preference and choice, morality belongs to the world of ordinary people who can choose the path, making moral failure an object of self-censure and public judgment. In this framework, people are miserable beings standing alone before morality, because they can never be free from the possibility of moral failure.

Restructuring the Internal

Virtue of Benevolence

Benevolence (*ren* 仁 in Chinese; *in* in Korean) has been viewed as comprising the core of Confucius' thought. Together with publicity (*gong* 公), it has been regarded as the definition of structured substance groups.

Benevolence is the highest value that befits the status of *li* and also the ultimate value that makes various moral values valuable. Prior to Dasan, Zhu Xi defined benevolence as “the whole capacity of mind and the principle of affection” in *Renshuo* 仁說 (On Benevolence), countering the perspective of viewing benevolence as concerning all existences in entirety or in terms of cognition.

Dasan found Zhu Xi's definition of the virtue of benevolence to be unacceptable because in his view Zhu Xi's definition may have established benevolence as a substance but could not induce behaviors that resembled benevolence. Dasan attempted to reinterpret benevolence not as a silent virtue enabling moral behaviors from people, but as a proactive virtue enabling people to actually practice moral behaviors in real life. For this, he tried to define virtue and benevolence in a new manner and overturn the existing interpretation of the context of substance.

For Dasan, virtue meant putting one's righteous mind into action. Virtue is not established unless it is put into action. According to this definition, what has traditionally been regarded as virtue—such as filial piety, fraternity, loyalty, trustworthiness, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—can no longer be defined as virtue, if not put into practice (*Jungyong jajam*, bk. 3). Dasan argued that “the appellation of virtue is established after one does what is expected in the situation” (*Daehak gongui*, bk. 1). Dasan always defined virtue in the context of practice, i.e., proceeding with matters systematically in accordance with fixed rules. Virtue, then, is only present when people practice good and eradicate evil with sincerity and it does not, no matter how hard they try, exist solely in abstraction.

According to Dasan, the basis of morality, which is not put into action, is futile and moral volition is meaningless. The establishment of the basis of morality and the fulfillment of moral volition can result in the birth of moral heroes such as sages. The emergence of moral heroes is desirable, but unless they relate with other people and generate virtue together, they are merely isolated. Dasan deemed it more desirable for ordinary people to practice in real life the virtues that are expected of them in human relations, rather than a small number of sages emerging

sporadically and living as an isolated group in society. Dasan believed that this would lead to the creation of moral individuals, which would ultimately result in the advent of a moral society.

Virtue (*deok*) means that people get along well. Benevolence (*in*) means that two people become companions in harmony. For example, being filial to one's parents is nothing but benevolence, as it is concerned with the relationship between two sides, parents and children. Being reverent to one's senior is nothing but benevolence, as it is concerned with the relationship between two people, an elder brother and a younger brother. Being faithful to the king is nothing but benevolence, as it is concerned with the relationship between two people, a ruler and a subject. Having compassion for others is nothing but benevolence, as it is concerned with the relationship between two people, a civil servant and a commoner. In addition, the relationship between husband and wife, and the relationship between two friends are both concerned with the relationship between two people and doing one's utmost in each situation is all benevolence. This is why filial piety and reverence are the roots of benevolence.

Question: Mencius said early on that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom have roots in the mind. According to this theory, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are comparable to fruits borne by flowers and rooted in the mind. For instance, the feelings of compassion and mercy for others and being ashamed of doing wrong occur from inside of my mind, while benevolent and righteous acts occur outside of my mind. Also, the mind to yield a good opportunity to someone else or the mind of distinguishing between good and bad occurs inside of me, whereas the acts following occur outside of me. These days Confucians think that the four kernels of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are inside the belly like internal organs and the leads of the four moralities come from them. This way of thinking is really problematic. For instance, filial piety and reverence, which Confucius advised, occur outside of me in the name of cultivating virtuous deeds. How can they possibly stay inside the belly, like the liver or lungs? (*Noneo gogumju*, bk. 1)

Historically speaking, the way that Dasan drew attention to the components composed of Chinese characters resembles that of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 of the Later Han dynasty of China and Ruan Yuan 阮元 of the similar period. He associated benevolence with the moral relations between two people, but like Mencius he did not deny the psychological connection of benevolence. He merged ordinary moral relationships and psychological connections into one theory. According to Dasan's definition of benevolence, people first experience moral feelings in accordance with moral relations, which are unique human characteristics, and then put such feelings into concrete actions that are expected in the given moral relations in everyday life. This definition is consistent with his aforementioned interpretation of virtue. He rejected the approach that the qualities of filial piety, fraternity, benevolence, and righteousness exist in the mind, invoke moral emotions, and then lead to moral actions. It is because filial piety, fraternity, benevolence, and righteousness, which are merely a type of moral emotions, should always be completed as befitting behaviors.

As shown here, Dasan placed benevolence as a virtue in the realm of public discourse on morality and transformed it into a virtue by which one who carries out benevolent acts and one who does not can be identified. Through this, he laid bare the hypocrisy of speaking of benevolence only in word and acting in the opposite manner. Also, as benevolence is practiced in real settings in situations where it is expected, it is not simply stuck in the mental sphere but is instead found in society.

Sincerity

Dasan tried to define Confucian virtue not in terms of the inner mind but by combining psychological experience and everyday practice. The aim of this scheme was to make morality ultimately lead to a moral society. As long as morality refers to mental unity with substance, such as the union between Heaven and humanity, or the mysterious artistic experience, such as the unity of all existences, the advent of moral heroes does not guarantee the establishment of a moral society. In Dasan's view, morality in the conventional sense is stuck in the closed circuit of the mind and

cannot come out into the sphere of reality. In this context, Dasan attempted to save morality from being confined to the closed circuit of the mental sphere and push it into the public sphere.

Even with Dasan's full-fledged effort to salvage morality, sincerity (*sindok* 慎獨) appears as an impregnable fort. This is because sincerity in *Daxue* (The Great Learning) and *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean) is viewed as concerning the activities of watchful waiting and contemplation, which are introspective and have little to do with practice.

The original meaning of *sindok* is that one takes the utmost caution with only what one knows, not that one takes the utmost caution with what one does in solitude. When one is sitting in a room calmly and reflecting on one's behaviors, one's conscience is unveiled layer after layer. . . . Think about when one commits evil. It is when one is with others. The bad behaviors one partakes in when alone in a dark room with no one watching may be just idling away or carrying out obscene behaviors. How could *sindok* possibly be confined to abstaining from those behaviors? Nowadays, people's understanding of the meaning of the word *sindok* is unclear. That is why they adjust their attire and sit upright in a dark room but deceive others and do unfair things when they are with others (*Simgyeong milheom*).

Here Dasan wrote about the two ways of understanding *sindok* and its outcomes. *Sindok* can be understood as one taking caution in conducting oneself in isolation from others. This conventional interpretation is based on the assumption that if one behaves properly when alone, one would exercise more caution in one's behavior in the presence of others. But Dasan believed that this manner of *sindok* leads to exactly the opposite results, that even if one is careful in one's conduct in solitude, one loses self-control and misbehaves when with other people. This is because one's control over oneself is based on a misconception.

In contrast to this, Dasan seemed to comprehend *sindok* in relationship to the watch of Sangje. According to Dasan, Sangje's gaze is constant and omnipresent. One may believe that only he/she knows how he/she conducts when alone, but according to Dasan, Sangje oversees all. A

moral success or failure is determined based on how one reflects on what one knows and what one chooses to do. If one believes that Sangje and all others know what one knows, then Sangje's omnipresent eye will lead people to voluntary self-control. This approach to understanding sincerity implicates not only the vertical gaze down from Heaven but also the horizontal gaze of those around, making the watch of each individual all-faceted and constant. This is also the point where Heaven's watch intersects with the king's watch.

What is righteous and what is not can only be verified by action; it is not determined by the darkness or brightness of true substance. Pure, empty, bright substance is as blank as a mirror and as fair as a scale, making it valuable in itself. The original truth can be sustained only when it is substantiated by action. If one just holds on to true substance, hoping it will become pure and bright, one will end up with an illness of the mind. That is what I see happening all of the time (*Dae-hak gongui*, bk. 1).

Here Dasan established *sindok* as the point where the individual actor's self-control meets Sangje's gaze. Without hesitation, Dasan took aim at the theory of the true substance of the mind. According to Dasan, one takes every problem in the mind under the structuration of the substance. What passes the inspection of the mind first is put into action. By way of this, one prevents moral misconduct beforehand. One can aim to prevent wrongful behavior from recurring by repenting afterwards, but this is done only after a regretful act inflicts irrevocable scars and suffering on individuals and the community. Morality always follows behavior and never precedes it.

However, as the mind takes on all problems, it seethes, like a bustling market, with the cries of desires claiming the right to action. It should maintain a pure, empty, and bright condition in order to be able to make righteous judgments. The mind regulates the process of taking action on the one hand and suffers from the formidable task of making judgments based on desires on the other hand. Because of this, the mind is put in a state of falling ill. This is similar to what Choe Han-gi (1803-1877) criti-

cized as the illness of one's self in *Gihak* (The Study of *Gi*). Dasan's concern was primarily with Sangje's gaze, individual reflection and choice, and judgment in the face of desires, while passing the judgment of good and bad and following action to the realm of public discourse, i.e., the political arena. Through this, inner virtue and the mind are not locked in a closed circuit and are connected with external action.

Construction of the External System and the Achievement of Justice through Politics

Dasan viewed conventional morality as locking people into the closed circuit of the mind and making them suffer. Recognizing this, he took morality into the realm of public discourse. Therefore, morality and politics are no longer adversaries, but are engaged in the same domain and inevitably work with each other. The moral kingdom, then, is no longer affected by either of them.

Dasan straddled morality on the internal and external arenas of humankind. Therefore, Dasan believed that morality inevitably overlaps with the political domain that governs the order of the external world. This is different from the theory of morality that puts substance groups into structure. This morality builds its own kingdom in the mind with its own absolute standards, so politics is only a method to execute and maintain it. In this scheme, politics is entirely subject to morality. For Dasan, politics occupies a different status. Justice in politics is an absolute necessity for moral as well as political success.

Dasan diagnosed that scholars and bureaucrats of his day were engaged in the practice of cliquing with those who were like-minded and attacking those who held differing views. Dasan witnessed all sorts of academic schools spring up and debate with each other with a master's doctrine eventually becoming the foundation for various sects by his disciples and those of similar lines forming sectarian groups and rejecting others (*Sipsam gyeongchaek* [Discussions on the Thirteen Classics]). Faced with the divisive milieu, he wanted to neither support one of these sects nor

create an additional one. In order to satisfy everyone, he entreated to listen to everyone, weighed it carefully with a fair mind, and attempted to find the right way amongst them (“*Sangnyesa jeon seo*” [Preface to the *Four Commentaries on Funeral Rites*]).

For Dasan's goals to move beyond theory, politics should accordingly work properly. There is nothing new in his definition of politics. He simply attempted a new definition of the relation between morality and politics. His view of politics becomes clear depending on what is more focused, the justice of politics or the virtue of politics:

Politics means to rectify things. They are all our people, but why do some of them take advantage of land and become rich, whereas some do not get any advantages and become poor? There should be a system to measure the land, distribute it equally among people, and correct such problems. This is what politics is all about. They are equal people, but why do some enjoy the wealth generated from the land and even throw out what is left over, whereas others do not even have enough barren land and worry about shortage? To correct this problem, we must build ships and carts, apply measures strictly, transfer products from one place to another, and resolve the gap between surplus and shortage. This is politics (*Wonjeong* [Essence of Politics]).

The passage above by Dasan illustrates the tenets that have been regarded as the golden principles of politics since the *Lunyu* (Analects of Confucius). The fact that Dasan's remark in the passage above confirms that the point raised by Confucius was still relevant and the principles were not met in reality. Dasan's purpose was not to reiterate an old cliché, but to reconfirm the existence of the wealth gap in order to usher in a new beginning. This is why he juxtaposes the reality with Confucius' remarks. Dasan believed the delivering of justice through rectifying the immoral and corrupt reality and the implementation of a fair and equal distribution of resources for people suffering from unequal land ownership and improper living conditions to be the key aspects of politics.

In order to achieve justice and equal distribution through politics, Dasan noted the need for integrating the virtues of understanding people

and bringing comfort to them, illustrated in the “Gao Yao mo 皋陶謨” (Plans of Gao Yao) chapter of *Shujing* (Book of Documents). In “Gao Yao mo,” Gao Yao proposed to King Wu the understanding of and bringing comfort to people as the solution. King Jeongjo and Dasan endorsed this agenda and worked towards this goal.¹⁴ Within Gao Yao’s framework, Dasan defined the understanding of people and the bringing of comfort to them as the preferential treatment of talented people or fair screening and the reduction of various levies such as tax, respectively. Then he further condensed it to wealth, which refers to the economic bounty and success in social status. Differentiating between the aristocracy and the peasantry, he attempted to administer tailored politics to each (*Sangseo gohun* [Commentaries on the *Book of Documents*], bk. 2).

What Dasan referred to as understanding people and bringing comfort to them corresponds to justice in modern-day terms. Public office and taxes are social resources. Public office is concerned with how to distribute political and social resources equally. Meanwhile, taxes focus on how to reduce people’s pains from the perspective of levying and how to allocate welfare benefits through redistribution. This is similar to Sangje’s administration of justice by granting fortune to the good and misfortune to the bad. Politics means to take over Sangje’s power of meting out justice and forging a just world in reality.

In regards to the idea of understanding people, Dasan had a special interest in performance assessment programs (Bae 2002). The performance assessment program is an institutional instrument that ensures an equal distribution of merits and demerits in politics. Without implementation of a performance evaluation system of bureaucrats, the goal of understanding people is difficult to achieve, and can result in political failures and consequently moral failures. Dasan pulled morality down to the realm of politics, as administering justice based on rigorous evaluation, arguing that it was not practical without operation of the performance assessment system.

14. On the point that Dasan’s conception of governing the world lies in the synthesis of understanding people and bringing comfort to them, see M. Kim (1996) and Baik (2007).

In contrast, if the performance assessment system properly works, understanding people, delivering justice, and reaping political and moral successes are attainable goals. In addition, the king, at the apex of the evaluation system, occupies the central position of presiding over order in the political sphere, just like Sangje situated at the center of the moral world. The performance assessment program, with the king at its center, should be strict in evaluation and fair in distributing merits and demerits. Dasan opposed holding multiple jobs and multiple positions for the sake of rigorous assessment and proposed the principle that “officers would be given tasks based on their capacities and then expected to give their all to their duties and be accountable for their performance outcomes” (*Injae-chaek* [Human Resource Management]).

The performance assessment program based on sole occupation and accountability is reminiscent of the ideas of Han Fei (280-233 BC), an ancient Chinese philosopher. According to Han Fei, a wise king should raise wealth with a keen assessment of the given conditions, distribute economic resources equally with well-administered tax policies, enable the capable to fulfill their potential by giving out preferred posts and compensations, and block disturbers with severe punishment.¹⁵ This is remarkably similar to Dasan's concept of the political ideal.

Han Fei also argues that, in order to realize the political ideal, a wise king should mete out punishment according to the results of performance outcomes and evaluate public officers based on the results of the tasks they were assigned to, in “*Waichu shuo zuo shang* 外儲說左上” (Outer Congeries of Sayings, the Upper Left Series) and “*Zhudao* 主道” (The *Dao* of the Sovereign), respectively. Those propositions are quite similar to Dasan's principle of sole occupation and accountability. Although similarities can be seen between the two scholars, their commonality lies only in their emphasis that one should reflect on one's imperfect personality and choose the best of it, taking responsibility for one's actions. In Max

15. “故明王之治國也，適其時事以致財物，論其稅賦以均貧富，厚其爵祿以盡賢能，重其刑罰以禁姦邪，使民以力得富，以事致貴，以過受罪，以功致賞，而不念慈惠之賜，此帝王之政也” (“*Liufan* 六反” [Six Reversals], in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子).

Weber's terminology in *Politics as a Vocation*, both are rooted in the ethics of responsibility, not the ethics of conviction.

Conclusion

Dasan thought that the established system of morality could create only a small number of moral heroes, not a large number of moral individuals. Additionally, he believed that even the creation of moral individuals does not guarantee the realization of a moral society. In this context, he undertook the fundamental problem of how to bridge moral individuals together in order to achieve a moral society.

With the structuring of substance groups, Dasan tried to overcome social problems with the human inner mind and thereby root out the possibility of moral failures. He viewed this design as having its origin in Buddhism, not Confucianism, and argued that it had critical defects, in spite of some successes. This form of morality may enable the passive morality of not committing negative conducts, but cannot induce the proactive morality of creating positive actions. It might breed pure souls and greedless people through passive morality; however, in reality they are useless people. Furthermore, trapped in the closed circuit of the mind, he argued that they would end up being afflicted with mental illnesses.

In order to move beyond this dilemma, Dasan attempted to transcend the features of Confucianism that lean towards inaction, inner reflection, and the sage, and instead tried to strengthen its tendencies towards action, practice, and the people. By stressing those characteristics, Dasan wanted to awaken responsibility in the existing incapable, irresponsible segments of society who shrugged off their moral and political failures and monopolized public offices, putting on the airs of scholars.

In terms that action, practice, and people are considered essential in moral philosophy, Dasan's morality approximates Liang Qichao's public virtue, which Liang differentiated from private virtue in his *Xinminshuo* 新民說 (On the New People) (Zhang 1999, 660-662). According to Liang Qichao's classification, private virtue is comprised of the moral individual

while public virtue is comprised of the moral society. He tried to design a modern society where the moral excellence of individuals is less emphasized than the regulation of public relations via moral responsibility.

For Dasan, morality was not limited to the purification of desire, but also required the promotion of good deeds. Thus, he endowed morality with an objective validity that people could use to evaluate themselves and their behavior. If Dasan's standard of moral ethics was universal, then it could transcend social differences and contribute to the formation of civil society. Liang Qichao had insisted that premodern Chinese ethics lacked a sense of public morality (*gongde* 公德), which he believed was essential for the development of civil society. In this regard, Dasan's morality provides the characteristic of public morality that Liang had hoped to achieve.

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