

The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate

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Philip J. Ivanhoe
Department of Public and Social Administration
City University of Hong Kong

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1. Introduction¹

A great deal has been written about the Four-Seven Debate by Korean, Chinese, and Japanese scholars and more recently by Western scholars as well. In addition to scrupulous and revealing analyses of the historical context and the many facets of the numerous exchanges that constitute this long discussion concerning the nature and relationship between the “Four Sprouts” (Korean: *sadan* Chinese: *siduan* 四端) and “Seven Emotions” (K: *ch'iljóng* Ch: *qiqing* 七情) of traditional Confucian philosophy, many have noted and admired the remarkable care with which participants in the debate crafted the presentation of their views and their responses to critics, as well as the impressive integrity and civility they displayed as they wrestled with problems at the heart of their philosophical commitments.² There is much of value in this literature and it bears directly on the aims of the current work; I have learned a great deal from earlier research on the debate and drawn upon it both explicitly and indirectly in all that I have thought and written below.

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² The best introduction to the debate in English is Michael C. Kalton, With Oaksook C. Kim, Sung Bae Park, Youngchan Ro, Tu Weiming and Samuel Yamashita, *The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Korean neo-Confucian Thought*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

What I hope to contribute in this essay is something much more modest than an overall account of the debate or its place in the history of Korean philosophy; instead, my focus will be about some of the ways the debate, as represented by the extensive and systematic exchanges between Yi Hwang 李滉 (Toegye 退溪) (1501-70) and Gi Dae-seung 奇大升 (Gobong 高峰) (1527-1572) and further developed in the correspondence between Seong Hon 成渾 (Ugye 牛溪) (1535–1598) and Yi I 李珥 (Yulgok 栗谷) (1536–1584), has been and remains philosophically significant. This will of course require me to say something about the nature of the debate itself, but almost everything I say in this regard will be aimed at explicating its significance. On the one hand, I want to describe why I think those involved in the Four-Seven Debate took it so seriously and were inspired to produce such a remarkable legacy. On the other hand, I want to show how the debate relates to issues that have been explored by important thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition that still are very much parts of contemporary moral metaphysics and moral psychology.

When I was first introduced to the Four-Seven Debate, I was told that it was the most famous and arguably the most important controversy in the history of Korean Confucian philosophy. I took this claim very seriously and obviously so did the scholars whose work I was reading with great interest and slowly-dawning comprehension. The effort, intensity, precision, and care displayed by the main protagonists in the debate, some of the greatest Korean philosophers of all time, is palpable to anyone who reads their extended scholarly exchanges. It was vividly evident to me that *they* took the debate absolutely seriously. Nevertheless, for many years, it was not fully clear to me *why* we all were taking the debate so seriously. I felt this way about almost all the primary and secondary literature on neo-Confucianism that I read in my early years as both an undergraduate and graduate student. Of

course, I knew that these debates were important to those who participated in them because they concerned core claims about neo-Confucian philosophy: getting these issues *right* meant the difference between truth and falsehood, orthodoxy and heresy, becoming a sage and falling into spiritual degradation, but I had a very difficult time sympathetically imagining my way into how it would feel to take these debates seriously. In other words and a bit roughly, I could see that as a committed Confucian, I would want to have the right view of my tradition. The trouble was, unless I thought of being a Confucian simply in terms of a fastidious preoccupation with orthodoxy, I couldn't develop much of sense of what it would be to be a *committed Confucian*.³

This led me to an issue that has broader implications for how one engages in the task of history of philosophy, but which I do not have time to explore here. Rather, I will simply claim that in order to understand the Four-Seven Debate in what I will call a full and vivid sense, we need to know not only the propositional content of the debate, its historical context, and the role it played in deciding doctrinal orthodoxy, in addition we need to be able, at least to some degree, to think and feel our way into the perspective of those engaged in the debate in order to appreciate why they found this controversy so pressing. Until we have an imaginative sense of why they were concerned with these issues, we are like people who know a great recipe for making *Pulgoki*, who know how much everyone loves eating *Pulgoki* made according to this recipe, but who never have savored for ourselves the flavor of *Pulgoki*. A full and vivid sense, a taste, of what it was to have a stake in the controversy is the kind of

³ While orthodoxy was indeed an important issue for neo-Confucians, as noted above, my point is that for most of them, this was shorthand for a complex and imaginatively accessible set of concerns, some social, some historical, but others philosophical in nature. This issue warrants much more thorough and careful study both in regard to the Confucian tradition and in comparative contexts. For an excellent comparative study focusing on the role of commentaries in the construction of orthodoxy, see John B. Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1998).

understanding I would like us to attain some measure of in regard to the Four-Seven Debate. We want to know not only what they were arguing about but why they undertook such a sustained and careful debate, and we want to answer the “why” question not only propositionally but existentially as well.

Now I will not argue—and think it would be wrong to identify—any single issue that motivated interest in the Four-Seven Debate. Each of the participants brought to the controversy not only a shared set of traditional questions but his own interests and concerns as well, and the content of the latter changed in the course of the debate, as old interests faded or took on new forms and new interests came into focus and play. I will highlight and explore only two broad and related concerns that participants in the debate identify and defend: (1) the nature of morality and (2) the nature and role of everyday emotions in moral life. In section three, I will argue that these concerns bear significant similarities to certain concerns found in the Western philosophical tradition and are very much with us as live issues within contemporary moral philosophy and psychology. Of course, the form these concerns took in 16th century Korea is unique and bringing out these distinctive features is a central aim of section two. Nevertheless, as will become clear from the analysis and discussion presented below, within these distinctive features are more familiar concerns and in some sense there *must* be if we are able to sense in imagination the importance this controversy had for those who took part in it.

2. The Nature of the Four-Seven Debate

Confucianism has played and continues to play a complex, central, and crucial role in contemporary Korean society and culture, but it played an even more decisive

role throughout the course of the Choson 朝鮮 dynasty (1392-1910). The dynasty's founder Yi Songgye 李成桂 (1335-1408), established the dynasty with the ardent support of a group of dedicated Confucian officials, and together they quickly ensured the dynasty would take up and defend the Confucian tradition as its guiding ideology. As Michael C. Kalton notes, this made it, "the first and only East Asian regime to be established under exclusive Neo-Confucian auspices."⁴

From the start, Korean Confucians were devoted followers of the "school" or lineage developed around the writings of Cheng Yi 程頤 and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200); for a variety of reasons, both historical and philosophical, they remained distant from and distrustful of the very different interpretations of the tradition that became influential during the Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644) and especially those associated with the great Ming thinker, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529). When the Manchus overthrew the Ming and founded the Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1905), Korean Confucians became even more fully convinced that they alone were the true guardians of the Confucian tradition, which for them meant the Cheng-Zhu School.⁵ One reason for this confidence was that Koreans accepted a widely held view, first put forth in China, that the "errors" and "excesses" of Ming dynasty Confucian philosophy led to the weakening and collapse of the dynasty and its conquest by the Manchus, a semi-nomadic people also known as the Jurchen. This historical context provides us some understanding of how issues of orthodoxy played an important role in debates over doctrinal issues, especially after the founding of the Qing dynasty. In

⁴ *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. xix.

⁵ For an introduction to the philosophy of the Cheng-Zhu School, see A. C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: The Metaphysics of the Brothers Cheng*, Revised Second Edition, (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1992), Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu His: Life and Thought*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1987), Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi: New Studies*, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), and chapters 4, 5, 8, and 9 in John Makeham, Ed., *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, (Dordrecht; London: Springer, 2010).

order, though, to get deeper under the skin and into the hearts of Korean Confucians, we need to review some of the core beliefs of the Cheng-Zhu School.

One of the most challenging and to modern sensibilities alien aspects of Cheng-Zhu philosophy and neo-Confucianism in general is their metaphysics; nevertheless, an accurate grasp of their metaphysics is essential for understanding not only the ethical views of committed Confucians but also for gaining some sense of what it would be like to see and respond to the world in their terms and from their perspective.⁶

Under the influence of Daoist and Buddhist metaphysical beliefs, neo-Confucians⁷ saw the world as an interconnected system or web of “principles” (K: *li*; Ch: *li* 理) and believed each and every thing in the world contained within itself all the principles in the universe. This idea, which I shall refer to as the view of “all in each,” came most directly from certain teachings within Huayan Buddhism; it is also an important and characteristic feature of Chan Buddhism as well, and this school of Buddhist philosophy had tremendous influence upon neo-Confucian thought.⁸ In neo-Confucian terms, each thing contains within it a shared “original nature” (K: *bonche ji seong* Ch: *benti zhi xing* 本體之性 or K: *bonyeon ji seong* Ch: *benran zhi xing* 本然之性), which consists of all the principles in the world. Individual things and types of things are what they are not because of a difference in their original natures or stock of principles but because their particular endowment of *qi* (K: *gi*; CH: *qi* 氣) only allows certain principles to manifest themselves. This second, “physical nature” (K:

⁶ The beliefs I will sketch out below were held, with some variations, by every major neo-Confucian.

⁷ I do not capitalize “neo-Confucianism” to make clear that it is a term that refers to a broad and loosely connected collection of thinkers and not to anything like a single school or point of view.

⁸ Chen Lai 陳來 offers an excellent discussion of some of these Buddhist influences on the thought of Wang Yangming. See his “The Realms of Being and Nonbeing in Wang Yangming’s Philosophy” *Wang Yangming zhaxue de you wu zhi jing* 王陽明哲學的有無之境 in “Self-Selected Essays” *Zi xuan ji* 自選集 (Guilin shi: Guangxi shi fan da xue chu ban she, 桂林市: 廣西師範大學出版社, 1997): 225-98.

gijil ji seong Ch: *qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性) was fixed in the case of non-human animals, plants, and material things. Different human beings receive individual and dissimilar initial endowments of *qi*, which vary in quantity and quality (the latter described in terms such as “clarity” and “turbidity”) and this determines the kinds of talents and abilities they naturally possess. Humans, though, are unique as a species because they alone have the ability to refine their initial endowments of *qi*. They must refine the *qi* that blocks the principles within to the point where the *li* of their “minds” (K: *shim* Ch: *xin* 心)⁹ can shine forth and illuminate the things they encounter or imagine, resulting in proper understanding and appreciation.¹⁰ This process of refining the *qi* of the mind in order to uncover and bring into play the principles inherent therein describes in broad strokes Cheng-Zhu neo-Confucian self-cultivation, what I have described elsewhere as a “recovery model” of self-cultivation.¹¹ In the course of this process, one moves from the state of the precarious and error-prone “human mind” (K: *in-shim* Ch: *renxin* 人心) to a full realization of the pure and perfect “Dao mind” (K: *do-shim* Ch: *daoxin* 道心) within.

This metaphysically robust picture of the self and its relationship to the rest of the world provided neo-Confucians with a strong justification for universal care: our shared principles supply a deep connection with other people, creatures, and things.¹²

⁹ The word *xin* often is translated as “heart and mind” to emphasize that it is the seat of feeling and volition and well as cognition.

¹⁰ For a clear and concise presentation of the general Cheng-Zhu position on these issues and their implications for self-cultivation, see Yi Yulgok’s response to Ugye’s third letter in Kalton, *The Four Seven Debate*, pp. 125-38. In general, neo-Confucians of the Song and much of the Ming dynasties saw *qi* as a largely negative influence on morality, though, as we will see, this view changed in later times. This Song and Ming attitude toward *qi* is dramatically different from Mengzi, who argued that certain kinds of *qi* nurture and sustain morality. This is but one of many examples illustrating the depth and extent of the differences between most early and later Confucians. Thanks to Erin M. Cline for noting the importance of this issue.

¹¹ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-cultivation*, Revised Second Edition, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000): 43-58.

¹² Neo-Confucian thinkers described a lack of feeling for the welfare of people, creatures, and things as being “numb” (K: *bulin* Ch: *buren* 不仁) to the world. This allowed them to play on the term *buren*

Along with this came an explanation for *why* people are emotionally affected not only by the suffering of other people, but by the suffering of non-human animals, the harming of plants, and even the wanton destruction of inanimate objects. Neo-Confucians had a ready explanation that flowed directly from their metaphysics. For example, Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-73) famously refused to cut the grass growing in front of his window saying, “I regard it in the same way as I regard myself.” Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-77) expressed the same sentiment when he heard the braying of a donkey.¹³ Like other neo-Confucians, these men felt a profound sense of *oneness* not only with other human beings but with the entire universe.¹⁴

This elegant constellation of ideas also presented neo-Confucians with a distinctive set of philosophical challenges. One such set, and the one which gave rise to the controversy that is our central concern, is explaining the relationship between the pure and perfect “principles” that constitute the “original nature” or “Dao mind” and the error-prone physical world of *qi* within which we live and act by exercising our “physically manifested nature” and “human minds.” This may remind Western readers of the not wholly dissimilar problems surrounding the nature of the mind and how things like reasons can serve as causes in the physical world, and those who took

which, in their age, had the ethical sense of “lacking benevolence” and the medical sense of “paralysis.” One who was “unfeeling” toward the things of the world was like a person with a paralyzed limb. In both cases, they failed to see and appreciate an underlying connection between themselves and something else. For a more thorough discussion of this idea, see *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, Revised second edition, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002): 27-9 and Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Virtue Ethics and the Confucian Tradition,” in Daniel Russell, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming, 2012). While neo-Confucian metaphysics has lost much of its appeal, the underlying claim that human beings are intimately connected with the rest of the world, in ethically significant ways, and cannot understand themselves without appreciating these connections is supported by many insights from modern science.

¹³ Both of these stories are recorded in the same passage in chapter three of *Extant Works of the Cheng [Brothers] from Henan (Henan Cheng shi yi shu 河南程氏遺書)*, (Taipei Shi: Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan 1978).

¹⁴ For a study of this notion of oneness and its contemporary implications, see David W. Tien, “Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 40.1 (2012): 52-71 and Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Senses and Values of Oneness,” in Brian Bruya, ed., *The Philosophical Challenge from China*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Forthcoming, 2012).

part in the Four-Seven Debate were aware of and concerned with such problems as well,¹⁵ but their attention was primarily focused elsewhere: on the relationship between their metaphysical views and earlier Confucian beliefs about our moral sensibilities and everyday emotions. In this general respect, they were continuing a debate that had already begun in China between members of the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools of neo-Confucianism.¹⁶ In order to understand the nature of this debate and appreciate the new and distinctive ideas raised and pursued by this set of Korean thinkers, we need to have a better sense of the “four sprouts” and “seven emotions” from which the debate takes its name.

The four sprouts first appear in the writings of Mengzi 孟子 (391-308 BCE) in a famous passage describing how he thinks any normal person would respond upon suddenly seeing a child about to fall into a well.

The reason I say all human beings have a mind that is not indifferent to the suffering of others is because if people were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well they all would have a feeling of alarm and concern. They would feel this not because they wanted to ingratiate themselves with the child’s parents, nor because they sought the praise of neighbors and friends, nor to avoid being thought callous.

From this we see that the mind of compassion, the mind of shame, the mind of complaisance, and the mind of judging right and wrong are essential to human beings. The mind of compassion is the sprout of benevolence, the mind of shame is the sprout of

¹⁵ For example, see Yulgok’s response to Ugye’s third letter, *The Four-Seven Debate*, pp. 131-4.

¹⁶ For an account of these two schools, see the references in note #5 above and chapters 12-15 in Makeham, Ed., *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*.

righteousness, the mind of complaisance is the sprout of ritual propriety, the mind of judging right and wrong is the sprout of knowledge. Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have four limbs.¹⁷

For Mengzi, the four sprouts are nascent moral sensibilities, experienced as spontaneous emotional responses to morally significant events, which can serve as the basis for the cultivation of genuine virtue. So, as noted in the passage above, the feelings of alarm and concern we spontaneously experience when we see or even contemplate a child about to fall into a well manifest a “mind” or “sense” of compassion or care, which is the sprout of benevolence; the sprout of complaisance, experienced through feelings such as our inclination to defer to or make way for an elder, serves as the basis for the virtue of ritual propriety and so on. Mengzi argued that the existence of these sprouts shows that human nature is basically good, by which he meant that it has the capacity for and inclination toward goodness. Mengzi did not believe that human nature was wholly or even substantially good without a great deal of sustained effort directed at moral cultivation; for him, the moral sprouts are fragile, nascent sensibilities that must be developed in order to take on their full and proper form. This is why he called them *sprouts*; such agricultural imagery is found throughout Mengzi’s philosophy and is crucial for grasping his view.

Neo-Confucians understood Mengzi’s notion of sprouts very differently, in ways that reflected the general metaphysical beliefs discussed above, which had come to dominate the age in which they lived. Instead of fragile, nascent moral sensibilities, Cheng-Zhu Confucians understood the four sprouts as different “clues” or

¹⁷ *Mengzi* 2A6.

“indications” (K: *seo* Ch: *xu* 緒) of the pure, perfect, and fully formed “principles,” “original nature,” or “Dao mind” within. Instead of Mengzi’s *developmental model* for cultivation of the self, they advocated the *recovery model* described above. They sought to contact and deploy a fully present but obscured and inhibited faculty existing within each and every human being. Readers may already see how this shift in conception begins to generate some friction for the overall view: for if the four sprouts are purely a matter of principle, they cannot be actual features of the physical world, which exert causal power, broadly construed, over other phenomena; actual phenomena require that *li* always be embedded within *qi*. This, indeed, is one important aspect of what was to become the Four-Seven Debate, but before we explore this issue further, let us introduce the other half of the controversy.

An early Confucian classic, the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), declares there are seven basic human emotions: happiness, anger, grief, fear, approval, disapproval, and desire (K: *hui, no, ae, ku, ae, o, yok* Ch: *xi, nu, ai, ju, ai wu yu* 喜怒哀懼愛惡欲).¹⁸ Later classical and canonical texts vary this list slightly and add additional wrinkles that complicate the ethical landscape of neo-Confucianism. Chapter One of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) simply has happiness, anger, grief and joy (K: *hui, no, ae, rak* Ch: *xi, nu, ai, le* 喜怒哀樂). Cheng Yi’s “Discourse on What Master Yan Loved to Learn” (*Yanzi suo hao he xue lun* 顏子所好何學論) has happiness, anger, grief, joy, approval, disapproval, and desire (K: *hui, no, ae, rak, ae,*

¹⁸ Chapter 23 of the *Zhuangzi* mentions six emotions: disapproval, desire, happiness, anger, grief, and joy (*wu, yu, xi, nu, ai, le* 惡欲喜怒哀樂); the set of four emotions found in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (see below) are found in chapters 2 and 21; the pair joy and anger (*xi, nu* 喜怒) appear in several places as well, e.g. chapters 2, 6, 11, 15. Early Daoists were concerned with the ways in which excessive emotions, of any kind, upset our natural ability to respond spontaneously to the events and situations we encounter in life. These writing exerted a profound influence on neo-Confucian thought and offer another important resource for the comparative study of emotions.

o, yok Ch: *xi, nu, ai, le, ai wu yu* 喜怒哀樂愛惡欲).¹⁹ The first chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean* elaborates upon the emotions, describing two fundamental modes,

The state in which happiness, anger, grief, and joy have not yet been expressed is called equilibrium. The state in which they have already been expressed and each attains its proper measure is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great root of heaven and earth; harmony is the all-pervading Way of heaven and earth. When equilibrium and harmony are fully achieved, heaven and earth will rest in good order and the myriad creatures will flourish.

With this much of the picture before us, we can begin to discern the outlines of the Four-Seven Debate. Earlier neo-Confucians, such as Zhu Xi, had explored the issue of how to understand the relationship between the principles of the original nature and the feelings we experience in the physical realm of *qi*; the difference between the state in which the emotions have “not yet been expressed” and that in which they “already have been expressed” seen in the passage above. This line of inquiry leads naturally to the question of how the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are related. In order for the four to be sensually experienced and causally effective parts of the actual world, they could not be purely a matter of principle; if they were, as it seems they must be, principle embedded within *qi*, then how could they avoid being “precarious” and “prone to error”? All neo-Confucians accepted the idea that the seven emotions were part and parcel of physical human existence and as such precarious and prone to error;

¹⁹ Neo-Confucians in general took these texts to be offering equivalent lists; Korean neo-Confucians took note of these differences but tended to stick with the list originally described in the *Book of Rites*.

nevertheless, like all material phenomena, they too must be a combination of principle and *qi*. As such, they do not seem to differ *in kind* from the four sprouts.

Another way of looking at this set of problems is to begin by asking whether the four sprouts are in fact emotions. Given the orthodox Cheng-Zhu position on *li* and *qi* it seems that they must be, but if so, that leaves unresolved whether and in what sense they might constitute a special and separate type or set of emotions. An alternative, as we shall see, is to understand them as aspects or modes of the seven everyday emotions. All of the above questions and more were raised and explored in the course of the Four-Seven Debate and we shall return to these issues in the following sections of this essay. Let us now, though, turn to the issue of what motivated the different participants in the debate to take up and argue these different positions. What was at stake? What were they aiming at? What were they afraid of? In short, why did they care?

3. The Historical Significance of the Four-Seven Debate

As should be clear from our earlier discussion of neo-Confucian metaphysics, committed members of the tradition all believed that the world is fundamentally interconnected in a deep and ethically relevant sense. Because each and every thing in the universe shares the same original nature or set of principles, human beings not only can understand and interact with the various people, creatures, and things of the world but also feel a profound and all-inclusive sense of care for the entire universe as in some sense a part of themselves. Their intimate connection with the rest of the world can be obscured through a distorting lens of ignorance imposed by turbid *qi*, but even the most hardened and unfeeling among us still, on certain occasions, feel

their way through such interference and from time to time sense their connection with and concern for the world.²⁰ Here we see a tension that runs throughout the first of the two concerns I am interesting in drawing out: that while the theoretical foundation of morality lies in the metaphysical fact that we are one with the world, in the distinctive sense in which neo-Confucians meant this claim, this metaphysical fact has a corresponding affective or emotional manifestation in certain paradigmatically moral emotions.

This set of claims served as one of the main bones of contention between Toegye and Gobong. Both thinkers recognized that the Four Sprouts as well as the Seven Emotions are combinations of *li* and *qi*; they also agreed that there is a difference between these sets of feelings. Their most important disagreements concerned the nature of this difference. Toegye wanted to preserve a special status for the Four Sprouts; they were not like the other emotions human beings commonly experienced: they were more intimately and directly connected to principle and therefore paradigmatic expressions of morality. His expression of this idea served as the opening of his long and complex debate with Gobong.

Expressions of the Four Sprouts are pure principle
and so wholly without moral flaw; expressions of
the Seven Emotions include *qi* and so are a mixture
of good and bad.²¹

²⁰ David Tien and I have described and analyzed this sense of “oneness” in other work, but here I only mean to impress upon the reader the absolute importance of grasping this aspect of the neo-Confucian point of view. For a more thorough discussion of this feature of neo-Confucianism, see David Tien, “Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming,” and my “Senses and Values of Oneness.”

²¹ *Kobong Sönsaeng munjip* 高峯先生文集, Volume 1103 of Han’guk yöktae munjip ch’ongsö 韓國歷代文集叢書 (Söul-si : Kyöngin Munhwasa: konggüpch’ö Han’gukhak Chönmun Söjöm, 서울市 : 景仁文化社: 供給處韓國學專門書店, 1999): 402. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 1.

Gobong objected that this way of describing the difference is too strong, for the Four Sprouts surely also belong to the world of *qi* and the Seven Emotions also contain within them *li*. He worried that such an explanation would lead to a fundamental schism between *li* and *qi*; the former being associated with goodness while the latter with moral error and turpitude and the implications this would have on the practice of self-cultivation. He went on to suggest we could avoid these difficulties by explaining the difference between the Four Sprouts (as first noted by Mengzi) and Seven Emotions (as mentioned by Zisi in chapter one of the *Doctrine of the Mean*) as arising from the fact that they have different referents: the former point to the goodness of human nature while the latter refer to emotions in general.²²

It is simply that Zisi and Mengzi were referring to different things; this is the sole basis for the difference between the Seven Emotions and Four Sprouts. It is not that the Four Sprouts exist apart from and beyond the Seven Emotions. Now, if one holds that the Four Sprouts are expressions of *li* and wholly without moral flaw and the Seven Emotions are expressions of *qi* and a mixture of good and bad, this would split apart *li* and *qi* and take them as two wholly separate things. This would be to claim that the Seven Emotions do not come forth from human nature and that the Four Sprouts do not depend and ride upon *qi*.²³

Gobong goes on to argue that the Four Sprouts are not separate and distinct emotions at all but rather,

²² In a later response, Gobong captures this difference by saying that the former are a “specialized” way of referring to the good aspects of human emotions (i.e. those that are expressions of *li*), while the latter is a more “general and comprehensive” way of talking about our varied emotions (i.e. those that express impure mixtures of *li* and *qi*). Ibid. 403. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 21.

²³ Ibid. p. 403. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 4.

When human nature suddenly is expressed without *qi* working to interfere and the original goodness [of the nature] is directly manifested, this is precisely what Mengzi referred to as the Four Sprouts. These certainly are pure expressions of heavenly principle; nevertheless these cannot exist separate and apart from the Seven Emotions. Rather, these [i.e. the Four Sprouts] are the underlying veins beneath those expressions of the Seven Emotions that attain their complete and proper form.²⁴

Toegye acknowledged Gobong's point that the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are combinations of *li* and *qi* but insisted they differ in source and this offers a legitimate basis for ascribing one to the realm of principle and the other to the realm of the physical world.

Although neither exists separate and apart from both *li* and *qi*, since their respective sources indicate they are governed by different elements and emphasize different factors, why can't we say that one concerns *li* and the other concerns *qi*?²⁵

Toegye goes on to cite the authority of Zhu Xi in summing up his own position,

His explanation is that, "The Four Sprouts; these are expressions of *li*. The seven Emotions; these are expressions of *qi*."²⁶

Gobong then takes a different approach to support his contention that the Four Sprouts are not special, separate emotions but simply the normative aspect of any of our regular emotions, i.e. "the underlying veins beneath those expressions of the

²⁴ Ibid. p. 404. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 409. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 11.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 413. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 14. Quoting from *juan 53* of Zhu Xi's *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類.

Seven Emotions that attain their complete and proper form.” On the one hand, he argues that all of the Seven Emotions can be expressed in ways that perfectly manifest moral principle. On the other, he notes even the Four Sprouts can be expressed incorrectly; we can experience and misapply even paradigmatically moral emotions.

Mengzi’s joy, which was so great it would not allow him to sleep, was joy. Emperor Shun’s punishment of the Four Criminals was anger. Kongzi’s grieving to the point of being unsettled was grief. His feeling of delight when Minzi, Zilu, Zaiyou and Zigong attended upon him was delight. How could these not be expressions of principle in its original state? Moreover, if you look at the actions of ordinary people, you will also find that there are times when heavenly principle is expressed in full and proper measure.²⁷

If one carefully analyzes a broad range of emotions one will see that even expressions of the Four Sprouts can be less than complete and proper, and so one certainly cannot call them all perfectly good.²⁸ If you look among ordinary people, some feel shame and dislike about things which they should not feel shame and dislike about. Some approve or disapprove of things they should not approve or disapprove.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid. p. 434. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 34.

²⁸ This is a fascinating point, but as Michael R. Slater has pointed out, in personal communication, this offers a clear illustration of how differently Gobong and neo-Confucians in general understood the Four Sprouts. Mengzi thought it part of the very notion of *being a sprout* that they are “less than complete and proper” and not “perfectly good.”

²⁹ Ibid. p. 451. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 46-7.

These are interesting points and surely do support the idea that the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are not fundamentally different in kind; they share a number of important features, as both men have acknowledged in previous exchanges. Toegye, though, remains unconvinced that Gobong has successfully established his stronger claim that the former are merely the normative aspect of the latter. His answer brings us particularly close to what I see as one of his most important philosophical points, which too simply put is that there is something in the very nature of the Seven Emotions that connects and inclines them toward error and something in the very nature of the Four Sprouts that connects and inclines them toward good. Toegye expresses this difference in terms of the normativity of *li* and the deleterious effects of *qi*, though, as will be clear in the following section, we can support his claim without having to embrace these aspects of neo-Confucian metaphysics. Toegye makes his point in a number of ways, in one passage relying upon an analogy, common among neo-Confucians, between *li* and *qi* and a horse and its rider and in another citing and commenting on a passage from Cheng Hao's *Reply to Master Heng Ju's Letter on Calming Human Nature*.

Earlier thinkers employed the example of how a man rides upon a horse as an analogy to the way in which *li* rides upon *qi* in order to be implemented [in the world]. This is accurate and helpful. Without the horse, the man would have no means for coming and going; without the man, the horse would lose its way. Man and horse need one another and cannot be separated from one another.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid. p. 482. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 67.

[Cheng Hao's] *Reply to Master Heng Ju's Letter on Calming Human Nature* says, "Within the human mind, the thing most easily expressed and hardest to control is anger. But if when angered one can forget one's anger and contemplate what is right and wrong according to *li*, one will see that such external temptations are not worth hating..." When he refers to "the thing most easily expressed and hardest to control" is he talking about *li* or *qi*?³¹

Toegye makes much the same appeal when he addresses cases in which people fall into error even though motivated by one of the Four Sprouts.

As for people who feel shame and dislike about things which they should not feel shame and dislike about or who approve or disapprove of things they should not approve or disapprove in all these cases the cause is the turbidity of their *qi*.³²

We will now move on to explore, briefly, the next stage of the Four-Seven Debate, which consists of a series of letters exchanged between Ugye and Yulgok. The correspondence between these two thinkers developed the Four-Seven Debate in a number of profound and fascinating ways. We will focus on a small set of passages that serve to sharpen and develop their contrasting theories about the nature of the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions themselves; together, these will help us to develop a clearer and more distinct account of our two primary concerns and especially the second: the nature of human emotions and the role these play in moral cultivation.

³¹ Ibid. p. 490. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 74.

³² Ibid. p. 497. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 77.

In his first letter, Ugye introduces the distinction between the human mind and Dao mind that was discussed in section two above. This distinction, drawn from classical sources, was used to distinguish the precarious and error-prone human mind from the pure and perfect Dao mind within. More important for our present concern, Ugye goes on to relate these different modes of the mind to different aspects of the self.

The tenuous spirit and consciousness of the mind are one and yet we have two terms, “human mind” and “Dao mind.” Why is this? It is because the former arises from the self-centeredness of the physical form, while the latter originates from the rectitude of the original nature.³³

Ugye’s explanation of the two aspects of the mind, is a close paraphrase of a line from Zhu Xi’s preface to the *Doctrine of the Mean*.³⁴ What is of particular importance for our inquiry is how this way of capturing the difference links the physical embodiment of the human mind with its tendency to be self-centered. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Ugye goes on to say that while one cannot refer to the human mind as the Seven Emotions, it is acceptable to refer to the Dao mind as the Four Sprouts. His point is that while the self-centered nature of the Seven Emotions does indeed tend to lead them astray, the first equivalence would mislead people into thinking our embodied human existence *always and necessarily* leads to moral error, which is not the case. With enough training of the proper kind, the human mind can be transformed into the Dao mind; this describes the path of neo-

³³ *Yulgok Sönsaeng chönsö* 栗谷先生全書 Volume 211 of Han’guk yöktae munjip ch’ongsö 韓國歷代文集叢書 (Söul-si : Kyöngin Munhwasa: konggüpch’ö Han’gukhak Chönmun Söjöm, 서울市 : 景仁文化社: 供給處韓國學專門書店, 1999): 128. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 110.

³⁴ In his third and fourth letters to Yulgok, Ugye again refers to this line and notes how it seems to support Toegye’s position in regard to the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions. See *ibid.* p. 153. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 121 and *ibid.* p. 171. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 140.

Confucian self-cultivation. On the other hand, Ugye thinks the latter equivalence is acceptable because of the close connection the Four Sprouts have with the universal principles that ground and govern morality.

In his fourth letter to Yulgok, Ugye connects the distinction between the human mind and Dao mind and his analysis of how they relate to the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions, as well as their respective origins in the correctness of heavenly principle and errant tendencies of our self-centered physical embodiment, to the familiar analogy between how *li* governs *qi* as a rider controls his horse. Ugye begins by quoting four lines from Toegye's works, which we have cited above.

Earlier thinkers employed the example of how a man rides upon a horse as an analogy to the way in which *li* rides upon *qi* in order to be implemented [in the world]. This is accurate and helpful. Without the horse, the man would have no means for coming and going; without the man, the horse would lose its way. Man and horse need one another and cannot be separated from one another.³⁵

He elaborates upon this passage by saying,

This being the case, when horse and rider go out the gate, this must be because the man desires it and the horse carries it out. This is precisely like the way *li* governs *qi* and *qi* carries *li*. When horse and rider go out and proceed along the proper path, this is an expression of *qi* in accordance with *li*. When the horse, even with a rider mounted upon it, wildly gallops away from the proper path, this is because

³⁵ Ibid. pg. 171. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 140.

qi has soared off and run away, leading to excess or deficiency.³⁶

In his discussion of this illustrative analogy, Ugye seeks to make clear that *li* are always normative and manifest Heavenly patterns but that *qi* has a tendency to moral error and represents the human as opposed to the Heavenly.³⁷ In the case of the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions, the rider is analogous to the former and the horse to the latter. The Four Sprouts provide us with direct and reliable moral guidance; this moral guidance may need adjustment in some cases, but in general it sets us on the right path. In contrast, the Seven Emotions are like a horse, which of course can be well-trained, but by nature is unruly and tends to stray from the proper path.

Yulgok insists that the Four Sprouts are not separate emotions, standing apart from the Seven Emotions, but the normative and correct aspect of the latter.

The Four Sprouts cannot comprehend the Seven Emotions,
but the Seven Emotions do comprehend the Four Sprouts...³⁸

The Seven Emotions are a comprehensive way of saying
that among the movements of the human mind there are
these seven. As for the Four Sprouts, this is a way of selecting
out and referring to what is good within the Seven Emotions.³⁹

Yulgok's explanation is extremely lucid but still faces potential challenges, some conceptual and others interpretive. First, it must show how the Four Sprouts can find expression within the Seven Emotions and how all proper manifestations of the latter

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 172. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 140.

³⁷ Neo-Confucian arguments about moral normativity are always grounded in appeals to Heavenly warrants as well as to conceptions of human nature and human good. These different moral foundations were seen as mutually consistent and of a piece. Thanks to Sungmoon Kim for raising the importance of this point.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 123. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 113.

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 124. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 114.

can in some sense be reduced to the former.⁴⁰ Aside from this conceptual challenge, it is not clear how such an explanation can be reconciled with Mengzi's account of the Four Sprouts. In the passages in which he mentions the Four Sprouts, Mengzi never gives us reason to think that the sprouts and emotions are related in the way Yulgok suggests;⁴¹ to the contrary, he presents the Four Sprouts of benevolence, rightness, ritual, and wisdom as manifesting themselves in what appear to be distinctive emotions, such as our "feelings of alarm and concern" upon seeing a child in imminent physical danger.⁴² In some passages, Yulgok seems to defend a position quite close to the view he claims to refute. For example, he says,

If, though, one is hungry, one desires food; if cold one desires [warm] clothes; if thirsty one desires drink; if itchy one desires to be scratched. The eyes desire [beautiful] sights; the ears desire [pleasant] sounds; the four limbs desire ease and comfort. Things of this sort are referred to as [belonging to] the human mind. While their ultimate source lies within the heavenly nature, their expression comes forth from the self-centeredness of the ears, eyes, and four limbs and is not the original state of the

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Yulgok's attempt to systematically correlate the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions, see Young-chan Ro, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989): 61-3.

⁴¹ One might point to passages such as 7A15, where Mengzi claims that care (*ai* 愛) is a form of pure knowing (*liangzhi* 良知), which can reasonably be equated with the Four Sprouts, or *Analects* 12.22, where Kongzi claims that benevolence is care to bolster the case for Yulgok's interpretation. It surely is conceptually reasonable and interesting to think that affective states like the Four Sprouts can be part of the ethically proper expression of other emotions. This, though, might still leave one wondering why the Seven Emotions play no clear role in those passages in which Mengzi describes the Four Sprouts. Thanks to Eric Hutton for raising the importance of *Mengzi* 7A15 for this issue.

⁴² An additional interpretive challenge is that Mengzi's account clearly discusses only *four* nascent moral feelings, but neo-Confucians, such as Yulgok, add a fifth, the feeling of "trustworthiness" or "fidelity" (K: *shim* Ch: *xin* 信), which is one of the five cardinal virtues for among neo-Confucians. For example, see *ibid.* pp. 148. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 134.

heavenly principles. And so, they are governed by
qi and regarded as the human mind.⁴³

Here, Yulgok seems to acknowledge that some emotional responses are more closely tied to our individual physical bodies and hence inherently more strongly governed by *qi*, prone to self-centeredness, and thereby error. He goes on, though, to insist upon his well-known view that the Four Sprouts are just the normative aspects of the Seven Emotions,⁴⁴

The Four Sprouts are the good sides of the Seven
Emotions. The Seven Emotions comprehend the
Four Sprouts.⁴⁵

Looking back over the various aspects of the Four-Seven Debate we have explored above, one of the most important points to take away and keep in mind is that any strong bifurcation of *li* and *qi* threatens to sever the foundation of neo-Confucian ethics from the practical sense and experience of morality. This, of course, would also have profound implications for neo-Confucian approaches to self-cultivation. If moral principles are not part of our everyday experience, something we can feel in the course of our normal emotional lives, which includes the Seven Emotions as well as the Four Sprouts, they become alien to human life (a criticism Confucians throughout the ages have leveled against competing systems of thought such as Mohism, Daoism, and Buddhism). On the other hand, if the Four Sprouts are not in some way *special*, it is difficult to see why Mengzi and those who followed him singled them out,

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 142. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ We might sum up Yulgok's point here and much of his position by saying that he insists that the distinction between the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions has more to do with *li*'s role in *governing* or *regulating* the emotions than the origins or source of the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions. Such a view is consistent with the claim, acknowledged by all participants in the debate, that both the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are combinations of *li* and *qi*. Thanks to Justin Tiwald for suggesting this way of describing his view.

⁴⁵ Ibid. pp. 144. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 131.

presented them in terms of particular affective reactions, and placed such tremendous importance upon them, holding them up as the primary evidence supporting the claim that human nature is good.

According to the Cheng-Zhu School, our moral feelings, expressed not only in terms of things like compassion but equally in our senses of ritual propriety, the rightness of certain types of actions, and moral judgments of right and wrong, are directly linked to the fact that the *li* unite us, in a special way, with the rest of the universe: they bring us into contact with the morally salient features of the world and serve as the basis of morality. These moral sensibilities differ from other emotions we commonly have. Our more common emotions (i.e. the Seven Emotions) are directly and more intimately linked to the corporeal nature of our existence, our individual embodiments in *qi*; they direct our attention to ways in which the things of the world can be used to serve and satisfy our individual needs and desires.

For neo-Confucians, the fact that we are embodied is a primary source of moral challenge; for our physical bodies separate us into distinct individuals, which tends to obscure our deep and intimate connections with the rest of the world and inclines us to adopt a “self-centered” (K: *sa* Ch: *si* 私) perspective on ourselves and the world.⁴⁶ These two facts about the nature of morality and the challenge of our embodied, physical existence, pull in opposite directions, and together seem to offer more support for a view closer to what Toegye and Ugye advocate. The Four Sprouts appear to be more directly and intimately connected to *li*. While these feelings admittedly must come to us through the *qi* of our embodied existence, they point beyond our individual selves to principles that govern what we owe to other people,

⁴⁶ The word *si* often is translated as “selfish” and there are times when such a rendering is most appropriate, but in general neo-Confucians are more concerned with self-centeredness. For a splendidly insightful discussion of this and related issues, see David W. Tien, “Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming.”

creatures, and things.⁴⁷ In contrast, the Seven Emotions seem to be more directly and intimately connected to and governed by *qi*; while they admittedly contain within them *li* and can, when properly trained, attain morally correct form and measure, they point toward our individual, separate selves and the various desires that come with embodied existence. As a result, they tend to lead us astray and seem more in need of regulation by the *li*.

Our selective and altogether too brief exploration of the Four-Seven Debate has sought to focus on and tease out two related concerns that participants in the debate identify and defend as among their central motivating interests: (1) the nature of morality and (2) the nature and role of emotions in our moral lives. By the former, I mean roughly the set of philosophical challenges these thinkers felt they had to confront in order to explain how moral principles are experienced in our daily lives. By the latter, I mean, again roughly, their competing views concerning whether the Four Sprouts are special, moral emotions, separate from and more important than the Seven Emotions or simply the normative aspect or mode of the Seven Emotions.

If one grants too much importance to the Four Sprouts, as some thought Toegye and Ugye do, one risks leaving no constructive role for the everyday emotions in our moral lives. This worry is related to a widespread and persistent neo-Confucian

⁴⁷ Later neo-Confucians challenged this aspect of the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, pointing out that *qi* not only separates but also connects us with others; without *qi* we would not experience the sense of rightness and joy of moral action that were so clearly featured in classical Confucianism. The first thinker to explicitly and systematically criticize this aspect of Cheng-Zhu thought was the late Ming Confucian Luo Qishun 羅欽順 (1465-1547). For an introduction to his philosophy, see Irene Bloom, "On the 'Abstraction' of Ming Thought: Some Concrete Evidence from the Philosophy of Lo Ch'in-shun," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Principle and Practicality: Essays in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979): 69-125) and Irene Bloom, tr., *Knowledge Painfully Acquired: The K'un-chih chi of Lo Ch'in-shun*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). This shift to a more *qi*-centered account of the world, which entailed an explicit rejection of at least this feature of Cheng-Zhu thought and a call to return to the earlier Confucian tradition, was carried forward by a number of brilliant thinkers throughout East Asia. See, for example, those mentioned in the following footnote. For a revealing study of the implications of this response for political theory, see chapter four, "The Shift Toward Legitimate Desires in Neo-Confucianism," in Stephen Angle, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 74-100. Thanks to Youngsun Back and Sungmoon Kim for comments on this topic.

concern to avoid various forms of quietism or asceticism: errors many neo-Confucians, as noted earlier, claimed are characteristic of competing traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism. Cheng-Zhu Confucians themselves at times seem inclined toward such a view since they maintain that our physical embodiment in *qi* is the primary source of moral error.⁴⁸ Views like those proposed by Toegye and Ugye could be and at times were understood as implying that one should distance oneself from the world of *qi* and withdraw into the pure realm of *li*. Gobong and Yulgok's alternative, that the Four Sprouts are simply the normative aspect of the Seven Emotions, should be understood against the backdrop of this general neo-Confucian concern. In their view, the everyday emotions are not anathema to morality; to the contrary, they are central to it and at the core of the task of moral self-cultivation: the challenge was not to eliminate them but to bring them in line with principles.

In the next section, we turn to the contemporary relevance of the Four-Seven Debate. My primary aim will be to show why we still should be concerned with the kinds of issues explored by these Korean thinkers, and I will do so partly by showing that in many ways we *already* are concerned with similar problems, since important Western philosophers have grappled with the same kinds of issues. As part of my defense of the contemporary relevance of the Four-Seven Debate, I will sketch an alternative, less metaphysically laden, analysis of Toegye and Ugye's claim about the special status of the Four Sprouts.

⁴⁸ Later neo-Confucians in China, Korea, and Japan were to raise and prosecute this very line of criticism against the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. In China, Dai Zhen (戴震) (東源) (1724-1777) was the most prominent and sophisticated exponent of such criticisms while in Korea there was Jeong Yak-yong 丁若鏞 (Dasan 茶山) (1762-1836), and in Japan Itō Jinsai 伊藤 仁斎 (1627-1705). For Dai Zhen's views, see Justin Tiwald, "Dai Zhen on Human Nature and Moral Cultivation," in the *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, (2010): 399-422. For Dasan, see Mark Setton, *Chong Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), and for Itō Jinsai, see John Allen Tucker, *Itō Jinsai's Gomō jigi and the Philosophical Definition of Early Modern Japan*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998).

4. The Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate

There are at least two ways in which the Four-Seven Debate remains highly relevant for philosophy today and these are directly related to the two questions we have been exploring from a more historical perspective: (1) the nature of morality or *moral metaphysics* and (2) the nature and role of emotions in our moral lives or *moral psychology*.

In regard to moral metaphysics, the participants in the Four-Seven Debate sought to explain how the foundations of their morality, which seem to lie in a pure, disembodied realm of *li*, could be experienced and provide guidance and motivation for actual human beings, living in the physical realm of *qi*. As noted in the concluding remarks of the last section, neo-Confucians in general, but Cheng-Zhu Confucians in particular were haunted by one of the strongest criticisms they leveled against Buddhists and Daoists: that these ways of life inevitably led to quietism and asceticism, that they were impractical and ultimately selfish attempts to escape the moral challenges of human life. Cheng-Zhu moral metaphysics, with its emphasis on the purity of *li* and the problems created by *qi* seems to counsel a similar retreat from the hurly-burly world of human emotion and bodily needs and desires. If, as Toegye and Ugye insist, the Four Sprouts are fundamentally different from the Seven Emotions, this seems to cast the latter into the shadows and could quite naturally give rise to the idea that the physical, emotional aspects of human life are fundamentally corrupt and corrupting.

An important parallel can be drawn here with Aristotelian and Stoic views of the emotions. While Aristotle regarded the emotions as inferior to reason, he still saw an important role for them in the moral life. Stoics, on the other hand, regarded the emotions as errors, even going so far as to characterize them as a form of disease. As

a result, they advocated a conception of the ideal life that tended to cut them off not only from ordinary emotions but ordinary objects and people as well.⁴⁹ In contrast to such suspicion and outright condemnation of human emotion, the views of Gobong and Yulgok insist that our everyday emotions are not to be avoided or looked down upon, instead, they must be recognized as the core of moral cultivation. What we need to do is not eliminate but properly order and train them, so that they accord perfectly with principle and become expressions of the Four Sprouts.

A similar contrast can be found in the later Western debate between Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1225-74).⁵⁰ Like their neo-Confucian counterparts, these two Christian thinkers believed human nature in its original state (i.e. as created by God) is good.⁵¹ They also agreed, at least with one another, that after the fall, human nature is profoundly damaged and inclined toward evil; in this respect their views are not wholly unlike neo-Confucian views about the purity of our original nature and Dao Mind in contrast to the “precarious” and “error-prone” tendencies of our physical nature and human mind. Of course, neo-Confucians differ dramatically in many respects from both Christian thinkers; one of the most notable differences is the complete absence among the former of any correlate to grace and the related belief that human beings can, on their own, with enough effort of the right sort, attain the highest spiritual ideal.

Augustine and Aquinas part company with each other over other important issues, most famously, concerning the extent of the damage done through original sin.

⁴⁹ Thanks to Eric Hutton for pointing out this important comparative point.

⁵⁰ There are a number of different works, in Korean and English, comparing various Korean neo-Confucians with one or another of these Christian thinkers, but none that I know of argue for the similarities and differences presented here.

⁵¹ For groundbreaking comparative studies between these Christian philosophers and earlier Confucians, Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990) and Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

The former sees the damage as so severe, especially in regard to the will, that human beings have few resources within themselves through which they might understand the good, orient themselves properly, and move toward God. Their salvation lies in faith.⁵² This means they must make a sharp and decisive turn away from human needs and desires and not entertain the delusion that they can find the good within themselves. In this regard, Augustine's view is not wholly unlike those neo-Confucians who believed we need to distance ourselves from and strongly control everyday human emotions as we turn toward Heavenly principle, which is most directly and completely represented by the Four Sprouts.

While recognizing that human beings can never be saved without God's grace, Aquinas believed we possess at least *some* inclinations toward the good and that reason can help us understand the good and guide ourselves and each other toward God. While Augustine sees human desires and especially the will as corrupt and unreliable, Aquinas is more Aristotelian. The proper end of human beings is God but they have more resources within themselves—resources of course endowed by God—to understand God's laws and in light of such knowledge, to orient and train themselves to obey. Aquinas sees human nature as imperfect but disordered, and he believes human beings have both the abilities and obligation to understand and pursue the good as they make themselves ready for God's saving grace. Aquinas' emphasis on finding God's law within the disordered and often errant physical world, as well as his belief that our God-given reason enables us to see, if however dimly, the outlines

⁵² Early Protestant Reformers—most notably Luther and Calvin—were united by their concern to recover this Augustinian view of sanctification or salvation in their various programs for reforming the Church and developed even more severe versions of the Augustinian perspective. Ensuing debates over the relationship between faith and works in Christian theology became a focal point of disagreement between, as well as among, Protestant and Catholic theologians. Thanks to Michael R. Slater for these insights.

of His plan, makes his view more like the kind of position advocated by Gobong and Yulgok.

Neo-Confucian concerns about how moral principles are experienced and function in the actual world also resonate clearly with central aspects of Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) moral philosophy,⁵³ which of course inherits many of its problems and approaches from the earlier writings of Aristotle and the Stoics, as well as Augustine and Aquinas. One place we see a similar dichotomy and tension is in Kant's distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal realms and the ways in which these function within his moral theory. No matter how skillfully contemporary Kantians seek to distance themselves from Kant's moral metaphysics, it remains a challenge. Most often, problems associated with the distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal realms are treated in terms of its implications for moral motivation, and one could understand this as akin to neo-Confucian concerns with how a moral obligation is experienced or felt or, more specifically, how the power to override our more natural and spontaneous patterns of stimulus and response is experienced or felt.⁵⁴

Neo-Confucians tend to carve up the problems related to moral knowledge, motivation, and failure quite differently, often relying on modes or degrees of moral

⁵³ A number of Korean scholars have noted the similarity between neo-Confucian views about *li* and *qi* and Kant's noumenal and phenomenal realms, but none that I know of argue for the similarities and differences presented here.

⁵⁴ The importance this issue had for neo-Confucians can be seen in their common criticism of Xunzi as lacking the resources to explain how we can rise above the usual ways in which stimuli such as beautiful objects, seductive sounds, provocative words etc. elicit responses from us. These thinkers believed we need something that comes from beyond us in order to "master the mind" so that it maintains equanimity (*jing* 靜) and thus control even amidst the heat and noise of external enticements—for example, enabling us to maintain control of anger so that it is directed only at those who warrant anger and never at anyone else (see the quote from Cheng Hao above, cited in footnote #31). They looked to a Heavenly power coming from the "great root" in our original nature, drawing from sources such as the *Zhongyong* passage quoted above. This issue is insightfully analyzed by Justin Tiwald in "Xunzi among the Chinese Neo-Confucians," in Eric Hutton, ed., *The Dao Companion to Xunzi* (Dordrecht; London: Springer, Forthcoming, 2013). Thanks to Tiwald for helping me to understand and appreciate this important point.

knowledge as the basis for their analyses and explanations. One example is the widely invoked distinction between ordinary knowledge (*changzhi* 常知) and real knowledge (*zhenzhi* 真知): the former being knowledge about what morality requires while the latter is a vivid sense of one's moral obligation.⁵⁵ In any event, we here see thinkers from vastly different and unrelated traditions grappling with significantly similar sets of problems. The hope is that my brief remarks offer good reasons to consider further, more complete and systematic comparisons between these distinct yet related views.

Critics of Kant's moral theory worry that his type of approach generates a kind of moral schizophrenia or alienation as we struggle to reconcile what moral principles prescribe and our deepest moral values, feelings, or motivations.⁵⁶ Here too we see something akin to the neo-Confucian tension between *li* and *qi* or moral principles and emotions. Another place we see and feel this tension between the theoretical and practical aspects of morality is in Kantian inspired political philosophy. Thinkers such as Rawls and even more strongly Habermas develop their political philosophies upon ideals of rationality. These are not just ideals toward which we might aspire but forms of idealism: Rawls' public reason (at least on one influential interpretation) and Habermas' ideal speech community exist nowhere in the actual world and yet serve as foundational, normative standards in their respective theories.⁵⁷ It is not at all clear how these standards can guide as opposed to simply dictate actual conversations about values in the real world. Even more troubling is the question of why people who hold deep and intensely felt commitments to values or ways of life excluded by

⁵⁵ For these different forms of knowledge, see *Confucian Moral Self-cultivation*, pp. 62-3.

⁵⁶ Michael Stocker, "Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73.14 (1976): 453-66.

⁵⁷ The analysis provided here is drawn largely from Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); recently, Amartya Sen has advanced a similar line of criticism against what he refers to as "transcendental" theories of justice, such as that advanced by Rawls. See Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

such normative standards would or should ever agree to abandon all they feel (the world of *qi*) in order to follow what these principles (the world of *li*) command.

A second way in which the Four-Seven Debate remains relevant and highly pertinent to contemporary philosophy concerns how we might try to defend some of its claims about the nature and role of emotions in light of contemporary philosophy and empirical psychology. Among the first things to note in this regard is that the traditional Confucian list of emotions is quite close to what one highly influential contemporary psychologist, Paul Ekman, has argued is a list of six basic, universal emotions, all of which find standard expressions in different facial muscles.⁵⁸

Ekman’s list of emotions contains five out of the most traditional lists of Seven Emotions found in the Chinese tradition.

Paul Ekman	happiness	anger	sadness	fear	(null)	disgust	(null)	surprise
<i>Book of Rites</i>	<i>xi</i> 喜 happiness	<i>nu</i> 怒 anger	<i>ai</i> 哀 grief	<i>ju</i> 懼 fear	<i>a i</i> 愛 approval	<i>wu</i> 惡 dis-approval	<i>yu</i> 欲 desire	(null)
“What Master Yan Loved to Learn”	<i>xi</i> 喜 happiness	<i>nu</i> 怒 anger	<i>ai</i> 哀 grief	<i>le</i> 樂 joy	<i>a i</i> 愛 approval	<i>wu</i> 惡 disapproval	<i>yu</i> 欲 desire	(null)

In later work, Ekman expanded his list, including a variety of positive and negative emotions some of which are not biologically encoded in facial muscles.⁵⁹

The remarkable overlap between the traditional Chinese Seven Emotions and Ekman’s original list of six basic emotions itself is well worth further study, but let us

⁵⁸ Paul Ekman and W. V. Friesen, “The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage, and Coding,” *Semiotica*, 1 (1969): 49–98. It is important to appreciate the difference between what Ekman calls a “facial affect program” and “display rules.” The former are part of every normal person’s nervous system: this is what links the experience of certain basic emotions with the movement of particular facial muscles to produce a shared set of expressions. The latter concern culturally specific norms and practices for the *display* of emotion.

⁵⁹ Paul Ekman, “Basic Emotions,” in T. Dalgleish and M. Power, eds., *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd. 1999): 45-60.

turn to another issue that is more squarely and directly related to our concern with moral psychology.

Is there, as Toegye and Ugye insist, a systematic and significant difference between the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions, granting that all of these are in fact emotions? One plausible way one might draw such a distinction is between *other* and *self-regarding* emotions or, in terms closer to those used by neo-Confucians, emotions that tend to separate the self, morally, from others and those that tend to connect the self with others. The emotions identified as the Four Sprouts, as well as their corresponding virtues, i.e. “benevolence” (K: *in* Ch: *ren* 仁), “rightness” (K: *ui* Ch: *yi* 義), “ritual propriety” (K: *ye* Ch: *li* 禮), and “wisdom” (K: *ji* Ch: *zhi* 知), all involve emotional responses about how to treat or what we owe other people, creatures, or things. In contrast, the Seven Emotions of pleasure, anger, grief, fear (or joy), liking, disliking, and desiring are all concerned with the self and its needs, desires, and interests.⁶⁰ In more neo-Confucian terms, the four are focused on the moral interconnections between the self and the rest of the world: its people, creatures, and things. The seven are focused on *my* interests in these same people, creatures, and things.

Now neo-Confucians would insist that the distinction I am making is just another way of talking about the difference between *li* and *qi*. The former are the normative principles interrelating all the phenomena of the world; the latter is the basis for the physical things of the world, the material that forms but also separates one thing from another and inclines each conscious thing to mistakenly see itself as

⁶⁰ More evidence and argument is needed to flesh out and adequately support this general claim. Some might, for example, object that love and grief are other-directed emotions. While love and grief do depend on thoughts of another, they focus our attention on *our* desires and needs or loss and pain, respectively. In addition, they display a tendency to excess that is part of this general neo-Confucian picture (something that was an explicit concern of early Confucians and especially Xunzi). Thanks to Eric Hutton for raising this concern.

cut off from and morally unconnected to the rest of the world. The important point, though, is that whenever the Four are manifested, they represent and gesture toward an important moral principle. They do this even when their expression is inappropriate. We can see an example of this in *Mengzi* 1A7, when King Xuan spared the ox being led to ritual sacrifice. Now *Mengzi* surely did *not* think that oxen should *not* be used for such ceremonial purposes. Such *sacrifice* is an important constituent of the meaning of this as well as other rituals. A properly cultivated Confucian will feel sympathy for the ox while recognizing that the importance of the ritual requires its death. As Kongzi said in response to a similar situation in *Analects* 3.17, "...you care for the sheep; I care for the ritual!"⁶¹ Nevertheless, the stirring of the other-directed emotion of compassion, which King Xuan experienced, is a critical and fundamentally moral response, which makes it one of the Four Sprouts. The same cannot be said for any of the Seven Emotions. Typically, when they are aroused, they tend toward error and call out for control. In neo-Confucian terms, it is only when properly regulated by *li* that they attain proper moral expression.

As we saw earlier, Toegye makes this very point by quoting a passage from Cheng Hao,

Within the human mind, the thing most easily expressed and hardest to control is anger. But if when angered one can forget one's anger and contemplate what is right and wrong according to *li*, one will see that such external temptations are not worth hating⁶²

This is also what he seems to be saying in lines such as,

It's just that the Four Sprouts are expressions of principle,

⁶¹ For a penetrating and revealing analysis of this passage, see Richard Wollheim, "The Sheep and the Ceremony," in *The Mind and Its Depths*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 1-21.

⁶² See note #31 above.

which are followed by *qi*, while the Seven Emotions are expressions of *qi*, which are governed (literally: ridden) by principle.”⁶³

In Toegye’s terms, the four and seven are fundamentally connected to the difference between *li* and *qi* and their respective relationships to what is proper and improper. Toegye’s distinction makes a good deal of sense, and the sense remains even if we set aside his metaphysics and take up the perspective of contemporary moral psychology.

5. Conclusion

We have covered a great deal of ground, which has required us to pass over a number of important issues much too quickly and without the attention they call for and deserve. In conclusion, I would like to recall and review some of the most important points we have touched upon.

The main aims of this essay are to provide readers with a sense of why the Four-Seven Debate was significant to its Korean participants and remains significant for contemporary readers today, East or West. On the one hand, I have sought to identify some reasons why those involved in the Four-Seven Debate took it so seriously and were inspired to produce such a remarkable legacy, on the other hand, I have attempted to show how the debate relates to issues that have been explored by important thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition that still are important parts of contemporary moral metaphysics and psychology. Of course, in order to

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 480-1. Cf. *The Four-Seven Debate*, p. 65. It is revealing to appreciate how this statement of his position differs from Toegye’s earlier formulation (see the quote referenced by footnote #21). The later statement makes clear that both the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are combinations of *li* and *qi*, thus addressing and incorporating an early criticism made by Gobong. It also reflects the analogy both men used of a horse and its rider (see footnote #30). I take part of the point to be that while both the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions are combinations of *li* and *qi*, the former are more directly and intimately associated with *li* while the latter are more directly and intimately associated with *qi*.

pursue these two goals I had to say something about the nature of the Four-Seven Debate itself, and I endeavored to do this in as concise and focused a way possible.

My attempts to describe the Four-Seven Debate and what was at stake for those who participated in it might be understood as aiming to provide a map to this famous controversy, a map that highlights some of the reasons making a trip across this difficult terrain was thought well worth the effort by those who took it. My attempt to show how several of the issues at the heart of the debate find correlates in certain Western thinkers and remain issues that are actively being explored by contemporary philosophers and psychologists might be understood as seeking to build a bridge from the Korean context of the Four Seven Debate to its Western correlates and contemporary scholars.

In my brief introduction to neo-Confucian philosophy, I emphasized the importance of their metaphysical beliefs about the underlying unity or oneness of the world and the implications of such beliefs for their ethical philosophy. The interconnection between the self and the rest of the world leads neo-Confucian thinkers to feel a profound obligation and responsibility for all the people, creatures, and things of the world. Such an existential stance is a vital dimension of the neo-Confucian *weltanschauung*, and is of a piece with their commitment to public service and their ultimate goal of bringing peace and prosperity to all under heaven. To not care for all the world was to express a kind of moral paralysis; it was to “numb” or “unfeeling” to the suffering not only of others but in some deep sense of oneself.

Korean neo-Confucians on both sides of the Four-Seven Debate accepted all the general metaphysical claims discussed earlier as well as a strong belief that Confucianism offered a dramatic contrast to alternative ways of life such as Daoism and Buddhism. Whatever virtues these other systems of belief might have, from the

neo-Confucian perspective, they suffered from a fundamental tendency to flee from the world and escape the difficulties and pain that came with living in it. Because of this, neo-Confucians dismissed them as self-centered and selfish and held up their own Way as the sole moral alternative. Against this background, we can come to see important features of the Four Seven Debate in a new and revealing light. For neo-Confucians were challenged to explain how their metaphysical views could support their bold claims on behalf of their tradition. How do the pure and perfect moral *li* that serve as the foundation of their moral philosophy enter into and inform the actual physical world, the realm of *qi*, in which we live and what place do our everyday emotions have within this moral scheme?

These questions took even more poignant forms when neo-Confucians sought to reconcile their general metaphysical picture with their interpretations of classical teachings about the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions. The Four Sprouts were widely understood to be manifestations of underlying, fully formed moral senses supporting the four cardinal virtues of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom. As such, they were directly and intimately related to *li*. Nevertheless, like all actual phenomena, these feelings existed and operated through the medium of *qi* and in this respect, seemed to be like other, less explicitly moral, emotions, which are prone to error. As we have seen, this gave rise to a debate about the nature of the Four Sprouts and their relationship to the seven everyday emotions. At stake were a range of important differences in doctrine, attitude, and practice. If the Four Sprouts were not in some way special and distinctive emotions, this would make it more difficult to interpret certain canonical texts such as the *Mengzi* which seem to present them as special emotions, at the core of an ethical life. If, however, the Four Sprouts were associated too strongly with heavenly principle and contrasted too sharply with our

everyday emotions and the realm of *qi*, then neo-Confucians seem to encourage the same kind of withdrawal and asceticism they so vehemently criticized in Daoism and Buddhism.

In constructing a bridge between this Korean debate and Western philosophy, I sought to highlight some of the similarities we see between these neo-Confucian concerns and classic debates in the Western tradition. First, I pointed out the general similarity between the two sides of the debate and the difference between Aristotle and the Stoics in regard to the emotions as well as the contrast between Augustine and Aquinas about just how bad human nature became after the fall. The Stoics and Augustine are more closely allied with the Daoists and Buddhists who were so harshly criticized by neo-Confucians in that both these traditions distrust and turn away from the all-too-human world (though of course, for radically different reasons and in dramatically different ways).⁶⁴ Aristotle and Aquinas seem closer to neo-Confucians, especially those who sought to find the thread of heavenly principle here in the world and use this to make progress along the Way, though of course Aquinas would be mortified that neo-Confucians thought they could accomplish this without the help of God's grace. I went on to point out that a version of the core tension between the ideal world of *li* and the phenomenal world of *qi* is also found at the heart of Kant's moral theory and more recent political philosophies inspired by Kant. This same tension seems to haunt a number of Western moral theories, within which it is difficult to reconcile the demands these theories impose with the motivations provided by many of our commitments and values.

⁶⁴ An interesting difference between these groups of thinkers is that Stoics and Christians contributed in significant ways to developing theories of ethics and government that provided the basis for later political and ethical policies, while Daoism and Buddhism had much less direct and significant influence, at least on later Chinese politics. Thanks to Aaron Stalnaker for raising this issue.

I noted as well, without argument or comment, that there is significant similarity between the traditional Chinese list of Seven Emotions and Paul Ekman's set of basic human emotions. My aim here was simply to note this fact and urge those interested in the comparative psychology of the emotions to take up this issue and pursue more extensive textual and experimental research. Such work has the potential to contribute significantly to fields such as psychology, philosophy, and anthropology and would either support or perhaps lay to rest a number of claims about the roles of biology and culture in the construction and expression of human emotions in general and moral emotions in particular.⁶⁵

I concluded the section on the contemporary relevance of the Four-Seven Debate by suggesting that we can distinguish the Four Sprouts from the Seven Emotions in ways that do not require appeal to neo-Confucian metaphysics. Specifically, the former all seem to concern other-directed emotions, while the latter all are more squarely focused on the individual self and its needs. This less metaphysical account can be understood either as an alternative to or further support for traditional neo-Confucian beliefs. While a modern reconsideration, based on this characterization of the Four Sprouts and Seven Emotions, might well lead us to modify or qualify the distinction between them, the contrast between other and self-directed emotions seems to support a fundamental difference between these two sets of emotions and the further point that the former have a more direct and immediate connection to morality. Such an observation is only the first move in what might prove to be an extremely productive and revealing line of inquiry and one that already finds clear precedent among Western philosophers and psychologists. Thinkers like Adam Smith (1723-90) and David Hume (1711-76) and more recently Michael Slote

⁶⁵ For a clear and incisive discussion of the debate about the roles of biology and culture in regard to the emotions, see Ron Mallon and Stephen P. Stich, "The Odd Couple: The Compatibility of Social Construction and Evolutionary Psychology," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): 133-54.

all have argued for the moral primacy of certain emotions, or more precisely something like the single emotional capacity of sympathy or empathy.⁶⁶ In different ways, these three Western philosophers would interpret the four sprouts as different expressions or applications of the human capacity or inclination for empathy or sympathy; this marks but one of many differences between their family of views and what we find among Confucians. Nevertheless, all these thinkers, as well as a number of prominent psychologists, primatologists, and neuroscientists,⁶⁷ in one way or another, not only believe that certain emotions are more directly and intimately connected with our perception and appreciation of morality but also that these serve as the foundation or basis for morality. Here we return to our two central concerns about the Four-Seven Debate and find intriguing and important philosophical topics calling out for further exploration.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ In fact they hold different views in this regard; all I am suggesting here is a family resemblance among their theories. For Smith, see his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Hume, see Book Three of his *Treatise on Human Nature* and *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. For Slote, see his, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, (London: Routledge, 2007) and *Moral Sentimentalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Lou Shirong has argued for a sentimentalist reading of early Confucians as well. See his, “A Defense of Ren-Based Interpretation of Early Confucianism,” in *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theories and Applications*, Yu Kam-por and Julia Tao, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., (SUNY Press, October 2010): 123-43.

⁶⁷ For example, see Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, Reprint, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2000) and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁶⁸ One such issue, worthy of much more thorough and careful investigation, connects up with the earlier references made to “oneness” in both neo-Confucian philosophy and contemporary psychology. The primacy of other-directed emotions can be seen as supporting the oneness theory of moral motivation as an alternative to views about sympathy or empathy. According to the oneness theory, we feel sympathy or empathy *because* we feel a sense of oneness with the group or collective. Thanks to David Tien for raising this point.