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The Early Confucian Worry about *Yuan* (Resentment)

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Abstract
This article focuses on a psychological phenomenon discussed by the early Confucian: *yuan* 怨, which is often translated as "resentment", "grievance", "lament", or "complaint". I attempt to use the early Confucian discussions of *yuan* to shed light on an aspect of human psychology, namely, when one laments about certain conditions that obtain in such a way that she sees as beyond her control and negatively affects her. This is an unusual reactive attitude because one who has *yuan* takes the "passive stance." This paper has four main sections: the first section makes textual observations of "yuan" in the early Confucian texts; the second section proposes a Confucian-inspired account of *yuan* and highlights the psychological state in which one who has *yuan* sees oneself as object; the third section discusses the problematic dimensions of *yuan*; the final section discusses the negative implications of the passive stance with respect to contemporary concerns: vulnerability, moral repair, and self-respect.

Keywords Confucian ethics · *yuan* · regret · resentment · moral psychology

1 *Yuan* in Early Confucian Texts

This article focuses on a psychological phenomenon discussed by early Confucian thinkers: *yuan* 怨. In the early texts, "yuan" can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. *Yuan* may refer to ill-feeling between groups of people from different states or to a certain psychological state of an individual.[1] This article is only concerned with *yuan* as a psychological state. As a psychological state, *yuan* can be roughly construed as one's negative reactive attitude, emotion, or feeling towards

[1] See Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 16-18.

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some lamentable circumstances (or aspects of life that she regards as dissatisfying) while also seeing herself as being subject to these circumstances.[2]

There does not seem to be any scholarly consensus on the appropriate English renderings of *yuan*. Even a cursory glance at the English translations of *Analects* reveals this difficulty. Even within the same translation, scholars tend to adopt different renderings of "yuan" that suits the specific linguistic context. James Legge, for example, translates "yuan" variably as "murmur," "resentment," "discontent," and "repine".[3] D. C. Lau uses none of these terms. Instead, Lau translates "yuan" as "ill will," "complaint," "grievance," "harbour grudges," "injury," "feel badly done by." Although it is difficult to find a suitable English word that sufficiently captures the nuances of the term, there might be a common thread among these different renderings, which is perhaps close to what we ordinarily mean by "resentment." But this is only a rough approximation. For the rest of this article, I will leave the term "yuan" untranslated.

The point of this paper is not to decide whether *yuan* is an emotion, a feeling, or a reactive attitude, nor to try to decide which English term is the most suitable translation of "yuan." The point is to propose a Confucian-inspired account of *yuan* that captures a distinctive psychological phenomenon. If successful, this project will supply us with a new vocabulary to talk about certain aspects of human psychology. To begin such a task, it is important to first look at how the texts discuss *yuan*. In the following section, I focus on analyzing *yuan* based on the way it is discussed in the early texts.[4] I highlight six textual observations about *yuan* that capture the ways *yuan* is discussed in the early Confucian texts. These six features are by no means exhaustive nor comprehensive. They do not capture all the ways in which *yuan* is discussed in the early texts. That said, these observations are consistent with the other usages. For the purpose of this project, they provide enough textual basis for me to construct a Confucian-inspired account of *yuan*. I will explain more what it means for an account to be Confucian-inspired in section 2.

First, *yuan* is a negative reactive attitude or feeling one has towards some inconvenient conditions in which one finds oneself, such as being single as a woman in pre-Qin times, being in a state of poverty, being distressed, and being burdened with some tasks.[5] This suggests that human psychology is prone to have *yuan* if one is put under circumstances that she finds difficult or unpleasant. We may also extrapolate from Confucius's thinking about two historical events. One event is Guan Zhong's 管仲 taking three hundred households from Bo and reducing Bo 伯 to living on coarse rice. Confucius praises Guan Zhong for not making Bo *yuan*

[2] For a helpful etymological discussion of *yuan*, see Michael D. K. Ing, *The Vulnerability of Integrity in Early Confucian Thought.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), p. 113.

[3] *Confucian Analects*, trans. James Legge (Auckland: Floating Press, 1872), 4.12, 4.18, 5.23, 5.25, 12.2, 14.1, 14.9, 14.10, 14.35, 15.15, 17.9, 17.15, 17.25, 18.10, 20.2.

[4] The Confucian texts on which I mainly rely as textual bases in this paper are the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Xunzi,* and the *Liji*.

[5] See *Analects* 4.18, 14.10, 20.2; *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1B:12, 1B: 18, 5A:1, 7B:4; *Liji*, *Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism Part IV The Li Ki, XI-XLVI*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1885), Book 27.

even though he has significantly reduced Bo's prestige and welfare.[6] We may infer from this that had Guan Zhong not handled the matter properly, Bo could have *yuan* towards him for the grave disadvantages Guan Zhong caused him. Another event is about two brothers, Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shi Qi 叔齊. Their father wanted to pass the throne to the younger son Shu Qi, but Shu Qi wanted his eldest brother Bo Yi to take the throne. Bo Yi refused to take the throne because it was against his father's will. The two brothers later jointly abdicated their claims to the throne and fled to another state. When a disciple asked Confucius if the two brothers have *yuan*, Confucius said that the two brothers do not have *yuan* because they pursue *ren* (benevolence).[7] The disciple, probably based on his understanding of ordinary human psychology, would have thought that it is normal for Bo Yi and Shu Qi to have *yuan,* given that they are hugely disadvantaged due to the loss of the throne or because they are unfilial to their father for not taking the throne.[8] Confucius seems to share this assumption about ordinary psychology and explains to the disciple why the two brothers do not have *yuan*.

Second, even though *yuan* is a negative reactive attitude or feeling, the early Confucians do not think that it is always inappropriate for one to have or feel *yuan*. When Mencius discusses the case of Liu Xia Hui 柳下惠 not having *yuan* when he was forced to leave office, he criticizes Liu Xia Hui for not being serious enough, implying that Liu should have had some degree of *yuan*.[9] There are also textual references that speak favorably of *yuan*. For example, when Confucius explains the importance of learning the *Odes*, it is said that the *Odes* allow one to express *yuan*.[10] "Xiao Pan 小弁," for example, in Mencius's view is one of the odes that can give expression to the author's intimate affection for his parent.[11] It seems that, for early Confucians, it is not unfitting to have *yuan* nor unacceptable to express one's *yuan* as long as it is expressed in an appropriate way. Moreover, Mencius thinks that even someone as cultivated as sage-king Shun had *yuan* because he lacked love from his parents.[12] It is said that Shun fled to the fields after his father, stepmother, and brother tried to kill him and cried to *tian* (Heaven). Mencius speaks favorably of Shun's *yuan* here because it results from his longing for his parents' affection. It is also said in the *Xunzi* that it is acceptable for a minister to have *yuan* but not be angry at the ruler.[13] These textual references suggest that having *yuan* is sometimes excusable or even appropriate.

Third, although early Confucians do not condemn those who have *yuan*, they still seem to view *yuan* generally with disfavor, unless there are extenuating circumstances (which I discuss below). Confucius seems to think that a *ren* person is

[6] *Analects* 14.9.

[7] *Analects* 7.15.

[8] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[9] *Mencius* 2A:9. Note that Mencius also praises Liu Xia Hui in 5B:1, 6B:6, and 7B:15.

[10] *Analects* 17.9. It is also said that the *Odes* can stimulate the mind, make one more observant, and help one become more sociable.

[11] *Mencius* 6B:3. The author is thought to be either King Zhou You's son Yi Jiu or Yin Jifu's son Bo Qi. Both have been badly treated by their fathers.

[12] *Mencius* 5A:1.

[13] Xunzi, *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu* (Beijing: Yenching University Press, 1950), 27/37.

someone who does not have *yuan* (benevolent).[14] When being asked by a disciple about *ren*, Confucius mentions four things, one of which is not having *yuan* when at home or in a state.[15] In addition, Confucius thinks that there is no room for *yuan* between Bo Yi and Shu Qi because they sought *ren* and had obtained *ren*.[16] Mencius echoes a similar idea with regard to Shun's relation to his brother Xiang, who had repeatedly tried to kill Shun. When Mencius's disciple is puzzled by Shun's decision to enfeoff Xiang, Mencius's explanation is that since Shun is *ren*, he would not hold onto his *yuan* towards Xiang.[17]

The fourth observation concerns the problem with holding onto *yuan*. A clue to how the second and third observations may be compatible is Mencius's point that Shun does not hold *onto* his *yuan* towards Xiang. That Mencius uses the term "su 宿," literally meaning "staying overnight," evokes an image of Shun not letting his *yuan* towards Xiang lodge in him for long. Perhaps what the early Confucians mean is not that *ren* people do not have *yuan* at all, but that what makes them *ren* is that they do not hold onto the *yuan* for too long. This is also probably why Confucius has a low opinion of those who befriend someone while hiding their *yuan* towards the friend.[18] What disturbs Confucius is probably not just the deception and insincerity, but also one's keeping of her *yuan* beyond the fitting time. The connection between *yuan* and remembering an unpleasant event can also be observed in Confucius's remark that since Bo Yi and Shu Qi did not keep recalling old sores, they rarely have *yuan*.[19] Taken together, these suggest that there is something particularly problematic about continually holding *yuan* and recalling the past event that triggers *yuan*.

The fifth observation concerns the object of *yuan*: in most of its occurrences, "yuan" is used as a noun to describe the feeling or psychological state that one is in. The object of *yuan* is often not mentioned. Very rarely, we find the construction of "*yuan* X." And wherever the construction "*yuan* X" occurs, the object is usually put in general terms, such as others (*ren* 人),[20] "one who kills" and "one who wins"[21] or "yuan tian 天 (Heaven)."[22] This suggests that *yuan* is not always directed to a specific agent. *Yuan* can be directed towards a particular set of circumstances or as Kwong-loi Shun puts it, to "the world."[23] In instances where the person towards

[14] *Analects* 14.1.

[15] *Analects* 12.2. The other three are: "When abroad behave as though you were receiving an important guest. When employing the services of the common people behave as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire." (trans., Lau)

[16] *Analects* 7.15.

[17] *Mencius* 5A:3.

[18] *Analects* 5.25.

[19] *Analects* 5.23.

[20] *Xunzi* 4/21, 30/2, 30/12.

[21] *Mencius* 2A:7, 7A:12.

[22] *Analects* 14.35; *Mencius* 2B:13, 6B:3; *Xunzi* 4/21, 17/5, 30/12.

[23] Kwong-loi Shun, "Resentment and Forgiveness in Confucian Thought," *Journal of East-West Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2014):17. There is one special instance in the *Mencius* 5A:6 where the phrase "self-yuan (*zi yuan*自怨)" occurs, but it is unclear if it means one has *yuan* towards oneself. Given the way "zi" is used in reflexive binomials, "self-yuan" in this context can mean that one comes to realize that the circumstances are such that she should have *yuan*. The object of *yuan* can still be some circumstances, not herself as the object of *yuan*.

whom one has *yuan* is made clear, it is interesting to note that *yuan* often arises in relation to someone who is hierarchically superior to the person that has *yuan*. For example, the ministers have *yuan* when the ruler does not keep distant from his relatives,[24] children have *yuan* when they have to work for their parents,[25] and subjects of a state have *yuan* when the state is not well-governed.[26]

The sixth observation concerns *yuan* in special relationships. One seems to be more prone to have *yuan* towards those she perceives as standing in a special relation to oneself. Both "Xiao Pan" and "Kai Feng 凱風" are odes written by authors who, at the time of writing, have somewhat suffered because of their parents. However, "Xiao Pan" expresses *yuan* but "Kai Feng" does not. It is generally thought that the father in "Xiao Pan" committed a major mistake. If the son does not *yuan* his father after the major mistake, it means he is distant from his father (*shu* 疏), which is unfilial. By contrast, the mother in "Kai Feng" made a minor mistake. If children *yuan* their parent for only a minor mistake, they will be too easily provoked and unfilial.[27] Hence, *yuan* can sometimes be an expression of intimacy and *ren*. Mencius illustrates this point with the example of how one can recount the incident of a stranger from another state trying to shoot oneself in a calm and joking manner, but one cannot recount the incident of one's own brother trying to shoot oneself without crying and weeping. The difference lies in the fact that one's brother stands in a special relationship to oneself.

2 Early Confucian Account of *Yuan*

Since *yuan* is not a prominent concept in early Confucian thought, the early thinkers did not offer much substantial argument on *yuan* and it is unclear if they have carefully thought through what kind of psychological state *yuan* is. What I try to do here is to systematize the term "*yuan,*" which early Confucians did not explicitly systematize, and to reconstruct an account of *yuan* that is recognizably Confucian.[28] Although the systematization and reconstruction are my doing, they are based on readings of texts, outlined above, that are historically grounded.[29] This is not to deny that there are different views on *yuan* within the Confucian tradition. It would take a much larger project to delineate the distinctive features of this tradition. Still, I assume that there are concerns and ideals that are characteristic of the Confucian tradition and that my proposed account is in line with those concerns and ideals.

24 *Analects* 18.10.

25 *Analects* 4.18; *Mencius* 5A:1; *Liji* "Nei Ze", "Ji Yi".

26 *Liji* "Yue Ji"; *Xunzi* 18/27.

27 *Mencius* 6B:3.

28 It should also be noted that the proposed account of *yuan* is only concerned with *yuan* of an individual, not the *yuan* of a group. As mentioned earlier, there are textual references to the *yuan* between groups. Instances like this will not fall under present consideration, though it leaves open the possibility that the proposed account is also applicable to collective *yuan*.

29 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the wording of these three sentences.

From the textual observations outlined in section 1, we may pick out three necessary conditions for *yuan*. (1) One has to see herself from her first-person perspective as worse-off. The comparison class is not others, but some possible state(s) she could be in. For example, if one thinks that she could be promoted at work, she might have *yuan* that she is in her current position. Although one does not necessarily compare oneself to others, it is very likely for one's *yuan* to be triggered by some state that others are in. If one learns that her colleague has been promoted, it can easily trigger the thought that she could have been promoted too. Once she thinks that she could have been promoted, it can easily lead to the thought that her actual state is one that is worse-off, and, hence, she has *yuan*. Still, her *yuan* is a response to her comparing her actual state to some other state she could be in, not directly to her colleague's state.

One's *yuan* can also be triggered by changes to one's circumstances without comparing her current worse-off state to some state in the past. For example, if one is demoted at work, she might have *yuan*. That she was in a higher position before makes her think that she could also currently be in that higher position, and, hence, she comes to see herself as worse-off. Strictly speaking, her *yuan* is a response to her comparing her current state to the possible state of being in a higher position, not a response to her comparing her current state to her previous state. This implies that *yuan* is not necessarily directed to the past.

One who has *yuan* has to think that there are better alternatives for her from her first-person perspective. As mentioned before, the texts mention cases where some people do not have *yuan* even though they seem to be worse off from a third-person perspective. The two brothers Bo Yi and Shu Qi did not have *yuan* when they had to flee to another state. Even though Bo Yi and Shu Qi are aware that inheriting the throne is an alternate possibility, they each, for different reasons, cannot accept that possibility. Hence, inheriting the throne is not a possibility *for them*. Accordingly, from a first-person perspective, Bo Yi and Shu Qi do not see themselves as worse off because they do not see better possible alternatives available to them. It is in this sense that we can say that *yuan* necessarily involves one's expectations. It is important to note that these expectations are not normative in the sense that someone should act in a certain way to me; rather, these are expectations that something could be the case for me. For instance, if a child has *yuan* when taking care of her ailing parents, her *yuan* does not necessarily include the expectation that her parents should not ask her to take care of them. But she must see some alternate possibilities where she does not have to take care of her parents, e.g. her parents are not sick or her sibling takes care of her parents. It does not matter whether these possibilities objectively exist. It suffices for one to consider them as possibilities.

(1) alone is too weak to delineate *yuan*. There are some situations that satisfy (1) but one does not have *yuan*. The second condition for *yuan* (2) is that the person who has *yuan* does not accept her current state. If the person who has *yuan* accepts her current state, she will no longer fixate on the thought that her current state could be otherwise. For example, it is said in the *Mencius* that a good ruler can employ his

people in such a way that even if his people toil, they will not have *yuan*.[30] The subjects who themselves have to labor for the ruler are probably aware that they could be in a state that does not require such hard work, but they do not have *yuan* because they see good reasons for working hard for the ruler. This does not mean that one who has *yuan* necessarily sees that her current state as unreasonable. For example, one might not think that taking one's ailing parents is unreasonable, but one still has *yuan*. She might have some other personal interests or concerns that prevent her from accepting that she has to take care of her parents. Or imagine someone is standing under a tree and a branch falls off and hits her head. She might have *yuan*. Even though she does not think that any moral wrong has been done to her, she might still ask "Why me?" and find it difficult to accept that it is she who happened to be hit by a falling branch. To satisfy (2), one simply does not accept that her current state is the only viable state for her.

The third condition (3) is that one sees the state about which she has *yuan* as passive, one that is brought about by other forces and one in which she is affected. This does not mean that she does not understand that the state could also be seen as an active one, one that can impact on others or other states. But somehow, her attention is fixated on the passive aspect of the state that she is in. This is like saying some people see the glass half-empty. Those who see the glass half-empty might not have trouble understanding that the glass is also half-full. But whenever they see the glass, their attention is on its being half-empty. Similarly, as soon as one who has *yuan* thinks about her situation, she would think of it as one in which she is being subjected to other forces. Her gaze, so to speak, is not on the wrongness of the act nor on others who are responsible for her circumstances, but on how she herself is affected. For convenience, I will call this the *passive stance*.

On my account, we can rule out ill-will as a necessary feature of *yuan*. As mentioned before in the fifth observation, *yuan* is not necessarily directed at an agent. It is possible for one to have *yuan* towards the season, weather, the environment in which she was born, and so forth. And when one has *yuan* towards impersonal things, one does not have ill-will towards them. Instead, she simply regards the season or weather as what causes her worse-off state. Similarly, when one has *yuan* towards a person, she does not have ill-will towards that person even though she might see that person as responsible for bringing about her current worse-off state. This is not to say that when one has *yuan*, one cannot have ill-will at the same time. Assuming that human beings can experience a range of different attitudes and feelings at the same time, it is possible that when one has *yuan*, one also has some other feelings or attitudes that include ill-will towards the person who brought about his current state.[31] Phenomenally, there might be some attitudes or feelings that are similar to *yuan*. From the experiencer's perspective, it might be difficult to tell what exactly she is experiencing. *Nu* 怒 (anger), for example, is, in some respects, also a negative attitude or feeling about some perceived inconveniences or disadvantages to

[30] Mencius 7A:12.

[31] Contemporary scholars note that *yuan* is associated with feelings of anger and frustration. See Ing 2017, op. cit., p. 113.

oneself.[32] Even though one who has a negative attitude or feeling about an unpleasant situation might have difficulty phenomenally separating her *yuan* from *nu*, there is still a conceptual distinction between *yuan* and *nu*.[33] Suppose *nu* does include ill-will; then, one who is experiencing both *nu* and *yuan* will have ill-will towards a person. However, we should not conceptually confuse *nu* with *yuan*. The ill-will part does not come from *yuan*.

Yuan is a reactive attitude or sentiment in the sense that one reacts to circumstances that go against one's wishes. However, conditions (2) and (3) mark *yuan* as a psychological phenomenon distinct from what P. F. Strawson calls "reactive attitudes," such as resentment, indignation, regret, and guilt. One difference is that, in Strawson's technical sense, reactive attitudes are reactions to "the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us, as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions."[34] This requires one to see others who display such attitudes and actions as agents who are capable of "involvement or participation with others in interpersonal human relationships."[35] On Strawson's model, for example, resentment necessarily takes as its object a moral wrong that another who is capable of interpersonal human relationships has committed against oneself.[36] By contrast, *yuan* does not necessarily take as its object a moral wrong. One may recognize that there is no moral wrong or not recognize any moral wrong, but still not accept her state because she thinks things could have turned out better for her.

Another difference is that having Strawson's sense of reactive attitudes does not inhibit one from taking a proactive stance to recognize what she can do to remedy or correct the situation. For example, when one regrets or is indignant, she does not necessarily see herself as helpless or powerless. One might regret precisely because she thinks she could have acted in some other way. One might be indignant at a friend's betrayal and think of the ways she can take revenge. However, when one has *yuan*, one necessarily takes a passive stance because her attention is on how she is rendered in a worse-off state by forces that are beyond her control.[37]

In light of the above analysis, we come to see that *yuan* is a negative feeling or attitude that arises as a result of one seeing oneself as being in a worse-off state she

[32] Other negative reactive attitudes that resemble or are associated with *yuan* but are conceptually different from *yuan* include blame (*you* 尤), envy, jealousy (*du ji* 妒嫉) and grief (*min* 憫).

[33] For example, it is said in the *Xunzi* that one can *have yuan* without *nu* (*Xunzi* 27/37). In the *Liji*, it is said that parents could have *nu* but not *yuan* towards their disobedient children (*Liji* "Nei Ze"). These two terms are not used interchangeably in the early texts and their use of these terms shows their sensitivity to the kind of circumstances that trigger these different kinds of negative reactive attitudes or feelings.

[34] P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1-28, 2008), p. 11.

[35] Ibid., p. 10.

[36] Ibid., p. 9.

[37] See Ing 2017, op. cit., pp. 79-111 for a detailed discussions of scenarios wherein Confucius expresses regret and sorrow associated with regret. My point here does not affect Ing's characterization and analysis of the sentiments. If the sentiments expressed in some of the scenarios do not meet the necessary conditions (1) to (3), then they are not *yuan*. But this does not preclude them from being some other reactive sentiments that are akin to regret.

does not want to be in due to forces or circumstances that are not up to her own control.

3 Problematic Dimensions of *Yuan*

In this section, I discuss the problematic dimensions of *yuan*. I build on existing discussions in the literature and add that *yuan* can sometimes be problematic because one has unreasonable expectations and is unwilling to accept their circumstances. I then identify the early Confucian worry about dwelling in the passive stance, which is an underlying worry for all instances of *yuan*.

Michael D. K. Ing, in his recent works, makes a compelling point that *yuan* can be an expression of our vulnerability to the concern of those who are significant to us.[38] On Ing's view, since *yuan* could result from one's care for those who are significant to oneself and one making oneself vulnerable to them, the early Confucians do not always view *yuan* as negative. In special cases, they might even regard certain instances of *yuan* that occur as a result of one's longing for concern as appropriate. I agree with Ing that for the early Confucians, *yuan* is not always viewed with disfavor and that *yuan* could be a result of frustrated desire for affection. Sometimes, the presence of *yuan* is an indication of one's deep affection or care for others (*mu* 慕). We turn to the near and dear for important advice and help and defer a substantial degree of control to them. We, in Jeffrie G. Murphy's words, "let down our guard and expose our vulnerabilities" to those who are special to us.[39] It is precisely because we value the closeness and intimacy (*qin* 親) of certain special relationships that we are more likely to see ourselves in the passive stance and find ourselves being protected, supported, betrayed, or abandoned by them.

My proposed interpretation of *yuan* captures a psychological phenomenon that is broader than Ing's, which includes more generally any state in which one does not want to affirm her current state, such as frustrated desires for material profit, failure to uphold ethical standards, and so forth. Although *yuan* can sometimes be appropriate, *yuan* is still dominantly characterized negatively by the early Confucians. There could be a number of explanations as to why one has *yuan* and why that could be problematic. Ing, for example, suggests that *yuan* can become excessive and lead to dispositions that are destructive.[40] Both Eric S. Nelson and Kwong-loi suggest that early Confucians are worried that *yuan* centers on the self in some problematic way.[41] We may also add to the list that one who has *yuan* sometimes has unreasonable expectations, which is tied to condition (1) discussed in section 2 and is sometimes unwilling to accept her circumstances, which is tied to condition (2).

[38] See Michael D. K. Ing, "Born of Resentment: *Yuan* 怨 in Early Confucian Thought," *Dao* Vol. 15, No. 19 (2016) and Ing 2017, op. cit.

[39] See Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," in Jeffrie G. Murphy & Jean Hampton, eds., *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 17.

[40] See Ing 2016, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

[41] See Eric S. Nelson "Recognition and Resentment in the Confucian *Analects*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2013):291–292; See also Shun 2014, op. cit., pp. 16–7.

With regard to (1), consider again the example of someone who has *yuan* because she is not promoted at work. She sees herself as being in a worse-off state compared to one in which she is promoted. However, if her performance at work does not deserve a promotion, then it is inappropriate for her to expect her company to give her a promotion. Her *yuan* is then problematic because of her unreasonable expectations. To borrow Mencius's example of archery:

> [*Ren*] is like archery: an archer makes sure his stance is correct before letting fly the arrow, and if he fails to hit the mark, he does not [*yuan*] his victor. He simply seeks the cause within himself.[42]

If the archer has *yuan* toward the winner, then the archer has some unreasonable expectations that the winner could have done something to help him to win instead. Sometimes, such unreasonable expectations are not of others but of the world.[43] The archer might have unreasonable expectations that the world should have favored him in the way he wants. Sometimes, such unreasonable expectations are generated by a lack of self-knowledge. This can explain why Xunzi thinks that one who knows oneself (*zi zhi* 自知) does not have *yuan* towards others.[44] If one has a good grasp of herself, her own capabilities, preferences, dispositions, and standing, it is less likely that she will have far-fetched expectations.

With regard to (2), imagine someone who has received due punishments for a certain wrong she has done but has *yuan* that she is punished. Her unwillingness to accept her circumstances could be problematic because it shows that she has not fully recognized the wrong she has done. For early Confucians, one's unwillingness to accept one's circumstances could suggest that one does not know their mandate (*zhi ming*知命) or allotment in life. Xunzi, for example, says that those who know their mandate do not have *yuan* towards *tian* (Heaven).[45] For one who knows their mandate or allotment in life, she will not be preoccupied with thinking about alternatives, and will, therefore, more easily accept the state that she is in.[46]

The above examples are ways in which some instances of *yuan* can be problematic. There might be more. However, these problems do not generalize to all instances of *yuan*. There are certainly cases where one's *yuan* is not destructive, does not problematically center on the self, and is not generated by unreasonable expectations. There are also circumstances that one should not accept too readily. Shun's *yuan* for his parents' mistreatment is such an example. That said, Mencius

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42 *Mencius* 2A:7 (trans. Lau, modified).

43 I am indebted to Kwong-loi Shun for helping me think through this point.

44 *Xunzi* 4/21.

45 Ibid.

46 This does not mean that those who know *ming* believe that things are predetermined. See Shun 1997, op. cit., pp. 19-20 and Michael Puett, "Following the Commands of Heave: The Notion of *Ming* in Early China," in Christopher Lupke, ed., *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawi'i Press, 2005) for discussions of different interpretations of *ming* in early Confucian texts. Scholars disagree on the usages of *ming* in the early texts. The main issue has to do with whether *ming* is used in a descriptive sense to refer to what is not within human control or in a normative sense to refer to moral obligations. And as Puett points out, the *ming* of Heaven could even be destructive in the sense that it frustrates or destroys humans' ethical projects.

still thinks that one should not harbor *yuan*. What is the early Confucian reason for thinking that even in the worst imaginable circumstances, one should not dwell in *yuan*? It seems wrong to tell someone not to expect something better or to accept the unfortunate circumstances that she is in, for that seems to be just blaming the victim. In the following, I identify an early Confucian worry that underlies all instances of *yuan*. This worry is connected to condition (3) discussed in section 2: the passive stance.

When one has *yuan* and assumes the passive stance, she sees herself as *object*. To say someone sees herself as *object*, I mean that she sees herself as affected. For example, "It pushed me," "She has forgotten about me," "The world betrayed me." This is different from seeing oneself as *subject* who can take a proactive stance to exercise her agency. Examples are, "I took a step," "I miss her," "I love it." The reason I use "subject" and "object" instead of "agent" and "non-agent" is that even when one views herself as *object* at a particular instance, she may still view herself as an agent. I also use the rather grammatically awkward expression seeing oneself "as subject" and "as object." In English, we usually add an article and say seeing oneself "as a subject" and "as an object." However, adding an article might mislead readers to thinking that I am talking about objectification. I do not mean that when one adopts the passive stance, one sees oneself as an object, a thing. What I mean is closer to the grammatical sense of "object" that is governed by the action of a verb. When one sees oneself as object, one sees oneself as being affected by forces that are beyond her control. This does not entail that one sees oneself as a thing that is a tool or owned by others.[47] To avoid confusion, I italicize the word "object."

The surface structure of a sentence can sometimes help us distinguish these two ways of viewing oneself. When one views oneself as *object*, she usually thinks of herself in terms of "me," taking the place of the object of a sentence. When one views oneself as *subject*, she usually thinks of herself in terms of "I," taking the place of the subject of the sentence. However, the surface structure of a sentence is not always informative. Let us consider the difference between how one thinks about the following events:

*e*1: She is running to complete ten laps on the track, and says, "He commanded me to run."
*e*2: She is betrayed by her close friend, and says, "He betrayed me."

Despite the surface structure of the sentences being similar, she may still be viewing herself very differently in *e*1 and *e*2. Suppose she willingly obeys the command. Then, she can still see herself as *subject* who obeys the command and therefore, sees *e*1 as of her own doing. But in *e*2, she can only see herself as being betrayed by her friend, that her friend has done something to her. She may come to reconcile with her friend later, but that is a separate event. The point is that in *e*2, she sees herself as *object* that is being treated or impacted in a certain way.

[47] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 24, No. 4, (1995) for a list of seven ways of treating someone as an object.

When one has *yuan*, one sees oneself in a way that parallels *e*2.[48] What is prominent in her mind are the things that happened to her or what others have done to her. This way of thinking by itself is not problematic. There are unfortunate situations in life one should rightly think that one's agency is not involved. However, it becomes problematic when one dwells too long in the passive stance. As Nicholas Bommarito helpfully points out, even though it might be difficult to tell how much counts as dwelling, the notion of dwelling can still play an explanatory role. For our purposes, even though it might be difficult to tell how long is too long to hold *yuan*, it suffices to say that, for early Confucians, there is a point that qualifies as too long.[49] Here, it might be helpful to draw a distinction between momentary *yuan* and harbored *yuan* (recall the fourth observation). A momentary *yuan* is in a way a direct response to an external situation, which occasions one's feeling that she is adversely affected by external forces over which she lacks control. For example, when Shun's parents were trying to kill him, it makes sense for him to have momentary *yuan*. Although it is fitting for Shun to have *yuan,* he will not hold on to *yuan* and let himself be embroiled in the negative feeling about how he was mistreated by others. The early Confucian worry seems to be that if one harbours *yuan*, one will be fixated on how she is affected as *object*. When one sees oneself as *object*, her gaze is on "me," how she is affected by the world; when one sees herself as *subject*, her gaze is on "I," how she interacts with the world. Although adopting the passive stance and viewing oneself as *object* in some situations is not in itself problematic, if that perspective dominates and persists, one will be distracted from the kind of perspective needed to properly respond to wrongdoing. I elaborate more on this point in the following section.

4 Contemporary Relevance of *Yuan*

In this section, I focus on cases where *yuan* is appropriate and outline two related areas of contemporary concerns, moral repair and self-respect, to make vivid the implications of the early Confucian worry about the passive stance that one adopts in having *yuan*.

As discussed earlier, one might have *yuan* because one is vulnerable to those who are special to her or one is unwilling to compromise some noble aspirations. In these

[48] That one who has *yuan* sees oneself as *object* helps explains the fifth observation mentioned earlier that *yuan* tends to be directed to those superior to oneself, such as one's parents, ruler, or *tian*. Those who have *yuan* believe that it is not up to themselves to decide certain conditions of their life but up to their parents, for example, to determine the chores to do at home, up to their ruler to determine the recognition and promotion they can get, up to *tian* to decide their prosperity and well-being at large. Although it is usual in a hierarchical relationship that the side in the inferior position will assume a passive role and see certain domains of their life as being in the hands of the superior, it is one seeing oneself as powerless that matters. So, it is possible for parents to have *yuan* towards their children if they see there is nothing much they can do to improve the situation when, for example, an outcome lies entirely in the hands of the children (*Liji*, "Nei Ze"). On this reading, it is possible for one to have *yuan* towards oneself as long as one sees that her current state is one that is affected by her earlier agency.

[49] See Nicholas Bommarito, "Modesty as a Virtue of Attention," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 122, No. 1, (2013).

cases, it is appropriate, the early Confucians would say, to have *yuan*. However, being in a state of *yuan* entails that one sees oneself as *object*. One of the main problems with the passive stance even in cases where *yuan* is fitting is that it prevents one who has *yuan* from engaging in what Margaret Urban Walker calls "moral repair." Moral repair, as Walker explains, "[is] the process of moving from the situation of loss and damage to a situation where some degree of stability in moral relations is regained."[50] Moral repair is only possible when one sees herself as *subject* who can decide how she is to respond to wrongdoing. For whatever appropriate reparative measures there are, whether it is forgiveness, reaffirmation of violated norms, etc., the victim needs to first see herself as *subject* so that she can decide whether she is to reaffirm or defend the violated norms, whether she is to restore or leave a relationship, and so forth.[51] For early Confucians, if one dwells in the passive stance, one is fixated on seeing oneself as *object* that is affected by and implicated in objectionable circumstances or structures that are beyond her control. She sees herself as someone on whom misfortunes have simply fallen. This prevents her from taking a proactive stance in which she decides how she responds to wrongdoing. It is one thing for one to recognize and remember lamentable conditions; it is another to decide how she is to respond to such conditions. At some point, early Confucians would say, she should shift from the passive stance to the proactive stance so that she can direct attention to how she will take morally reparative measures.

It should be noted that the shift from the passive stance to the proactive stance is a normatively neutral one. It is different from the kind of shift of perspectives that Kwong-loi Shun outlines in his discussion of resentment in early Confucian thought. The kind of shift Shun discusses is about shifting from seeing one's standing as a matter of "how others view oneself" to a perspective of seeing one's standing as a "matter of one's own ethical qualities."[52] This shift focuses the victim's attention on the ethical quality of her response. The kind of shift that I am suggesting here is not about focusing one's attention on her own ethical qualities, but about shifting from seeing oneself as *object* to seeing oneself as *subject*. The shift from a passive to a proactive stance itself does not guarantee morally appropriate responses. One might, as a result of shifting to the proactive stance, decide to take revenge and inflict harm on others. To be clear, my point is not that adopting the proactive stance is sufficient for having morally appropriate responses. Rather I claim only that adopting the proactive stance is necessary.

One might worry here whether this emphasis on shifting from the passive stance to proactive stance threatens one's self-respect. It seems that self-respect is crucial and is the primary value that is being defended in many other kinds of

[50] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 6.

[51] Since one's focus in *yuan* might not even be on the wrong, the question of forgiveness does not even arise in some cases. She might not be in any standing to forgive or she might not see that there is any offense that needs to be forgiven.

[52] Shun 2014, op. cit., p. 31.

reactive attitudes such as resentment or blame.[53] If I am mistreated by others and I do not have *yuan*, it seems to indicate that I do not respect myself and defend my own worth. Early Confucians themselves might not have as their main concern one's own worth and prerogatives. That said, their worry about the passive stance in *yuan* is compatible with a commitment to having self-respect. Harboring *yuan* does nothing to guard against others injuring (or attempting to injure) us. When one dwells in the passive stance, her attention is fixated on seeing herself as *object* and it is an admission of one's helplessness and incapacity to respond to the offender. For early Confucians, in order to be an ethical agent, one needs to be able to take some control of her ethical pursuits. This is not to deny the importance of community in enabling one to be an ethical agent. I only mean that one needs to at least be able to guide oneself to conform with ethical standards. Take the cultivation of two of the most important attributes, *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yi* 義 (moral propriety) as examples. *Ren* requires the agent to actively attend to and care for others; *yi* requires the agent to hold oneself to ethical standards, which, in turn, requires one to have some moral stamina and steadfastness. The cultivation of *ren* and *yi* requires one to shift from the passive stance to a proactive stance so that one can exercise one's ethical agency.

In this article I have analyzed the early Confucian view on *yuan*, a reactive attitude where one laments certain conditions that obtain in such a way that she sees them as beyond her control and as negatively affecting her. Some of the stories about one's *yuan* in the early texts might no longer be relevant to our contemporary contexts; however, the Confucian insights on *yuan* still have much relevance today. There are people who are born into a systematically hostile environment that denies their access to resources that are crucial to well-being, such as healthcare, education, and a nurturing community. They are in a vulnerable position physically, financially, psychologically, epistemically. Their ability to exercise their agency in these hostile circumstances is precarious. Even if they see themselves as *subject* who can take a proactive stance to exercise her agency, there might not be much they can do to significantly improve their situation. After all, their unfortunate circumstances may be a product of some systematic historical or social injustice. In such circumstances, their *yuan* is borne out of a sense of justice and moral aspiration. Nonetheless, the early Confucians would hope that one does not dwell too long in the passive stance lest it prevent one from responding to what befell her. In this regard, the insights of early Confucians on *yuan* can be taken as stressing the need to engage in moral repair and the need to take control of one's own ethical pursuits.

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[53] See, for example, Murphy, op. cit., Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Jean Hampton, "Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred," in Jeffrie G. Murphy & Jean Hampton, eds., op. cit. See also Shun op. cit., 2014, pp. 27-28 for a helpful discussion of contemporary philosophers' views on the connection between resentment and self-respect.

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