

A Mencian Account of Resentment

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Abstract: The reactive attitude of ‘resentment’ has been gaining increasing attention within contemporary philosophical literature. However, little attention has been given to the conceptions of resentment in Asian philosophy. In recent years, some philosophers have argued that there is a positive account of resentment in Confucian philosophy. This paper brings a recent Mencian account of resentment in conversation with contemporary philosophical discussions. The conversations revolve around aspects of resentment such as exculpatory conditions, payback, transition, and moral cultivation. The conversation not only adds clarity to the Mencian account, it also demonstrates potential contributions this account has to contemporary discussions on resentment.

S1 Introduction

The topic of ‘resentment’ (and related moral attitudes and emotions such as anger and forgiveness) has been receiving increasing attention in contemporary philosophical discussions (e.g., Nussbaum 2016, Jacobs 2017, Carlsson 2018, Wallace 2019 etc). While not an indictment of the current literature, it is somewhat unfortunate that much of the discussion revolves around ‘Western’ notions of resentment.

In recent years, some philosophers have suggested that there is a positive account of resentment in Confucian philosophy (e.g., Ing 2016, Ing 2017, Sung 2020, Ooi 2021).¹ While there

¹ There are important differences between the projects of Shun (2014), Ing (2017), Sung (2020) and Ooi (2021). For instance, while (Shun 2014), (Ing 2016) and (Sung 2020) purport to provide a general ‘Confucian’ account, I focus more specifically on presenting a ‘Mencian’ account (Ooi 2021). This difference is significant since, as is well-known,

are significant overlaps across ‘Confucian’ accounts of resentment, there are also important differences between these accounts. In this paper, I will focus on developing an account of resentment offered by a Confucian philosopher, Mencius.² Unlike received Confucian accounts of resentment (e.g., Shun (2014) and Sung (2020)), the Mencian account is role and agent-based – that is, the Mencian account focuses on resentment as a reactive attitude in the context of interpersonal relationships (see Ooi (2021)). This makes it a fitting candidate for comparisons with contemporary accounts of resentment for contemporary discussions often focus on resentment within inter-personal relationships. For instance, one of the most influential discussions of resentment can be found in Peter Strawson’s *Freedom and Resentment*. Strawson characterises resentment as a reactive attitude within the context of inter-personal relationships. Another important recent discussion of this topic is due to Martha Nussbaum, who expertly examines what well-reasoned anger would look like, within inter-personal relationships.

By placing Mencius in conversation with both Strawson and Nussbaum, we are able to make several important comparisons which, I argue, both challenge and elucidate our understanding of resentment as an interpersonal reactive attitude. As will be argued, part of the contribution of a Mencian account to the contemporary literature is in understanding resentment as a moral emotion, through the lens of an ethics of roles and in emphasizing the importance of individual moral cultivation as a response to resentment. It thus raises an important challenge to Strawson’s focus on *intentions*, but also proposes a role-based solution to the challenge. But in turn, Strawson’s discussion of the centrality of intentions provide greater clarification to the notion of moral injury in the Mencian account. Martha Nussbaum has argued, against popular conceptions of anger, that well-reasoned anger should not be concerned with the payback wish, but move towards, what she calls, transition-anger. The Mencian account support Nussbaum’s argument by providing an independent argument in support of her thesis, and provides clear resources to explain how agents may move towards the transition. Relatedly, Nussbaum’s discussion helps clarify the place of payback and *status* for the Mencian account. My primary aim, therefore, in this paper is

Confucian thinkers some times differ in their doctrines. Another important but related difference is that they focus on different (though often overlapping) source texts. Sung thus presents what she calls a Confucian-inspired account.

² As Sung (2020) notes, there may be different views of ‘resentment’ within the Confucian tradition (Sung 2020, 261; see also Ing 2016, 26). In this paper, I focus on a particular Confucian philosopher, Mencius. Unsurprisingly, the Mencian account has significant overlaps with other related ‘Confucian’ accounts. Nevertheless, where relevant, I will highlight aspects where the Mencian account differs from other contemporary ‘Confucian’ accounts.

to demonstrate how, when put in conversation, these accounts may help clarify and contribute to each other. The result of this will be the formulation of a coherent account of well-reasoned resentment.

One upshot of this analysis is the claim that Confucianism provides a wealth of resources for thinking about resentment and is especially interesting as it presents us with very different starting points, emphases and assumptions. In S2, I will introduce a Mencian account of resentment which emphasizes resentment as a morally appropriate response to injury (Ooi 2021). After which, I compare this account of resentment with two different contemporary accounts: Strawson's treatment of relationships, exculpatory conditions and the objective attitude (S3) and Nussbaum's insights on the payback wish and transition anger (S4). I conclude by proposing ways in which the Mencian account may contribute to contemporary discussions of resentment (S5). A project such as this is hopefully of value to different audiences: whether one is hoping to clarify the Mencian account through contemporary resources, to consider what the Mencian account might contribute to contemporary discussions, or even the more ambitious aim of constructing a 'global philosophy' of resentment.

S2 A Mencian Account of Resentment and Forgiveness

In articulating a Mencian Account of Resentment,³ it is worth noting that the word in the *Mencius* that is often thought to be the closest to 'resentment' is the Chinese character 怨 (*yuan*).⁴ In general, in the *Mencius*, resentment is a moral emotion which is often discouraged.⁵ However, there are specific circumstances in the *Mencius* where resentment is not only permitted, it is also encouraged (e.g., *Mencius* 2A7; see also 2B13, 6B3).⁶ In this regard, we may speak of resentment as an emotion that is, in most circumstances, morally unjustified and discouraged, while in other circumstances, morally justified and encouraged.⁷ Part of what it means for resentment to be a

³ As noted above, there are several other treatments on this subject, which I will refer from time to time as they are generally compatible with my account in (Ooi 2021). (See Ing 2016, Ing 2017, Sung 2020). For simplicity's sake, I will henceforth refer to this account as the Mencian account.

⁴ This is the general approach adopted by Shun (2014), Ing (2016), Ing (2017), Sung (2020) and Ooi (2021).

⁵ Similar observations are made of the Confucian account by Ing (2016, 26-28) and Sung (2020, 259-260).

⁶ Here, the Mencian account appears *prima facie* continuous with Ing (2016, 21-26) and Sung (2020, 259).

⁷ Within the contemporary literature, different terms have been used to describe the kind of emotion resentment is. For instance, Strawson describes the emotion as "natural," "reasonable" and "appropriate" (Strawson 2008, 7); while

morally justified emotion is that a *junzi* (exemplary person) would possess this emotion under specific conditions.⁸ In Chinese Philosophy, one conceptualisation of the *junzi* is that she is someone who is in a strong moral position – she possesses the Confucian virtues and consistently acts according to these virtues.

A key passage for understanding why, in some circumstances, Mencius not only permits resentment but also encourages it is *Mencius* 6B3. In this passage, Mencius’ disciple explains to him that Gaozi claimed that a particular ode describes a petty person (as contrasted with the exemplary person). When Mencius asked his disciple why Gaozi thought so, his disciple replied, “Because there is resentment [*yuan*].”⁹ Presumably, Gaozi was of the view that to be resentful would make one a petty person. In response, Mencius argues that Gaozi was being “inflexible.” Why? Because Gaozi did not know how to differentiate between circumstances whereby resentment is encouraged and justified, and circumstances where it is discouraged or unjustified. In this regard, Mencius then gives us a positive account of resentment. He spells out two conditions for resentment to be encouraged. First, it depends on the *relationship* between the offender and the offended party. When one fails to treat one’s *x* (parents, siblings, relatives etc) as *x*, one therefore fails to fulfil one’s role-obligations toward that party. In doing so, the offended party ought to be resentful at the offender. Second, the *extent* of the crime. When the crime committed is a great one, then one ought to be resentful as well. Mencius thus argues:

“To fail to be resentful [*yuan*] when the fault of one’s kin is great is to be too distant, but to be resentful [*yuan*] when the fault of one’s kin is small is to be too easily perturbed. To be too distant is unfilial, but to be too easily perturbed is also unfilial.” (*Mencius* 6B3).

Simply put, when both conditions are met (close relationship between offended party and offender; and large extent of crime), one *ought* to be resentful.¹⁰ In fact, not to be resentful is to be unfilial.

Nussbaum prefers the term “well-grounded” to describe anger (though, as I will argue, there is an important resemblance between Nussbaum’s account of Transition (well-grounded) anger, and the Mencian account of resentment (Nussbaum 2016).

⁸ The *junzi* has often been translated as the gentleman. However, as Clark and Wang have argued, attaining *junzi* status is possible for everyone, regardless of gender (Clark and Wang 2004). I thus use the term ‘exemplary person’ to note this conceptual distinction.

⁹ All references to and quotations of the text of the *Mencius* are taken from Van Norden (2008), the *Analects* are taken from Slingerland (2003).

¹⁰ Here, my view differs from Shun. Shun argues that responding with resentment may be allowed, but it reveals a deficiency. Instead, my reading of *Mencius* 6B3 generates the conclusion that there are times where responding with resentment is exactly the morally appropriate response; and not to be resentful is tantamount to being unfilial. Shun writes, “Even if we do respond with resentment, these are reactions that we should ideally have done without in the

This passage thus provides us with a clear observation: that there are some circumstances where, according to Mencius, the offended party *ought* to be resentful towards the offender. However, in one sense, Mencius' criteria are rather ambiguous. After all, it is unclear how 'close' the relationship between the offender and offended party needs to be, and how 'great' the crime needs to be, in order for the resentment of the offended party to be encouraged. Nevertheless, I think we can provide a reasonable reconstruction of a Mencian account by appealing to resources in other aspects of Mencius' work; specifically, the notion of role-ethics.

It is useful here to view resentment as a response toward a moral injury. Central to this interpretation is the Confucian notion of role-ethics. By this, I refer to the minimal view that, within communities, participants stand in some moral relationship toward each other.¹¹ This finds some affinity in *Mencius* 6B3, where Mencius notes that we ought to treat one's parents (or kin) as parents (or kin). Each moral relationship is accompanied by moral obligations (of commission and omission) that participants owe towards each other. For instance, within a parent-child relationship, the parent might be said to be morally obligated to protect and care for the child; while the child in turn may be morally obligated to respect and be filial towards their parents.¹² The experience of moral injury could be attributed to different causes. Resentment is only encouraged when an offence is caused by someone who defaults on fulfilling their role-obligation towards the offended party. In defaulting on their role-obligation, the offense committed is a *moral* offense. Understood in this way, resentment is then encouraged when two conditions are fulfilled: (a) a specific person stands in a role-relation to me, and as such, possesses a role-obligation toward me, and (b) that same person defaults (either by commission or omission) on their role-obligation (Ooi 2021, 220-224; see also *Mencius* 6B3).¹³

first place. Their presence shows a deficiency in ourselves, and to address such reactions, the primary focus of our efforts should be to correct this deficiency in ourselves rather than to change the way we view the offender" (Shun 2014, 33). Of course, given that Shun's aim is broader than mine, the difference may be attributed more naturally to the fact that a *Mencian* account may differ from a more general *Confucian* account, after all, we know that the views of the Confucians are not identical in every respect.

¹¹ Here, I adopt a weaker understanding of the Role-Ethics thesis. For a helpful recent discussion, see Ramsey (2016). In Ramsey's language, my view adopts the 'moderate' version of role-ethics, though it may certainly be made compatible with 'strong' versions as well. The point here is that this view does not require the strong metaphysical commitments that accompany the strong version of role-ethics, but neither does it preclude that view.

¹² Of course, the specific ways to understand each obligation differs among thinkers and commentators.

¹³ In this paper, I focus on the Mencian account as being concerned more generally with different kinds of obligations and relations. The account I discussed focuses more specifically on the 'greatness' of the offense' and the role of 'intimates' (Ooi 2021). While this discussion is an interesting one, and one that can be read in comparison with Nussbaum (2016, Chapter 3), it is beyond the scope of this present paper.

Due to this, an agent-based conception of resentment conceptualises it as a complex emotion. It is an emotion that an agent feels, but when experienced, it is often a combination of anger, disappointment and sorrow, though all in different degrees, as appropriate to the role-obligation. That is, following our discussion above, whenever one feels resentment, one also experiences anger, disappointment and sorrow: anger, because the agent has caused a moral injury; disappointment, because the agent is *expected* to fulfil their role-obligations, but failed to do so; and sorrow, because, as a result of the agent's actions, the situation is less than desirable. Thus, whenever, one experiences moral injury in this way, one experiences the emotion of resentment; but the feeling resentment is often a combination of feeling angry, disappointed and sorrowful at the same time.

The degree of each emotion determines the way resentment is *expressed*: through lament, protest, grief, complaining etc. For instance, when 'anger' is the central emotion at play, resentment may be expressed through protest. But when 'disappointment' is the central emotion, resentment may be expressed through lament. Thus, when Mencius viewed Heaven as defaulting on its role-obligation towards him, he was angry (at Heaven for its failure), disappointed (because Mencius expected Heaven to fulfil its role-obligations), and sorrowful (at the circumstances that he was in). Resentment, when conceived as a *moral* emotion in relation to role-ethics, tends to be a combination of anger, disappointment and sorrow. Relatedly, elsewhere, I have argued that, in the *Mencius*, Heaven stands in a role-obligatory relationship towards individuals and societies (Ooi 2021). Interestingly, in *Mencius* 5A6, there is the possibility that resentment may be directed towards oneself. This is consistent with my account insofar as one has some moral obligations toward oneself – a discussion that exceeds the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting here a difference between the Mencian account and some contemporary articulations of the Confucian account. On the Mencian account, as a *moral* emotion, one should only be resentful towards agents who stand in a role-obligatory relationship towards her. Within the *Mencius*, resentment is therefore expressed towards other agents such as one's kin (e.g., *Mencius* 6B3) or towards Heaven (e.g., *Mencius* 2B13).¹⁴ While most Confucian accounts would agree that resentment can be directed towards agents,¹⁵ some also argue that resentment may be

¹⁴ See an interesting analysis in Sung (2020, footnote 23).

¹⁵ See for instance, Shun (2014, 17) and Sung (2020).

expressed against circumstances or inanimate objects. For instance, Sung argues that *yuan* “is a negative reactive attitude or feeling one has towards some inconvenient conditions in which one finds oneself, such as being single as a woman in pre-Qin times, being in a state of poverty, being distressed, and being burdened with some tasks” (Sung 2020, 258), “*Yuan* can be directed towards a particular set of circumstances...” (Sung 2020, 260) and “towards the season, weather, the environment in which she was born, and so forth” (Sung 2020, 263). Relatedly, Shun argues that *yuan* “can also be a response to one’s dire circumstances as such, without being directed to anyone in particular (*Lunyu* 14.10). If directed to anything at all, then this complaining state of the heart/mind is directed to, so to speak, ‘the world’” (Shun 2014, 17).¹⁶

At first glance, these accounts appear to pose a challenge to the Mencian account since, on the Mencian account, resentment requires a role-based moral obligation; and presumably, ‘circumstances’ are not the kind of objects that possess moral obligations towards individuals. The apparent differences between the accounts, however, may be less substantial than it first appears. I suggest two reasons for this. Consider, first, that while Sung and Shun aim at providing a ‘Confucian’ or ‘Confucian-inspired’ account, our account is decidedly Mencian. Given the observation that Confucians may differ in their views, it may be possible that in this respect, Mencius differs from other Confucian thinkers.¹⁷ In support of this reading, observe that much of the evidence provided for the view that one may be resentful against inanimate objects come from texts *other than the Mencius* (Shun’s analysis, for instance, depends on a text from the *Lunyu*).¹⁸

A second reason follows Shun’s analysis. When one appears to be resentful, as a response to one’s unfortunate circumstances, without being resentful towards any particular individual, one then *appears* to be resentful against ‘the world’. In these cases, it seems to me, that one’s resentment is then directed towards society – society seen as a ‘group’ of agents who are responsible for and complicit in the unfortunate (and perhaps unfair) circumstances that I am in. One’s resentment is then directed towards a class of agents who are, in various ways, complicit

¹⁶ While Shun (2014) and Sung (2020)’s presentation of their Confucian account allows resentment to be directed towards non-agents, it is worth noting that one may also reconstruct a Confucian account that subscribes to a form of agent-based role-ethics. If one takes the latter strategy, then *that* construal of the Confucian account would be much closer to the Mencian account that I’m developing here.

¹⁷ See Sung (2020, 261) and Ing (2016, 26).

¹⁸ Sung cites a variety of Confucian sources to support her view, including several references to the *Mencius* (namely, *Mencius* 1B12, 1B18, 5A1, 7B4). However, it appears to me that the passages cited in the *Mencius* may be interpreted in a way that is consistent with the view that resentment ought to be directed towards agents.

and responsible for my circumstances. It is worth noting that this is not an approach which is designed to absolve *me* of responsibility either – it simply recognises that, in addition to whatever moral responsibilities I may have for my current situation, other agents in society may also be, in various ways and degrees, complicit and responsible. And relatedly, my interpretation of their degree of complicity would result in the degree of resentment I feel towards them – the more complicit agent *x* seems to be in causing my unfortunate circumstances, the more resentful I would be towards her.¹⁹ Consequently, what *appears* to be resentment against circumstances is really resentment towards agents who are, in various ways and degrees, complicit in decisions and actions (or non-actions) that cause these circumstances.²⁰

Relatedly, on some views, Heaven is an agent which acts in the world, and possesses role-obligations. In this way, ultimately, whenever one appears resentful against an inanimate object, or against circumstances and the like, one is really expressing resentment at Heaven. Let me provide an illustration of this from *Mencius* 2B13.

Mengzi left the state of Qi. While on the road, his disciple Chong Yu asked, “It seems that you have an unhappy countenance, Master. Yet, the other day I heard it from you that ‘The gentleman is not bitter toward Heaven and does not blame others.’”

Mengzi said, “The situation has not changed from when I said that. Every five hundred years, a King must arise. Between them, there must be those illustrious in their time. Since the founding of the Zhou, it has already been more than seven hundred years. This is more than enough time. And if one examines the situation in our era, it seems an appropriate time. Nonetheless, Heaven does not yet desire to pacify the world. If it desired to pacify the world, who besides me in the present time is there? Why would I be unhappy?” (*Mencius* 2B13).

In this passage, Mencius’ disciple observed that Mencius looked unhappy. Notice Mencius’ explanation. Mencius was in a bad circumstance – he was not looked upon favourably, and the world around him was not ‘fixed’. However, notice that Mencius’ resentment was not targeted at

¹⁹ Thus, when it comes to resentment against the ‘weather’ or ‘circumstances’, one is really resentful towards the *cause* of the ‘weather’ or ‘circumstance’; and in the case of Mencius, that is Heaven (Ooi 2021).

²⁰ See Walker (2006, 110-150) for an interesting discussion on this. On my reading, Walker provides a roughly similar argument with regards to resentment against circumstances and the like. Walker discusses cases where one appears to be resentful against one’s circumstances (such as one’s height or the rain that ruined the picnic). Such cases of resentment may be “misplaced.” There is also an interesting discussion of resenting “states of affairs, such as being paid too little.” In that case, notice that the state of affairs “is also something that results from the choices and actions, as well as the indifference or inattention, of other human beings” (Walker 2006, 116).

the unfortunate circumstances. Instead, he interpreted the unfortunate circumstances that he faced as Heaven's lack of willingness to fix the world. Consequently, because Heaven stands in a role-obligatory relationship towards humans, and Heaven failed to fulfil its obligation (the unfortunate circumstances), Mencius responds with resentment towards Heaven.²¹ In this way, the Mencian account may still be compatible with Shun's (2014) and Sung's (2020) accounts insofar as Mencius may be allowed to differ from other Confucians in this respect.

Yet, while the *junzi* may sometimes be encouraged to be resentful towards others, she should not remain resentful forever.²² We may use the term 'temporary resentment' to explain this: when the *junzi* experiences the appropriate conditions for resentment, she responds rightly by exhibiting resentment. This is a natural and morally appropriate response. However, knowing that resentment should only be temporary, she finds ways to stop being resentful. In *Mencius* 5A3, Mencius explains, "Benevolent people do not store up anger nor do they dwell in bitterness (*yuan*) against their younger brothers. They simply love and treat them as kin." The key here is not that benevolent people are *never* angry nor resentful; instead, the idea is that benevolent people do not *store up* anger, or *dwell* in resentment. Thus, when combined with *Mencius* 6B3, we form a picture of how the exemplary person responds to moral injury: she initially reacts with resentment, but eventually lets go of that resentment and moves towards a restorative relationship.

Here, closely tied to resentment is the notion of something close to forgiveness. It may be understood as forgiveness in the sense that it requires the offended party to let go of their anger and work at restoring the relationship – the offended party ought to treat the offender according to what their role-relations demand, in the same way that, Shun treated his brother with affection and love in *Mencius* 5A3.²³ In conceptualising forgiveness as the foreswearing of resentment, we find the idea of forgiveness in the temporal nature of justified resentment – the end of resentment is the

²¹ The key reason why *Tian* failed to fulfil its obligation in this regard is that Mencius, being a virtuous person, should not be in such straitened circumstances. Instead, he should be enjoying acclamation and, more importantly, the people's following his ways because he is virtuous. Additionally, *Tian* also failed to fulfill its obligation to the people, in that it is supposed to raise a 'King' once every five hundred years, but failed to do so.

²² See also Sung (2020, 269).

²³ Here, my interpretation is generally continuous with Shun's own analysis. Shun approaches the topic of forgiveness in Confucian philosophy primarily by examining terms that are either translated as forgiveness or "concepts within the semantic field of forgiveness." In his analysis, he argues that the focus of forgiveness in Confucian philosophy pertains primarily to how the offended party *treats* her offender, rather than how she *views* her offender (Shun 2014, 21-25). The interpretation I provided in *Mencius* 5A3 is compatible with Shun's claim: that is, that Shun ought to *treat* his brother differently.

beginning of forgiveness.²⁴ Mencius uses the phrase 不宿怨焉, that is, not to remain in a state of resentment (*Mencius* 5A3).²⁵ Instead, one lets go of her resentment and seeks the welfare of one's self and others (as in the case of Shun and Mencius).²⁶

Having sketched out a Mencian account of resentment, let us now compare this account with two important contemporary accounts.

3. Strawson on Relationships, Exculpatory Conditions and the Objective View

Strawson argues that resentment is a *reactive attitude*. Resentment describes a response toward an interpersonal transaction in which one party is offended by the other (Strawson 2008, 5). Likewise, on the Mencian account, one ought only to react with resentment *in response* to a moral offense.²⁷

On Strawson's account, resentment should be understood within the context of relationships. He explains that we attach a kind of importance to the intentions other people have toward us based on the relationship we have with them.²⁸ He provides a list of examples of such relations: "as sharers of a common interest; as members of the same family; as colleagues; as friends; as lovers..." (Strawson 2008, 6; see also Strawson 2008, 15). He observes that we expect goodwill from those who stand in such relations toward us, and that the content and degree of goodwill depends on the kind of relationships in which we stand toward each other. Presumably, there is a moral dimension for such goodwill in order for the reactions to the offense to be morally reasonable.

There is an important connection here to Confucian role-ethics.²⁹ According to standard accounts, Confucian role-ethics begins with the assumption that a central aspect of the self is its

²⁴ This is also consistent with Perkins' interpretation of *Mencius* 2B13, where throughout the passage, Mencius moves from anger to acceptance (see Perkins (2014), Ing (2015)).

²⁵ See Shun (2014, 16).

²⁶ It is worth noting that insofar as we think that resentment in the *Mencius* is conceptually tied to the restoration of a relationship, it appears to support our reading that resentment in the *Mencius* is ethical and person-directed. In instances where one appears to be resentful against one's circumstances, in the same way that one's resentment may in reality be directed towards either a group of complicit agents or against Heaven, her forgiveness would likewise be directed against those same agents.

²⁷ Thus, philosophers have pointed that Confucian resentment is a reactive attitude (see Shun (2014) and Sung (2020)).

²⁸ Martha Nussbaum has an interesting related discussion on this issue (see Nussbaum 2016, chs. 4-5).

²⁹ Of course, the notion that relationships come with *roles* and *moral obligations* is not necessarily a 'Chinese invention' (See for instance, Cohen (1966-1967), Hart (1968), Williams (1972), Hardimon (1994), Cane (2016)).

social nature.³⁰ One stands *in relation* to others, and the self is understood in terms of the relationships to which it stands. I am a son to my parents, a husband to my wife, a teacher to my students etc. Relationships come with obligations; and different kinds of relationships come with different kinds of role-obligations. Role-obligations are the kind of civil and moral duties we *owe* to each other,³¹ and they include both actions and attitudes.³² Consequently, wrong-doing occurs whenever one defaults on fulfilling one's role-obligations toward another party.

While the focus of Strawson's list is on *relational* roles, the Confucian list also provides another category: *vocational* roles. Doctors, for instance, stand in a moral role-obligatory relationship to their patients – to do no harm.³³ A key lesson here is that analysis of resentment ought to take into consideration the centrality of role-relations that participants stand toward each other and what obligations and expectations those relations entail.

But this introduces a new kind of problem: how are we to respond when one's role-obligations conflict? Suppose, as a soldier, when the state goes to war, Rachel has a role-obligation to fight for the state (vocational role). However, at the same time, Rachel finds out that her mother is ill, and she has an obligation to take care of her mother (relational role). Rachel's role-obligations now stand in conflict – she cannot fulfil both and has to choose. She chooses to fight the war. Here is an important consideration: should Rachel's mother feel resentful against her? Here, a distinction between action and intention might help provide an answer. Presumably, Rachel genuinely wanted to stay home and care of her mother – she did not have any ill-intention toward her mother. On a Mencian account, Rachel has committed an offense toward her mother – in defaulting on her role-obligations towards her – and therefore, her mother *should* respond with resentment.³⁴ The answer is not so straightforward, I think, on a Strawsonian account. While Rachel did not intend any ill-will toward her mother, it is arguable whether she neglected to show

³⁰ See, for instance, Nuyen (2007), Ramsey (2016), Rosemont and Ames (2016).

³¹ According to standard Confucian accounts, these obligations are moral, and based on a standard recognised and applicable in society. For instance, the child is obligated to practice filial piety toward her parents; and the parents are obligated to take care of their children. The obligations are conceptualised according to Confucian ideals and virtues.

³² The inclusion of *attitudes* is important as it connects with Strawson's notion of *intentions*. For a common example of *attitudes* as part of role-obligations, see *Analects* 2.7.

³³ One way to think of the distinction is in the context of conflict between the two kinds of roles, sometimes expressed in terms of statements such as 'As your friend, I'll support you in this; but as your doctor, I cannot endorse this decision'.

³⁴ Like the majority of cases of resentment in Confucian accounts, resentment in this case is 'bottom up' in the sense that in that the mother, being ill and requiring care, feels resentment towards Rachel, who has the ability to help her mother.

her mother goodwill.³⁵ A Strawsonian account appears then, to differ from the Mencian account, in that it likely leans towards the view that the mother should not respond with resentment.

Additionally, one might argue that, under Strawson's account, there is no clear standard for relational obligations. In fact, relational obligations are understood primarily in terms of the offended party's perception of the offender's intention. Importantly, while the Strawsonian account emphasises perceived intentions, the Mencian account focuses on role-obligations.

Another important aspect of Strawson's analysis is the role of exculpatory conditions.³⁶ There are certain circumstances in which one may *initially* feel resentful, but upon hearing new information about the event, one then modifies or mollifies one's initial feeling of resentment (Strawson 2008, 7). Strawson identifies two such considerations: first, where the offender is a fully responsible moral agent, but the harm committed was unintentional; and second, where the offender is not a fully responsible moral agent – she is incapable of acting morally due to reasons such as mental disorders. In both these cases, our initial feeling of resentment is either modified or mollified. The lesson here is that resentment is only justified or reasonable in cases where the offense is committed with the intention of ill-will, and the offender is a fully responsible moral agent. These considerations are important and can be built-in to the Mencian account – either in terms of distinguishing between justified or unjustified resentment, or possibly part of the process of talking-oneself-out of such instances of resentment. I want, however, to highlight Strawson's observations about how we treat people who are in the second group: people who we deem as being incapable of being fully responsible moral agents.

People in this group are often seen as incapable of being fully responsible moral agents because they are thought to be “morally undeveloped,” such as someone who is “warped or deranged, neurotic or just a child” (Strawson 2008, 9). We tend to suspend our normal reactive attitudes (including resentment) toward such people, and instead view them objectively. We suspend our ordinary expectations of moral obligations and do not treat them as agents. Instead, we often view them as “an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense,

³⁵ Relatedly, it is arguable that Rachel's action might fit the first of Strawson's exculpatory conditions (which I will elaborate on below) since in a sense, ‘she had no choice’ (though this is not clear as well).

³⁶ Cherry considers ignorance as a possible exculpatory condition. She writes, “While dying on the cross, he did not ask God to avenge those who were crucifying and mocking him; instead Jesus asked God to forgive them ‘for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). Jeffrie Murphy argues that the ignorance of offenders gives us reason to excuse them but not to forgive them” (Cherry 2017, 59).

might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided...” (Strawson 2008, 9).

This observation makes more intelligible an aspect of the Mencian account that might, at first glance, appear somewhat unintuitive: Mencius’ argument that withholding resentment toward a loved one who has committed a great offence toward us is tantamount to being unfilial. That is, *if* we view our loved ones as loved ones, we ought to demand of them certain moral obligations and expectations. However, if they commit an offence and thus default on their moral obligations, we ought to react with resentment. The Mencian point is straightforward: we ought to treat our loved ones as loved ones; by withholding resentment, we are not treating them as we should. Either we do not treat them according to the specified role-relations (and therefore do not require of them the accompanying role-obligations), or we take the objective view to them. If it is the former, we fail to take our relationship seriously; and if the latter, by taking the objective view, we treat them as morally undeveloped and therefore mistreat them.

4. Nussbaum on the Payback Wish and Transition-Anger

Another insightful discussion of resentment is due to Nussbaum (2016). Since Nussbaum’s central concern is ‘anger’, it will be appropriate to focus on the kind of Mencian resentment where anger takes center stage. Beginning with Aristotle’s definition of anger and taking into consideration primarily ‘Western’ discussions of the topic, Nussbaum observes that the philosophical tradition generally holds that a payback wish is a conceptual part of anger (Nussbaum 2016, 22). The payback wish is “a wish for things to go badly, somehow, for the offender, in a way that is envisaged, somehow, however vaguely, as a payback for the offense. They get what they deserve” (Nussbaum 2016, 23). When one experiences anger, she has three options: take (a) the road of payback, (b) the road of status, or (c) the transition. While the first two options include the payback wish, the third option does not.

The first road one might take is the road of payback. One wishes for harm to come upon the offender in hopes that the harm in some ways compensates for the inflicted offense. Nussbaum thinks that this follows an irrational belief since the harm experienced by the offender does not

actually restore the offended party's welfare in any meaningful way.³⁷ It does not *really* improve the situation of the offended party. Consequently, Nussbaum argues that this road is built on “magical thinking.”

The second road, the road of status, follows the logic that when one experiences injury, one's status has been in some way unfairly hurt and one experiences down-ranking – the relative status of the offended party has been down-ranked. Consequently, the payback wish here seems “intelligible and after a fashion rational” because it attempts to restore the relative status of the injured party, perhaps vis-à-vis the offender. However, Nussbaum argues that while intelligible, it is morally flawed because injuries become “problems of relative position,” and leads to what she calls a narcissistic error (Nussbaum 2016, 29).

Instead, Nussbaum introduces a third option: the *transition*, where, instead of a payback wish, the offended party focuses on future welfare. Transition-anger is the only species of anger that Nussbaum thinks is well-grounded, where, after the episode of experiencing anger, one then responds with an emotion that says, “How outrageous! Something must be done about this” (Nussbaum 2016, 35).

On my view, Nussbaum's account bears much similarities with the Mencian account. Like Nussbaum, Mencius thinks that for the most part, anger (which involves the payback wish) is not the mark of a *junzi*. Importantly, it appears that the kind of resentment that the *junzi* holds should not involve the payback wish. There is no evidence that the payback wish is present in any of the exemplars cited by Mencius – whether it be the authors of the odes, Shun or Mencius himself. This is not to say that in Confucian philosophy, anger does not come with a payback wish; but that the kind of resentment that is exemplified by a *junzi* does not include a payback wish.

Perhaps a common assumption often attributed to Confucianism is that status and hierarchy play an important role in life. If this is the case, would the road to status not be the kind of response expected of the Confucian? The answer, I think, is yes and no. Indeed, status and hierarchy is

³⁷ In fact, some philosophers think that this strategy causes more harm to the sufferer. Adams, for instance, writes “Horrors cannot be made meaningful by structures of retributive justice, because justice is a matter of proportion. Horror for horror (e.g., torturing and beheading those who have tortured and beheaded) might fit the crime, but it does not fit the agent whose capacity for personal integrity it *prima facie* destroys” (Adams 2013, 163).

important in Confucianism, and as Christoph Harbsmeier (2011), an expert in Chinese linguistics, and Shun have both observed, status differentials are an important conceptual aspect of the Confucian taxonomy for resentment and forgiveness. Nevertheless, notice that in Mencius' analysis of resentment, the emphasis is not on one's hurt status but on the defaulting of moral obligations and severing of relationships. Consequently, given that resentment is not primarily or even particularly about one's hurt status, the payback wish in the road to status makes little sense. Instead, status is crucial in two different ways. First, status is important in that it has implications for the role-obligations that both parties in the transaction owe toward each other – by this, we refer to vocational and relational status, as instead of, strictly speaking, social status. Second, status is significant in that the exemplars in the *Mencius* acknowledge the importance of one's social status in being able to bring about constructive change – Shun's position of power allowed him to act in a way that he treats his brother as kin and loves his brother; Mencius' desire for a status was for him to help Heaven facilitate peace in the world.

Instead of taking the road of status, Mencian resentment promotes temporary resentment, somewhat akin to Nussbaum's transition-anger. Accordingly, when one experiences offense, one responds in anger; however, one eventually moves towards commitment to constructive action, to improve the situation for one's self and society. Interestingly, pedagogically, both Nussbaum (throughout her book, e.g., Nussbaum (2016, 212)) and Mencius appeal to exemplars to demonstrate what transition-anger or temporary resentment look like.

5. Concluding Remarks

I have set the Mencian account of resentment alongside contemporary discussions. Part of the value of this comparison is to clarify the Mencian account in the context of contemporary concerns in the philosophy of moral emotions. But the Mencian account also helps clarify and support several aspects of contemporary accounts. For instance, I have noted how it both presents a challenge, but also a role-based solution to Strawson's focus on *intentions*. Relatedly, I have argued that it not only supports but adds a dimension of self-cultivation that may supplement Nussbaum's concern with moving towards transition-anger. In the rest of this section, I suggest several additional ways the Mencian account can positively contribute to contemporary discussions.

Both Mencius and Nussbaum think that well-reasoned anger (or resentment) should only be temporary and move to a transition. However, moving toward the transition is difficult. Mencius takes up this question due to his concern with ethical cultivation. How, according to the Mencian account, should we move toward the transition? I consider two suggestions.

According to the Mencian account, one's immediate response to resentment should be self-reflection (*Mencius* 4B28).³⁸ This is interesting and perhaps an aspect of the response process that I find less extensively discussed in contemporary literature. The process of self-reflection is crucial as it encourages the sufferer to consider whether (a) she was (partly) at fault for her suffering and (b) she is mistaken in her interpretation of the situation. If it turns out that, upon reflection, she realises that she was (partly) at fault, she would adjust her degree of resentment toward the offender according to the degree of blame involved. While I suspect that this might be an unpopular suggestion, let me provide a simple example of a case where I think self-reflection is extremely valuable.

At the individual level, we sometimes encounter people who do not like to take responsibility for their actions; in fact, their initial response is always to play the 'blame game' – as long as the person to blame is not them. In such cases, recommending self-reflection is prudent insofar as, if the individual involved *does* in fact have some part to play in the negative transaction, it would be prudent for her to *learn* from her mistakes. In addition, it would be wrong and unfair for the resentment and blame to be placed wholly on the offender, if it turns out that the offender is not wholly to be blamed for the offense.

The second kind of self-reflection is to consider whether the offended party might have misinterpreted the situation. Again, given the complexity of most human interactions, I do think it is quite likely for people to misinterpret the *intentions* behind different actions. Following Strawson's analysis that resentment is often a reaction to the intention of the offender, and given the difficulty of accurately assessing someone else's intentions, coupled with our past experiences of making wrong inferences about the intentions of others (or past experiences of others

³⁸ See a discussion in Ooi (2021, 222-223).

misinterpreting our intentions), it seems reasonable to reflect on whether our interpretation of the transaction is indeed accurate.³⁹

A second suggestion to cultivate one's moral emotions is through singing. According to the Mencian account, this would appear to be the singing of odes to regulate and express one's resentment. Indeed, Confucius himself recommended that the odes may be used "to give vent to" one's resentments (*Analects* 17.9). In singing the odes, one is able to express one's emotions, and perhaps learn from the exemplars who wrote the odes – in most odes where the poet expresses resentment, the poet eventually moves toward the transition (see Ooi 2021, 224). After all, learning and singing the odes are part of the Confucian rituals, the participation in which is intended to help individuals cultivate the appropriate virtues and behaviors. In this case, when one is filled with resentment and wants to move towards the transition (and may find it difficult to), the singing of odes may be a tool that she may employ to help her move towards the transition.⁴⁰

To conclude, I have noted that part of the contribution of a Mencian account to the contemporary literature is in understanding resentment as a moral emotion, through the lens of an ethics of roles; and in emphasizing the importance of individual moral cultivation as a response to resentment. In reading these different accounts together, we might formulate a coherent account of well-reasoned resentment, at least, the species of resentment where anger plays a central role. Well-reasoned resentment is a reactive attitude that an offended party holds against her offender in response to a moral offense committed against her (understood in the context of role-obligations). Instead of wishing for payback, the offended party eventually moves towards the

³⁹ It is worth adding a qualification here. There are different kinds of suffering and offences and, while I am optimistic about the value of self-reflection in most cases, I remain sceptical about its uses for cases of horrendous evils, such as participation in the Nazi concentration camps or rape. For discussion on 'horrendous evils', see Adams and Sutherland (1989) and Adams (1993). For the participation in horrendous evils is often reasonably followed by some form of trauma. In this, self-reflection appears counterproductive since it would be cruel in such circumstances to suggest that victims are to be blamed; and self-reflection could force the offended party to relive the suffering over and over again, in a way that harms her even more. Consequently, while self-reflection has much value as a tool to regulate one's resentment and to gain an accurate perspective of the transaction, it appears a counterproductive tool for sufferers of horrendous evils.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, it is worth noting that this suggestion is consistent with recent findings in cognitive and music psychology. It is a generally accepted view that emotions are difficult to change. This is sometimes called emotional bias. Someone may *want* to move toward the transition, and away from being in a resentful state, but find it difficult to *actually* do so. For recent work on the connection between music (and singing) and emotions (particularly anger), see Haas (1951), Gilbert (2005), Fisher and Gilboa (2016), Hakvoort et al (2016), Sharman and Dingle (2015). Nussbaum has an interesting discussion connecting emotions to music (see Nussbaum (2001)).

transition, and concerns herself with constructive responses for wellbeing (broadly understood). The move towards the transition is extremely difficult, however, and consequently, appropriate tools such as self-reflection, references to exemplars and singing might be adopted by the sufferer where relevant. We ought to take care not to misuse exemplars (or any of these tools), by not replacing the focus on ethical considerations by a blind appeal to exemplars. Given this, I hope to have shown that comparative ethical philosophy allows for a more robust understanding of moral emotions as it takes seriously the multiplicity of perspectives and approaches to the same kind of emotional experience.

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