Moral Metaphysics and Moral Psychology of Korean Neo-Confucianism: Explanation of the Moral Mind and Emotion in the Four-Seven Debate

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Abstract

The paper discusses the philosophical conflict of the Four-Seven Debate (사단칠정논쟁, 四端七情論爭) in the Chosŏn (朝鮮) dynasty Korea. The Debate reveals the philosophical difficulty of the Cheng-Zhu (程朱) Neo-Confucianism on the matters of the moral mind and moral emotions. Specifically, the li-qi (理氣) metaphysics of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism could not provide adequate explanation of why and how certain emotions (the Four Emotions 四端) are intrinsically good while others (the Seven Feelings 七情) are only contingently good. The root cause of this philosophical difficulty (i.e., developing a viable form of Neo-Confucian moral psychology that can explain both the goodness and the evilness of the mind and the difference between the Four and the Seven) lies in the comprehensive or integrative orientation of Neo-Confucian moral metaphysics. Specifically, the teleological, integrative, and generative explanation of li-qi metaphysics makes it very difficult to explain the contrastive and discrete distinctions (good/evil and the Four Emotions/the Seven Feelings) in moral philosophy and moral psychology. This paper interprets the Four-Seven Debate from the perspective of the philosophical effort made by the Korean philosophers to develop an adequate explanation of the moral emotions in the Four-Seven Debate and to overcome the inherent philosophical difficulty of the li-qi metaphysics.

Keywords: The Four-Seven Debate, Korean Neo-Confucianism, Li-Qi Metaphysics, Moral Metaphysics, Moral Psychology

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Introduction

Classical Confucian texts such as the Mencius (孟子 2A6, 6A6), the Doctrine of the Mean (中庸, first chapter), and the Book of Rites (禮記, chapter of Yiyun 禮運), categorize affective states of the mind with different sets of emotions. Among these, the two sets of emotions are frequently discussed by Confucian philosophers in the following centuries. The first set of emotions are called the Four Emotions (四端, siduan/sadan, the four intrinsically moral emotions, such as the emotions of pity/compassion (側隱), shame/dislike (羞惡), deference/reverence (辭讓) and moral approval/disapproval (是非) discussed by Mencius) that are intrinsically good. The second set of emotions are called the Seven Feelings (七情) listed in the Book of Rites (禮記) such as joy, anger, grief, fear, love, hate, and desire (喜怒愛懼哀惡欲) that are morally contingent. The Seven Feelings can be good or evil depending on their circumstances. Since they have different moral psychological characteristics, the distinction between the two was generally acknowledged and explained by Chinese Neo-Confucian philosophers such as Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130 – 1200). Korean Neo-Confucians, however, raised deeper philosophical questions about the moral psychological natures of the two sets of emotions. They discussed if the distinction can be fully and systematically explained and justified by the Neo-Confucian li-qi metaphysics (i.e., explanation of the reality of the universe through the interaction between the two cosmic elements, li(理, the governing order and pattern of the universe) and qi(氣, the dynamic force and energy in the process of change and transformation in the universe) developed by Chinese philosophers in the Song dynasty. They debated whether the diverse functions of the li and qi can systematically and consistently explain the intrinsic moral emotions (the Four Emotions 四端) and the morally contingent emotions (the Seven Feelings, 七情).2

In this paper, I will discuss how the Korean Neo-Confucians such as T’oegye, Uge, Kobong, and Yulgok discussed whether the morally specific or morally dedicated emotions (the Four Emotions) are different from the morally neutral or morally contingent emotions (the Seven Feelings).3 As I will explain in the following sections, Neo-Confucianism has a

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1 They are pity/compassion, shame/disgust, deference/reverence, approval/disapproval (Mencius), joy, anger, sorrow, pleasure (the Doctrine of the Mean) and joy, anger, grief, fear, love, hate, desire (the Book of Rites). In addition, Xunzi (Xunzi, Zhengming Chapter) lists six emotions (like, dislike, joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure).

2 See Huh Nam Jin, Li and Qi philosophy in the Early Joseon Period, (Seoul Korea: Seoul National University, Institute of Philosophy, 2004) and Kim Young Woo, Philosophy of Nature and Mind in Early Joseon Period, (Seoul Korea: Seoul National University, Institute of Philosophy, 2004) for general explanation of Korean Neo-Confucianism in the early Chosŏn period.

peculiar philosophical orientation: It explains the distinctive and contrastive moral properties of good and evil in the mind and its emotions through its generative (i.e., understanding change as the process of constructive realization of an underlying foundation), integrative (i.e., the tendency to combine conflicting processes into the holistic unity), and teleological (i.e., the presence of the goal directedness in the universe set out by an original foundation) viewpoint. ⁴ If everything in the universe derives from and comes down to the same ultimate foundation of the goodness of the Supreme Ultimate (taiji 太極), explaining good and evil as the two independent and contrastive moral properties is very difficult. It is also difficult to distinguish the ideal moral nature and the contingent psychological nature of emotions, which the Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers struggled to explain in the Four-Seven Debate.

In the following sections, I will discuss the Korean Neo-Confucians’ effort to provide a philosophical explanation of the moral goodness of the heart-mind (心), the nature (性), and the emotions (四端七情). I will start by explaining the philosophical orientation of the Cheng-Zhu school’s Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Then, I will analyze how Korean Neo-Confucians explain morally intrinsic (i.e., morally distinct, or morally specialized) and morally unspecific emotions within the philosophical framework of the Neo-Confucian li-qi metaphysics. Specifically, I will explain the tension between Neo-Confucian metaphysics and the moral psychology of the Four Emotions (the Four hereafter) and the Seven Feelings (the Seven hereafter) through the lens of the philosophical integration of the ideal morality and the psychological reality of the moral emotions. ⁵ I will argue that the philosophical conflict developed and articulated in the Four-Seven Debate, although the debate failed to develop any satisfying consensus, reveals both the philosophical limitation of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism on the matters of moral goodness in the mind and the Korean Neo-Confucians’ philosophical attempt to explain the fundamental conditions of good and evil in the Confucian heart-mind (心). The reason the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism is limited in its explanation of the mind and its moral nature is not because it is imperfect or incoherent but because it provides an overly integrative and comprehensive explanation of moral goodness of the mind that combines the three distinct sets of properties: metaphysical properties (properties about what things truly are), moral properties (properties about what

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⁴ The philosophical limitation here means using indiscrete (holistic or inclusive) notions such as li  and qi  to explain discrete and exclusive distinctions such as the distinction between the Four and the Seven. Lee Chan, “A Rethinking of the Four-Seven Debate: Critical Approach to the Fact-Value Framework and Moral Naturalism”, Journal of Toegye Studies (退溪學報), 125 (2009), 47-92 and Lee Dong Hee, “Philosophical Aporia of Zhu Xi’s Thought in the Joseon Dynasty”, Eastern Philosophy (東洋哲學), 32 (2009), 125-148 point out the similar limitations or peculiarities of Neo-Confucianism, i.e., moral naturalism or naturalistic moralism through the intricate distinction and integration of good and evil in the li-qi metaphysics. The philosophical limitation here means using indiscrete (holistic or integrative) notions such as li  and qi  to explain discrete distinctions such as the distinction between the Four and the Seven.

⁵ In a similar vein, Hong, “The Dissolution of the Four-Seven Debate” interprets the Four-Seven Debate as the process of the unification or integration of the foundation of goodness.
things should be or become) and psychological properties (properties of the affective state of the mind).

Neo-Confucian Metaphysics and Moral Psychology

Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130 – 1200) the two major Chinese Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Song dynasty, explain the nature of the mind, morality, and the generative processes of the universe through the activity of li, qi and their intricate interplay. The li-qi metaphysics refers to this general metaphysical framework where the universe and its myriad objects and properties are explained by the intricate interactivity between li and qi. The li-qi metaphysics has the following philosophical characteristics. First, li is one but it can be related or applied to many different things (理一分殊). According to a famous Neo-Confucian analogy, li is compared to the moon: the moon is one but it is reflected in many different rivers and lakes (月映萬川). Like the singularity of the moon reflecting on many rivers, the universal penetration of the cosmic order (li) in the universe is the first metaphysical foundation of Neo-Confucianism. It is important to note, however, that li is not an abstract and transcendental entity such as a Platonic form, but an inherent and generative pattern or resonance residing in individual objects, their properties, and their environments. That is, the governing order of Neo-Confucian universe is universal but not transcendental.

Second, li does not have tangible forms (無形), i.e., not bound by particular forms, shapes, or physical conditions of a local environment. Nor is it bound by physical and spatial activities or functions. It is called wuwei/muwii (無為), i.e., lacking particular physical actions and processes. It is the holistic coherence and universal (but immanent) pattern of the

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8 See Zhu Xi after him.”

9 Yulgok, for example, distinguishes li and qi on the basis of wuwei/muwii (無為) and muhyŏng (無形) (無形...氣有形也氣無為也氣有為也). Yi Yulgok, Yulgok Chŏnsŏ (栗谷全書), (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan University Taedongmunhwa Yŏng'gwŏn Press, 1960), Tapsŏnghowŏn栗谷全書 I.10, 10, and 11, please note that wuwei/muwii (無為) does not mean that li is completely inert and inactive. Nor does it refer to the Daoist notion of spontaneous action. In this Neo-Confucian context, wuwei/muwii means not being involved with causal processes or not being limited by the local and physical conditions of the world. Since li is global coherence and penetrating pattern, it is not bound by the functions or processes of particular contexts or environments. See Ahn Jae-ho, “The Significance of Toegye’s Theory on ‘Manifestation of Principle’”, Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 41 (2015), 114–129, Kim Sung Won, “A Reconsideration of the Mutual Issuance Theory in Yi Toegye’s Neo-Confucianism”, Philosophy East & West, 65-2 (2015), 582–603, Lee Seung-Hwan, “Toegye’s Conception of Li (理) Explained from the Theory of Supervenience”, Eastern Philosophy (東洋哲学) 34 (2010): 191-237, and Mun Seok-yun, “On the Meanings of Manifestation of Li, Li in Motion, and Initiation by Li for Toegye: The Issue of Activity of Li”, Journal of Toegye Studies (退溪學報), 110 (2001), 161-201 for different interpretations of the inactivity (wuwei) of li.
universe. Therefore, *li* is often characterized as something above the form (*形而上*), i.e., being above or beyond the physicality and locality of individual objects and their properties.

Third, since *li* is the governing order of the universe, it represents the true and original nature of things, i.e., what things truly are and what they should ideally become. That is, *li* refers to the essential nature of things and their purity and goodness. *Qi*, on the other hand, refers to the concrete, local, dynamic, and physical side of the universe. It is the material force or energy behind the uneven and diverging tendencies and activities of physical objects and their local properties.\(^\text{10}\) It takes material forms/shapes, serves their physical functions, and stimulates the diversifying forces of the universe.\(^\text{11}\) For this reason, *li*, as the governing order of the universe, represents the defining nature of moral goodness but *qi* represents variable and contingent reality that can be good or evil depending on its contexts or environment.\(^\text{12}\)

Fourth, the Neo-Confucian universe is generative and teleological. It is changing, growing, and expanding to realize its inherent nature. It exists in a continuously growing and generative process that consists of the complex interaction among myriad things. Everything derives from the unifying foundation of the universe and exists in the continuous process of interactive self-realization. According to Zhou Dunyi’s (周敦頤, 1017–1073) metaphysical scheme illustrated in his *Taijitushuo* (太極圖說, *The Illustrative Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*), the Neo-Confucian universe comes to exist by such foundational elements or forces as *taiji* (太極), *li* (理), *qi* (氣), *yin* (陰), *yang* (陽), and *wuxing* (五行). These different layers of existence derive from and reflect the built in goodness of the ultimate foundation of *taiji* (太極). That is, the Neo-Confucian universe has the holistic identity in its generative and teleological nature. The whole universe is a living organism growing from the seed of *taiji* (太極) and guided by the pervasive goodness deriving from *taiji* (太極). Therefore, the Neo-Confucian universe is inclusive and integrative. Conflicting details of individual events and objects are contextualized.

Fifth, in this generative and teleological universe, the interactivity of *li* and *qi* is critically important. Although *li* and *qi* are the two different or contrastive foundations of the universe, they always interact with each other in myriad things and their generative processes in the universe. According to the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, *li* and *qi* are distinct but not separable (不相雜不相離): their natures and identities are different but they work together in every object and property in the world. Through the interaction between *li* and *qi*, therefore, Neo-Confucian philosophers explain all the properties of the universe including those of the mind and morality, good and evil, the Four (四端) and the Seven (七情). However, the cosmic interactivity of *li* and *qi* often glosses over the discrete and intricate differences or distinctions such as the one between the Four and the Seven.

It is unclear whether the interactivity of *li* and *qi* can explain consistently and unambiguously the two distinct properties, i.e., the moral and the psychological properties.

\(^{10}\) Ivanhoe, “Historical Significance”, 418 provides a concise description of *li* and *qi*. *Li* is “the normative principle interrelating all the phenomena of the world,” but *qi* 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 cut off from and morally unconnected to the rest of the world.”


\(^{12}\) See Wong Wai-Ying, “Morally Bad in the Philosophy of the Cheng Brothers”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 36-1 (2009), 149. He states that “…according to the Cheng Brothers [Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi] the sources of moral badness lie in the native endowment of *qi*, the body, and the inherent desires of human beings.”
of the mind and emotions. For example, if li and qi are everywhere, involved with everything in the universe, why is li exclusively or closely related to goodness but qi is closely related to evilness? Specifically, in the context of the Four-Seven Debate, this question presents a puzzling philosophical conundrum. Why are some emotions good but others are evil if all emotions come from the same foundation (li, qi, and ultimately taijī 太極) of the universe? In fact, there is a more pressing question. A moral emotion such as ceyinzhixin/ch’ŭkŭnjishim (惻隱之心), the Confucian heart-mind of pity and compassion, discussed in the book of Mencius (2A6, 6A6) is moral (i.e., a li-governed state) but, at the same time, an aroused (i.e., a qi-activated) state of the mind. Is it purely good (exclusively governed by li) or only contingently good as an aroused (a qi-activated) state of the mind? If the moral categories (good/evil) and metaphysical categories (li/qi) are correlated and integrated in the inclusive metaphysical framework of Neo-Confucian, it is very difficult to focus on and explain the moral goodness of ceyinzhixin/ch’ŭkŭnjishim under the governing order of li independently of the qi-activated psychological arousal. The goodness of ceyinzhixin/ch’ŭkŭnjishim seems to be incompatible with its contingent psychological arousal (potentially evil) yet they coexist in the mind as a moral emotion because of the interactivity of li and qi. How is that possible? How can one explain this intricate combination of the pure goodness of li and the possibility of evil by qi, in the same moral emotion of ceyinzhixin/ch’ŭkŭnjishim? The Four-Seven Debate reveals the philosophical difficulty of explaining the moral goodness of the mind under the li-qi metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism.

The Four-Seven Debate

The Four-Seven Debate (사단칠정논쟁, 四端七情論爭(1559–1572), a philosophical debate about the moral psychological nature of the four intrinsically moral emotions and the seven morally contingent emotions listed in the classical Confucian texts) is one of the major philosophical debates in Korean Neo-Confucianism in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). Many papers have been published and its line of argumentation have been analyzed along the concepts of li, qi, the original nature (本然之性, the nature that a thing is born and defined with), the qi-affected nature (氣質之性, individually and locally conditioned nature), the balance and harmony (中節, the well-organized original states of the mind and their dynamic integration). However, a relatively small number of papers have been published to discuss the metaphysical background (the li-qi metaphysics of the Song Neo-Confucianism) and its broad philosophical implications (moral philosophy, moral psychology, moral realism and constructivism, self-cultivation, virtue ethics etc.). In the following sections, I will conduct such an analysis, an analysis of the foundational or philosophical issues of the Four-Seven Debate, through the notions of good, evil, the mind, and emotion. If the foundation of the Four-Seven Debate is the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, the debate inherits the general metaphysical foundation and the conceptual framework from the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. If the Four-Seven Debate runs into a deep philosophical trouble in explaining the distinct moral psychological natures of the Four (the four intrinsically moral emotions) and the Seven (the seven morally contingent emotions)

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13 A statistical study of Korean philosophy shows that T’oegye and Yulgok, the two major philosophers in the Four-Seven Debate, are the most studied philosophers in Korea along with Wonhyo and Chŏng Yakyong. See Huh Nam Jin, “Trend and Future of the Eastern Philosophy at the Reception Period of the Western Philosophy - Statistical Analysis”, Philosophical Thought (哲學思想), 5 (1995), 175-190.

it is worthwhile to investigate the root cause of the philosophical trouble at the foundation. i.e., the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism (specifically in its 里-氣 metaphysics). The root cause of the philosophical difficulty, as I discuss in this paper, is the overly inclusive approach of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism to the nature of moral goodness of the affective state of the mind. Simply the 里-氣 metaphysics of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism is too inclusive and integrative to analyze and explain the discrete moral nature of the mind and its emotion that is distinctively different from other non-moral properties (such as nature, harmony, balance, etc. along with the more fundamental processes driven by the Supreme Ultimate, 員-陽, 里-氣, 物性) discussed in the Neo-Confucian philosophy. That is, good/evil and the Four/Seven have clear boundaries and distinctions (or at least this is intended by the Korean Neo-Confucians) but 里 and 氣, often, have a more interactive, integrative, and vague boundary. For instance, good is different/separate from evil and the Four is different/separate from the Seven but 里 is different from but not necessarily separate from 氣. (According to the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian metaphysics, 里 and 氣 are distinct (不相雜) but inseparable (不相離).) Because of the inclusiveness and the integration of 里 and 氣 in the Neo-Confucian universe, developing and explaining sharp and discrete moral distinctions such as good/evil and right/wrong are deeply challenging tasks in Neo-Confucianism. To make the matters worse, if one adds another layer (i.e., the layer of the mind) to this, one can see a formidable philosophical challenge. Explaining the moral goodness of the mind and moral emotions, specifically with the 里-氣 metaphysics is even more challenging as one can see in the Four-Seven Debate.

Perhaps, the best way to understand the philosophical success and failure of the Four-Seven Debate and its philosophical foundation, i.e., the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, is to understand the complexity and the integration of the multi-layered or multi-dimensional structure of the 里-氣 metaphysics featured in the explanation of good/evil and the Four/Seven in the Four-Seven Debate. In this section, I will briefly summarize the Four-Seven Debate and, in the following section, I will analyze the three different threads or dimensions of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and identify the underlying cause of the difficulty in explaining the moral nature of the mind and emotion.

The Four-Seven Debate is a moral psychological debate on the nature of the two sets of emotions listed in the Confucian classics specifically in the 孟子 and the Book of Rites. The major point of conflict in the Four-Seven Debate is whether and how the Four are intrinsically different from the Seven. If the Four are morally specific emotions but the Seven are morally contingent, then the uniqueness of the Four in comparison to the Seven would be the intrinsic moral goodness of the Four.\(^\text{15}\) If the distinct nature of the Four, in contrast to the Seven, lies in the former’s intrinsic moral goodness, the investigation of the former would

15 To be specific, the Four refers to Mencius’s four beginnings (四端 the four moral sprouts) and the Seven refers to the seven emotions (七情) in the Book of Rites. For full explanation and analysis of the Four-Seven Debate see Ahn Young-sang, “A Study on the Joseon Neo-Confucian’s Four-Seven Debate, Comparing it with the Yangming School’s Debate about Equilibrium in the Meditation and Harmony in the Practice”, Studies of Folk Culture (民族文化硏究) 51 (2009a), 615-653. Ahn Young-sang, “An Exploration on Zhu Xi’s the Theory of Mind’s Consolidating Nature and the Emotions for Understanding Four-Seven Debate”, Study of Philosophy and Culture (精神文化硏究) 32-4 (2009b), 281-308.

constitute the investigation of the intrinsic and pure goodness of the mind. Can the moral nature of the mind be explained by the Four’s distinctive moral psychological character in contrast to the Seven? Specifically, can the difference between the Four and the Seven and the intrinsic goodness of the mind be explained consistently by the Neo-Confucian li-qi metaphysics?

T’oegye (退溪, Yi Hwang, 李滉 1501 - 1570), who started the debate, argues that the Four and the Seven are fundamentally different emotions. T’oegye believes that the Four is different from the Seven because the former is intrinsically moral and deeply rooted in the governing order of li. While, the Seven can become good, they become only accidentally or contingently good. The Seven’s goodness cannot be their intrinsic nature because they can become evil. Li is also involved in the Seven, it does not exclusively or intrinsically contribute to the generation of the Seven. T’oegye states that:

…although the neither of the two (the Four and the Seven) is separable from principle (li) and material force (qi), on the basis of their point of origin, each points to a predominant factor and emphasis, so there is no reason why we cannot say that the one (the Four) is a matter of principle (li) and the other a matter (the Seven) of material force (qi).

Against T’oegye’s li-centered interpretation of the moral emotions, Kobong (高峯, Ki Taesŭng 奇大升, 1527 - 1572) focuses on the qi’s activity in the moral emotions. He argues that the Four and the Seven are not essentially different because they are all emotions: they are all aroused states of the mind caused by qi. According to him, it is wrong to believe that the Four are the only moral emotions because the Seven can become good through self-cultivation and balanced regulation of emotional arousal. It is also wrong to argue that the Four are caused (jalbal 發) by li: li does not have causal efficacy. He points out that T’oegye’s ibal (理發 being activated or caused by li) is not compatible with Zhu Xi’s distinction between li and qi: li does not have any material form nor does it assume any physical efficacy. Li is beyond the form (形而上) and devoid of physical action (無為) that is completely bound by physical functions and their local operations because li serves the global coherence and the governing pattern of diversely different things. Kobong states that:

The two (li and qi) are certainly distinct, but when it comes to their presence in actual things, they are certainly mixed together and cannot be separated. It’s just that principle (li) is weak while material force (qi) is strong; principle (li) has no concrete sign, but material force (qi) is physically in evidence.

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16 Kalton, The Four-Seven Debate, 11.
17 The first view is called Kobong’s kongbal theory (共發, common arousal by qi) and the second view is called his chungchŏl (中節) and puchungchŏl (不中節) theory.
18 Kalton, The Four-Seven Debate, 6. Also see Yulgok’s reply to Ugye’s sixth letter in Kalton, The Four-Seven Debate, 175.
According to Kobong, even though $li$ works with $qi$ to provide orderly existence and dynamic changes in the world, $li$ does not have any causal efficacy.\footnote{From a less metaphysical but more morally relevant viewpoint, see Ivanhoe, “Historical Significance”, 420.} If all emotions are aroused states of the mind, they are all $qi$-activated or $qi$-affected states. Then, the Four and the Seven are not really different. The conflicting views of T’oegeye and Kobong reveal the inherent vagueness of the $li$-$qi$ metaphysics in its application to the Four and the Seven, which I will discuss in the following sections.

**Three Layers of the Neo-Confucian Heart-Mind**

To understand the philosophical significance of the Four-Seven Debate, it is important to see how the three different philosophical dimensions of Neo-Confucianism are utilized in the explanation of the moral nature of the Confucian heart-mind. First, the debate discusses the moral psychological distinction between the Four and the Seven: how and why are the Four different from the Seven? T’oegeye and Ugye (牛溪 1535 – 1598, Seong Hon, 成渾) believe that the Four and the Seven are different sets of emotions. The former is intrinsically moral, but the latter is not. However, Kobong and Yulgok (栗谷 1536-1584 Yi 李珥) believe, from the perspective of $qi$’s activity in the arousal of emotion, that the Four and the Seven are basically the same: they are all affectively aroused states of the mind.\footnote{T’oegeye and Ugye developed similar ideas of the Four and the Seven. Their view is often characterized as the $li$ school of Korean Neo-Confucianism that emphasizes the $li$-guided moral nature of the Four. Kobong and Yulgok, on the other hand, developed a different viewpoint often characterized as the $qi$-school of Korean Neo-Confucianism that empathizes the common psychological nature of the Four and the Seven. Therefore, the Four-Seven Debate is, often simplistically, described as the philosophical conflict between the $li$ school (T’oegeye/Ugye) and the $qi$ school (Kobong/Yulgok).}

Second, to explain the distinction between the Four and the Seven, the debate explores whether the Four and the Seven are aligned with the moral distinction between good and evil: Is the Four the foundation of good but the Seven the source of evil? T’oegeye and Ugye believe that the Four are morally good but the Seven can be evil. The Four represents the pure goodness of the mind but the Seven represents the possibility of evil. The former is intrinsically good, but the latter is only contingently or accidentally good. Kobong and Yulgok, however, believe that both the Four and the Seven are emotions aroused by $qi$’s activity. According to them, the Four and the Seven have different moral characteristics but they are not fundamentally different.

Third, ultimately, the moral goodness of the mind, its aroused states (emotions), and the distinction between the Four and the Seven are all related to the activity of $li$ and $qi$ in the Neo-Confucian universe. If everything in this universe, according to Neo-Confucian cosmology, comes out of the differential (不相離, mutual distinction) but integrative combination (不相離, mutual non-separation) of $li$ and $qi$, the moral psychological nature of the mind should be explained by the same process, i.e., the generative interactivity of $li$ and $qi$. However, T’oegeye-Ugye and Kobong-Yulgok developed different interpretations of how $li$ and $qi$ give rise to the Four-Seven and good-evil, in their theories of $fal-bal$ (發, causation, generation, manifestation, or issuance).\footnote{Yoo Weon-ki, “A Philosophical Analysis of the Concept “Fal/Fa 發” in the Four-Seven Debate between Toegye and Gobong”, *Korea Journal*, 52-2 (2012), 92 – 115 explains different meanings of $fal-bal$ 發.} T’oegeye developed $hobal$ (互發, the alternate
causation of the Four and the Seven by *li* and *qi* theory and Kobong developed *kongbal* (共發, the common causation of the Four and the Seven by (both) *li* and *qi*) theory to explain how *li* and *qi* contribute to the goodness and evilness of the Four and the Seven. The *Hobal* theory argues for the alternating (i.e., differential) involvement, whereas the *kongbal* theory focuses on the uniform involvement of *li* and *qi* in the moral and psychological properties of the Four and the Seven.

The key philosophical point of the Four-Seven Debate, therefore, is whether these three dimensions can correlate with one another so that the different moral psychological natures of the Four and the Seven can be explained within the consistent framework of the Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Can the moral psychological distinction (the Four vs the Seven) be explained by the moral distinction (good vs evil), and the metaphysical distinction (*li* vs *qi*)? That is, can the three dimensions be correlated, and can their integration explain the moral psychological distinction between the Four and the Seven? If the answer is positive, the moral goodness of the mind and its emotions can be integrated into and explained by the Neo-Confucian metaphysics and its correlative alignment between the Four/good/*li* and the Seven/evil/*qi*.

If one realizes, however, the incompatibility or misalignment among the three dimensions (as the Korean Neo-Confucians did in the Four-Seven Debate) and still attempts to explain the Four and the Seven, one has basically two options: (1) rejecting the Neo-Confucian *li*-*qi* metaphysics and explaining the Four and the Seven purely from the moral psychological viewpoint without bringing any metaphysical theories or (2) accepting the Neo-Confucian *li*-*qi* metaphysics and explaining the Four and the Seven with the available combinations of *li*, *qi*, nature (性), and the mind (心). The Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Four-Seven Debate (as followers of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism) chose the latter option and explained the difference between the Four and the Seven with the diverse metaphysical distinctions available in Neo-Confucian *li*-*qi* metaphysics. For example, they used the *li*-derived original nature (本然之性, *benranzhixing/bonyŏnchisŏng*, the intrinsic and innate nature of human being and the human mind) and the *qi*-affected nature (氣質之性, *qizhizhixing/kichilchisŏng*, the nature of the human being understood by *qi*’s activity in a given environment) to explain the difference between the Four and the Seven. That is, the Four are the emotions derived from the original nature of the human being but the Seven are the emotions derived from the *qi*-affected nature. Things derive from the original nature are inherently good, but things derive from the *qi*-affected nature can be contingently good or evil.

Korean Neo-Confucians in the Chosŏn dynasty continued to discuss the two forms of nature (*xing/sŏng* 性) in their philosophical discussions, but the two do not seem to capture the distinction between the Four and the Seven. Since both the original nature and the *qi*-affected nature derive from the same foundational nature (性), the distinction between the two shows only minor or perspectival difference. If the goal of the Four-Seven Debate is to explain the substantial difference between the Four and the Seven, the two forms of nature,

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22 See Seok Bongrae, “The Four–Seven Debate of Korean Neo-Confucianism and the Moral Psychological and Theistic Turn in Korean Philosophy”, *Religions*, 9-374 (2018), 1-15. Seok explains the correlation and the conflict between *li/good/Four* and *qi/evil/Seven* in the Four-Seven Debate. The current paper, however, focuses on the broad conflict among metaphysics (*li,qi*), moral philosophy (good, evil) and moral psychology (the Four and the Seven) in the Song Neo-Confucianism that resulted in the philosophical difficulty of the Four-Seven Debate.

23 See Seok, “The Four-Seven Debate of Korean Neo-Confucianism” for the full discussion of the incompatibility among the moral, the moral psychological and the metaphysical dimensions of Neo-Confucianism.
(because they are not substantially different) do not explain the substantial moral difference between the Four and the Seven.  

Although the second option is the only way to maintain their Neo-Confucian identity (the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism), the Korean Neo-Confucians quickly realized that they had to deal with the philosophical difficulty of explaining the discrete and contrastive moral psychological distinction between the Four and the Seven with the inclusive and integrative Neo-Confucian terms. That is, they needed to develop Neo-Confucian explanation of the moral goodness of the mind with the inclusive and often indiscrete interactions of *li* and *qi*. The difficulty, however, is that the clear and sharp moral (good/evil) and moral psychological (the Four and the Seven) distinctions are not fully and consistently correlated with the broad and interactive nature of *li* and *qi*. Simply speaking, if the Four comes out of *li* and *qi*, and the Seven comes out of *li* and *qi*, then what is the difference between the Four and the Seven? 

The ultimate cause of this philosophical difficulty (i.e., developing a viable form of Neo-Confucian moral psychology that can explain the intrinsic goodness of the mind and the difference between the Four and the Seven) lies in the conflict between the teleological, integrative, generative orientation of the Neo-Confucianism metaphysics and the contrastive and discrete distinctions (good/evil and the Four/the Seven) in moral philosophy and moral psychology. In the following section, I will explain the deep philosophical nature of this conflict the Korean Neo-Confucians faced in the Four-Seven Debate.

**Li-Qi Metaphysics, Moral Philosophy, and Moral Psychology**

To understand the incompatibility between the *li*-*qi* metaphysics and the Four-Seven moral psychology, one needs to start with the two important characteristics of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. The first is the intricate relation between *li* and *qi*. As I explained in the second section, *li* and *qi* are distinct elements/processes/forces of the universe, but they are constantly interrelated with each other. Simply they are different (不相雜) but not fully separated from each other (不相離). Because of the differential but integrative and interactive activities of *li* and *qi*, the mutually exclusive and discrete distinction between the Four and the Seven is difficult to explain. As one can see in T’oegeye’s and Kobong’s theories, the Four is not exclusively explained by *li* and the Seven is not exclusively explained by *qi*: Both *li* and *qi* are involved in the generation of the Four and the Seven. If the goal of the Four-Seven Debate is to explain the clear and contrastive distinction between the Four and the Seven via *li* and *qi*, the goal is not going to be achieved easily or fully. Because both *li* and *qi* are involved in the generation of the Four and the Seven, one cannot explain the Four without explaining some properties of the Seven and vice versa. Broadly speaking, the distinction between the Four and the Seven, which the Four-Seven Debate aims to explain and justify, is a discrete moral distinction but the available Neo-Confucian explanation couched in terms of *li*, *qi*, and *xing* is metaphysical and inclusive. Although T’oegeye and Kobong developed their *hobal* and *kongbal* theories by proposing the different roles and the combinations of *li* and *qi* in the generation of the Four and the Seven, the substantial and

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24 Regarding the distinction between the original and *qi*-affected nature, a Korean Neo-Confucian Yi Ik (李瀷 1681–1763, pen name Sŏng Ho 星湖) argues that the two types of nature are two different modes of the same foundational nature deriving from the governing order of the universe (i.e., *li*). He states that that “the original nature and the *qi*-affected nature are not two natures [...] The nature is one” [本然之性與氣稟之性非二性也...性一也]. See Jeong So-yi, “A Study of the Continuity and Discontinuity of T’oegeye Hwang’s, Sŏngho Yi Ik’s and Dasan Jŏng Yakyong’s Theories of Mind”, *Human, Environment, and Future*, 10 (2013), 46 n.16.

25 This incompatibility or misalignment among the three distinctions is discussed in Seok, “The Four-Seven Debate”, 7-8. In this paper, the foundational cause of the incompatibility, i.e., the generative, inclusive, and integrative orientations of the Neo-Confucian metaphysics is analyzed.
exclusive difference between the Four and the Seven (in comparison with more interactive and inclusive distinction between li and qi) is not fully explained. Although they play different roles, both li and qi are involved with hobal and kongbal. Therefore, from the perspective of li, qi, and their intricate interaction in emotional states, the Four and the Seven look only slightly, not substantially, different.

The second point of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism one needs to understand in the context of the Four-Sevent Debate is the integration of moral ideality and psychological reality of the mind (xin/sim 心). The mind (the Confucian heart-mind of xin/sim) can be intrinsically moral and can reflect the true nature of human being but it can be affected by uncontrolled or spontaneous psychological processes.26 The mind can cultivate its intrinsic nature and morality but it exists as a real and contingent psychological entity. The integration of the moral ideality and the psychological reality of the mind is important in Neo-Confucianism because, within the teleological cosmology and the integrative moral metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism, the normative ideality and the psychological reality of the mind are not completely separate: They should be closely integrated in the teleological and cosmic process of the universe. Neo-Confucianism, as one can see in Zhou Dunyi’s scheme of the cosmic evolution, explains both what is happening and what should ideally happen in the integrated vision of the ultimate goodness of taiji (太極). However, this integration of ideality and reality (or value and fact) in Neo-Confucianism may defeat the philosophical effort to explain moral distinctions such as moral goodness and evilness or moral psychological distinctions such as the Four and the Seven because these distinctions can be meaningful if one can differentiate the moral ideality and the psychological reality of the mind. To understand successfully and consistently the intrinsic moral nature of the Four and to distinguish the Four from the Seven, the moral ideality the Four should be discussed independently of its psychological reality (i.e., emotional arousal). Even though the Four are aroused states, their moral identity, in contrast to that of the Seven, should be explained at the level of normative ideality. Under the integrative Neo-Confucian metaphysics, however, one cannot successfully explain the former (the ideal norm and intrinsic moral quality of the mind) without explaining the latter (the factual, contingent, and locally conditioned mind).

According to Neo-Confucian metaphysics, everything is part of the continuous and generative process of development initiated by the Supreme Ultimate. From the viewpoint of this inclusive and integrative process, one can understand that li is not an abstract entity or a formal principle but the continuously growing and interacting order of the universe. That is, the ultimate reality of the universe is not only real but also dynamically generative and ideally normative. Kim Hyoung-Chan states that “The concept of li in Neo-Confucianism means both physical law and moral norm. According to this view, li is not only an ontological principle, which forms and operates nature and society, but also an axiological rule, which describes how nature and society should exist and be operated. The potential of the physical law and moral norm can be realized with the help of ki (qi), which represents matter or energy.”27 That is, reality (existence) and ideality (normativity) are intertwined in the teleological and generative Neo-Confucian universe, which is often understood as a constructive entity under a cosmic realization process that emanates from the Supreme Ultimate down to the myriad things. In this regard, Zhu Xi (Zhuzi Yulei, 6.2371) states that “The Great Ultimate (Supreme Ultimate) is not a separate entity. It is present in yin and yang as yin and yang, in the Five Phases (Five Elements) as the Five Phases (Five Elements), in the ten thousand things as the ten thousand things. It is (nonetheless) only one principle. Because of its ultimate reach, it is named the Great Ultimate.” He also adds that “The Great

26 Perhaps this distinction is comparable with that between daoxintdosim (道心) and renxin/sim (人心).
Ultimate (Supreme Ultimate) is simply the supremely excellent and perfect normative principle...What Master Zhou called the Great Ultimate (Supreme Ultimate) is the exemplary virtue of all that is good and most excellent in Heaven and Earth, in people and things.²⁸ That is, reality (what it is) and normativity (what it should be) are coherently and fundamentally integrated in Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism.²⁹

Since everything in the Neo-Confucian universe is in the interactive and generative process of realizing the original nature and the foundational coherence of the universe, it is often difficult to explain the psychological nature of the mind independently of its moral nature and vice versa. If everything is changing and growing in the continuous process of the onto-generative derivation from the cosmic foundation (taiji 太極) and the governing order of the universe (li 理), how can one explain the intrinsic moral goodness (the normativity and ideality) of the Four, independently of its psychological background driven by qi’s activity? More important, if value (what should ideally happen) and fact (what is happening) are integrated in the ultimate foundation of goodness in the Neo-Confucian universe, how can one explain the moral mind independently of the generative process of the cosmic coherence (the underlying reality of the Neo-Confucian universe)? If the normative standard and the axiological foundation of moral goodness are explained by the metaphysical unity (i.e., the teleological cohesiveness or the inclusive oneness) of the universe, explaining good and evil or the Four and the Seven separately as the two contrastive and conflicting moral properties will be a formidable philosophical challenge in Neo-Confucianism.³⁰

The comprehensive philosophical integration of Neo-Confucianism, however, does not imply that there is no distinction between good and evil. Neo-Confucianism is neither moral skepticism nor moral nihilism although it allows the relative or relational conditions or contexts of good and evil.³¹ However, the kind of moral distinction that is necessary to differentiate the Four and the Seven (i.e., a clear and sharp distinction between the Four and the Seven on the basis of the former being intrinsically good but the latter only contingently good) cannot be found in the integrative, generative, and teleological world of Neo-Confucianism. The distinction between the Four and the Seven is a discrete, exclusive distinction but the philosophical orientation of Neo-Confucianism is holistic, generative, and inclusive. That is, the Neo-Confucian tool is too inclusive and integrative to separate and distinguish the Four and the Seven.

²⁹ This does not mean that there is no distinction between reality and ideality (or normativity) in Neo-Confucianism. They are distinguished in different dimensions of the universe with their relative and variable differences but, ultimately, they are integrated in the cosmic process of the Supreme Ultimate.
³⁰ For this reason, Lee Dong Hee in his “Philosophical Aporia of Zhu Xi’s Thought” believes that the Four-Seven Debate as an intellectual puzzle (aporia) of Neo-Confucian philosophy. He argues that Neo-Confucianism, like natural law theory, did not clearly distinguish fact and value. Lee Chan, in his “A Rethinking of the Four-Seven Debate”, also analyses the Four-Seven Debate from the similar viewpoint, i.e., integrating the fact and value distinction.
³¹ One would argue that Confucian notions of good and evil are relational and situational and therefore only ambiguously or vaguely understood. However, the relational and situational nature of Confucian goodness and evilness do not imply that Confucian moral philosophy is weak and sometimes it does not even distinguish good and evil. For example, See A. Walden, “Zhu Xi, the Four-Seven Debate, and Wittgenstein’s Dilemma”, Philosophy East and West, 65-2 (2015), 579. He argues that although the standard of moral goodness is not clearly specified or formulated in Neo-Confucianism, it is still meaningful to discuss the normative standard. He states that “The fact that that standard cannot be explicitly stated is not a weakness but a strength of the theory...It [the standard of moral goodness] is not manifest in the sense of being explicitly present to consciousness, but it is present to consciousness in the sense that veridical moral judgment is the phenomenal product of the li, as manifest in and through the qi of the heart-mind.”
Considering the two Neo-Confucian characteristics discussed in this section, one can argue easily that explaining the contrasting and qualitative difference between the Four and the Seven that the Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers sought after in the Four-Seven Debate is not an easy task. If one adopts the integrative and interactive stance of the all-inclusive Neo-Confucian li-qi metaphysics, where li and qi are closely related and everything derives from the same fundamental foundation with the same ultimately goodness, the clear and exclusive moral distinction between good and evil in the Four and the Seven will be very hard (if not impossible) to make.

The unresolved debate between T’oegye-Ugye and Kobong-Yulgok clearly demonstrates the philosophical difficulty and the challenge of Neo-Confucianism. T’oegye and Ugye attempt to explain the unique moral nature of the Four by li’s special or exclusive contribution to the moral identity of the heart-mind. Kobong and Yulgok, however, do not believe that the goodness of the Four is a distinct moral property explained exclusively by li but a common property shared by the Seven explained by both li and qi. That is, to explain both the unique moral psychological character of the Four and the morally contingent nature of the Seven, one needs to change or revise part of the Neo-Confucian li-qi metaphysics, i.e., emphasizing li’s (not qi’s) special or exclusive contribution to the Four (à la T’oegye and Ugye) or giving up the special moral status of the Four by smoothening the sharp distinction between the Four and the Seven (à la Kobong and Yulgok). The Four-Seven Debate, however, is neither a complete failure nor a clueless philosophical puzzle. It is a reflection and revelation of the philosophical aoria of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and an attempt to resolve the philosophical ambiguity (reality/ideality, mind 心/ nature 性, etc.) that looms large in the li-qi metaphysics. Perhaps, with the philosophical inspiration of the Four-Seven Debate, one can develop, beyond the Neo-Confucian conventions of good-evil and li-qi, a new brand of moral psychology and moral philosophy as the various schools of Korean philosophy in the later centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty did.32

**Conclusion: Moral Psychology, Moral Metaphysics, and Korean Neo-Confucianism**

In this paper, I discussed how the Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Four-Seven Debate explain the moral emotions and the moral mind within the metaphysical framework of Neo-Confucianism. The unresolved debate between T’oegye-Ugye and Kobong-Yulgok reveals the philosophical difficulty of Neo-Confucianism in integrating moral psychology and moral metaphysics of the Confucian heart-mind. Because of the teleological, generative, and integrative metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism that combines reality (existence, being and becoming) and ideality (moral norms and values) of the universe in its explanation of nature (性), li (理), the Confucian heart-mind (心), and emotions (四端七情), the discrete

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32 Regarding the deviation from or the overcoming of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and the unique orientation towards the affective moral psychology in Korean Neo-Confucianism, see Choe Young Jin, “A Study of the Mentalizing (心學) Tendencies of Korean Neo-Confucianism in the 18th to 19th Century”, *Korean Folk Culture* (韓國民族文化), 33 (2009), 339-368 and Jeong Weon-jae, “Does the Neo-Confucianism of the Chosŏn Dynasty belong to the Cheng-Zhu School? Rethinking the Intellectual History of Chosŏn through the Philosophical Tradition of Yi I (1538–1584)”, *Journal of Korean Religions*, 7-1 (2016), 67–92. According to Ivanhoe, “The Historical Significance” 426-427, 429, some of the philosophical effort to criticize or overcome the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism can be found in Luo Qishun’s (羅欽順 1465-1547), Dai Zhen’s (戴震 1724 - 1777), Ito Jinsai’s (伊藤仁斎 1627-1705), and Chŏng Yakyong’s (丁若镛 1762 - 1836) views. The Korean Neo-Confucians in the Four-Seven Debate, however, used the philosophical language of the Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism but the content of their philosophical discussion comes close to the study of the mind (心學) than the study of nature and li (理性). See Jeong “Neo-Confucianism of the Chos’ŏn Dynasty” for further details of this interpretation. This does not, however, mean that Korean Neo-Confucianism follows the path of the Yangming school (陽明學) of Neo-Confucianism.
and contrastive distinctions, such as moral psychological distinction (the Four and the Seven) and the moral distinction (good and evil) are not fully developed and explained.

The Four-Seven Debate exemplifies this philosophical difficulty (i.e., difficulty of clearly distinguishing the Four and the Seven by the philosophical means available in the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism) and Korean Neo-Confucians’ effort to overcome it.\(^{33}\) For this reason, it is inappropriate to characterize Korean Neo-Confucianism simply as a linear philosophical extension or a direct philosophical heir of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. Korean Neo-Confucians understood the ambiguities of the li-qi metaphysics in its application to the moral mind and attempted to overcome the overly inclusive and integrative orientations of the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism.\(^{34}\) They did their best to bridge the gap between moral metaphysics and moral psychology through their rigorous philosophical analyses and arguments. Despite the inherent philosophical vagueness derived from the integrative and teleological tendencies of Neo-Confucianism, Korean Neo-Confucians in the Chosŏn dynasty developed their own moral psychological approach to the challenging questions of Neo-Confucianism, i.e., the moral mind and emotions. Korean Neo-Confucianism, therefore, is a unique school of moral psychology and moral philosophy and the Four-Seven Debate clearly demonstrates both the challenge and opportunity of Korean Neo-Confucianism on the issues of the moral goodness of the Confucian heart-mind and its emotions. Although they did not find satisfying solutions to the challenging philosophical questions raised in the Four-Seven Debate, the Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers clearly recognized the philosophical difficulty and attempted to find the peculiar moral psychological nature of the mind, i.e., the mind of moral emotion, of self-cultivation, and of virtue.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{33}\) For example, the hobal and the kongbal theories of T’oegye and Kobong can be understood as the overcoming effort. In these theories, li and qi do not simply interact: they develop intricate interplay to generate the Four and the Seven. Li’s and qi’s discrete, differential, and detailed contribution to the Four and the Seven demonstrates that the Korean Neo-Confucians, in their fa/bal theories, think of the discrete roles of li and qi beyond the typical characteristics of li and qi such as universal/particular, form, function, interaction (理一分殊, 形, 爲, 不相雜, 不相離) etc..

\(^{34}\) For example, if li and qi are everywhere in this world (i.e., if their interdependent or interactive activities are pervasive in the world), why are the Four heavily or exclusively invested in li (with only minor involvement of qi)?

\(^{35}\) Considering their theories of fa/bal (such as the hobal or the kongbal theory), what the Korean Neo-Confucians discovered, one can estimate, is the unique combination of the moral and psychological processes of the mind where both li and qi play differential but interactive roles, which the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism did not fully explore and develop. As I discussed in this paper, however, even this innovative renovation of Neo-Confucianism could not answer all the questions about the nature of the mind and emotions. The Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers could not come to full agreement in the details of their theories and tried to find different ways of explaining moral emotions because they realized that the Neo-Confucian terms (li, qi, nature etc.) cannot fully, consistently, and unambiguously explain the moral mind and emotions.
References


