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**Metaphors in Neo-Confucian Korean Philosophy**

Abstract: Metaphor is an effective way to show *how* something is to be conceived. In this paper, I look at two Neo-Confucian Korean philosophical contexts—the Four-Seven debate and *Book of the Imperial Pivot*— and suggest that metaphors are philosophically expedient in two further contexts: when both intellect and emotion must be addressed; and when the aim of philosophizing is to produce behavioral change. Because Neo-Confucians had a conception of the mind that closely connected it to the heart (心 *xin*), metaphor’s empathy-inducing and perspective-giving capacities made it an especially helpful mode of philosophizing in the history of Korean philosophy.

I.

Philosophers endow metaphor with many capacities. It structures our thought (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), builds intimacy (Cohen 1978), invites make-believe (Hills 2017), and provides an affective orientation, which is a way of seeing something (Camp 2009). Metaphor is an efficient way to show *how* something is to be conceived, and its foremost achievement might be social in nature. To build on these insights, this paper analyzes two particular uses of metaphors in Korean Neo-Confucian philosophy. I’ll ultimately suggest that metaphors are expedient when an inquiry is considered both an intellectual and emotional endeavor and when the aim of philosophizing is to produce a change in behavior.

I’ll begin by looking at metaphors in the Four-Seven debate, which concerned the relationship between moral emotions and everyday emotions. Metaphors arise when there seems to be an impasse, and I’ll suggest that metaphors made it conversationally burdensome to continue the debate. I’ll also suggest that Korean philosophers’ prior commitments about the heart-mind (心 *xin*) affected the way they used metaphors. Because Neo-Confucians had a conception of the mind that closely connected it to the heart, a satisfactory philosophical exchange had to tend to both the intellectual and the emotional aspects of the interlocutor. The philosophers invoked and reworked metaphors about both philosophical ideas and the act of philosophizing, and metaphor was used not only as a way to effectively convey a thought, but also to invite empathy and express concern for the heart-mind.

I’ll then turn to King Jeongjo (정조 1752-1800) and examine how he reinterprets the Confucian “imperial pivot” metaphor to bring factionalism under control. Though under political constraint due to his inferior position to the Chinese emperor, Jeongjo skillfully blended two metaphors to establish himself as the political center. The goal was to get his audience to *do* something, and metaphors were helpful because they often invoke something bodily, lived, and concrete. Recent works in neuroscience suggest that emotions play a causal role in judging (Woodward 2016). If emotion and reason are processed together, then the heart-mind might be understood as a sense organ sensitive to both emotion and reason, and, like metaphor, should be recognized as an important tool for study and development.

II.

The Four-Sevendebate is a Neo-Confucian debate between Yi Hwang (pen name: Toegye퇴계 이황1500-1570) and Gi Daeseung(pen name: Gobong고봉 기대승1527-1572) from 1559 to1566. They debated the relationship between the moral “four sprouts” and the seven everyday emotions. The “four sprouts,” on the one hand, come from Mengzi, a classical Confucian who argued that human nature is “good.” He argued that humans have four “sprouts” of compassion, respect, disdain, approval/disapproval, which accompany the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (Mengzi 6A6). The sprout metaphor speaks to Mengzi’s belief that human nature is such that if given a healthy environment, it will develop its incipient tendencies towards virtue (Ivanhoe and van Norden, xxix-xxx). The “seven emotions,” on the other hand, come from the Confucian classic *The* *Book of Rites* (禮記 *Liji*) and point to the basic emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate, and desire. The Four-Seven debate asks about the relationship between the two: how are the four sprouts (moral emotions) and seven emotions (everyday emotions) related?

By the sixteenth century, Neo-Confucianism had developed some sophisticated metaphysical concepts, prominent among them *li* (理 “principle,” “underlying structure”) and *qi* (氣“vital energy,” “psycho-physical stuff”). Toegye and Gobong’s disagreements took place in the Neo-Confucian framework: Toegye argued that the four sprouts emerge from *li* while the seven emotions stem from *qi*; the four sprouts were special, good, and pure because they were intimately connected to *li*, the principle governing reality. The seven emotions, on the other hand, inclined towards chaos because they were at home in the realm of *qi* (Ivanhoe, 79).

Gobong thought Toegye’s classification was too dualistic. He argued that both the four sprouts and the seven emotions belong to the realm of *li* *and qi*, the important ramification being that the seven emotions also had the potential to be moral and good. The four moral emotions and the seven everyday emotions all stemmed from the heart-mind, the former simply being the normative, praiseworthy parts of the everyday emotions. In other words, Gobong thought that they might be the same thing in different aspects, the sprouts pointing to the goodness of human nature while the seven emotions referred to the emotions in general.

There’s more to say about the nuances of the debate itself, but what interests me is the way the debate concluded.[[1]](#endnote-1) When it seems like the debate is heading towards an impasse, Toegye sends a letter that features a metaphor of a person riding a horse. This metaphor was first used by Zhu Xi (朱熹1130-1200), a Chinese Neo-Confucian who compared the relationship between *li* and *qi* to that of a man riding a horse; *li* and *qi* were thought to always accompany one another, principle (*li*) needing material force (*qi*) lest it lack something to attach itself to. Toegye repurposes the metaphor to argue for a *priority relationship*: just as a person directs the horse, *li* directs *qi*. Toegye insists *li*—and therefore the four moral emotions—enjoy a kind of superiority or priority over *qi,* and therefore the seven emotions.

As a reply to Toegye’s reworked person-on-horse metaphor, Gobong reworks another Chinese metaphor: moon-reflected-on-water. Buddhists had used the imagery as an analogy of Buddha nature being contained in everything while Buddha nature itself is undivided.[[2]](#endnote-2) By the time the metaphor is used by Gobong, the moon-reflections are meant to show that everything—including the four sprouts and seven emotions— is reflective of *li* but manifested by *qi*, the faithfulness of the reflection differing because of the different qualities and movements of *qi*. Sometimes, moral emotions *seem* like they are pure and direct manifestations of *li* when *qi* is calm, but Gobong argues that this is an illusion. It would be akin to thinking that we’re looking at the moon itself while looking at the moon reflected on calm water. All emotions, even the moral ones, are comprised of *qi* according to Gobong, so they have no difference of origin.

Metaphors in philosophy have sometimes been analyzed along their ability to aid understanding. Metaphors ground abstract concepts and make them more tangible (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Talking about *li* and *qi* is less concrete than talking about a person and a horse, and putting descriptions in terms of schemes we understand better helps us grasp abstract concepts (Park, 3). Metaphors also help us agree on *how* to frame the problem. Because it helps us set up the problem itself, metaphors can play a role in determining what would and wouldn’t make satisfactory answers.

The Four-Seven debate is fascinating because it features a number of metaphors that are reworked from their original contexts and purposes. In addition, metaphors in the debate do more than capture the philosophical ideas being argued for—they also show how the philosophers felt about their debate.

After the pair of metaphors are exchanged, when Toegye begins to tire of the debate, he writes “… as I have heard, if one’s paths (tao) are the same, then with a single word, there is a meeting of minds, but if [the paths] are not the same, a lot of talk on the contrary further obstructs the [true] path” (Kalton 78). He expresses reluctance over continuing the debate, but Gobong is unwilling to stop then. So, I believe Gobong turns to pun and metaphor to respond to Toegye’s worry. (The English translation we have available for the Four-Seven debate skips over the following material; I’ll say more about the omission).

In what becomes the last letter of the proper debate, Gobong replies that he worries their exchange is like a horse carrying two persons’ worth of luggage. Not only is this another reworking of the existing horse metaphor, but there’s also a pun involved as the Korean word for “talk” or “word” (말 *mal*), which Toegye worried might cause more harm than good, is homonymous with the Korean word for “horse.” In Gobong’s new metaphor, the horse stands in for the philosophers’ relationship (or the debate), and the luggage, the weight of their ideas. Gobong says early on in the reply:

… I’ll also use a metaphor. Two travelers were walking with a horse bearing their luggage. If one side’s load is heavier than the other’s, the left side’s load will sag and the right side’s will move up. If the person in the east hitches their load up in fear that his will fall off, then the luggage will tilt towards the west. If the person in the west becomes angry that his load is now sagging, he will use all his strength to hitch his load up, causing it to tilt towards the east again. If this continues, the luggage will never reach equilibrium, and will eventually fall off the horse. So, it’d be better for the two travelers to join their hearts and might to hitch up both sides’ load, or if it is tilted to one side, reasonably adjust it… then there won’t be a worry about loads sagging, so eventually they’ll be able to travel harsh terrains and reach faraway lands. Our debate is like this… (*Gobong Jeonseo*, my translation).

Gobong then moves on to a full line-by-line reply. Toegye also composes a detailed response, but he doesn’t send it, as if to agree with Gobong that they’re merely shifting the load back and forth without reaching equilibrium. So, instead of the reply responding to Gobong’s arguments, Toegye sends a poem picking up on the overburdened horse metaphor:

Having thought it over, I won’t reply so courageously like before. But I’ve written a poem to tease you, one based on your metaphor of two persons putting on their luggage on one horse, so now I send this poem:

Two people contest the weight of their loads on a horse

But once we look, the sides are already equal

Still, we shift one side’s load to the other So when will the load become balanced?

I hope you laugh with me. (*Gobong Jeonseo*, my translation)

It’s interesting that the Kalton’s translation omits the sections containing Gobong’s horse-load metaphor and Toegye’s poem response. Kalton must have thought that they’re mere pleasantries that can be cut without affecting the substantive philosophy surrounding them. But what I want to suggest is that these metaphors are important for understanding how and why the debate concluded the way it did, and how metaphor, as a philosophical tool, is related to the Neo-Confucian conception of the heart-mind.

What should we make of these later metaphors? A readily available answer is that metaphor helps with expressivity: sometimes figurative language provides the neatest, fastest, clearest way to convey something. But note that Gobong and Toegye hesitate to draw out the debate once metaphors are introduced. Based on this, I suggest that the metaphors were used not only for intellectual purposes, but also for emotional purposes. And I want to suggest that instead of helping the debate move forward, the metaphors made it more difficult for the philosophers to continue the debate because it had raised the emotional stakes.

Ted Cohen (1978) writes that metaphors help to build intimacy; using a metaphor is to invite the hearer to stand in the speaker’s place, as it were, and see things like they do. David Hills (2017) writes that metaphors invite make-believe, asking us to imagine what it would be *like* if the figurative speech were literal. Elisabeth Camp (2009) argues that metaphors provide an affective orientation, a *way* of seeing something. What all these philosophers note is that metaphor is an efficient way to show *how* something is to be conceived. It is an invitation to occupy a certain point of view, and when this happens, philosophical discussion becomes more than mere exchange of ideas: it becomes an exchange of places—and perhaps this is why Gobong and Toegye hesitate to draw out the disagreement after metaphors are repeatedly used.

Why are all the metaphors in the debate reworked, none of them conceived from scratch? Perhaps they were meant to imply a continuity with previous Buddhist and Neo-Confucian thought, a sense that there’s a conversation developing out of the metaphors. Such a sense points to the understanding that Toegye and Gobong aren’t talking past each other with their own preferred images. They were actively engaging with each other’s thoughts and expressions (as well as those of previous philosophers’), in part because comprehending the metaphors requires that one get out of one’s frame of mind to occupy another’s point of view.

I used to wonder whether it was intellectual weakness of sorts that prevented Toegye and Gobong from properly concluding the debate. Given that the Joseon intelligentsia were often caught up in political strife, it makes sense that they might tread lightly on ideological differences. Korean Neo-Confucians had specific party affiliations, and because ideological dominance went hand-in-hand with political hegemony, intellectual disagreements sometimes led to bloody political purges (Seok, 5). However, I think a more charitable interpretation would be that Toegye and Gobong’s moral psychology made them reluctant to draw out the debate because they saw no separation between the rational self and the emotional self.

In Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, the word for “heart” (心 *xin*) is better translated as “heart-mind” because it was considered the center of not only the emotions, but also of perception, understanding, intuition, and even rational thought. There was no sharp contrast between the cognitive states (representative ideas, reasoning, beliefs) and affective states (sensation, feelings, desires, emotions). Mengzi considered the heart-mind the “principle sense organ” in charge of selecting and interpreting input from other sense organs, and he was describing the heart-mind when he talked about the four sprouts. The Neo-Confucians, including Gobong and Toegye, kept to the traditional notion of the heart-mind and considered it the site of both emotion and intellect.

If reason and emotion are inextricably linked, functioning together as a unit, it makes sense that theoretical progress *per se* wouldn’t be the sole aim in philosophy—or at the very least, philosophy would, or should, remain sensitive to how the idea *feels*. I think this is exactly what happened in the Four-Seven debate. Gobong noticed that the debate was beginning to feel emotionally heavy (hence the overburdened horse metaphor). Toegye, being the older, more authoritative figure and aware of the power imbalance, might have thought that there’s more potential for harm than good in a continued exchange. This led him to first expressing worry about the debate’s potential harm, and then sending a closing poem that builds upon Gobong’s last letter, an intellectual cooperation that also serves as an agreement and a truce. If we interpret their debate’s conclusion along these lines, we seem to have a historical example of moral psychological assumptions affecting the way philosophy is done, down to the kind of language used.

In the Four-Seven debate, metaphors were used to signal a continuity with *and* divergence from Chinese Neo-Confucianism. Metaphors were also used to overcome disagreements both intellectually and emotionally. Metaphors involving horse riding and moon reflections helped to make abstract concepts more tangible to work with, and they also helped philosophers decide how to proceed. The philosophizing-as-tinkering-with-luggage metaphor that Gobong introduces serves as both an acknowledgement of Toegye’s hesitancy and an invitation to go further; he gives Toegye the option to steer the conversation differently should he wish to. The fact that Toegye composes both a full response and a shortened response suggests he understood the choice opened up by Gobong’s metaphors.

III.

Let’s briefly turn to another instance of a reworked metaphor in Korean Neo-Confucianism. King Jeongjo, the twenty-second ruler of the Joseon dynasty, modified a well-known Confucian metaphor of the “imperial pivot.” We’ll see how the reinterpreted metaphor helped the king consolidate his royal power and combat the idea that the ruler ought to be passive or indirect in governance.

The imperial pivot is a governing ideal from *The Book of Documents* (書經 *Shujing*), one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. The idea is that the king should be the pivot of the state[[3]](#endnote-3), though interpretations of what exactly that entails diverged. Kongzi compared the ruler to the Pole Star, a pivot in the sky around which all other stars moved; the ruler was to rest in *wuwei* (無為 “nonaction”) and his ministers, moved by his virtue, were to accomplish all governing duties. Zhu Xi also gives the imperial pivot a passive interpretation: the ruler’s job wasn’t to bring order to the cosmos himself, but to merely ensure that objective ethical standards were met by the ministers carrying out their duties (Lovins 2012).

Neo-Confucianism was a convenient state philosophy because it was predicated on there being a king. However, in the Korean context, the king’s power was somewhat limited by the fact that the Son of Heaven (the emperor of China) was the ultimate political authority. Though the emperor didn’t intervene in Joseon affairs, the Korean king could not insist on absolute monarchy without running up against the politics of the tributary system. There were also Korean ministers eager to maintain their power in politics. Joseon aristocrats favored Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the imperial pivot, not only because he was considered Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, but also because his interpretation gave the aristocrats justification to take a leading role in government. Indeed, the Old Doctrine faction—King Jeongjo’s primary opponents—were quick to cite Zhu Xi when arguing that the king ought to submit to ministerial guidance (Lovins 2012)

So, given these constraints to his ruling power, King Jeongjo offers a reinterpretation of the imperial pivot metaphor to give himself a more active role in governing, thereby limiting the ministers’—and therefore the factions’—powers. His *Book of the Imperial Pivot* (황극편 皇極編) analyzes the imperial pivot in a way that refutes the standard Neo-Confucian interpretation that the king is a passive implementer of external standards. Instead, Jeongjo argued that the king *establishes* the imperial pivot: the king himself *is* the standard, not simply an enforcer of the standard. Using himself as the center of gravity, Jeongjo expands the imperial pivot metaphor to invoke a balance schema, writing that a functional court ought to be properly oriented around the king just as bodily balance requires finding the center of gravity and orienting everything around it (Lovins 2012).

Notice how Jeongjo transforms the metaphor, shifting the emphasis and evoking the bodily sense of balance. A pivot doesn’t naturally lead one to think of a purposeful agent. However, applying the pivot metaphor to an existing political structure allows Jeongjo to “blend” the pivot and order-as-balance metaphors to sway the ministers that they ought to be oriented in relation to the king, and not in relation to the factions they belong in. We might think the metaphor was effective because it “drew on the deep-seated human desire to get into (or maintain) equilibrium in service of a strengthening of his position” (Lovins 2012, 195). For instance, the metaphor “digging a financial grave” is effective because it equates financial ruin with physical death, activating our visceral aversion to death and imbuing the financial mistake with negative valence. Along the same line, the imperial pivot equates proper orientation with the visceral desire to keep a sense of balance, encouraging the ministers to act in a way that would restore or maintain political balance.

IV.

As we can see from the Four-Seven debate and the *Book of the Imperial Pivot*, metaphors are effective in part because they invoke emotions—sometimes empathy, other times a more amorphous positive or negative valence connected to visceral bodily preferences. They let us attend to both thought and emotion, inviting metaphilosophical questions about doing philosophy in a way that’s sensitive to how an idea feels. Metaphors, as a figure of speech that imbues linguistic meaning with psychological weight, seem a natural tool for Neo-Confucians who believe the heart and the mind are really one. Philosophers note that metaphor’s achievements go beyond those of semantic nature, and the Four-Seven debate and the *Book of the Imperial Pivot* serve as historical examples of the kind of social and political achievement metaphor is capable of.

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1. To learn more, see Kalton 1994, Ivanhoe 2016, and Cawley 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zhu Xi, too, had reworked the moon metaphor, comparing the moon to the *taiji* (Supreme Polarity 太極, e.g. primal pattern that orders yin and yang) and the moon-reflections to the manifestations of *taiji*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kongzi also makes a reference about the ideal ruler being a Pole Star; see *Analects* 2.1 and 15.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)