

戴震

7. Dai Zhen

Dai Zhen (1723-1777 C.E.) is the best known and most respected thinker of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911 C.E.).¹ His intellectual contributions are remarkable in their breadth alone; he produced significant works on mathematics, astronomy, geography, philology, phonetics, and philosophy. He is best known for his philological studies and for his contributions to the Imperial Library Compilation known as the *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書 "Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries."² I will focus on an aspect of his work for which he was neither well known nor particularly respected, at least in his own lifetime: his ethical philosophy.³ In particular, in keeping with our stated theme, I will explore his view of moral self cultivation.

Dai's ethical philosophy is extremely original and distinctive among Confucian thinkers. This is probably why his contemporaries were a bit perplexed by this aspect of his thought and why he remains little understood or appreciated even in our own time. Unlike other Neo-Confucians, Dai did not espouse the assiduous practice of rites; he did not practice or advocate a life of constant inner scrutiny, nor did he engage in quiet sitting. His method of self cultivation was much more cerebral or academic in character. He saw moral improvement exclusively as an intellectual, scholarly endeavor. Dai was never a moral teacher, in the style of Zhu Xi; much less was he a kind of spiritual *guru* in the manner of Wang Yangming. He was a rather withdrawn and bookish person, but one who had a genuine intellectual passion for moral knowledge. And if he was right in believing that a proper understanding of the classics was the key to moral improvement, there would be little need or room for spiritual guides or gurus.⁴

Some interpreters of Dai's thought see a deep tension, if not an outright conflict, between his dual interests in ethical philosophy and philological studies.⁵ I will argue that such an understanding of Dai's thought misses the essence of his philosophy. For Dai there was no genuine philosophy outside of philology, and true philology was *always* philosophical in nature. Philology was the very method of philosophy. The introduction to one of Dai's two main philosophical essays, the *Yuan Shan* 原善 "On the Good," shows that such a view was the motivation and guiding assumption of this important work.⁶

I first composed the *Yuan Shan* in three chapters [but] I feared that students would be misled by their individual interests, and so I drew supporting passages from the classics and used these to explain and verify my work. I separated the three chapters and made each of them an opening [section] and then supplemented each of these [with supporting passages from the classics] to form three books, grouping together material that agreed in kind and meaning so each point and every detail was clearly displayed.

The Ways of Heaven and human beings are revealed completely in the great lessons of the classics. But since the present age is so far removed from the wisdom of the sages of old, among those who study the classics, none is able to gain a comprehensive and thorough understanding of them. Habituated by what they see and hear, they accumulate falsehoods and turn them into "truths". . . .

Dai explains how he had originally written a rather speculative philosophical essay in three parts, concerning the central terms of art in Confucian thought. But he realized that in order to carry forth his argument, he needed to present evidence for the positions he described by quoting from the classics. Consequently, he divided up the original essay into three parts and used each of these to introduce extended examples drawn from various classical texts. It is possible to interpret Dai as saying that he used the classics to verify truths that he had arrived at through a process of philosophical reflection, but a careful reading of this preface and his other work shows that Dai believed that the process that led him to a true understanding of the Way worked in very much the opposite direction, it was *derived from* a proper understanding of the truths inscribed in the classics. For him, the projects of philosophy and philology were coextensive; one found the truth by getting the classics *right* and one got the classics right by doing careful textual work.

It is precisely because sheer speculation cannot lead one to the philosophical ideas of the sages of antiquity that one has to seek them from the ancient classics. Since messages contained in the surviving records have gradually fallen into oblivion due to the expanse of time between the past and the present, one therefore has to seek them through philological studies [of the classics]. Thus only if philology is clear, can the ancient classics be understood; and only if the classics are understood, can the sages' philosophical ideas then be grasped.⁷

This paragraph, as well as many other things that Dai said, can be understood as his particular interpretation of Kongzi's teaching that,

"Study without reflection is a waste. Reflection without study is a danger."⁸ According to Dai, learning requires that one reflect on a specific corpus of texts in a specific way. One needs to reflect upon the classics in the sense of submitting them to careful, critical, and comprehensive philological analysis. Only in this way could one be sure of arriving at a proper understanding. "Reflection" in the sense of "sheer speculation" could only lead one astray. Once one appreciates this aspect of Dai Zhen's vision, one can see why he wrote the kinds of philosophical books he did and why he focused on the kinds of problems he chose to explore. Both the *Yuan Shan* and his magnum opus, the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證 "The Meaning of Terms in the *Mengzi* Explained and Verified,"⁹ are philological explorations of classical Confucian philosophy. These works were organized around two guiding aims: a refutation of contemporary *misunderstandings* of the classics and an *exposition* of the true meaning of these cherished texts. Dai was greatly concerned with disabusing the people of his age of their mistaken interpretations of the classics. He fervently believed that the views current in his age were deeply stained by Daoist and Buddhist influences, and he sought to expurgate these and return to the original meaning of the classics. These points are elegantly and powerfully made in the preface to the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.

Mengzi disputed [the doctrines of] Yang and Mo. [But] later people are accustomed to hearing the doctrines of Yang, Mo, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the Buddha. Moreover, they have used these doctrines to disrupt and confuse the doctrines of Mengzi. This is why those who come after Mengzi again cannot refrain [f r o m engaging in debate].¹⁰ Were I unable to understand this, then that would be the end of it. But to understand and not speak out—that would be disloyalty! I would be turning my back on the learning of the sages and worthies of old and distancing myself from the benevolence of the good people of my own age and those of later generations. Apprehensive about this, I composed the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*. Han Yü¹¹ said, "To follow the teachings of Yang, Mo, Lao, Zhuang, and the Buddha with the hope of reaching the Way of the sage, is like navigating a closed off harbor or cut off lake w i t h the hope of reaching the sea. And so, those who seek to gaze upon the Way of the sage must begin with Mengzi."

Dai was a strong ethical realist, and he believed that one approached moral truth by getting clear about the facts of the matter. The knowledge one gains through study leads to moral understanding. For him, self cultivation consisted in a systematic, critical, comprehensive, careful, and thorough study of the classics; in his own terms, study nourishes one's

mind just as food nourishes one's body.¹² Dai expressed no interest in developing some nascent moral capacity, nor did he emphasize the need for shaping the self through ritual practice. He did not advocate cultivating and maintaining a state of constant inner vigilance, nor did he engage in practices such as quiet sitting. He is unique among the thinkers we have discussed thus far in that he believed that proper *intellectual* understanding was the only way to fully grasp the *Dao*.

In part, Dai's position was a reaction to the overly subjective approach of Neo-Confucianism, but it is also very much a manifestation of his own personality. As was mentioned, Dai was a rather bookish person who was constantly striving to perfect his own understanding of the many disciplines he practiced. One can see this tendency to constantly refine and enlarge his understanding in his philosophical work as well; he produced no less than four separate versions of his magnum opus, the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, and would probably have produced more had he not died about a year after the last version was completed.

It is tempting to speculate about the effect that Dai's various intellectual pursuits had on his view of self cultivation. He was engaged in numerous disciplines that required sophisticated mathematical expertise and careful empirical method. It seems reasonable to see these as informing his methodology in both philology and philosophy. One perceives an almost scientific tendency in both his ethical philosophy and textual studies. In one's individual moral decisions, he argued that one must avoid taking one's *yijian* 意見 "opinion" as the truth. Instead, one must research and reason one's way to *buyi zhi ze* 不易之則 "unchanging standards." One employs the same method in textual studies: moving from one's initial impression of a text to a proper interpretation by continually revising one's idea about what it means in light of careful and comprehensive philological and historical study. Dai's approach to moral self cultivation can be understood as an ethical expression of the hermeneutical circle.

In regard to moral issues, one moves from opinion to truth by discovering those things that everyone would agree to do in a given situation, and one accomplishes this by employing the Confucian golden rule.¹³

[Someone] asked, "What did the ancients mean by *Heavenly principle*?"

[Dai] responded, "*Principle* is feelings that do not err. One can never be without the proper feelings and still grasp principle. Whenever one does something to another, one should turn within oneself and calmly consider, If another had done this to me would I be willing to accept it? Whenever one requests something of another, one should turn within oneself and calmly consider, If

another requested this of me would I be willing to do it? If one measures [one's treatment of] others with oneself, then principle will be clear."¹⁴

It is very important to grasp this aspect of Dai's thought, for it shows that while emphasizing the role of reason in moral self cultivation, he was by no means antagonistic toward desires or emotions. Quite the contrary, he saw, correctly, that certain of our shared desires serve as the very basis of Mengzi's moral philosophy, and that, on this view, there is no fundamental tension between our desires and morality. Our *true* desires, those which we possess when fully aware of what we are as creatures and how the world works, lead us to be moral. One of Dai's central complaints about Neo-Confucian thinkers was their failure to appreciate the role of desires.

When the ancients talked about principle, they sought for it in human feelings and desires, they took following principle to be a matter of causing feelings and desires to be without flaw. When people today talk about principle, they seek for it apart from human feelings and desires; they take following principle to be a matter of causing oneself to endure yet be indifferent to feelings and desires. This distinction between principle and desire is just the thing that will turn the people of the world into deceivers and hypocrites.¹⁵

Dai's intellectual method of self cultivation is original and unique. He describes its trajectory by saying that we all start out with natural desires (what is *ziran* 自然 "natural"), and that the moral task is to transform these into moral desires (what is *biran* 必然 "necessary" or "imperative"). This is the process of moving from *yijian* "mere opinion" to *buyi zhi ze* "an unchanging standard." Mere opinions will be culled by passing one's "natural desires" through the winnowing standard of the Confucian golden rule. In this way, only *biran* "necessary" desires will be allowed to manifest themselves in actions. If my natural desires fully accord with what the golden rule commands, then they are not just opinions, they are necessities, things that I *must* do.

Dai's model of moral self cultivation strongly emphasizes the role of the intellect to *realize* the Way—both in the sense of recognizing what is right and directing the self to follow what is right. These two aspects of moral self cultivation appear to occur simultaneously in his view of things. And so it seems appropriate to refer to Dai's method as a *realization model* of moral self cultivation.

Though he criticizes them relentlessly, Dai is actually closer to Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming than he is to the early Confucians he claimed to defend and sought to emulate. First, like Zhu and Wang, Dai believes that we *already* possess appropriate moral feelings. The problem is that we also have many inappropriate feelings that obscure and interfere with those that are correct. In contrast, Mengzi believed that appropriate feelings need to be cultivated; our nascent sprouts must be strengthened, expanded, and extended in order to fulfill the demands of morality. Xunzi believed that appropriate feelings need to be acquired; we have some desires and feelings that can be conscripted into the moral cause but even these are like raw clay, in need of shape and texture. Second, for Dai our central problem is that we have too many feelings and need to weed out the inappropriate ones—those that are “mere opinion.” For him, the process of self cultivation is a filtering-out of erroneous influences, namely, any thought, inclination, or desire that is *si* 私 “selfish.” This is much closer to Zhu’s or Wang’s view than it is to any early Confucian. In general, Neo-Confucians saw moral self cultivation more as a paring-away of the bad rather than a building up of the good—however the later is conceived. What is distinctive about Dai is the degree to which he relies upon the intellect and specifically upon scholarly endeavor to achieve this end.

Given this picture of Dai’s ethical philosophy, it would seem that he is not altogether clear about an issue that is central to Mengzi’s theory of moral self cultivation. Recall that for Mengzi, morality is satisfying in the same way that good food and pleasant sights and sounds are satisfying. For him, a special kind of joy marks the moral act as moral. This joy also makes moral self cultivation possible, by providing positive reinforcement for the good actions one performs. Dai clearly endorses the idea that *any* moral action one does produces a feeling of joy, if only one reflects upon it.

When Mengzi said, “Principle and righteousness please my mind just as the flesh of grass and grain fed animals pleases my palate,” this was not a metaphor. Whenever one does something that accords with principle and righteousness, one’s heart and spirit will always be joyful and contented.¹⁶

However, as we have seen, Dai believes that in order to *recognize* something as a case of principle or righteousness, one must already have passed it through the golden rule’s universalizability test. It would seem that one can experience the joy of moral action only after one has discovered what is *necessary* and understands the *unchanging standard* behind one’s action.¹⁷

And so Dai seems to require a second-order knowledge of the necessary moral standard in order to experience the joy of moral action. While Mengzi does believe that in order to appreciate the joy of moral action we must be aware of the fact that we are motivated by our moral sense, he does not seem to require the kind of abstract understanding Dai insists upon, as a prerequisite to experiencing the joy of moral action.¹⁸ Perhaps the way to relieve this apparent tension within Dai's thought is to understand him as saying that we will enjoy every truly moral action that we perform, but we will only experience the *full joy* of such actions when we understand their underlying principles completely. Such a position, though not explicitly held by Mengzi, would seem to be consistent with his general picture of moral self cultivation.

Much of Dai's philosophical project involved a refutation of the views of thinkers like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. He believed that such thinkers had unknowingly incorporated Daoist and Buddhist ideas into the Confucian school and perverted its message. Dai relied upon rather straight-forward philological arguments in order to make his case against the Neo-Confucians. For example, he repudiated the notion that the mind contained *li* "principle" or that it is principle¹⁹ by deploying careful philological arguments supported by extensive classical references.²⁰ He argued decisively and convincingly, that in the classical texts of Confucianism, the term *li* never had the kinds of senses that Neo-Confucians later ascribed to it. According to Dai, Zhu and Wang had lost sight of the fact that *li* simply meant "good order." It is the orderly pattern of the universe which we can come to understand through careful examination and study. It is not *within us* already; it is something we come to realize through acquiring certain kinds of knowledge and augmenting this with a systematic application of the Confucian golden rule.

In the Six Classics, the *Analects* and *Mengzi* and even in the various biographies and other records [from ancient times], one does not often see the character *li* "principle." But now a days even the most ignorant people, no matter how perverse or dissolute, will quickly invoke the notion of *principle* whenever they decide an affair or upbraid another. Ever since the Song dynasty, it has become the common practice and established custom to regard *principle* as if it were a thing received from Heaven and lodged in the heart and mind, and to take the opinions of the heart and mind as according with principle.²¹

Dai Zhen had begun with a faith in the classics and the sages, and his careful, objective study of the language and history of these convinced him that the true meaning of the classics had been lost. He believed that

he had arrived at their truth by relying on careful research and reasoning, and this in turn convinced him that the truth of the classics itself is rational and demonstrable. The truth of the classics must itself be an *unchanging standard*, something that is *necessary*. But if the classics themselves are simply a manifestation of this unchanging standard and one can arrive at this standard through the careful application of the Confucian golden rule, it would seem as if one should be able to realize the standard simply by appeal to the rule. Why would one need to proceed by way of the classics?

It seems as if Dai has climbed the ladder of the classics and could, at this point, very well have kicked it away. He did not, and it is clear why he did not; he never considered doing philosophy in any way other than *through* the classics. In this he remained true to some of the oldest promptings within the Confucian tradition. He saw his quest to discern the teachings of the sages as a task of *finding* not *making*, more a matter of *xue* "study" than *si* "reflecting."²² For him, providing an account of *why* one does what one does is a task one can only approach *after* one has mastered the classics. It is only through such a course of study that one can *become* the kind of person who will make the right choices; this in turn provides one with the understanding necessary for discerning the pattern behind one's actions. In this respect, moral understanding is regarded as like the knowledge of a craft. For Dai, as for many Confucians, rules, such as the golden rule, were never regarded as free standing justifications for action.²³

Because Dai relied on intellect over moral intuition, many scholars have likened him to Xunzi, and the comparison is neither unwarranted nor unhelpful. Yet we must recognize that, in respect to the classics and the sages, their philosophies are very different. Xunzi had faith that a calm and careful analysis of traditional rituals and norms would eventually convince anyone that they are the unique solution to life. But he insisted that one could only come to such an understanding by diligently *practicing* these traditional forms for many years under the strict discipline and guidance of a proper teacher. Those who are just beginning to learn the Way are largely unaware of the reasons that justify the things they practice. They are simply to obey their teachers and apply themselves diligently until they have enough experience and information to begin to see how the whole thing fits together. For Xunzi, one's *practice* of the *Dao* runs far ahead of one's *understanding* of it. For this reason, there was never any danger of dispensing with the lessons of the classics and the examples of the sages. Xunzi saw individual moral intuition as a threat to tradition. In particular, he worried that Mengzi was advocating a form of intuitionism that left no clear role for either the classics or the sages.²⁴

In principle, it would seem that Dai Zhen is open to a similar charge, since he appears to have believed that one could *reason* one's way to moral truth through the careful application of the Confucian golden rule. Had he taken just one more step and regarded the rule as a decision procedure for generating only and all proper actions, he would have been open to such criticism; he might well have ended up following one influential stream of contemporary western ethical philosophy, a stream which has little interest in appeals to traditional wisdom. But Dai did not see things this way. He was very much a traditionalist and dedicated his life to discovering and making clear the genuine truths of the Confucian tradition and distinguishing these from the dross of Daoism and Buddhism. He never separated his ethical philosophical principle (universalizability) from his philology (the study of the classics). Had he done so, he might have seen some of the notorious problems that arise when one takes this final step, but had he taken it, he would no longer have been a traditional Confucian self cultivationist.

Notes

1. For a brief biography of Dai Zhen, see "Tai Chen," in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1911)*, vol. 2, Arthur Hummel, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943-44): 695-700. Brief descriptions of his philosophy with selected translations can be found in Chan, *Source Book*, pp. 709-22 and Fung, *History*, pp. 651-672. A general introduction, now quite dated, can be found in Mansfield Freeman, "The Philosophy of Tai Tung-yuan," *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 64 (1933): 50-71. See also the translations noted below.
2. For a good discussion of Dai's different kinds of work and his place in Chinese intellectual history, see Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
3. Dai Zhen is still not well understood or appreciated as a philosopher. Wing-tsit Chan purportedly explains why Dai did not exert a great deal of influence in his own age by saying his doctrines "are not really profound." See Chan, *Source Book*, p. 711.
4. There was a fascinating and on going debate within the Confucian tradition regarding what the proper role and function of a teacher was. Many Confucians wrote essays with titles like *Shi shuo* 師說 "Discourse on Teachers" often criticizing earlier views and arguing for their own specific perspective. For an example of such an essay, see the translation of Han Yü's *Shi shuo* in Wm. Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960): 374-5.

5. For example, Yü Ying-shih argues that throughout his life, Dai was torn between the competing claims of philosophy and philology until in the end philosophy won out. See his "Tai Chen's Choice between Philosophy and Philology," *Asia Major*, n.s. 2.1 (1989): 79-108.

6. There is a translation of this work by Cheng Chung-ying, but unfortunately it is unreliable and obscures the structure and plan of the original text. See Cheng Chung-ying, tr., *Tai Chen's Inquiry into Goodness* (Honolulu, HI: East West Center Press, 1969).

7. Translation by Yü Ying-shih. See his "Tai Chen's Choice," pp. 83-4.

8. *Analects* 2.15. See Chapter 1, p. 2 and Chapter 3, p. 37.

9. There are several translations of this work now available. The most recent version is Ann-ping Chin and Mansfield Freeman, tr., *Tai Chen on Mencius: Explorations in Words and Meanings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). This is generally an unreliable work. A much better translation is Torbjorn Lodén, tr., "Dai Zhen's Evidential Commentary on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 60 (Stockholm, 1988): 165-313. The best translation of the text is by John W. Ewell, Jr., "Reinventing the Way: Dai Zhen's *Evidential Commentary on the Meanings of Terms in Mencius* (1777)" (Berkeley, CA: Unpublished PhD Dissertation in history, 1990).

10. Dai Zhen is drawing a comparison between himself and Mengzi as defenders of the faith who "could not but engage in disputation," the point being that neither he nor Mengzi was fond of disputation. See *Mengzi* 3B9. Cf. the discussion of Zhu Xi's relationship to Mengzi above, p. 43.

11. Han Yü (768-824 C.E.) is often considered to be one of the central figures in the revival of Confucianism. The quote is from a preface entitled *Song Wang xiucai* ("Parting Praise for Licentiate Wang") in *Han Changli quanji*, 20.7a-b (SBBY).

12. See section 9 of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.

13. Dai focused upon the notion of *shu* 恕 "sympathetic understanding," the ability to gauge what others desire by reflecting upon one's own desires. Cf. *Mengzi* 7A4.

14. See section 2 of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.

15. From section 43 of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.

16. *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*, section 8. The quoted lines are from *Mengzi* 6A7.

17. This appears to be true at least for those who are starting out on the process of moral self cultivation. An individual who has developed a thorough and complete understanding of moral principles through a life of study and reflection, having formed her mind so that it is in complete accord with principle, might no longer need to engage in this intellectual exercise.

18. Mengzi's long exchange with King Xuan of Qi in *Mengzi* 1A7 shows that the king did not fully appreciate or enjoy his sparing of the ox until Mengzi led him to see that it was motivated by his moral sprouts.
19. The views of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, respectively.
20. For example, see sections 1 through 10 of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.
21. Section 5 of the *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng*.
22. Here again we can see Dai's views as elaborate reflections of one of Kongzi's basic teachings. In *Analects* 7 1, Kongzi insists that he is one who *shu er bu zuo* 述而不作 "transmits rather than creates" Cf. Chapter 1, p. 1.
23. I have argued that the golden rule can never provide such a freestanding justification for action. By itself, it proves inert; it must be embedded in a surrounding ethic in order to function effectively. See my "Reweaving the 'one thread' of the *Analects*."
24. As we have seen, this cannot be considered a fair criticism of Mengzi's position. However, it is not altogether inappropriate in the case of Wang Yangming; many of his later followers clearly took the idea of intuitionism to a radical extreme.