Community Practices and Getting Good at Bad Emotions

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Abstract

Early Confucian philosophy is remarkable in its attention to everyday social interactions and their power to steer our emotional lives. Their work on the social dimensions of our moral-emotional lives is enormously promising for thinking through our own context and struggles, particularly, I argue, the ways that public rhetoric and practices may steer us away from some emotions it can be important to have, especially negative emotions. Some of our emotions are bad – unpleasant to experience, reflective of dissatisfactions or even heartbreak – but nonetheless quite important to express and, more basically, to feel. Grief is like this, for example. So, too, is disappointment. In this essay, I explore how our current social practices may fail to support expressions of disappointment and thus suppress our ability to feel it well.

In the popular imagination, philosophers are often associated with equanimity. Whatever people may imagine philosophers to be, they tend to expect philosophers to manage the ordinary struggles of human life with greater composure and, indeed, may expect that philosophers *should be* wise in ways that afford protection from the negative emotions that bedevil the rest of us. While anyone who personally knows a philosopher will know better than this, this perception that wisdom can or should guard against negative emotion has some historical purchase. Models such as Socrates or traditions such as Stoicism do align wisdom with protection from conventional sorrows and struggles. Early Confucianism, particularly Confucius himself and, later, Xunzi, offer a striking and, I believe, heartening counterpoint.

While Confucius and Xunzi do suggest that wisdom affords an improved capacity to navigate the travails of life, they find substantial place within wisdom for negative emotions. A wise person will also sometimes feel quite bad, and part of pursuing wisdom amounts to getting good at bad emotions. Much of what improvement of our bad emotions entails is internal work, adjustments to our thinking and framing of experience. But much of it is also social, and it is to the social aspects of our emotions that I want to attend here. One important aspect of early Confucian philosophy is its refusal to isolate wisdom, or the wise, from the social, communal, and familial dimensions of experience. Wisdom is found *in* these aspects of experience

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and is importantly supported by them. If we will be better at feeling bad, then, we do well to see how our emotions are inflected and influenced by our environment. My own interest in these matters is not scholastic, but born of a sense that much in our present culture fails to well support us in emotions we would do well to feel. So while I first detail the early Confucian approach to our negative emotions, my more pressing target is considering what they may offer us.

The negative emotions to which the Confucians most closely attend are not, significantly, unusual or uncommon emotions. Rather, they are strikingly ordinary and commonplace, just the sorts of negative emotions that will and do arise in the course of experiences most typical of human beings. Just as wisdom may be found in our ordinary lives with and among other people, so, too, some of the emotions that importantly matter to our wisdom are found just there. For example, unlike their ancient counterparts in Greece and Rome, the early Confucians, and indeed most early Chinese philosophers, made much of the struggles of grief. Where Western philosophers largely ignored bereavement or counselled against grief, early Chinese philosophy is rich with sensitive reflections on loss and even heated debates about funerary ritual. The Confucians, in particular, focused their closest attention on that most ubiquitous form of bereavement: the deaths of parents.[1] Most of us have or someday will endure this sorrow. Indeed, a life that goes the way that both we and our parents would wish must include it, for the alternative is surely counted worse. In short, the experience of losing parents is both terribly common and aligned with an order of life we prefer. Even so, as the Confucians recognized, the change this loss enforces can be seismic, the struggle it entails fierce. So in their reflections on death and loss, we find close attention to this most common of human heartbreaks and strategies for honouring its place in our lives.

Just as the Confucians attended to the prosaic struggles of losing beloved elders, they also, as Wenhui Xie argues, paid attention to worry, to the ways that caring about other people and about the world entails courting some distress (Xie, forthcoming). Here, too, the relation between parent and child can serve as a touchstone. Much is often made of the Confucian tradition's extolling of filial piety, of its emphasis on children deferring to elders. But in one of the tradition's oldest texts, the *Analects*, Confucius sometimes and tellingly references the worries that reside in close parent-child relations, attaching filiality to care for how we, parents and children

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[1]   I cannot here do justice to the intricacies of the Confucian position regarding the loss of parents. For more on this, see Olberding (2011).

both, worry each other. He counsels children to give their parents no cause for anxiety beyond their health (Eno, 2015, 2.6), and he remarks on how a child whose parents have grown old will find this a joy, but also a source of great trepidation (Eno, 2015, 4.21). In these passages, Confucius acknowledges that even when the parent-child relation is at its best, it will include anxieties. Parents will worry for their children's well-being, and children who bear witness to their parents' decline come to know this worry too. Most broadly, to care for another is to want for her health, well-being, and flourishing – and to worry about just such matters. As Xie argues, Confucius' approach to such realities is not to deny the worth of worry or to seek its eradication in favour of personal peace, but to learn to worry well. A wise person seeks to worry where it is well spent, as a measure of affection and care, while keeping in view what matters we can control and what we cannot, and while schooling herself to favour worries that reflect her profoundest values and commitments.

In their attention to prosaic experiences such as the loss of parents and the worries we bear for those we love, the early Confucians pick out some of the most commonplace human experiences and make them a philosophical focus. They appear to grant that a well-lived life will include distress and unpleasant emotions. Their work appears predicated on the idea that some of what it takes to live well – caring well and deeply for others, in particular – will exact costs that we should not seek to dodge. Love of others will induce worry, and it will induce grief. These are bad emotions – unpleasant, distressing, sometimes miserable – but they are also important. For they originate in relations that constitute much of the value life may offer us. To fly from such emotions or seek their eradication, as some of the Western ancients recommend, is to lose something of the humanity we achieve in caring for and about beloved others. Because of this, what the Confucians sought were ways that one can endure well and perhaps even come to valorize some of our bad emotions – to see them as regrettable elements of a life that, nonetheless and in its totality, is exquisitely rewarding.

Of course, if one will extol the value of emotions most find both negative and unpleasant, one will need to take care. Grief can sometimes be romanticized and is quite often actively damaging; worry can abduct us and separate us from the goods that love of others affords. Recognizing just such hazards in part motivates those philosophers, such as the Stoics, who exhort us to train ourselves out of bad emotions. The Confucians, too, see the peril. Their response to it, in its most basic form, is to seek skilfulness in managing one's emotion and to seek a society that supports us in just this.

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Managing negative emotion well entails some substantial tending to our own internal workings. We should both seek and sustain an internal mental life that seats distressing emotion in values we circumspectly endorse. The internal effort here is naturally quite complicated and indeed intricate, worthy of its own study. This is but what we would expect, as philosophers of all sorts who recommend ways to seek our own flourishing turn us inward toward adjustments to our thinking and reflecting. But I wish to focus instead on an aspect of managing negative emotion less often philosophically addressed: the impact of social experience on emotion.

In the everydayness that pervades the Confucians' work, they understood that even as we may experience grief or worry as our own internal workings, there is a social side to both. Emotions develop not just internally, but also socially. They are coloured, influenced, and steered by the communities and social environments we inhabit. And how our emotions go for us will often have much to do with what our society supports or fails to support, what it invites us to cultivate and what it disdains, or, most basically of all, what it attends to and what it ignores. The social practices and rhetorics surrounding familiar experiences can function to steer what we feel and how. The frameworks we employ for understanding our experiences – from what they mean to how they ought to be countenanced – are shaped by the social narratives and practices that structure our communal lives. Likewise, whether we can make our emotions intelligible, both to ourselves and others, will ride in part on whether we have, ready to hand, shared linguistic and behavioural resources for their expression. The fullest development of this view is in Xunzi's work.

Xunzi understood that our social and cultural practices function as paths tracing out what reactions and responses to events are acceptable and reflect our values. We are shaped by others and by a variety of social forces – our shared manners and mores, our interactional norms and practices, and the social rhetorics we employ. Xunzi's primary interest was in articulating a moral system that would foster virtue through the joint effects of good role models (Hutton, 2014, chapter 1) and robust ritual practices (Hutton, 2014, chapter 23). He argues that well-devised, shared social practices are key to both social and personal well-being. On Xunzi's view, the human being is like bent wood that may be made straight where it is brought under the correcting influence of appropriate ritual (Hutton, 2014, p. 267). Xunzi's account of moral and social life takes its own shape under the influence of a society riven by war, corruption, and decline, circumstances Xunzi seeks to remedy with a return to traditional practices. What interests me here, however, are the

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wider dynamics on which he rests his recommendations, his emphasis on the shaping power of social practice and environment.

The first chapter of the *Xunzi*, called 'An Exhortation to Learning', begins with a series of images that vividly capture the significance of setting and environment (Hutton, 2014, pp. 2–3). There is a bird whose nests tend to fail at the slightest wind because she builds them on frail branches. There is a short plant that enjoys the view of vast vistas because it grows along mountaintops. A sprawling, curving vine grows straight because it is set among upright hemp. A famously 'sweet-smelling' plant becomes offensively malodorous because it is set in foul water. In each of these cases, circumstance and setting, for good or ill, exert a shaping pressure. So it is with human beings as well. We, too, enjoy the view and adopt the contours that our social positioning makes possible. We, too, take on the odour of the social waters we are 'soaked' in. Much of what influences us and gives us our shape will be the behavioural and emotional patterns most evident in our society's practices, both formal and informal. And much of this influence will transpire below conscious awareness.

Xunzi's work remarkably anticipates concepts now common in psychology – the effects of peer influence and emotional contagion, the ways we absorb and mirror the moods and emotional states of others. As Xunzi puts it, we are akin to animals in this, such that when one horse neighs, the others neigh responsively (Hutton, 2014, p. 19). Our nature is to be receptive and give uptake to the emotional and behavioural states of our fellows. The most direct form of this is of course the face-to-face encounter, those occasions when we catch and mirror the mood of one with whom we interact. But at a wider level, our commonplace social practices and patterns operate as settings influencing and constraining our responses. Our social practices and patterns will inflect what sorts of 'neighs' we make and so, also, what sort of 'neighs' we find in answer. Where ethically important negative emotions are concerned, the early Confucians recommend social practices that, optimally, support our healthy development of these emotions or, minimally, do not discourage such emotions. Here, too, grief can serve as illustration.

If we exist in a society that publicly recognizes loss and subsequent mourning as a period of great fragility for the bereaved – through forms of ritual and suspension of more routine business – we will find grief an emotion more natural to express and even to feel. Where mourners are socially recognized as such – say, by the adoption of symbolic dress that denotes their status – we invite a communal responsiveness to grief that functions to support those experiencing it. This dynamic is in evidence throughout the *Analects* and *Xunzi*,

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where social rituals attending mourning are emphatically endorsed (e.g., Hutton, 2014, pp. 223–234), but even simple gestures are salient. In offering Confucius as a role model, the *Analects* notes his habits in the presence of mourners: he 'never ate his fill' when dining in their company (Eno, 2015, 7.9) and would incline his head in a bow or alter his expression when encountering them (Eno, 2015, 10.22). Such gestures give both recognition and sanction to a mourner's distress.

A striking contrast to the Confucian style of social practice is evident in the personal reflections of Geoffrey Gorer, describing his experience of mourning his brother in mid 20th-century England. When Gorer declined invitations to events or parties, citing his mourning status, others were palpably uncomfortable. Indeed, in Gorer's recounting, 'I got the impression that, had I stated that the invitation clashed with some esoteric debauchery I had arranged, I would have had understanding and jocular encouragement; as it was, the people whose invitations I had refused, educated and sophisticated though they were, mumbled and hurried away' (Gorer, 1965, p. xxxii). As Gorer's experience shows, if our social practices make little place for mourning, offer few public ways to acknowledge our sorrows, then what grief we feel may be discouraged – from expression, certainly, but perhaps also from feeling. What grief we experience, we may feel pressure to conceal. More forcefully, we may have incentives to 'move on', rather than to grieve. The early Confucian emphasis on our social practices may be understood to live in the contrast between these two examples.

Confucius' society is one that effectively commends grief to its members, providing sanction and forms of expression that support the emotion. Gorer's society is one that effectively discourages grief, implicitly treating it as shameful and thereby denying its members both ready forms of expression for grief and support from others. Where one seeks to grieve well, to situate one's experience of this most negative emotion in a life one can judge meaningful, a society such as Gorer's (and of course our own) will work against one's efforts.

There is much we might here say about how poorly our current social environments aid in the experiences of grief. However, I want here to focus instead on an experience and negative emotion I less often see addressed: disappointment. Put plainly, where disappointment is concerned, I think it quite important to have some. Like grief and worry both, disappointment is an emotion rooted in our caring for and connection with others. Yet I also find that disappointment is an emotional response our current social environment both

discourages and makes very difficult to express. Let me sketch some of what I mean by 'disappointment' by first offering an example.

The state in which I live has one of the highest Covid death rates in the United States. Despite this, when my university resumed in-person classes, it refused to institute any vaccine or mask mandates. In autumn 2021, just as the Delta variant began tearing through the region, the semester began for faculty with a gust of menacing emails forbidding our doing anything that might be perceived as pressuring students into wearing masks, from any gestures that might make unmasked students feel judged or excluded. Both the university's policies and its tight restrictions on faculty classroom speech were disappointing in their own right, but I here want to speak of what followed.

Forbidden to insist on masks, yet desperate to increase the safety of their classrooms, many professors began their classes with recitations of their personal circumstances – immunocompromised spouses, unvaccinated infants, elderly relatives in their care, or health vulner-abilities of their own. These painful narrations were a last-ditch strategy to get their unmasked students to put on masks, but they largely did not work. The many who arrived unmasked mostly stayed that way, the students not just unmoved to take up masks, but gratuitously appearing so: bland looks of indifference, distracted scrolling through phones, averted looks, and even eyerolls in response to a professor's pleading. Reports circulated on campus of students even laughing at professors as those professors detailed their anxieties about their own health or loved ones.

My initial response to this phenomenon was plain shock. It had, I confess, never occurred to me that our students would behave so. I had not anticipated the open displays of contempt and indifference, nor the sheer number of students who would refuse. Once the shock abated, I found myself profoundly disappointed. Disappointment of this sort seems to me a rather complicated response to other people. Most basically, disappointment occurs when our expectations of others fail, when they do not do what we would expect them to do. But it is also more than this, more than expectations that fail. It is also about hopes that fail. Disappointment emerges through some regrettable failure of understanding and aspiration. It derives from both a knowledge problem and a hope problem. Let me address knowledge first, then hope.

Disappointment can expose underlying beliefs about people we may have assumed as knowledge. Prior to fall semester, I would not have believed so many students *could* engage in hostile disrespect of their professors in moments of self-exposure and vulnerability – in

fact, I thought I *knew* such a thing wasn't possible, that it did not reside in the character of our students to behave so. When they did so behave, I was left painfully aware that I had made an error, that what I thought I knew was just wrong. This looks like an error in knowledge, but it can't simply be so. Because errors in knowledge don't inevitably produce disappointment. After all, when people turn out *better* than we expect, when they do better than we thought they could, we don't respond with disappointment. To be disappointed, one must also have some hope, however modest.

My prior understanding of my university's students was not a neutral bit of knowledge, but one laced all through with trusting optimism. It was not really about how I knew them to be, but about what I *supposed* them to be. It was rooted not just in what I saw of them, but in something more nebulous, something like a disposition to think well of them, to expect well of them even in circumstances none of us had ever experienced before.

The reality is such that life is unpredictable. We cannot forecast with reliability how people will behave in circumstances not yet encountered. What we do instead is try our best to form accurate judgments about their general character and, where we are hopefully disposed, to think well of their possibilities. We may recognize that people, so to speak, sit on a fence and can go one way or another, but opt to trust that they'll tilt the way they ought, that they will be their better selves rather than their worst selves. Disappointment emerges where we had some high degree of confidence, where we felt reasonably well grounded in the expectation that they would tilt to the good.

As I hope is clear, disappointment interlocks with doubt in important ways. On the front end, our orientation toward others is taken based on a hopeful reading of the evidence before us – that is, we can become well disposed toward others in a hope rooted in what we see of them. But this is, and must be, a position short of certainty; it can be doubted. On the back end, when others have disappointed us, doubt is of course far more forceful and unpleasant: we're left to wonder where exactly things went wrong and, above all, what now to think of others and our relations to them, what kind of relation is possible or prudent. On my account, then, disappointment originates in some uncertainty and results in even more. Experientially, disappointment doesn't yet draw a moral conclusion – it is instead the distressing state that arises where we recognize that others have failed to meet a higher expectation we have had of them.

Characterized in this way, it is possible to see why disappointment can be ethically valuable, why disappointment, despite its unpleasantness, is

an emotion we might want included in the fullness of a good life. Disappointment rides on an orientation toward other people that often serves us well. Healthy personal and social relations profit where we can be well disposed toward others, where we *want* to think well of them – of their character, their capacities, and so forth. This has to do in part with the lack of any fact of the matter here. People really are an unpredictable muddle and what they can or might do will often live in an open, undetermined space. If we think well of them, they may be more likely to behave well; our thinking well of them can be social support for their being their better selves. They may rise to the higher expectations we have of them. This is in part why the Confucians recommend supportive social practices, a society that can 'soak' us in aspirational aims about what humanity can be.

Even as we recognize that disappointment can be ethically valuable, we can also see why the orientation it requires may be hard and even undesirable. To be disappointed, one must be vulnerable – vulnerable both to being wrong and to hoping for better than you will get. Longing for the better, and the disappointment to which it can give rise, invites practical risks. It is not just that we may risk being wrong, but where being wrong may leave us. One notable trouble is that frustrated hopes are not easily contained. Disappointment in one can generate wider suspicion and alienation. This explains why Confucius remarks of one of his more disappointing students that this student's untrustworthy talk led him to doubt the trustworthiness of people more generally (Eno, 2015, 5.10). Finding your hopes in one misplaced, you may come to doubt all. This is also why some faculty at my university came to feel alienated not just from the students who refused to mask, but from students generally. And, as one might imagine, experiencing disappointment in others can rather quickly transmute into becoming a disappointment oneself – as one becomes less open and well disposed, one grows less receptive to others' needs and situations. Burdened by the weight of frustrated expectation and hope, one is more likely to let others down.

Becoming good at disappointment would surely involve avoiding retraction from trying to be well disposed toward others. It would likewise involve cultivating a capacity to tolerate doubt, to holding in abeyance quick conclusions about those we perceive to have failed us and about our relation toward them. As with both grief and worry, much of the work would necessarily be internal. One needs to think hard and reflect well on the orientations that produce disappointment. When I am disappointed in other people, I need to ask: am I expecting too much of them? Have I misunderstood their capacities, attitudes,

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or relationship to myself? Are the hopes I had of others vain or misplaced, hopes not well grounded in understanding of what they can or should do? These – and surely other questions – are the sorts of internal considerations that should proceed when I have found myself disappointed by a friend, a colleague, or my fellow citizens.

While I don't discount the internal aspects of managing disappointment, I want to consider some of the social reasons it can be so hard to have some, to experience disappointment and to express that, out loud, where others can recognize it. My own disappointments in the last several years have been many and diverse. Perhaps because of this, I have noticed that the available social modes and moods for reactions to our present plight tend not to make much space for disappointment. We are, to be sure, permitted negative reactions to others and to our fellow citizens, but these have a direction that carries us well away from disappointment. One may, for example, freely express outrage and disdain. One may excoriate, condemn, and deride. One can confess bitter aggravation, hostility, and even enmity. Far less common are reactions that would betray that one expected better of people than they have given – that is, reactions that admit to vulnerability and thus to disappointment. Let me just target two of the more commonplace responses: outrage and cynicism. To be clear, outrage or even cynicism are not always unwarranted. There may well be circumstances in which either or both are well justified. My concern instead is with their *prevalence* and indeed their *ubiquity* as public and social responses to human failings, specifically as this can narrow or foreclose the space for expressions of disappointment.

When we receive evidence of human failings with outrage, we are of course angry and indeed angry in a form made fierce. In its most common form in our public discourse, outrage is characterized as a product of just-minded attention to the unjust structure of the world, as a righteous response to the many unrighteous ills of society. The now cliché slogan, 'If you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention', serves not just to recommend outrage, but to implicitly condemn its absence. However, as a mode of social expression in response to human failing, outrage carries certain risks. This seems particularly the case where outrage is overused, where outrage becomes a kind of social currency that through overspending loses value it might otherwise have. Crucially, where we are socially encouraged to outrage, we may be primed to bypass any doubts that accompany disappointment, leaping to quick condemnation rather than reflection about just how failure may originate. If we presume – as I admit that I do – that human failures of all sorts

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tend to emerge from vexing and complex factors not easily or quickly understood, the rush to outrage may cost us understanding, and it may cost us the usually valuable connections on which disappointment rides. Outrage can operate, as it now too often does, as a distancing mechanism. Outrage is rarely directed at those for whom we care, those with whom we align ourselves. The targets of outrage are some others, people represented as our enemies or opponents. We are, put plainly, most often outraged at what *they* have done, but rarely with what *we* or *ours* have done – we do not identify or align ourselves in relation to those who so provoke us.

Like outrage, cynical responses to human failings also remark a distance between ourselves and others. In the context of my earlier example, some faculty at my university responded to our students' poor behaviour with a summary 'but of course'. The further explanations varied, but coalesced for the cynical among us as proof of what they already so well knew and never doubted, that the students were incapable of better. Both the distance and the certainties that the cynic thereby asserts are more totalizing than the outraged.

In public discourse, the cynic operates as seer, one whose knowledge of humanity is so complete that it forbids surprise. The cynic's doubts have all been settled. This sets the cynical apart not just from those who behave badly but from those who would evince surprise or harbour doubt. The cynical response will often operate as an implicit claim to special discernment, greeting each fresh ill as utterly foreseeable and predictable, an altogether too obvious twist of the ever-twisting knife of human life. In weariness with humanity, the cynic rejects ahead of time both good expectation and the hopes on which it rides. This is why the cynical response is more corrosive to our possibilities for disappointment. For it suggests that to have hoped that people could be otherwise-than-awful was naïve folly, a patently obvious mistake and error. Disappointment may, to the cynic, read as but stupidity, a failure to grant what evidence purportedly everywhere shows.

Disappointment can of course lead us into anger – the force of expectation and hope betrayed can yield to ire. Disappointment can also tempt us to be cynical, to truncate or even eliminate any higher expectations of others. Maintaining a capacity for disappointment, then, requires resisting these responses overtaking us entirely. Disappointment originates in connection to others, however tenuous that connection be, and, in its doubts, does not immediately resolve us against maintaining that connection. To be well disposed toward others is to harbour hope of them, to cast oneself toward them in some aspiration. It requires a measure, however modest, of trust

borne by connection and connectedness. It requires something of an *us* that is resistant to casting some offside as *them*, as well as resistant to expressive reactions that would assert or even finalize such separations. We must count others as connected to ourselves, and we must tolerate – indeed, maintain – a capacity to get things wrong, to expect more than we may get.

The Confucian interest in our social practices is, in part, a concern with how we make ourselves intelligible to each other morally – that is, the norms, practices, and rhetorics that we culturally share do moral work, signalling where we stand in relation to others and in relation to important values. Where expressions of outrage, cynicism, and the like dominate our shared discourse, disappointment risks losing its intelligibility, or of taking on meaning altered by the wilder reactions with which it must compete. As I have noted already, to the cynical, disappointment may but read as wilful ignorance or plain stupidity. More deeply, where disappointment loses traction in our shared catalogue of intelligible responses to human failing, it may lose traction in our internal capacities for feeling. That is, we may find it harder to feel that which cannot also be expressed. And the ways we find to hand for expressing ourselves may shape what responses we find possible. Trained to express outrage or cynicism, feeling otherwise – retaining both hope and doubt that these expressions so foreclose – grows a greater challenge.

My reasons for focusing on disappointment are, I expect, likely obvious, but let me admit just now that I have found far too much in the last few years disappointing. My shaken faiths just lately are too many here to list, but surely they can sum in saying simply that my prior expectations of the world have not been met. My expectations have been wrong, my hopes misplaced, but in their place now rises a confusion that, on my account of disappointment, comes as partner to that breach of expectation and of hope. And, in this, I have also found that too often, our public practices and rhetoric embrace responses that discourage me in this. The outraged would have my confusion sort itself into a fury. To do otherwise is to have failed to pay attention, to be wanting in those faculties of noticing all we ought. The cynical cannot bear a broken heart left to its grief. If I announce my sorrows, I should expect that some will say I earned them, that my faith in others or naïveté are my own undoing. I have not yet any explanation for my failed expectations. But neither have I much anywhere to go with my disappointment and the doubts it has induced. To the extent that you share something of this reaction, we ought to take a lesson from the Confucians and seek modes of public discourses that hold open avenues of hopeful

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connection, support for uncertain aspirations for humanity, and open up a tamer space for sorting out just where things have gone wrong. We ought, in short, seek to support each other in cultivating some of our bad emotions.

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