

An Interpretation of the Philosophical Thoughts in Dai Zhen's *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius*

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Abstract

Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius is a pivotal philosophical work by Dai Zhen, a prominent scholar of the Qing Dynasty. In this book, Dai Zhen critiques Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism by annotating and verifying *The Mencius*, thereby expounding his own philosophical ideas. Thus, *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius* stands as a significant achievement in Dai Zhen's philosophical thought. This paper primarily interprets his philosophical ideas from two perspectives: first, the concept of "li", and second, the ideological system embodied in the work. It reveals that Dai Zhen developed his own philosophical thought in the process of criticizing Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. With a simple materialist worldview, he forcefully criticized the ascetic viewpoint of "preserving heavenly li and extinguishing human desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians, and further established a materialist outlook on the universe, theory of knowledge and action, and theory of human nature.

Keywords

Dai Zhen; *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius*; Outlook on the Universe; Theory of Knowledge and Action; Theory of Human Nature.

1. Introduction

Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius, written by Dai Zhen, a renowned scholar of the Qing Dynasty, is a significant philosophical work focused on Confucian doctrines. Employing a question-and-answer format, the book selects several key concepts from *The Mencius*-including "li", "tiandao", "xing", "cai", "dao", and "quan"-and provides annotations supported by citations from Confucian classics. Through this, Dai Zhen critiques the interpretations of these concepts by Neo-Confucian scholars like Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi, while expounding his own philosophical ideas. Dai Zhen lived in an era when China's feudal system was gradually declining. Neo-Confucianism, which the feudal ruling class utilized to constrain people's minds, increasingly revealed its reactionary nature. Therefore, in this work, Dai Zhen elaborated his philosophical thoughts through annotations, with the aim of criticizing Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. The following part will interpret his philosophical ideas from two perspectives: first, the concept of "li", and second, the ideological system of Dai Zhen embodied in the work.

2. Interpretation from the Concept of "Li"

In his annotations and verification of the concept "li", Dai Zhen primarily criticized the view of "preserving heavenly li and extinguishing human desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and put forward the proposition of "embodying the feelings of the people and satisfying the desires of the people".

First, proceeding from a materialist perspective and addressing the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' view that "li exists prior to things", Dai Zhen elaborated that "li" refers to the "fenli" and "tiaoli" of things, i.e., the objective laws inherent in things. He stated that after carefully observing

things, distinguishing them according to their different characteristics and assigning them different names is what is called "fenli"^[1]. When "fenli" manifests in the texture of objects, it is referred to as "jili", "couli", or "wenli". If one can analyze and distinguish the characteristics of things in an orderly manner, this is called "tiaoli". Dai Zhen further pointed out that this "li" exists within people's daily social relationships and behaviors. The objectivity of this "li" is evident everywhere in the institutional systems and ethical practices of traditional society. For instance, the household registration system in ancient China was formulated based on objective and practical factors such as region, clan, and population size. Its "tiaoli" lies in clarifying the attribution of the population and the order of management, rather than being a transcendental criterion created out of thin air. Another example is the principle of equivalent exchange in commercial activities, which is a "fenli" formed based on the labor value of commodities and market demand. It can only be manifested through actual transaction behaviors-this stands in sharp contrast to the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian view that regards "li" as an abstract entity detached from specific things. In this way, Dai Zhen, from a materialist standpoint, forcefully refuted the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' idealist worldview that "li exists prior to things".

Second, based on a materialist theory of knowledge, Dai Zhen criticized the idealist apriorism of "li inherent in the mind" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians. Dai Zhen argued that "li resides in things" and "li lies in the detailed analysis of things and affairs". He stated that the tastes, sounds, and colors of objects all require people to perceive them through sensory organs such as the mouth, ears, and eyes, and to use the mind to analyze objective things. This stands in contrast to the view of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians, who held that "li" exists a priori in human minds. At the same time, Dai Zhen further developed Xunzi's thought of "valuing learning". He believed that only through continuous acquired learning could one attain the realm of a "sage". As he put it, only learning can make up for one's shortcomings and enhance one's wisdom. Dai Zhen's emphasis on "learning" here does not merely refer to the recitation of classical texts; it further includes practical investigation of objective things. Take ancient craftsmen as an example: forging exquisite artifacts required repeated polishing, measuring, and adjustment. Through practice, they mastered the properties of materials and the rules for using tools. This process is precisely the embodiment of "perceiving things through the senses and analyzing the ordered principles with the mind," and it also confirms that "li" must be acquired through acquired learning and practice, rather than existing innately in the mind. If we follow the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' view that "li is inherent in the mind," craftsmen would be able to master the principles of creating objects without practice-this is obviously contrary to the logic of skill inheritance in reality.

Third, in his annotations and verification of the concept "li", Dai Zhen further put forward the view that "li resides in desires" to refute the ascetic idea of "preserving li and extinguishing desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians, and proposed the proposition of "embodying the feelings of the people and satisfying the people's desires"^[2]. Proceeding from a materialist perspective, Dai Zhen explicitly advanced the viewpoint of "li resides in desires". He argued that it is precisely because humans have desires that they possess "ren"-only by starting from their own natural desires and emotional experiences, and extending their feelings to others, can they perceive the desires and emotions of others. He further stated that "li" lies in the absence of bias in one's perception of others' desires and emotions; such unbiased perception can only be achieved by recognizing one's own desires and emotions first and then extending that understanding to others, rather than being derived from an a priori "li". He also pointed out that similar desires and emotions exist in both oneself and others, and "li" emerges when these desires and emotions are neither excessive nor insufficient. Therefore, the way to conform to "heavenly li" is to moderate human desires, not to eliminate them.

To further clarify the relationship between "li" and desires, Dai Zhen provided an explanation by distinguishing between "ziran" and "biran". He stated that humans having desires and

emotions is a form of "ziran" inherent to being human; after examining these human desires and emotions, one will understand the laws of "biran"-and this is what "liyi" refers to. "Ziran" and "biran" are not two separate things. For "ziran", if one understands its inherent laws and avoids mistakes, they can attain "biran"^[3]. Acting in this way allows one to have no regrets and feel at peace, which represents the highest realization of "ziran". If one causes flaws in "ziran", they will instead lose it-and this would no longer be "ziran". Therefore, restraining "ziran" with the laws of "biran" actually enables the fulfillment of "ziran". In other words, desires belong to "ziran", while "li" belongs to "biran". Moderating desires with "li" allows one to fulfill "ziran"; conversely, going against "li" and indulging in desires leads to the loss of "ziran". Thus, starting from the perspective that "heavenly li" is nothing more than human desires and human feelings, Dai Zhen put forward the proposition of "embodying the feelings of the people and satisfying the people's desires"-thereby forcefully refuting the ascetic view of "preserving li and extinguishing desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians.

In his annotations and verification of the concept "li", Dai Zhen further argued that the "li" proposed by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians-defined as "bestowed by Heaven and inherent in the mind"-lacks the attribute of "being universally acknowledged by the mind". Thus, it is not a universal truth but merely an individual opinion. He stated that true "li" or "yi" can only be called such if it is commonly recognized and affirmed by all people's minds; those ideas that are not universally accepted by the public, but only represent the personal views of certain individuals, cannot be termed "li" or "yi".

In his annotations and verification of the concept "quan", Dai Zhen further pointed out the essence of Song Dynasty Confucians' practice of "killing people in the name of li". He argued that whenever someone takes "li" as a standard rooted in their own mind-instead of starting from human desires and emotions to "extend their feelings to others"-and uses this "mind-inherent li" to judge others, they inevitably harm people across the world by treating their personal biases as "li".

In his annotations and verification of "li", Dai Zhen also noted: "When a person dies for violating laws, there are still people who show sympathy; but when a person dies for 'violating li', who would feel sympathy for them?" Dai Zhen's critique of "killing in the name of li" directly targets the cruelty of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism in the practice of social ethics. In Qing Dynasty society, women were often accused of "violating heavenly li" for "failing to uphold chastity" after their husbands' deaths, and some were even forced to commit suicide. Such moral trials conducted in the name of "li" disregarded people's natural desires for survival and emotional fulfillment, becoming a tool for the ruling class to suppress human nature. It was precisely because Dai Zhen recognized the harm of placing "li as one's personal bias" above "the people's natural desires" that he firmly advocated replacing the notion of "preserving li and extinguishing desires" with "embodying the people's feelings and satisfying the people's desires," seeking to break the suppression of human nature imposed by Neo-Confucianism. Therefore, here Dai Zhen exposed the essence of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' practice of "devouring people in the name of li", and philosophically revealed the idealist nature of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism from a materialist perspective.

3. Interpretation from the Perspectives of Outlook on the Universe, Theory of Knowledge and Action, and Theory of Human Nature

In the process of criticizing Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, Dai Zhen developed a materialist outlook on the universe, a materialist theory of knowledge and action, and a materialist theory of human nature. Below is an interpretation of the philosophical thoughts embodied in Dai Zhen's Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius (hereafter referred to as Annotations) from these three perspectives.

(1) Outlook on the Universe

The outlook on the universe embodied by Dai Zhen in *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius* mainly focuses on the interpretation of concepts such as "qi", "dao", and "li". He argued that the origin of the universe is "qi", which consists of two forms: "yin" and "yang". All things in heaven and on earth are the result of the integration and generation of "yin-qi" and "yang-qi". As he stated, "All things in the world come into being, and their origin can be traced back to yin and yang." (*Annotations*, Volume 1: On Li) Dai Zhen held that "dao" refers to the changing and flowing movement of the two vital energies, yin and yang, and that "yin, yang, and the five elements" constitute the substantial entity of "dao". For instance, he wrote, "The alternation of yin and yang flows unceasingly-that is precisely what is called 'dao'." (*Annotations*, Volume 2: On Heavenly Dao) He further noted, "Yin, yang, and the five elements are the substantial entity of dao." (*Annotations*, Volume 2: On Heavenly Dao) Dai Zhen believed that the transformative flow and movement of "qi" in "dao" are not chaotic; instead, they follow various inherent laws and order-and this law and order is "li"^[4]. He maintained that "li" is obtained by conducting a meticulous examination of things, then distinguishing them according to the observed results and assigning corresponding names, which gives rise to "fenli" and "tiaoli". Principles that distinguish things from one another are "fenli", while principles that reflect consistency among things are "tiaoli". Dai Zhen pointed out that "qi", "dao", and "li" are closely interconnected and together constitute the origin of the universe. This viewpoint embodies a strong materialist spirit.

(2) Theory of Knowledge and Action

The theory of knowledge and action presented by Dai Zhen in *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius* embodies a materialist view of nature. Dai Zhen argued that the fundamental difference between humans and animals lies in humans' ability to understand objective things (i.e., to acquire "li" [principle/reason]), while animals lack this capacity. He further maintained that "li" is inherent in things themselves; the "li" contained in things is not something added by humans. Therefore, things are the sole source of "knowledge", and "knowledge" is the objective necessity and inevitable result of the human mind's efforts to understand the "li" inherent in things. This is the manifestation of a materialist view of nature. With this perspective, Dai Zhen criticized the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' interpretation of "li" and rejected their idealist stance-that "li" can only be obtained through intense introspection of the mind, and that no other means of inquiry exist. Dai Zhen attached great importance to the view that "valuing action must first involve valuing knowledge". He held that to acquire "knowledge", humans should analyze things, understand and grasp their laws, and based on these laws, achieve clarity of thought through learning. Thus, from the perspective of epistemology, Dai Zhen criticized the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians' view of "preserving heavenly li and extinguishing human desires". In the course of this criticism, he further elaborated that to obtain correct "knowledge", humans must overcome personal biases, proceed from their own desires, emotions, and natural perceptions with an objective and truthful attitude, and "extend their feelings to others"-i.e., empathize with others. Only by doing so can they truly analyze things impartially and accurately grasp the objective laws of things.

(3) Theory of Human Nature

In *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius*, Dai Zhen quoted the interpretation of "ming" and "xing" from Da Dai Li Ji : "The specific forms of various things differentiated from the Dao are called 'ming'; when many specific things share the same characteristics and thus belong to the same category, they are called 'xing'." He then elaborated on this interpretation, stating that humans and things come into being through the differentiation of the various characteristics of yin, yang, and the five elements, and humans and things possess different attributes due to the distinct characteristics each belongs to. Yin, yang, and the five elements are the substantial entity of the Dao, while humans' "xueqi xinzhì" are the substantial entity of

human nature^[5]. Things with substantial entities can be differentiated, and precisely because of this differentiability, each has its own unique characteristics and varies from one another. The ancient sages and virtuous people explained "xing" based on the Dao itself. The act of drawing principles from the specific things of the Dao essentially involves differentiating them according to the characteristics of yin, yang, and the five elements inherent in those specific things. As soon as differentiation is mentioned, it inherently entails limitations from the very beginning, accompanied by inconsistencies such as partiality versus comprehensiveness, approval versus disapproval, clarity versus confusion, and vagueness versus distinctness. Each of these situations becomes a specific type along with differentiation, thereby each possessing its own unique characteristic. Therefore, Dai Zhen argued that human nature is differentiated based on the characteristics of yin, yang, and the five elements embodied in humans' xueqi xinzhì, and this differentiation is distinct from the attributional differentiation of inanimate objects. Thus, proceeding from a materialist view of nature, Dai Zhen held that human nature is precisely xueqi xinzhì. He sharply criticized the idealist theory of human nature proposed by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians, which claims that "xing is li". He clearly pointed out that both humans and things are "differentiated from yin, yang, and the five elements", and because their share from yin, yang, and the five elements differs, the nature they form also varies from one another.

Based on this line of thinking, Dai Zhen offered a new interpretation of Mencius' theory of "the inherent goodness of human nature". He argued that "the inherent goodness of human nature" refers to the process where humans, in their daily social relationships and behaviors, develop various perceptions of things, gradually become aware of their own "heart of compassion", "heart of shame and disdain", "heart of respect and deference", and "heart of right and wrong", and thereby acquire the moral concepts of ren, yi, li, and zhi. He also provided a new interpretation of Xunzi's theory of "the inherent evil of human nature". He held that the needs for "food, drink, and sexual relations" are inherent to human nature and cannot be deemed "evil"; as long as one restrains their actions within reasonable bounds, such behavior is "good". This view of Dai Zhen's centered on a naturalistic theory of human nature-forcefully criticized the idealist perspective of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians that "human nature is li".

4. Conclusion

In summary, in *Annotations on the Meanings of Terms in the Mencius*, Dai Zhen, from a simple materialist worldview, forcefully criticized the ascetic view of "preserving heavenly li and extinguishing human desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians. In the course of this criticism, he developed a materialist outlook on the universe, a materialist theory of knowledge and action, and a materialist theory of human nature-all of which stand as important achievements in Dai Zhen's philosophical thought.

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