

On Anger
An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology¹

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(Forthcoming in David Jones & He Jinli, eds., Zhu Xi Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Great Ultimate (State University of New York Press))

I

In this paper, I will take as my starting point three observations that Zhu Xi (1130-1200) made about anger, and explore the Confucian view on the subject and how this view relates to a number of other Confucian ideas. Although I will use Zhu Xi as a starting point and also relate the discussion to his thinking at different points, my interest is in developing an account that is inspired by his ideas as well as by ideas in other Confucian texts and that is intelligible and of relevance to us nowadays. The goal is not to approximate Zhu Xi's thinking, but to construct a philosophical account of the subject that is grounded in certain distinctive Confucian ideas.

The first observation is a comment by Zhu Xi on a passage in the Mencius, in which Mencius discussed with King Xuan of the state of Qi the king's fondness for courage. Mencius urged him not to be fond of the lower form of courage, which is illustrated by the eagerness to fight one's opponents. Instead, the king should be fond of the higher form of courage, which is illustrated by the former King Wu, who brought peace to the people after overthrowing the rule of a tyrant. Mencius describes King Wu's courage as follows:

“If there was one tyrant in the Empire, King Wu regarded this as shameful. This was the courage of King Wu. He, too, brought peace to the people of the Empire out of anger.”²

¹ This paper is part of my work on a multi-volume project on Confucian ethics that starts with textual analysis and moves eventually into more philosophical discussions. It is part of an attempt to make a transition from the former to the latter, and is experimental in that the approach adopted in the paper is tentative and likely to be modified with further reflections on the relevant methodological issues. An earlier version of the paper were presented at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Vancouver, April 8-12, 2009), and I am grateful to participants for their suggestions. I am particularly indebted to the following for comments: Stephen Angle, Joseph Chan, Chan Sin Yee, Cheng Chung-ying, Howard Curzer, Steven Geisz, P. J. Ivanhoe, David S. Nivison, Wai-kuen Shun, Winnie Sung, Christine Swanton, and David B. Wong.

² Mencius 1B:3.

In his comment on this passage, Zhu Xi cites and endorses a distinction made by an associate:

“The lower form of courage involves anger that pertains to the physical body, while the higher form of courage involves anger that pertains to morality. One should not have the lower form of courage, and should not be lacking in the higher form of courage.”³

The second observation is a comment by Zhu Xi on the following passage from the Analects of Confucius:

“Duke Ai asked which of his disciples was eager to learn. Confucius answered, ‘There was one Yan Hui who was eager to learn. He never transferred the anger he felt nor did he make the same mistake twice.’”⁴

Zhu Xi makes the following comment on this passage:

“... Master Cheng Yi said, ‘Yan Hui’s anger resides in things and not in the self, and that is why it does not transfer.’ ... It (the mind) is like a mirror reflecting things ... it just follows things and respond ...”⁵

Finally, the third observation has to do with two apparently inconsistent statement by Zhu Xi. On the one hand, still in connection with the passage from the Analects about Yan Hui, he appears to be saying that the sage does not experience anger:

“The sage does not have anger; in what way does he depend on not transferring his anger?”⁶

And yet, in another context, he states that the sage does experience anger and does express such anger. He also makes an implicit reference to the metaphor of the mirror, referring to how such anger goes away when the affair is over:

“How can (a sage) be without an angry countenance? When he should be angry, his

³ Collected Annotations on Mencius 1.18b. For a similar distinction between two kinds of anger, see Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu: 239.

⁴ Analects 6.3.

⁵ Collected Annotations on the Analects 3.10b.

⁶ Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu: 776.

anger will take shape in his expression. ... When Heaven is angry, the skies will shake with thunder and lightning. Shun, when he put an end to the ‘four evils’, also had to be angry. As long as one is angry when one should, one’s anger will be in the proper measure; as long as the anger goes away when the affair is over, it will not store.”⁷

From these observations, we can extract the following points about the way Zhu Xi views anger. From the first observation, we see that he distinguishes between different forms of anger, some more and some less appropriate. This view is also found in other early Confucian texts, and the cited passage from the Mencius also shows that there is a close relation between anger and shame, or rather, between the two Chinese terms translated respectively as “anger” and “shame”.⁸ From the second observation, we see that he would characterize the higher form of anger which Yan Hui represents in a certain way, namely, it resides in things and not in the self, and involves the mind acting like a mirror that responds to things as they are presented. And finally, from the third observation, we see that he holds the view that the sage does have anger in one sense, though not in another sense. In my paper, I will elaborate on a way of viewing anger that takes its inspiration from these observations.

I should add three points of clarification before proceeding to the main discussion. First, I have so far spoken freely of anger in relation to Confucian thought. Now, the English term “anger” is only a convenient way of referring to certain phenomena that have been discussed in Confucian thought and that have some affinity to the phenomena we now refer to as “anger”. The way the Confucians conceptualize the phenomena and the terms they use to refer to them can be quite different. Just as we have in the English language terms like “anger”, “rage”, “wrath”, and so forth to refer to a range of related phenomena, the Chinese have their own terms to refer to parallel phenomena.⁹ The conceptual linkages between these terms can be quite different. For example, as we saw from the passage from Mencius, there is a linkage between the two Chinese terms usually translated as “anger” and “shame”, while in western philosophical discussions the phenomena of anger and shame are not usually related.¹⁰ Still, despite these differences, there are some broad similarities between the phenomena in Confucian thought that I will be discussing and anger as it is

⁷ Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu: 2445.

⁸ For further discussions of different forms of courage in early Confucian texts, see Mencius 2A:2 and Xunzi 2.8a-b.

⁹ Two such terms are *nu* 怒 and *fen* 忿. Zhu Xi relates *fen* to *nu* in Questions and Answers on the Great Learning 7b, and the combination *fen nu* occurs frequently in early Confucian texts. Probably, *fen* differs from *nu* in having the connotation of some emotional response that is more sudden and short lived, like a rush of anger; see, for example, the reference to *fen* of a day in Analects 12.21.

¹⁰ The two terms translated as “anger” and “shame” are, respectively, *nu* 怒 and *chi* 耻.

understood in contemporary western discussions. They have to do with one's responses to situations that one views as in some way unacceptable or inappropriate, where such responses engage one's emotions and often move one to act to correct the situation. In speaking of the Confucian view of anger, I am using the term "anger" as a convenient way to refer to the range of phenomena broadly defined in this manner.

Second, while drawing on ideas from Confucian texts, the account I develop in this paper might also modify or go beyond these ideas in certain respects. The paper is not an attempt to approximate the thought of Confucian thinkers, a task that would involve close textual and historical analysis. I have conducted such analysis in relation to the same subject matter in other publications.¹¹ The purpose of the present paper is to build on ideas that can be extracted from Confucian texts on the basis of such analysis, and develop an account that is philosophical appealing and hopefully also relevant to our contemporary ethical experiences. In doing so, I may modify or go beyond the ideas recorded in the texts, but I believe the resulting account is still recognizably Confucian in the sense that it stays close to certain core ideas that can be extracted from these texts.¹²

Third, given that the purpose of the paper is not to approximate the thinking of the Confucians, but to develop a way of viewing anger that is philosophically appealing and relevant to us nowadays, the content of the paper should be something that can be presented with only minimal reference to Confucian texts. Accordingly, having motivated the discussion with the few passages cited earlier, I will from now on relegate to footnotes as much as possible any further reference to Confucian texts, and keep the main discussion free from such textual references to the extent possible. However, as mentioned earlier, the terms used by Chinese thinkers to discuss the relevant phenomena and the conceptual linkages between them can be quite different from the corresponding English terms, and understanding these terms and their conceptual linkages can be crucial to our understanding of the Confucian perspective. I have found it difficult to avoid discussion of some of these terms, as framing the discussion entirely in the English language without discussing these terms tends to reduce the unfamiliar to the familiar, thereby missing the distinctive contribution of a study of Confucian thought. Therefore, from time to time, I will have to introduce a discussion of certain key terms in Confucian thought, though still retaining the use of certain corresponding English terms in my discussion largely for convenience.

¹¹ See the four recent papers on Zhu Xi listed at the end.

¹² In "Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections," I distinguish between three tasks that one might undertake in the study of Confucian thought – textual analysis, articulation, and philosophical construction. The present paper undertakes the third of these three tasks.

II

Before considering the Confucian view on the subject, let us first make more specific the nature of the issue related to anger that I will be focusing on. The range of responses that may be described in terms of anger is quite broad; it may include rage due to frustrated desires or, in more extreme cases, sudden outbursts grounded in certain pathological conditions. My focus of discussion is the kind of response that is based on one's view of a situation as unacceptable, due to treatment of one party by another that one regards as inappropriate in relation to certain norms or standards that one endorses. For convenience, I will refer to the two parties as the offender and the victim. More specifically, my interest is in the kind of response that would be appropriate in situations in which I myself am the victim of the inappropriate treatment. The Confucian perspective on this issue is, I believe, closely related to other ideas in Confucian thought, such as ideas related to a phenomenon that I will label "equanimity", and part of the purpose of my discussion is to bring out the linkage between these Confucian ideas. The issue of first personal responses to inappropriate treatment has been quite extensively discussed in the western philosophical literature in relation to the subject of resentment and forgiveness. My discussion will implicitly be contrasting the Confucian perspective on this subject with contemporary discussions, but I will again relegate to footnotes any reference to the western philosophical literature.

Let us start by considering a situation in which the victim is neither me myself nor someone related to me in some special way, though it happens that I do witness the treatment the victim has received. In this case, I might condemn the action and be moved to intervene, and there might be an emotional dimension to my response where the emotional engagement is a consequence of my caring about the norms or standards that have been violated in this instance. Following usual practice, I will refer to a response of this kind as "indignation".

Consider next a situation in which the victim is related to me in some special way, such as a family member who has been unjustly injured. In this case, there might be additional elements to my response that are appropriate. By virtue of the special relation I stand to the victim, I might feel a special obligation to intervene in ways that go beyond what I might be obligated to do, and even what might be appropriate for me to do, when the victim is a stranger. Also, because I care about the victim in a

special way, my emotional engagement with the situation might take on a more intense and complex form. Differentiation in our responses may be appropriate as a result of the differential relations we stand to the victims of inappropriate treatment.

Consider now a situation in which the victim is me myself. Following the same line of thought, an enhanced sense of urgency to intervene and a more intense and complex emotional engagement with the situation compared to the case when the victim is a stranger might be appropriate, due to the more intimate relation I stand to the victim, who happens to be me myself. One issue discussed in the recent philosophical literature concerns a possible additional element to my response that goes beyond what is generated by the differential relation we stand to the victim, an additional element that is in some sense a first personal response and is often referred to as “resentment”. As this additional element will be the focus of our discussion, and as the word “resentment” is sometimes used in different ways, it would be useful to elaborate on what this additional element of response involves.¹³

Even without introducing this additional element, and just by following the line of thought having to do with differential relations, it could already be appropriate for me to respond to a situation in which I am the victim in ways that go beyond what might be appropriate for me to do if the victim were a stranger. My emotional engagement with the situation could appropriately be more intense, and so in a sense I might be ‘angrier’ when I myself am the victim. Thus, the additional element under consideration does not have to do with these other dimensions of my response, and to say that one is ‘above resentment’ is not to say that one does not respond with anger in these other ways.

Rather, this additional element has to do with a certain perspective that I have as the victim of the inappropriate treatment.¹⁴ In responding with resentment, not only am I responding to the actual treatment that I have received and the tangible injury that has resulted from the treatment, but I am also responding to what I perceive to be the attitude of the offender toward me. I see myself as being treated with disregard or even contempt, and attach importance to such an attitude and feel injured by it, in a way that goes beyond the tangible injury that has resulted from the treatment. This additional element of my response focuses on me in a special way, going beyond what

¹³ Comments by several participants when the paper was first presented at a Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association alerted me to the need for this elaboration. I am particularly grateful to Howard Curzer, who was commentator when the paper was presented, for his comments.

¹⁴ In the following elaboration, I largely follow Strawson (4-6); this understanding of resentment is also close to the notion of “sophisticated anger” introduced by Taylor (2006: chap. 5).

is generated by the line of thought having to do with differential relations. My relation to the situation is not just that, being the victim myself, I have a more intimate understanding of the injury that has been done and am in a better position to take corrective action as well as being more motivated to do so. Instead, I also see myself as being the target of an offender who views me in a way that is less than what I deserve, and I am moved to assert myself to correct not just the tangible injury that has taken place, but also this attitude of the offender. My response is also focused on the offender in a special way. Not only would I act to correct the tangible offence and maybe deter similar offences in the future, but I also act to assert myself in a way that corrects this attitude of the offender. Because resentment is focused on the offender in this way, it has adverse implications for the relation between me and the offender. Forgiveness, as the foreswearing of resentment, restores the relationship.

To further clarify the nature of this additional element of my response, let us add three points of clarification. First, since this additional element in my response involves my seeing the offender as targeting me, it presupposes that I believe the offender knows me, which in turn usually presupposes that I know who that offender is. An unknown offender who has spilled coffee on the ground without cleaning up caused me to slip and get injured; in this case, I might be angry at this inconsiderate offender, but it would be odd for me to see the offender as specifically targeting me, regarding me as not deserving better treatment. It also presupposes that whatever the offender has done to me, I see it as something done intentionally and not just a matter of accident; otherwise, I would not have perceived the offender as bearing this attitude toward me.

Second, even when the victim is someone closely related to me, such as my child, my response might also be accompanied by a similar viewpoint, though it need not be. This can happen in two ways, one focused on me and the other focused on me and those close to me. The first involves my seeing the inappropriate treatment as somehow also targeted at *me*; the thought is not just that some injury has been done to my child, but that the offender is specifically doing this to *my* child. That is, the offender knows me, knows that this is my child, and is deliberately doing this to my child to show contempt for me. The second involves my seeing the inappropriate treatment as targeted at *us*, where the “us” is conceived in terms of me and those close to me. In this case, the additional thought is that the offender is infringing on ‘my world’, where my world comprises myself and those close to me. I see the offender as showing disregard or contempt toward me and those close to me, and I act to assert ourselves against this attitude.¹⁵ I will return to the Confucian view on inappropriate

¹⁵ See Fisher (chap. 10) for a presentation of such a position, which he ascribes to Aristotle.

treatment of those close to oneself later in the paper; for now, I will focus on the additional element of response when I myself am the victim.

And third, although “resentment” is sometimes used in a way that carries other additional connotations, such as my feeling bitter about the offender’s treatment of me, my having vengeful feelings, or my seeing the offender as somehow evil or less than human, the additional element of response I have in mind need not carry these implications. For convenience, I will say that the victim is “resentful” should such additional thoughts and feelings be present, while reserving the word “resentment” for the additional element of response we have been considering.¹⁶ Being resentful in this sense involves one’s focusing on oneself and on the offender in the manner described earlier, and so presupposes resentment. But while resentment can potentially lead to resentful feelings, it need not as it may only involve the first personal viewpoint just described along with a milder form of response.

In recent philosophical discussions, there has been disagreement about whether resentment is protective of self-respect or is based on an insecure sense of self-esteem, and whether not feeling resentment when one is inappropriately treated shows a lack of self-respect or is an admirable trait. Also, while sharing the view that forgiveness involves the banishment of resentment and helps to restore human relations, there has been disagreement about the nature of forgiveness and the conditions under which it would be appropriate.¹⁷ I will not be directly addressing these issues in relation to the recent philosophical discussions, as my interest is more in elaborating on the Confucian perspective on a corresponding range of phenomena. As we saw earlier, the Confucian view on anger relates it to a phenomenon described by a Chinese term often translated as “shame”. That term, in turn, is related to another term often translated as “disgrace”. I will start by considering the Chinese view on the phenomena described by these two terms.

III

The first personal viewpoint under consideration involves the perception that an offender has treated me without due respect, and that I have been slighted in the process. One phenomenon that is quite prominently displayed in early Chinese texts

¹⁶ The notion of resentment used in Hampton and Taylor (2006: chap. 5) carries such additional connotations and is closer to the phenomenon I refer to as “being resentful” than to resentment in the sense introduced earlier.

¹⁷ Murphy and Novitz see resentment as protective of self respect, while Hampton links it to insecure self-esteem. These recent discussions illustrate some of the issues of disagreement on the subject.

and that involves a similar first personal viewpoint has to do with inappropriate public treatment that one regards as degrading. Such treatment might take many different forms, such as being stared at in the eye or being beaten in public, and it may also involve one's not being treated in accordance with certain accepted protocols of conduct in a social setting, such as being summoned to court in a manner not fitting with one's status.¹⁸ Not all such examples have to do with injustice in the ordinary sense – being stared at in the eye is not ordinarily viewed as an act of injustice – and for this reason, I have deliberately framed the discussion in terms of inappropriate treatment, where inappropriate treatment is understood broadly to include but also go beyond what is unjust in the usual sense.

There are two Chinese terms describing such treatment, one focusing on the fact that such treatment is inappropriate by certain generally accepted public standards, and the other focusing on the viewpoint of someone subject to such treatment, involving a perception of the treatment as somehow diminishing oneself. For convenience, I will use the translations “insulting” and “disgraceful” for these two terms.¹⁹ That human beings dislike disgrace is described in early texts as a fundamental part of the human constitution, similar to the way that the senses dislike certain sensory objects. In viewing the treatment as disgraceful, one also regards the disgrace as shameful. Here, I have used “regard as shameful” as a translation of the term *chi*, which is the term used in the passage from the Mencius cited earlier.²⁰ *Chi* refers to a certain attitude to a situation that one regards as beneath oneself. Though often translated as “shame” or “regard as shameful”, it is not associated with the thought of being seen or the urge to hide oneself. Instead, the imagery is that of being tainted, and it is associated with the urge to cleanse oneself of what is tainting by correcting or avenging the situation.²¹ For this reason, *chi* is closely related to anger at the situation, where such anger involves a strong sense of confidence in oneself rather than a sense of insecurity, and where the reaction is more a matter of outward behavior than one of harboring bitter feelings within. *Chi* can also be directed to a disgraceful situation that is contemplated but has not yet materialized; in this case, it is associated with a firm resolve to distance oneself from that situation through pre-emptive action.

¹⁸ This viewpoint is often associated with one's being treated in violation of *li* 禮 (rites), where *li* refers to certain protocols of conduct in recurring social contexts.

¹⁹ The terms are *wu* 侮 (insulting) and *ru* 辱 (disgraceful). The difference between the two roughly corresponds to a distinction Hampton (44-52) draws between ‘being demeaned’ and ‘being diminished’, where the former focuses on one's undergoing treatment too low for one, while the latter focuses on the psychological effect of feeling that one has been lowered in value as a result of the treatment.

²⁰ For a discussion of *chi* 恥, see my Mencius and Early Chinese Thought: 58-63.

²¹ Thus, *xue chi* 雪恥, or cleansing oneself of *chi*, occurs from time to time in early Chinese texts.

In early China, being subject to insulting treatment is often regarded as disgraceful, and it leads one to fight back to avenge the situation. Fighting of this kind was so pervasive that it led one early thinker to propose that, if one stops seeing what is insulting as a disgrace, such fighting would stop.²² Xunzi (3rd century B.C.) took note of this view, but disagreed on the ground that whether people fight depends on what they dislike, and as long as they dislike insulting treatment, the fighting will not stop regardless of whether one regards such treatment as disgraceful. Contrary to Xunzi, though, this thinker has probably made a valid point – in not regarding the insulting treatment as disgraceful, one no longer sees it as a personal affront even if one still dislikes it, and it is seeing something as a personal affront that leads to the kind of fierce fighting that has become problematic. In any instance, Xunzi’s own position shares something in common with that other early thinker in that he also advocates a transformation in what one regards as truly disgraceful. According to him, what we regard as disgraceful should not be tied to the way others view or treat us, but should be a matter of our own ethical conduct, which also includes the way we respond to others’ treatment of ourselves.²³

This view is shared by practically all Confucian thinkers. In the passage from the Mencius cited earlier, the lower form of courage that Mencius refers to has to do with fighting in response to insulting treatment. The higher form of courage, by contrast, has to do with the resolve to correct situations that one regards as ethically problematic.²⁴ Several passages in the Analects also make the point that what one regards as shameful, that is, the proper object of *chi*, should be a matter of one’s own qualities and actions rather than the way one is viewed or treated by others.

Three points are worth noting in connection with the Confucian perspective. First, it has the implication that what is truly disgraceful is something within one’s control. How we are viewed or treated by others is not up to us though it may depend on our own qualities and actions, but our own qualities and actions are, at least from the Confucian perspective, within our control. Second, while downplaying the significance of how we are treated or viewed by others, the Confucians do not deny that this does matter. In the Analects, we often see Confucius lamenting the lack of appreciation by others, and certain kinds of treatment can of course be humiliating and hurtful even to the Confucians. The Confucian position is rather that, even though these things do matter, they pale in significance compared to our own ethical qualities.

²² See the presentation of Songzi’s position in Xunzi 12.11a-11b.

²³ Xunzi 12.12b: “The superior person can have social disgrace but not ethical disgrace; the inferior person can have social honor but not ethical honor ...”

²⁴ The same point is made in Mencius 2A:2.

When we do not fare well in relation to the former, at least the latter is something we can fall back on and take consolation in. And third, a consequence of this way of viewing what should be the proper object of *chi* is that *chi* is no longer linked to the thought of avenging oneself, as its object is no longer directed to one's treatment by others. Instead, *chi* has more to do with the resolve to distance oneself from certain situations that can be ethically tainting on oneself, and to correct such situations should they arise.

To relate this discussion to the Confucian perspective on anger, I will use as an example a kind of situation not unfamiliar to Confucian thinkers. Confucius, as we know, actively sought political reform for most of his life, encountered numerous obstacles and challenges, including being slandered and even posed with threats to his life. He finally realized the futility of his political endeavors and turned to teaching for the rest of his life. Confucius' experience in the political realm was shared in one form or another by many Confucian thinkers up to the nineteenth century. Most of them were not just scholars, but were in public office in one capacity or another for most of their adult life. Quite a number of them found themselves in corrupt political environments, and the trying experiences they went through are often reflected in their teachings. The records we have of their teachings are not based on pure scholarship, but often relate back to their own ethical experiences. To help make more concrete the Confucian perspective on anger, I will consider one such trying situation.

IV

Imagine the situation of a Confucian official who seeks reform in a corrupt political environment. Those in power are pre-occupied with power, status, and reputation, and have no genuine concern for those whom they are supposed to serve. They form close associations with others with a similar political bent and with aligned interests, and they freely manipulate perception as a way to influence decisions and enhance favorable views of themselves.²⁵ They are also set on undermining and discrediting those whom they view as their opponents, and would stop at nothing to achieve their political goals. In seeking to reform the situation, this official is seen as a threat by those in power, and every effort is made to eliminate this perceived threat, including undermining his efforts in government, isolating him by turning others against him, and spreading rumors to damage his credibility. Imagine that these efforts have indeed

²⁵ There is a Chinese term, *dang* 黨, that refers specifically to this kind of problematic association in politics.

succeeded in damaging this official, and that there is not much the official can do to correct the situation. How, from the Confucian perspective, should he respond to the situation?

Certain things are not out of place. The individual would feel hurt, and there would be emotional responses at the injustice done, responses that could be described as anger. If possible, he would act in appropriate ways to correct the situation, such as by bringing the facts to light to counter the rumors that have been spread. And knowing about what has happened, he would be more cautious in his activities to avoid further distortions of his motives and abilities. At the same time, he would not act inappropriately, including performing acts of injustice, to counter his opponents, nor attempt to injure the other party out of vindictiveness. Even when speaking to correct the facts, he would consciously avoid the slight exaggeration, or the deliberate choice of tone, that could have helped manipulate perception against his opponents. Being experienced in politics, he knows the usual strategies at manipulating perception, such as strategically dropping certain words to the right people to generate rumors of certain kinds. But, unlike his opponents, he sees the effects of such maneuvers as a reason against, rather than a reason for, adopting these strategies.

In addition, when dealing with his opponents in other unrelated contexts, he would not treat them in a way that is prejudiced by the treatment he has received from them in the political context. He would treat them as he would have treated others, even if doing so would be to their advantage. This includes not just refraining from committing an injustice against them, but also defending them if they are themselves unjustly treated. Even if he would not commit an injustice against the parties who have injured him, and is ready to speak in their defense if they are themselves treated unjustly, he might still feel a secret pleasure should they suffer some misfortune. He might still wish them to suffer, though not through his action, or his inaction. He might take pleasure not just in the actual misfortune they suffer, but in the mere thought of such misfortune. Again, for his anger at the injury to be properly directed, he would not feel pleasure of this kind.

Two points are worth noting in connection with the above description of the Confucian official's response. First, we have described a situation in which there is little the official can do to correct the situation, and for that reason the official's response might appear relatively passive. However, this does not mean that what is being described is an attitude of passive resistance.²⁶ There might be other

²⁶ I am indebted to a comment by Christine Swanton for alerting me to the need to clarify this point.

problematic situations in which there are corrective steps the official can appropriately take. In these instances, it would be not just appropriate for the official to take these steps, but also his responsibility to do so if this is to the public good. Second, the above description assumes a certain conception of what actions might or might not be appropriate for the official to take to remedy the situation; for example, he is not supposed to act manipulatively in the way that his opponents do. But what if he could in fact correct the situation by acting manipulatively? There is a trend in certain Confucian texts that is opposed to such maneuvers, accompanied by the belief that such devious means can never truly remedy the situation as they undermine the fundamental goal of ensuring an ethical environment in which those in public office operate.²⁷ Some might dispute this view, and the question whether one might, in the public interest, appropriate employ in the political context means that in other contexts would be ethically objectionable is a complex question. However, the main point in the above description of the Confucian official's response is about what motivates the actions the individual takes in response to the situation, independently of our view regarding what the appropriate actions are. Even if what would otherwise be manipulative maneuvers are appropriate in such a political context, they should still not be motivated in a certain way.²⁸

The Confucian official's response stems from a certain perspective that relates to the Confucian view toward disgrace described in the previous section. He does care about the way he is viewed or treated by others, and finds the situation he is in deeply hurtful. And he is also aware that he has been treated unjustly and in a way that he should not be treated. What is distinctive of his perspective is that, while sharing these thoughts and sentiments that others would also have, his primary concern is with the way he conducts himself in such a situation. His focus is not on the way he has been treated or on the attitude others display toward him in such treatment, and he does not regard as disgraceful the way he has been viewed or treated. In his eyes, what is truly disgraceful is to let himself be corrupted by this political environment, resulting in his becoming in his own eyes a lesser person. And this is not just a matter of what he would or would not do, but also a matter of his thoughts and feelings as he navigates his way in this trying situation. While the treatment he has received is deeply hurtful, what would be truly injurious to him would be for him to conduct himself in a way that falls below his own ethical standards, and such injury is something that he alone can do to himself. From this perspective, while he has in a more material way been hurt by the situation, those who have been truly injured are those who have been

²⁷ See, e.g., *Mencius* 3B:1.

²⁸ I am indebted to David S. Nivison, David B. Wong, and Joseph Chan for comments that helped me clarify this point.

manipulated, since by allowing themselves to be manipulated, in perception and in the resulting conduct, they have allowed themselves to be led to conduct themselves in a way that falls short of such standards.

Given such a perspective, he is not vulnerable to resentful feelings, such as bitterness about the way he has been treated or the urge to take revenge. We might, if we wish, still say that he feels resentment, in the minimal sense that he has a conception of his not having been treated in the way he should and is aware of the inappropriate attitude others display toward him in such treatment. Even so, this conception is not highlighted in his thoughts, which are not focused on the way he has been treated, and is not linked to a desire to assert himself to counter the attitude that others display. Whether or not we say that resentment is present, it is not a prominent part of his response, and it does not generate the kind of feelings that pose an obstacle to human relations. This explains why the notion of forgiveness, understood in the sense of banishing resentment, is not a prominent notion in Confucian thought. On this picture, forgiveness in the sense of relinquishing feelings of resentment that pose obstacles to human relations is appropriate only for those fallible and vulnerable to such feelings.²⁹

That resentment is not a prominent part of his response does not mean that he does not take himself seriously or is lacking in self-respect.³⁰ On the contrary, his attention is very much on himself, not on the way he has been treated by others, but on the way he conducts himself in the situation. As for the notion of self-respect, whether the notion is applicable depends on how it is understood. Suppose we characterize self-respect in terms of one's regarding certain behavior and certain kinds of treatment as below oneself, accompanied by a resolve not to allow such things to happen.³¹ Understood in this manner, what is distinctive of the Confucian view is not that it does not operate with some notion akin to self-respect, but that what it regards as truly beneath oneself is not others' view or treatment of oneself, which is not within one's control, but one's own ethical conduct. Thus, if we are to use the notion of self-respect in characterizing the Confucian position, then what the response of the Confucian official shows is not a lack of self-respect, but a different way of conceptualizing self-respect. On the Confucian view, self-respect is tied not to the way others view or treat me, but to the

²⁹ A number of authors mention a similar perspective in their discussions. Jankelevitch (6) describes the sage as someone barely injured or offended by inappropriate treatment, someone with almost nothing to forgive. Hampton (58-59) refers to Jesus as an example of someone who is 'above resentment', and Griswold (11-13) describes Socrates and the Stoic sage in a similar manner.

³⁰ Contrary to Murphy's (16) and Novitz's (301) views on this issue.

³¹ Taylor (1985: 78) characterizes self-respect in this manner, and this way of understanding self-respect is close to Telfer's (109) notion of conative self-respect.

way I myself behave or respond to such treatment; for this reason, loss of self-respect is not something that one suffers, but something that is self-inflicted.

Also, being relatively unaffected by others' treatment of himself and being 'above resentment' does not mean that the attitude of the individual is akin to a form of arrogance in that he does not take other human beings seriously and does not pay attention to their attitude toward himself.³² Confucian thinkers do acknowledge that others' assessment of oneself can be instrumental to one's having a more realistic self-assessment. Confucian texts such as the Analects and the Mencius talk about how one should engage in self-reflection should one receive 'adverse' treatment from others, questioning whether there might be some defect in oneself that has called forth such treatment, and this signifies a concern with others' attitude toward oneself as an indicator of one's own qualities.³³ Still, there is a sense in which this Confucian official does hold himself above others, not in a problematic way, though it can be perceived by his opponents as problematic. Given his moral stance, there is a sense of uprightness surrounding this individual that can be deeply unsettling to his opponents. Not only would they feel slighted by the fact that their malicious actions have apparently gone unnoticed, or are not viewed in the way they wished them to be, but their own ethical shortcomings are highlighted in his presence. This leads to further animosity toward this individual, and in such a situation, it is tempting for one to hide one's moral stance, portraying oneself as going along with inferior standards as a way to protect oneself. But, from the Confucian perspective, not only should one not act unethically to cope with the situation, but there is also an insistence on not hiding one's moral stance as a way to appeasing others. If one had bent oneself or hidden one's moral stance in this situation, one would have encouraged those with lower standards, thereby undermining the very reform that one has sought in the first place.³⁴ This insistence on maintaining and not hiding one's moral stance in the midst of corruption may convey a sense of aloofness, but not, from the Confucian perspective, of a problematic kind.

V

On this account of the Confucian position, there is a sense in which my response to a

³² Murphy (18) portrays the Nietzschean view in this manner.

³³ For further elaboration on this point, see my "Self and Self-Cultivation in Early Confucian Thought."

³⁴ See Mencius 3B:1. The attitude of this individual is the reverse of that of the village worthy as described in Mencius 7B:37. The village worthy seeks to manipulate perception so as to project an image of being morally decent, thereby gaining the favorable opinions of others. He is a 'thief of virtue' in that he steals the name of virtue by his manipulative moves; in doing so, he undermines the very conception of that to which he makes a false claim.

situation in which I am the victim bears a structural similarity to the way I would have responded if someone unrelated to me were the victim. Even when I myself am the victim, the thought that I have been treated inappropriately does not gain any prominence in my thought, going beyond the thought, also present if someone unrelated to me were the victim, that someone has been treated inappropriately in the situation. And even when the victim is someone unrelated to me, I would still have reacted in a way that focuses on my response to the situation just as is the case when I myself am the victim. This we see from the passage cited earlier about the *chi* of King Wu when he observed how the people were oppressed by a tyrant. Even when others are the victims, there is still an appropriate way for me to respond to the situation, and to the extent that I can act to correct the situation, the thought of not so acting would be a cause for *chi*. Thus, whether the victim is me myself or someone unrelated to me, my primary focus is on the way I respond to what I view as inappropriate treatment of humans.

This structural similarity between one's responses in the two instances may suggest that the Confucian official's posture is in some sense 'impersonal' rather than 'personal'. There is, indeed, a sense in which the official's response is not 'personal'. As he does not attach the kind of significance to external conditions of life that many others would, he does not view the situation we just described as a personal situation in which he has been injured. His attention is not focused on the attitude that the offenders display toward him, and so he does not view the situation as one in which he is personally targeted by the offenders. Instead, he views it primarily as an ethical situation, one in which others display their moral inferiority through their manipulative maneuvers, and one in which he himself is put to the test. He does not deny the evil that occurred, but the evil is not seen as a personal offence. He would still feel hurt by what has happened, and be deeply disappointed that evil has prevailed. But he has not been injured in the way that matters most to him as long as he conducts himself appropriately. His response can still be described as one of anger, but such anger is directed at the problematic behavior of others, not at what was done to him. The anger he feels is not fundamentally different from the 'anger that pertains to morality' ascribed by Zhu Xi to King Wu in his comment on the passage from Mencius. This is related to the point made earlier that resentment, understood in a sense that involves a conception of one's not being treated with due respect, is not prominent in his thoughts. There is, from the Confucian viewpoint, no significance to the contemporary contrast between the first personal response of resentment and the third personal response of indignation.³⁵ This does not mean that they are not aware

³⁵ Strawson (14-15) and Hampton (56) present such a contrast in their discussions. Strawson (4-6) also

of the practical reality that human beings can be subject to sentiments akin to what we would describe as resentment.³⁶ After all, the Confucian view of what one should regard as truly disgraceful is directed against this kind of sentiment in the context of insulting treatment. But they advocate a move away from this kind of sentiment, which focuses on others' treatment of me, to a perspective that focuses on my response to the treatment. A consequence of this position is that they also do not focus on the phenomenon we now refer to as forgiveness, which is a response to a sentiment that ideally, for them, should not have been there in the first place.

Although the official's response is not 'personal' in the sense described, it could be misleading to describe his perspective as 'impersonal'. The Confucian perspective is not 'impersonal' in the sense that it does not take into account personal relations. Even from the Confucian perspective, one might react differentially depending on the way one relates to the victim of an unjust or inappropriate treatment. Indeed, differential obligations and differential emotional engagement grounded in different social relations is very much emphasized in Confucian thought. More generally, the Confucian perspective is not impersonal in the sense of bracketing the special relations in which one stands to those involved in a situation to which one is responding.

To avoid the possible misleading connotations of the term "impersonal", I will instead use the term "detached" to describe the Confucian perspective to capture the kind of structural similarity described earlier. That is, not putting weight on the fact that it is me myself who has been treated inappropriately, my response to inappropriate treatment of myself is not structurally different from the way I would have responded if someone else were the victim. This account of the Confucian view of anger allows us to make sense of the three observations Zhu Xi makes about anger mentioned at the beginning of the paper. While the Confucians advocate the kind of response just described, they are aware that in reality many do respond in a different way that focuses on the way one has been viewed and treated. Both are possible forms of anger, and the difference between them is reflected in the distinction Zhu Xi draws between "anger that pertains to the physical body" and "anger that pertains to morality". This

considers gratitude as a first personal reaction to what I perceive to be others' esteem and goodwill toward me. It does not follow from the discussion in this paper that Confucians also advocate not responding with gratitude to benefits to oneself due to others' goodwill. The Confucian transformation in attitude toward disgrace is, after all, related only to insulting treatment by others. That the Confucians do not view these two phenomena symmetrically can be seen from *Analects* 14.34, where Confucius urges one to "respond to injury with uprightness and to kindness with kindness." I am indebted to Howard Curzer who alerted me to the relevance of this passage.

³⁶ I am indebted to P. J. Ivanhoe for alerting me to add this point of clarification. Early Confucian texts do have a term, *yuan* 怨, that refers to sentiments akin to what we call resentment.

distinction also explains why Zhu Xi sometimes describes the sage as being without anger and sometimes as having anger. The sage has anger of the latter kind but not of the former kind, and it is anger of the former kind that tends to persist even after the situation that triggers the anger has already been appropriately dealt with.

The detached perspective that characterizes the latter kind of anger also provides a way of making sense of Zhu Xi's comment that Yan Hui's anger resides in things but not in the self. If my response to inappropriate treatment is structurally unaffected by whether the victim is myself or someone else, then the response is directed to features of the situation that do not make any special reference to the fact that the victim is me myself. In this sense, my anger 'resides in things'. And for my anger to 'reside in the self' is for it to involve an additional thought that relates specifically to myself, namely, that it is me myself who has been treated inappropriately. In having this additional thought, a reference to the self intrudes in a way that distorts the nature of my response; for Zhu Xi and many later Confucians, inappropriate responses to situations often involve this kind of intrusion of the self.³⁷

VI

The detached perspective just described is also conveyed in the metaphor of the mirror found in Zhu Xi's comment on the passage from the Analects. The metaphor suggests the idea that one's mind is in some sense surveying and responding to the situation, in a manner that is not personally involved. This detached perspective is naturally linked to a loosening of one's emotional involvement in the situation – if my focus were on the thought that *I myself* have been treated inappropriately, my response would have been emotionally more intense and complex. Thus, adopting the detached

³⁷ Thus Zhu Xi, along with many later Confucians, ascribe ethical failure to *si* 私, a form of self-centeredness. For a discussion of *si*, see my "Zhu Xi on *Gong* and *Si*." There is another idea in Confucian thought, to which Zhu Xi also subscribes, that helps illustrate the Confucian position on anger. The Confucians do not draw a sharp distinction between self and others – I am connected to all humans, and although differential relations to them might make appropriate a differentiation in obligation and emotional engagement, this is a matter of degree and does not reflect a fundamental distinction between self and others. This is part of the Confucian idea of all humans forming 'one body', which highlights the point that we ideally should be sensitive to the well-being of all humans just as we are sensitive to the well-being of different parts of our bodies. The idea of one body is not just a statement of some 'metaphysical' position developed by later Confucians in response to Buddhist challenges. Instead, it is found in early Confucian texts and reflects the sentiments of the caring ruler or official, who feels for the people in the way that parents feel for their children. It follows from this view that my response to the way a stranger is treated should be structurally no different from the way I respond to the way I myself or someone close to me has been treated, aside from the differentiation in response grounded in differential relations. For a discussion of the idea of one body, see my "Zhu Xi and the Lunyu."

perspective also means that one is, in a certain sense, emotionally unperturbed by situations one confronts. For convenience, I will call “equanimity” a state of mind in which one is emotionally unperturbed. The state of equanimity is frequently highlighted in Confucian – as well as Daoist – texts, and I now turn to aspects of the state of equanimity that relate to certain distinctive Confucian ideas.

One aspect is a sense of invulnerability that is illustrated by the posture of the Confucian official. The official is aware that deliberate attempts have been made to undermine him and damage his reputation. He would view this as hurtful, and yet would regard such injury as of minor significance. What would be truly shameful to him would be if he had responded in problematic ways to the situation, such as by acting out of vindictiveness. This he would regard as true injury, but something that he alone can do to himself. There is, therefore, in him a sense of invulnerability – however others might try to undermine and manipulate perception against him, what they can affect are external conditions that, though mattering to him, are only of minor significance by comparison. If he had responded inappropriately to the situation, then his opponents would indeed have succeeded in injuring him, but only because he himself had allowed this to happen.³⁸

Note that this sense of invulnerability does not mean that the individual is not susceptible to harm, only that he is not vulnerable to the kind of injury that matters the most to him. Indeed, given his moral stance, he is in a sense defenseless against evil. Having had experience of the complexity of political life, he need not lack knowledge of the strategies and skills at manipulating perceptions to counter, or even to outmaneuver, his opponents. And yet he is unable to put what he knows to use because of the kind of person he is. This is an instance of knowing how, while still lacking the ability – the inability comes from the heart and not from lack of skill. Indeed, if he had engaged in these manipulative maneuvers, he would not have succeeded in countering his opponents. Instead, his doing so would have already done injury to himself, thereby allowing his opponents to succeed in their goals. The political situation might evolve to a point when he has to conclude that there is nothing that he could do to counter the corruption and bring about reform. Once he draws such a conclusion, he would extract himself from the situation; a failure to do so would itself be a cause for *chi*.³⁹

³⁸ Griswold (11-13) also discusses Socrates’ and the Stoic sage’s sense of invulnerability to harm. In Confucian texts, this sense of invulnerability is reflected in the idea that what is of genuine significance, namely, following the Way, is within one’s control; see, for example, *Mencius* 7A:3.

³⁹ *Analects* 8.13: “Show yourself when the Way prevails, and hide yourself when the Way falls into disuse. It is shameful (*chi*) to be poor and humble when the Way prevails in the state, and it is equally shameful to be wealthy and noble when the Way falls into disuse in the state.”

The feeling that one in some fundamental sense cannot be injured leads naturally to a certain emotional calmness, as whatever happens to oneself one can take consolation in the fact that what is of fundamental importance is something within one's control. One is therefore not perturbed by adverse external circumstances of life, an attitude conveyed through the notion of *ming*, a term often translated as "destiny" or "decree". This attitude involves one's willingly accepting unfavorable conditions of life that are not within one's control or are of such a nature that altering them requires improper conduct.⁴⁰ This does not mean that one is totally unaffected by these unfavorable conditions of life – one would still grieve at the death of loved ones, be disappointed by the lack of appreciation by others, and lament the corruption that prevails.⁴¹ However, one would not direct one's emotional energy to blaming others or complaining about the outcome, nor become bitter and resentful.⁴² Also, it does not mean that one is resigned to the situation in the sense that one becomes totally passive. One would still await and welcome the possibility of change, and even when such opportunities do not arise, one would redirect one's energy in a positive direction, just as Confucius redirected his energy to teaching after having come to a realization of the futility of his political endeavors. And accompanying this acceptance of the adverse external conditions of life is a positive affirmation of the ethical values that one stands by and in which one takes consolation.

In addition to the acceptance of adverse circumstances as conveyed through the notion of *ming*, Confucian texts also describe the individual's state of mind in terms of the absence of worry and anxiety, and in terms of *le*, a term often translated as "joy".⁴³ For example, in the Analects, Confucius refers to Yan Hui's *le* while living in extreme poverty, and at times also refers to his own *le*.⁴⁴ It might seem puzzling how one could be in a state of joy while confronting extreme hardship, but the puzzlement is due largely to extraneous connotations associated with the translation of *le* as "joy". What *le* in early Chinese thought emphasizes is not a state of emotional exhilaration or excitement, but a state of moving along at ease with the flow of things, calmly and without obstruction or constraint. The same character for *le* is also used to refer to

⁴⁰ See my Mencius and Early Chinese Thought: 15-21, 77-83, for a more detailed discussion of *ming* 命.

⁴¹ Thus, the Confucian position is not the kind of anti-worldly position that Kekes (511-2) ascribes to Kierkegaard.

⁴² See, for example, Analects 14.35.

⁴³ An example of a reference to the absence of worry and anxiety is in Analects 9.29; in Analects 7.19, Confucius remarked how his *le* in moral learning leaves no room for worry and anxiety.

⁴⁴ Analects 6.11: "The Master said, 'How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water – others would find unbearable their worry and anxiety, but Hui would not let this affect his *le*. How admirable Hui is!'" Confucius also refers to his own *le* in Analects 7.16, 7.19.

music (though pronounced differently in the two different usages), and early texts often relate the attitude under consideration to music. One passage in the Mencius, for example, relates *le* to the imagery of one's 'dancing with one's feet and waving one's arms' to the rhythm of music.⁴⁵ This suggests that *le* probably has to do with a state of calmly and contentedly moving along with the flow of things, unobstructed and without deliberate effort, in the way that one moves with the rhythm of music. This understanding of *le* is conveyed in Zhu Xi's comments on this passage from the Mencius and on the passage from the Analects regarding Yan Hui's *le* – Zhu Xi explains *le* in terms of one's flowing along with things contentedly, with ease and without effort.⁴⁶ And this understanding of *le* is also found in other early texts such as the Zhuangzi, which relates *le* to a state of freely wandering and, on one occasion, describes the *le* of a fish in terms of its moving along with the flow of water, contentedly and without constraint.⁴⁷

This way of understanding *le* allows us to see how the state of mind of the Confucian official can be described in such terms. The Confucian official accepts the unfortunate situation he is in, and takes contentment in following the ethical path and in knowing that whatever treatment he might have received, he has not been diminished in any way that is of significance. Though he might still be pained by the situation, he at the same time takes on a more detached posture that enables him to stay emotionally unaffected. His state of mind is not one of joy in the usual sense, but one of contentment, of one's flowing along with the ethical in a way that gives one comfort.

So far, I have presented three aspects of the state of equanimity – a sense of invulnerability, the willing acceptance of the adverse circumstances of life while being free from worry and anxiety, and a sense of ease and contentment as one flows along with the Way, or the ethical way of life. While Confucian texts do highlight these qualities, we have to acknowledge that, from time to time, such texts also convey a sense of helplessness in the face of ethical corruption, and a sense of loneliness as one insists on one's moral stance. We have seen that implicit in the Confucian attitude toward *ming* is the willing acceptance of adverse circumstances of life, whether it be poverty, lack of recognition and appreciation, illness, or even death of beloved ones. This is true even of one's own death – there are proper and improper ways of dying, and one can approach one's death with ease if on self-examination one has conducted oneself properly.⁴⁸ However, there is one set of circumstances that is

⁴⁵ Mencius 4A:27.

⁴⁶ See Questions and Answers on the Analects 11.12a and Collected Annotations on Mencius 4.15a-b.

⁴⁷ Zhuangzi 7.18a and 6.15a-b. See also chap. 18 for a discourse on the supreme form of *le*.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Mencius 7A:2.

much more closely linked to the ethical than these external conditions of life and that is not within one's control, namely, the prevailing of the Way. Having witnessed the corruption in political life, which inevitably spreads beyond a narrowly defined political realm, Confucian thinkers lament the failure of the ethical to prevail, including the failure of their own efforts to reform the situation. While *ming* is also mentioned in this connection, one gets the sense that the ethical corruption of their times is for the Confucians something not on par with other adverse external conditions of life such as illness or death.⁴⁹ Although one can still take comfort in one's own practice of the ethical, it would be difficult to maintain a posture that combines the contentment in one's own practice of the ethical with a willing acceptance of a general corruption in the social and political realm. That the two do not sit well together is reflected in an optimistic belief, found in almost all Confucian classics, that ethical transformation of oneself should lead eventually to ethical transformation of others.⁵⁰ Thus, while we do see the sense of equanimity permeating Confucian texts, we can also detect in these texts a sense of tension. There is the tension between the dedication to public service, which is so crucial to the Confucian ideal, and the frustration with the corruption of political life that leads to withdrawal to private life. And there is also the tension between the optimism that the virtuous should eventually be appreciated and exert a transformative influence, and the realization of the practical reality that the virtuous is often not understood nor appreciated by the majority.

Accompanying this sense of tension is also a sense of loneliness, reflected in such remarks as that the superior person might have to walk the Way alone.⁵¹ This sense of loneliness is not a matter of physical isolation, as the Confucians even in withdrawal are often among students and close associates. Nor is it a matter of social disengagement, as the Confucians continue to be deeply engaged in social matters, if not through active participation in government, then through reflecting and discoursing on such matters. Rather, the sense of loneliness has to do with the awareness that one's ethical aspirations and vision are often not understood and not shared by others.⁵² Although Confucius also observes on one occasion that the

⁴⁹ *Analects* 14.36: "... The Master said, 'If the Way prevails, it is *ming*; if the Way falls into disuse, it is *ming*...'"

⁵⁰ This idea is part of the Confucian understanding of *de* 德 (virtue) and *cheng* 誠 (wholeness). The possibility that this is an overoptimistic belief, and that there might be situations in which it is by doing what would normally be ethically inappropriate that one can further the public good, relates to the complication mentioned earlier regarding how manipulative maneuvers might be needed to address politically complex situations.

⁵¹ See, for example, *Mencius* 3B:2.

⁵² *Analects* 14.35: "The Master said, 'Alas, there is no one who understands me. ... I do not complain against Heaven nor do I blame humans. I start from below in learning and reach what is above. Perhaps

virtuous does not stand alone, the very fact that he needs to make this observation also testifies to the sense of loneliness that the virtuous often feels.⁵³ The ultimate tension, perhaps, is the tension between the sense of equanimity and the sense of loneliness that inevitably accompany each other.

it is Heaven that understands me?”

⁵³ Analects 4.25: “The Master said, ‘Virtue does not stand alone; it is sure to have neighbors.’”

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