

The View from Here, Looking Outward

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[DRAFT]

This paper seeks to respond to the “bourgeois predicament” problem raised by Jay Wallace’s in his book *The View from Here* by drawing on insights from the early Confucian conception of *yuan* 怨, a reactive attitude about certain given conditions of our life. What I will be proposing is not a solution to the predicament, but a response that is broadly consistent with Wallace’s own suggestion. I shall argue that, for the early Confucians, it is important for the agent to turn her attention to others and what she herself can do to remedy the situation, instead of being trapped in a view that focuses on how certain given conditions are being tainted. This paper has four main sections: the first section of this paper briefly reviews Wallace’s main positions; the second section articulates the early Confucian conception of *yuan*; the third section draws insights from early Confucian thought and the fourth section makes the insights relevant to discussion of the “bourgeois predicament” problem.

I. The problem

Wallace motivates his argument in *The View from Here* with two main steps. First, he uses cases in which there are conflicts between an objectionable or unjustifiable event in the past and the agent’s retrospective attitude on the event to illustrate that the agent’s inability to regret certain decisions she made does not track questions of whether the decisions are objectively wrong and whether they are worthy of being affirmed. These cases mainly are (1) cases that involve decisions of an agent that lack justification but the agent later on could not come to regret her earlier decisions (e.g. Gauguin’s case) and (2) cases that involve lamentable personal conditions that later give one’s life’s meaning (e.g. the hearing-impaired case). Then, Wallace extends this line of thought to our affirmation of life in general. According to Wallace, we would like to affirm our lives unconditionally, implying that we would also have to affirm the social and historical conditions that bring them about. This is what he calls “affirmation dynamic” (77). However, the social and historical conditions that lead to these significant attachments that we would like to unconditionally affirm are often objectionable or unjustifiable ones. Hence, we are caught in what Wallace calls the “bourgeois predicament” (210), a predicament that is born out of the tension between objectionable historical and social conditions on the one hand and unconditional affirmation on the other. Wallace concludes along the line that suggests our attachments and achievements are inevitably tainted. We would need to accept that we are unable to attain a life that is ultimately worthy of being unconditionally affirmed.

In this paper, I will bracket considerations that pertain to whether there are “objective” moral justification and objective worthiness of moral decision. Instead, I focus on the intriguing “bourgeois predicament” Wallace has set up. Wallace introduces

is an insightful and pressing one. It draws our attention to certain uncomfortable facts about ourselves and challenges us to confront the salient features of our most significant attachments, which we might find unsettling or inconvenient to acknowledge, and invites us to be more modest about our achievements that we thought we could unconditionally affirm.

There are a number of tempting ways to object to Wallace's account but it seems to me that they have missed the point. One objection, suggested by Alan Thomas (2014), is that Wallace thinks that the only action that is relevant to past events is trying to change them in the present. However, nowhere in the book does Wallace talk about changing past events. Quite the contrary, Wallace cannot emphasize enough that past events cannot be changed. The whole predicament is generated by the tension between our wish to unconditionally of our life, which includes past events, and the give aspects of past events that cannot be changed. Wallace at one point entertains the idea of changing the nature of events through strategy of redemption (5.4) but quickly points out that reject this route of escaping the predicament because the content of redemptive projects that seek to change the nature of regrettable events are inevitably making reference to the very regrettable conditions that are at issue.

A second objection is that it is too demanding to think that we have to affirm everything, including some lamentable conditions of the world that are beyond our lives. Lynette Reid (2014) suggests that one way to block the pessimistic conclusions that come from the affirmation dynamic is to say that it is possible to affirm those we love and the meaning of our lives in an imperfect world, without having to affirm the "tragedies and imperfections" of that world (393). This, according to Reid, can highlight the value of "reflective affirmation" against particular vulnerabilities and imperfections of the world. Wallace can agree with Reid that we can affirm the good things in our life and leave out some imperfect causal or constitutive that preconditions that have led to these good things. But as Wallace points out, this will not count as unconditional affirmation. If we want to unconditionally affirm the projects and people of our lives, we cannot but feel deeply ambivalent (4.4).

A third objection is that it is too demanding to think that our affirmation should encompass the all of world history. Thomas Nagel (2014) suggests that we can think of our affirmation as being bounded by "a statute of limitations on its reach to the past" (26). The idea is that we can take the things before our existence as given and limit our affirmations to things from here and now. We will still feel regrets and ambivalent about things but these feelings need not reach all the way to lamentable conditions far in the past that are not borne out of our own doings or willing. One difficulty with Nagel's suggestion is that it is unclear how we can decide the limit on our reach to the past in a non-arbitrary way. Should our reach ends at our grandfather's time or our great-grandfather's time? Are there any specific features of the past events that weigh differently in our considerations for the statue of limitations? Nagel thinks that if we follow Wallace, there is no way we can unconditional affirmation toward. But it seems to me that one of the most original and attractive aspects of Wallace's argument is that it challenges us to be honest with our lives (255, 260-1). The bourgeois predicament challenges us to face up to the conditions of our existence and our relation to the world, including those unpleasant aspects we might not be willing to affirm. Such facing up probably requires significant courage and truthfulness but it would be just be too naïve or

self-serving for us to cherry pick what we want to affirm and sweep the uncomfortable facts under the rug.

The early Confucians would be sympathetic to Wallace to the extent that they are also aware of the tension between our normative hope to affirm our relationships and commitments and the givenness of our lives. This concern is palpable in early Confucians' discussions of *ming* 命 (allotment, decree) and *yi* 義 (moral uprightness; propriety) in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Interestingly, the early Confucians would part with Wallace when it comes to Wallace's somewhat pessimistic conclusion. The early Confucians' recognition of this predicament has led them to emphasize the capacity human beings have to assert and exert oneself as a moral agent. I take the early Confucians to say that it is always for moral agents to turn our attention to others rather than our own givenness. What I seek to do in the following is to offer a way of facing up the predicament, not a route of escaping the predicament. I will analyze the early Confucians' negative view on *yuan* 怨, a reactive attitude where the agent laments about certain conditions that have obtained in a way that is beyond her control but have negatively affected her. Then, I will draw the Confucian-inspired positive lesson that, in spite of the predicament, our focus should not be on how we are trapped in the predicament. In virtue of our capacity for *ren* 仁, our attention should be directed outward to others and do whatever that is within our capacity to improve the conditions of human existence.

II. *Yuan* in early Confucian thought

In early Confucian thought, the notion of *yuan*, broadly construed, refers to a subject's negative reactive attitude toward some circumstances or aspects of her life that she regards as dissatisfying and sees herself as not being in any position to change the lamentable circumstances. Throughout this paper, I will leave the term "yuan" untranslated because it is difficult to find a suitable English word that sufficiently captures the nuances of the term. Even a cursory glance at the English translations of *Analects* will make us aware of this difficulty. There does not seem to have any scholarly consensus on the appropriate renderings of *yuan*. 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,"¹ "resentment,"² "discontent,"³ and "repine."⁴ D. C. Lau has not used any of the English terms Legge has used. Instead, Lau translates "yuan" as "ill will,"⁵ "complaint,"⁶ "grievance,"⁷ "harbour grudges,"⁸ "injury,"⁹ "feel badly done by."¹⁰ But if we pile these

¹ *Analects* 4.12, 4.18, 12.2, 14.9, 14.10, 14.35.

² *Analects* 5.23, 5.25, 14.1, 15.15, 17.9.

³ *Analects* 17.25.

⁴ *Analects* 17.15, 18.10, 20.2.

⁵ *Analects* 4.12, 5.23, 12.2, 15.15.

⁶ *Analects* 4.18, 7.15, 14.9, 14.10, 14.35, 18.10, 20.2 (repeating 4.18).

⁷ *Analects* 5.25, 17.9.

⁸ *Analects* 14.1.

⁹ *Analects* 14.34.

different renderings together, a pattern starts to emerge: *yuan* is a negative feeling or attitude experienced by the subject in response to a condition with which one is dissatisfied.¹¹

Although the early Confucians do not condemn *yuan* and deem it acceptable for those who have *yuan* to express it in appropriate ways, the overall impression is that having this negative feeling of *yuan* is less than ideal. It is said that an ethically cultivated person will stay away from *yuan*. This suggests that there is something ethically unappealing about *yuan*. The following analysis will explicate the psychological phenomenon of *yuan*. The negative stance early Confucians take towards *yuan* will then help us paint a positive picture of the importance of asserting one's own capacity and control to shape one's well-being, instead of passively seeing oneself as being shaped by circumstances. In the following, I will first highlight some key observations about how *yuan* is discussed in early Confucian texts and then offer an interpretation of the early Confucian conception of *yuan*.

One observation is that *yuan* is a negative reactive feeling or attitude a subject has towards some inconvenient conditions in which one finds oneself. Examples include a single woman has *yuan* that she is still unmarried;¹² the barbarian states have *yuan* that they are not being taken care of first; one's state of poverty.¹³ Confucius says that: "It is more difficult not to [have *yuan*] when poor than not to behave with arrogance when rich."¹⁴ If we read the latter half of the sentence as saying that one has a positive feeling about one's own riches, then the contrast with the first half of the at least tells us that *yuan* is a negative feeling about one's lack of riches. It is also emphasized in the early texts that one should not *yuan* even if one is distressed or has to undertake burdensome tasks.¹⁵ Again, this suggests that human psychology is prone to have negative feeling *yuan* if one is put under circumstances that she finds difficult or unpleasant, hence the importance of cultivation to check against this tendency.

A second observation is that even though *yuan* is a negative reactive attitude or feeling, the early Confucians do not seem to think that it is always reprehensible for one to have or feel *yuan*. Indeed, when Mencius discusses the case of Liu Xia Hui, who is portrayed as unusual in not having *yuan* when he was forced to leave office, suggests that Liu Xiahui's not having *yuan* is an indication of his lack of seriousness (*gong* 恭), implying that Liu should have had some degree of *yuan*.¹⁶ There are also positive textual references that speak favorably of *yuan*. For example, when Confucius explains the importance of learning the *Odes*, he said that it is because the *Odes* can stimulate the mind (*xing* 興), make one more observant (*guan* 觀), help one becomes more sociable (*qun* 群), and allow one to *yuan*.¹⁷ It seems that, in Confucius's view, it is not unreasonable to have *yuan* nor unacceptable to express one's *yuan* as long as it is

¹⁰ *Analects* 17.25.

¹¹ When "yuan" is used as a noun in the early texts, it refers to the complaint or this kind of negative feeling that one has; as a verb, it refers to the subject's complaining or feeling in such a negative way.

¹² *Mencius* 1B:12.

¹³ *Mencius* 1B:18.

¹⁴ *Analects* 14.10 (trans. Lau; modified).

¹⁵ *Analects* 4.18, 20.2; *Mencius* 5A:1, 7B:4; *Liji* "Fang Ji".

¹⁶ *Mencius* 2A:9. I have trouble reconciling Mencius's statement here with his praise for Liu Xia Hui in 5B:1, 6B:6, and 7B:15.

¹⁷ 詩可以興可以觀可以群可以怨 *Analects* 17.9.

expressed in an appropriate way, for instance, by identifying with or quoting from the odes. “Xiao Bian 小弁” is probably one of these odes that can give expression to *yuan*. This point is made explicit and further elaborated by Mencius. Mencius criticizes Gaozi’s for being too rigid in thinking that “Xiao Bian” is ode of petty man. For Mencius, the note of *yuan* in “Xiao Bian” is an expression of the author’s intimate affection for his parent.¹⁸ Along a similar line, Mencius thinks that even someone as cultivated as sage-king Shun had *yuan* that he does not have love from his parents.¹⁹ It is also said in the *Xunzi* that there are some acceptable ways for a minister to convey his disagreement with the ruler, e.g. the minister can remonstrate the ruler but not libel, can absent himself but not harbor ill will, and can *yuan* but not be angry.²⁰ These textual references suggest that, for the early Confucians, having *yuan* is sometimes understandable and excusable.

Third, although the early Confucians do not condemn those who have *yuan*, they still seem to view *yuan* generally with disfavor, unless there are extenuating grounds. This impression comes from the connection between being *ren* 仁 (benevolent) and not holding *yuan*. Even though Confucius is unsure if someone who does not have *yuan* qualifies as a *ren* person,²¹ there is strong impression that a *ren* person is someone who does not have *yuan*. When being asked by disciple about *ren*, Confucius only mentions four things, with one of them being one’s not having *yuan* when at home or in a state.²² In addition, Confucius thinks that Bo Yi and Shu Qi sought *ren* and therefore had obtained *ren*, hence there is no room for *yuan* between them even though they both abdicated their claims to the throne.²³ A similar idea about a *ren* person does not *yuan* can be found in the *Mencius*. Mencius draws an analogy between a *ren* person and an archer. When the archer fails to hit the target, he would not have *yuan* the one who wins against him for his own failure in hitting the target.²⁴ Mencius again echoes a similar idea with regard to Shun’s relation to his brother Xiang. When Mencius’s disciple is puzzled by Shun’s decision to enfeoff Xiang, who had repeatedly tried to kill Shun, Mencius’s explanation is that since Shun is *ren*, he would not hold onto his *yuan* towards Xiang.²⁵

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”, is telling as it evokes an image where Shun does not let his *yuan* towards Xiang lodge inside him for long. This can explain how someone even as sagely as Shun may have *yuan* but being it is because of *ren* that he can let go of his *yuan*. Perhaps what the early Confucians mean is not that a *ren* person does not have *yuan* at all

¹⁸ *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.

¹⁹ *Mencius* 5A:1.

²⁰ *Xunzi* 27.34 (trans. Knoblock).

²¹ *Analects* 14.1.

²² *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.”出門如見大賓使民如承大祭己所不欲勿施於人(trans., Lau)

²³ *Analects* 7.15.

²⁴ 仁者如射者正己而後發發而不中不怨勝己者反求諸己而已矣 *Mencius* 2A:7.

²⁵ *Mencius* 5A:3.

but what makes them *ren* is that they do not hold onto the *yuan* they have. In this sense, even if *yuan* is momentarily triggered, a *ren* person can quickly let go of his *yuan* as in the case for Shun. This is also probably why Confucius has low opinion of those who befriend someone while hiding their *yuan* towards the friend.²⁶ What disturbs Confucius is probably not only the deception and insincerity, but also the subject's keeping of her *yuan*. 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*.²⁷ These altogether suggest that there is something particularly problematic about continually holding *yuan* and recalling the past event that triggers *yuan*.

Fifth, *yuan* is a specific kind of negative reactive attitude or feeling that is conceptually different from other negative reactive attitudes even though, phenomenally, they might be similar to the subject. *Nu* 怒 (anger), for example, is also a negative reactive feeling that might also be triggered when one perceives inconveniences, disadvantages, or deprivation of benefits to oneself. When a subject negatively reacts to an unpleasant situation, it might be difficult for her to delineate her *yuan* and *nu*; but the early thinkers seem to take these different kinds of negative reactive to be conceptually distinct. For example, as we have seen in the *Xunzi*, it is said that one can *have yuan* without *nu*.²⁸ In the *Liji*, it is said that parents could have *nu* but not *yuan* towards their disobedient children.²⁹ Other negative reactive attitudes that resemble *yuan* but are conceptually different from *yuan* include blame (*you* 尤), envy, jealousy (*du ji* 妒嫉),³⁰ anger (*nu* 怒), and grief (憫). These terms are not used interchangeably in the early texts and their use of these terms shows their sensitivity to the kind of circumstances that will trigger these different kinds of negative reactive attitudes or feelings.

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 the subject is in and it is unclear what the object of *yuan* is. But in instances the object is made clear, the object is often in a hierarchically superior to the subject. For example, human beings may have *yuan* towards Heaven (*tian*),³¹ ministers towards the ruler,³² children towards parents,³³ and subjects of a state towards the government.³⁴

III. Insights from *Yuan*

In this section, I will try to weave the above observations together and develop an interpretation of the early conception of *yuan*. My goal is to be as faithful to the texts as

²⁶ *Analects* 5.25.

²⁷ *Analects* 5.23.

²⁸ 有怨而無怒 *Xunzi* 27.

²⁹ 若不可教而後怒之不可怒 *Liji* “*Nei Ze*”.

³⁰ My translation of “*du ji*” here is only tentative. In *Xunzi* 3, “*du*” and “*ji*” are associated with “*yuan*”.

³¹ *Analects* 14.35; *Mencius* 2B:13, 6B:3; *Xunzi* 4, 17, 30.

³² *Analects* 18.10.

³³ *Analects* 4.18; *Mencius* 5A:1; *Liji* “*Nei Ze*”, “*Ji Yi*”.

³⁴ *Liji* “*Yue Ji*”; *Xunzi* 18.

possible. However, since *yuan* is not a prominent concept in early Confucian thought, the early thinkers have not offered much substantial argument on *yuan* and it is unclear if they have carefully thought through what kind of psychological state *yuan* is. In view of these limitations, it is inevitable that I might somewhat depart from the original thought. I do not intend to claim that the proposed interpretation of *yuan* is the way the early Confucians formulated it. Rather, I take the above observations as clues for constructing an account of *yuan* that is generally in line with early Confucian spirit and uses that to understand other aspects of Confucian thought. 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.³⁵

Up to this point, I have deliberately avoided using an English term and used rather clumsy sentences to discuss *yuan* so as to avoid framing our reading of the texts. The observations mentioned above are all derived from a minimal assumption that *yuan* is a negative feeling or attitude experienced by the subject in response to a condition with which one finds unpleasant. Although translators sometimes translate “*yuan*” as “resentment”, there are reasons to think that *yuan* is quite different from how resentment is understood in the contemporary sense. On Murphy’s account, for example, there are two kinds of wrongs against oneself: “resentment of direct violations of one’s rights (as in assault) *or* resentment that another has taken unfair advantage of one’s sacrifices by free riding on mutually beneficial scheme of reciprocal cooperation.”³⁶ In the course of his discussion of wrongs, he seems to have equivocated moral wrongs with moral injuries, that is, in his view, “intentional wrongdoing [that] *insults* us and attempts (sometimes successfully) to *degrade* us.”³⁷ However, on the basis of textual evidence, it is unclear if one’s *yuan* is a response to the subject’s seeing her own rights as being violated or that one has been unfairly taken advantage of. This line of thought does not sit very well with the idea that one can have *yuan* towards *tian* 天 (Heaven). It is up to Heaven to decide what individuals should get and will get; hence, the problems of violation of rights, free-riding, or betrayal are not applicable to Heaven-human relationship.³⁸ Although the subject might have grievances about the state is in and blame it on *tian*, it is unlikely that the content of these grievances are about how she sees her right (if there is any) as being violated by *tian* or how her sacrifices as being free ridden by *tian*. For the early thinkers, *tian* itself is the source of rewards and punishment.

Furthermore, it is suggested in the early texts that *yuan* is not so much the subject’s response to the moral wrongs in what’s done to the subject as it is the subject’s response to the determining role external forces have on an unpleasant condition that she finds herself. There are many circumstances wherein no moral wrong has been committed against oneself but it is still conceivable that the subject will have *yuan*. We may use an example inspired by Confucius’s remark that the child should not *yuan* when working for parents to illustrate this point. Suppose a parent is suffering from a chronic disease and has fallen into a coma that requires intensive care and her child is put under extremely stressful and burdensome circumstances might have *yuan*. In taking care of her

³⁵ There are textual references to the *yuan* between states. 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*.

³⁶ Murphy 1988, p.16. This assumption goes back to Joseph Butler’s account of resentment.

³⁷ Murphy 1988, p.25.

³⁸ This point will be further refined in later drafts.

parent, she has to give up all activities she enjoys and has no time for herself. In this case, it cannot be quite right to say that the child feels resentment towards her parent because she knows very well that her parent has not done any moral wrong against her, that her own distressed situation is not caused by any of her parent's doings given that the parent is not even in a position to form intention and act, and that her parent could not have prevented this disease. In a case like this, the conditions for contemporary understanding of resentment are not obtained. Nonetheless, on the early Confucian view, it is still possible that the burdens of the child will bring about a child's *yuan*. Even if she knows that her unpleasant situation is not a fault of her parent's doing or anyone's doing, she sees her own condition as one that is not up to her own control. From her perspective, the life's forces throw her into this unpleasant condition that she is in and there is nothing much she can do about it. Strictly speaking, her *yuan* is not directed towards her parent as such but the external forces that she see as causing her to be in an unpleasant state. It just happens that in this scenario, her mother's illness is the external force that leads to her unpleasant state. Hence, *yuan* is not necessarily a response to a perceived moral wrong; but more generally, it is a response to perceived external force as having an unpleasant effect on the self.

What differentiates *yuan* from resentment is that the focus of the subject is not on wrongdoings but on her attributing her state of life to external forces. It is possible that some instances of *yuan* are occasioned by wrongdoings, but it is not necessary. If this is right, then there are two factors in *yuan* that make one susceptible to *yuan*: (1) one's seeing oneself as being in an unpleasant state and (2) one's attribution of (1) to external forces. Seeing oneself being in an unpleasant state is not the sufficient condition for *yuan*. One also needs to see others or external forces as having control over for one's state for *yuan* to arise. It is worth noting that both passages convey the point that when it comes to whether or not one has *yuan*, it is not so much dependent upon what others have done to oneself as it to how one positions oneself in relation to others (or the world). This point is made explicit by Mencius's analogy between *ren* and archery, which says:

[*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.³⁹

The last sentence is significant, for it highlights the connection between one's not having *yuan* and one's seeking cause within oneself. If the archer does not seek the cause of his missing the target within himself but *yuan* the winner, then he is essentially assuming is that his missing the mark is not up to him but caused by the winner. This would be an absurd thought in archery, for the game only requires on one's own control of execution.

In light of the above analysis, we come to see that *yuan* is a negative feeling or attitude that arises a result of the subject seeing herself as being in a state she does not want to be in due to external forces that are not up to her own control. This is in line with the fifth observation discussed above, which suggests that *yuan* tends to be directed to those superior to oneself, such as one's parents, ruler, or *tian*. The subjects of *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

³⁹ Mencius 2A:7 (trans. Lau, modified)

determine the recognition and promotion they can get, up to *tian* to decide their prosperity and well-being at large. Although it is usually in a hierarchical relation that the subject in the inferior position will assume a passive role and sees certain domains of their lives as being in the hands of the superior, it is the subject's seeing herself as powerless that matters. Hence, it is also possible for parents to have *yuan* towards their children if they see there is nothing much they can do to improve the situation but lies entirely in the hands of the children.⁴⁰

Yuan is a psychological phenomenon distinct from reactive attitudes like resentment, blame, and regret, which are also directed to some past events that disadvantage the subject, in the sense that the attention of the subject is not on the wrong but on external forces that she sees herself as lacking control over. The subject sees herself as powerless in the face of the given conditions. In Wallace words, she cannot affirm her conditions wholeheartedly because she sees her conditions as constituted by or arising as a result of forces or conditions that are beyond her control.

IV. Response to the Predicament

The proposed interpretation of *yuan* has prepared the ground for me to explain what is problematic about *yuan*. Since the subject might not be a victim of anyone's wrongdoing and her focus in *yuan* is not even on the wrong, the question of the forgiveness does not even arise for the subject. She might not be in any standing to forgive or that she does not see that there is any offense that needs to be forgiven. So, the problem with *yuan* is not that the subject is not being forgiving or merciful. The early Confucians' problem with *yuan*, I suggest, is that such an attitude will prevent the agent from affirming her own capacity in determining his own well-being, changing the states of things, and caring for others. Since the focus of *yuan* is not on moral wrong but on how dissatisfied one is in a condition that she does not control over, having *yuan* does nothing to guard against others' attempt to injure us. It is not a protest against violation of independence or prerogatives; quite the contrary, *yuan* is an admission of one's lack of prerogatives and a helpless cry of "I'm *not* in charge here," "It is up to others to determine what I do with my own life," "Why am I trapped in this situation?" Not only does *yuan* not guard against self-respect, if anything, it further threatens self-respect and empowers the offender in further degrading us into a lower and weaker moral standing. This way of thinking might parallel the kind of thinking an agent has when she realizes she is trapped in the bourgeois predicament.

The more optimistic idea in the early Confucian thought is that an agent always has the capacity to self-govern and care for others. For the early Confucians, the ideal ethical agent is someone who affirms her capacity to follow the ethical way even if the external forces are not in her favor. It is true that whether the conditions one finds in is not entirely up to one's own control and, in this regard, she is a passive recipient to a large extent. Nevertheless, the ideal agent also has the moral capacity to decide the kind of person she wants to be. In this regard, she is an active author of her own life. Hence,

⁴⁰ Liji, "Nei Ze".

the ideal agent does not have *yuan* even when her natural allotments turn out unfavorably for herself.⁴¹

There does not seem to be anything intrinsically wrong with having *yuan* but it is an attitude that the early Confucians do not recommend us dwelling too long in. Recall the second and sixth observations, namely, that it is not always problematic to have *yuan*. Indeed, in some circumstances, it would even be strange not to have *yuan*. Here, it might be helpful to draw a distinction between momentary *yuan* and harbored *yuan*. A momentary *yuan* is direct response to an external situation that occasions one's feeling that she is adversely affected by external forces in a way and there is nothing much she can do. Shun, for example, really was powerless as a child but had to endure the mistreatments by his parents. When Shun realized that his parents were trying to set fire to the granary and kill him, it is inevitable that Shun will feel *yuan*. But Shun will not dwell in his feeling of powerlessness and sorrow; in virtue of his *ren*, he will quickly turn around his attention from his own misfortunes to caring for the needs of others. This is probably what Mencius meant by since Shun has *ren* towards his brother Xiang, he does not let his *yuan* lodge.⁴² Hence, it is reasonable for anyone, including a *ren* person, to have momentary *yuan*. The difference between a *ren* person and a person without *ren* is that the former will quickly turn her focus back to others' well being, instead of holding on to *yuan* and let herself embroil in the negative feeling about how others have adversely affected her. The worry with one's having *yuan* is that one will be stuck with the view that her fortunes and misfortunes are entirely determine by external forces, which obscures her from seeing her own capacity to assert her own agency and govern her own life regardless of how hostile her external environment might be.

The picture outlined so far might sound attractive but one might object that this assertion of one's capacity could be impractical or trivial. Impractical, because we all know it is possible that one is born to a systematically hostile environment that denies her access to resources that are crucial to well-being, such as healthcare, education, and a nurturing community. There is nothing much she can do to improve the situation and she cannot even afford to carefully think about ethical commitments to which she should ascribe and commit. Trivial, because in certain situations, even if one recognizes one's own capacity to govern oneself, it will not lead to any improvement of the state of affairs. In early Confucian's social context, for example, an unmarried woman does not have much control over whether she will be married. It really is questionable in this respect whether she has the capacity to make things better for herself.

A clue to the early Confucian answer to the challenge is the connection between being *ren* 仁 (benevolent; compassionate) and not holding *yuan* discussed in the third observation. *Ren* is the one capacity that the early Confucians assume that all human beings naturally have. No matter how hostile the external environment is, even if one has not been taught of moral norms and standards, a human being has the endowed capacity to resonate with and respond to others. In virtue of *ren*, one can shift the perspective from the self to others and if one exercises this capacity, one can turn her attention from what others have done to her to what she can do for others. What one needs to recognize is that she always has the capacity to determine the kind of life she lives insofar as she has the capacity to turn her attention from what well she herself is faring to how well others are

⁴¹ Cf. *Analects* 14.35

⁴² *Mencius* 5A:3.

faring. We may imagine how both a person with *yuan* and a person of *ren* find themselves in very similar circumstances wherein there is nothing they can do to improve the state of things. The former is trapped in lamenting the unfortunate conditions she is in. She passively let her life to be shaped by the external forces she encounters. By contrast, the *ren* person is able to turn her attention out to others. Although she might not be able to actively bring about concrete changes in the circumstances of her life, what she can do is to determine the shape of her life and care for others.

Wallace also highlights the value of the agency in his conclusions and outlines three “ambitions” that he thinks we are capable of realizing through our agency: first, one can focus on the aspects of life that give us positive basis for affirming our lives. The efforts that are within our control do make a difference and because of that, there are still things that are worth striving for, even though we cannot affirm unconditionally. Second, since we have control over ourselves, we should strive to interact with people responsibly and avoid creating further objectionable conditions. Third, we can bring ourselves to recognize that we cannot realize the aspiration of living a life that is worth unconditional affirmation and “unflinchingly confront the absurdity of [our] own ambitions” (261). I hope it is clear by now that the early Confucians, given their view on *yuan*, would agree these three ambitions Wallace suggests. Perhaps a fourth ambition the early Confucians would hasten to add is that instead of indulging ourselves in the view that we are to some extent passively shaped and swayed by historical forces and social conditions, it is important to shift our gaze from the condition we are in to what we can do to extend our *ren* to others. One who works at an elite institution should face up to the social inequalities that are closely connected to the causal conditions of the elite institution (220). But it is one thing that we recognize and remember this fact; it is another thing that our attention as agents is on the inescapability of this condition.

I think the early Confucians will defend Wallace and say that even if our feelings would be “diluted in the ocean of our universal implication in the horrors of history”, there is always a possibility of stepping back and determining what kind of life we want to live. In most circumstances, there is probably something on our part that can be done to improve the situation. If there really were nothing one can do, one could just accept certain given though regrettable conditions of our life. Such acceptance will not prevent us from stepping back from the external forces and determining our own shape of life because we always have the capacity for *ren*, a compassionate attitude that is directed to the well-being of others. On the proposed account, the early Confucian response to the bourgeois predicament is that, from here, we should direct our eyes outward to others and the world, instead of inward to the conditions we ourselves are in.

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