

“A Moral Sentimentalist Reading of Dai Zhen’s Qing-ism”

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Abstract: It is generally known that Dai Zhen purposefully subverted the Cheng-Zhu li-based metaphysical scheme by privileging the existential manifestations of qing (情 sentiments and emotion) and yu (欲 desires) in the ontological realm of qi (气 psycho-physical force), such that his philosophy may be characterized as an architectonic vitalist worldview that features the dynamic creativity of humanity’s rationality and intellection in relation to its natural and biological constitutions of blood and breath (xueqi xinzhi 血气心知), whose workings find instantiations and expressions in the socio-cultural domain of “human relations and daily practice” (人伦日用). My paper ponders whether Dai’s rejection of the priority of li in ethical construal and his appeal to qing and qi may be read as an agent-driven moral sentimentalist ethics—what I call qing-ism—in which the test and criterion of right action is its leaning toward enhancing the welfare and care of oneself and fellow human beings. It may be argued that Dai conceives of emotions and desires as the basic premise of ren (仁 humaneness) as well as the point of reference for moral terms (good-and-bad/right-and-wrong), adjudicated by affective and conative attitudes.