

MOHISM AND SELF-INTEREST

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Abstract

The Mohists are often depicted as regarding human beings as predominantly self-interested, so much so that self-interest amounts to people's only significant source of motivation. According to David Nivison, for example, the Mohists see human beings as self-interested, amoral "rational calculators," who have no motivation other than "the desire to optimize material satisfaction." Benjamin Schwartz claims that, for the Mohists, "all men and women, whether they be fathers, mothers, teachers, or rulers, tend to be nonloving and self-interested." Other writers maintain that the Mohists think people can be motivated to practice their moral code only, or mainly, by seeing that doing so converges with self-interest. Kwong-loi Shun, for instance, suggests that the Mohists assume self-interest will be people's main motivation for practicing inclusive care, their signature moral doctrine. In his view, Mòzǐ thought that "once one properly sees its link to one's own interest, one is moved to practice it." According to P. J. Ivanhoe, Mòzǐ believed people could be motivated to care about others only by seeing that doing so was part of a system for "the equitable distribution of material goods which guaranteed them treatment in kind." All of these writers agree, then, that for the Mohists, self-interest is people's principal source of motivation. I call this interpretive hypothesis the *Self-Interest Thesis*.

This article clarifies the role of self-interest in Mohist thought, along the way marshaling grounds to refute the Self-Interest Thesis. I examine passages from the *Mòzǐ* bearing on the role of self-interest in Mohist ethics and psychology and show that, in each case, an alternative

interpretation explains them more adequately than the Self-Interest Thesis does. I argue that the Mohists recognize the obvious truth that self-interest figures among people's basic motives, but they think people also have other important sources of motivation. Self-interest probably plays four main roles in Mohist thought, two normative and two psychological. Normatively, it counts among the goods that are criteria of what is morally right and among the objects of concern for a person who practices inclusive care. Psychologically, I think the Mohists must allow that nonmoral self-interest might be among some people's motives for conforming to Mohist ethical norms. But they probably think that for most people it will be at most only an auxiliary motivation, since they assume people will generally be motivated on moral grounds. As I explain, the major role of self-interest in Mohist moral psychology is as a kind of constraint on a practicable moral code.

The article first briefly illustrates the Mohists' assumption that self-interest counts among people's basic motives and sketches its role in their normative ethics. Next it reviews potential grounds for the Self-Interest Thesis. Three sets of passages in the *Mòzǐ* are particularly relevant to the role of self-interest in Mohist thought: the "Identifying Upward" essays, the response to the objection that inclusive care is too difficult, and the response to the objection that inclusive care cannot be "applied." The article discusses these passages in detail, showing that none of them supports the Self-Interest Thesis and that they jointly recognize several sources of motivation other than self-interest.

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I. Introduction

The Mohists are often depicted as regarding human beings as predominantly self-interested, so much so that self-interest amounts to people's only significant source of motivation. According to David Nivison, for example, the Mohists see human beings as self-interested, amoral "rational calculators," who have no motivation other than "the desire to optimize material satisfaction."<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Schwartz claims that, for the Mohists, "all men and women, whether they be fathers, mothers, teachers, or rulers, tend to be nonloving and self-interested."<sup>2</sup> Other writers maintain that the Mohists think people can be motivated to practice their moral code only, or mainly, by seeing that doing so converges with their own interests. Kwong-loi Shun, for instance, suggests that the Mohists assume self-interest will be people's main motivation for practicing inclusive care (*jiān ài*) (兼愛), their signature moral doctrine. In his view, Mòzǐ (墨子) thought that "once one properly sees its link to one's own interest, one is moved to practice it."<sup>3</sup> According to P. J. Ivanhoe, Mòzǐ believed people could be motivated to care about others only by seeing that doing so was part of a system for "the equitable distribution of material goods which guaranteed them treatment in kind."<sup>4</sup> All of these writers seem to agree, then, that for the Mohists, self-interest is people's principal source of motivation. For convenience, I will call this interpretive hypothesis the *Self-Interest Thesis*.

The aim of this article is to clarify the role of self-interest in Mohist thought and by doing so to refute the Self-Interest Thesis. Toward these ends, I will examine passages from the *Mòzǐ*

(《墨子》) bearing on the role of self-interest in Mohist ethics and psychology and show that, in each case, an alternative interpretation explains them better than the Self-Interest Thesis does. I will argue that the Mohists recognize the obvious truth that self-interest figures among people's basic motives, but they believe people also have other important sources of motivation. Self-interest probably plays four main roles in Mohist thought, two normative and two psychological. Normatively, it counts among the goods that are criteria of what is morally right and among the objects of concern for a person who practices inclusive care. Psychologically, I think the Mohists must allow that nonmoral self-interest might be among some people's motives for conforming to Mohist ethical norms. But they probably think that for most people it will be at most only an auxiliary motivation, since they assume people will generally be motivated on moral grounds. As I will explain, the major role of self-interest in Mohist moral psychology is as a kind of constraint on a practicable moral code.

In what follows, I first briefly illustrate the Mohists' assumption that self-interest counts among people's basic motives and sketch its role in their normative ethics. Next I review potential grounds for the Self-Interest Thesis. Three sets of passages in the *Mòzǐ* are particularly relevant to the role of self-interest in Mohist thought: the "Identifying Upward" essays, the response to the objection that inclusive care is too difficult, and the response to the objection that inclusive care cannot be "applied." In the remainder of the paper, I discuss these passages in detail, showing that none of them supports the Self-Interest Thesis and that they jointly recognize several sources of motivation other than self-interest.

## II. Self-Interest as a Common Motive and a Normative Criterion

The Mohists unquestionably recognize that self-interest is among the common motives for which people act. This is clear, for instance, from their belief in the utility of material incentives and disincentives in modifying people's attitudes and behavior (*Mòzǐ*, books 8–13) and from their claim that the disorder in the world is due to people's pursuing their own interests without regard for others' (14/5–12).<sup>5</sup> Also, the “Ruler” argument defending inclusive care against the objection from applicability (discussed below) presupposes that people are typically motivated to protect their own welfare.<sup>6</sup> The most plausible explanation of these points is that the Mohists take self-interest to be a typical, even universal source of motivation for people. Of course, this stance by no means commits them to holding that self-interest is people's sole or predominant motivation.

The Mohists' other defense against the objection from applicability—the “Caretaker” argument—suggests a crucial qualification to the Self-Interest Thesis. The Mohists recognize that individuals may sometimes be so narrowly self-interested as to injure even family members for selfish benefit (14/5). But the Caretaker argument assumes that people will typically seek to ensure the welfare of their immediate family—their dependent parents, spouse, and children—even when doing so is of no direct benefit to them as individuals. If the Self-Interest Thesis claims that the Mohists view people as concerned only with their own *individual* interests, then the Caretaker renders it obviously, and uninterestingly, false. So we should take it instead to be the more plausible claim that the Mohists see people as concerned principally for their own interests in a broad sense that includes the interests of their dependents. In what follows, I will

take “self-interest” and “one’s own interests” to refer to one’s interests in this broad sense.

Self-interest seems to play two roles in Mohist normative ethics. First, one’s own interests figure among the goods that are criteria of right. The Mohists hold that the morally good person takes as his model or standard (*fǎ*) (法) of conduct “promoting the benefit of all under heaven and eliminating harm to all under heaven” (32/1). One’s self and one’s family are understood to count among “all under heaven,” and thus morally right practices are expected to promote one’s own interests as much as everyone else’s. Also, the “benefit of all” includes the exercise of what I call the “relational” virtues—virtues the Mohists associate with the proper performance of basic, relational social roles and thus flourishing personal relationships (see, e.g., 16/84–86). For instance, rulers are to manifest beneficence, their subjects loyalty; fathers are to manifest paternal kindness, their sons filial devotion, or “filiality” (*xiào*) (孝). The Mohists thus consider it morally right to be a loving parent or devoted child—aspects of self-interest in the broad sense.

Second, a moralized form of self-interest is incorporated into the doctrine of inclusive care. The standard (*fǎ*) of inclusive care is to “inclusively care about each other and in interaction benefit each other” (15/10–11). That is, people are to develop an attitude of all-inclusive moral concern for everyone and, accordingly, to seek mutual benefit in their interactions with others. This concern is for oneself as well as for others, and the conduct it motivates is generally expected to benefit oneself as well as others, at least in the long run. So, while Mohist ethics forbids pursuit of one’s own interests while disregarding others’, it endorses a commitment to one’s own interests along with others’.

### III. Grounds for the Self-Interest Thesis

Three sets of discussions in the *Mòzǐ* are likely to be cited as grounds for the Self-Interest Thesis. The first is Mohist political theory. According to Schwartz, for instance, the Mohist account of the origins of the state depicts people in the state of nature as “self-regarding individuals” devoted solely to pursuing their own interests.<sup>7</sup> In Nivison’s view, Mohist political theory amounts to a proposal for leading people to follow a moral code by harnessing their self-interest through “a suitable structure of constraints and inducements.”<sup>8</sup> Nowhere in the theory, according to Nivison, is there any hint of “anything more complex or subtle inside people than an ability to think out...where their interests lie.”<sup>9</sup> The second set of discussions is the Mohists’ response to what I call the objection from difficulty, in which they deny that inclusive care is difficult, because those who practice it will also benefit from it themselves (15/15–29, 16/72–83). To Shun and Ivanhoe, this latter claim implies that the Mohists suppose people’s motivation for practicing inclusive care will be that doing so is in their own interest.<sup>10</sup> The third set is the Caretaker and Ruler arguments, which constitute the Mohists’ response to what I will call the objection from applicability (16/21–34, 16/34–45). Since the arguments appeal to one’s own and one’s family’s interests to show that inclusive care “can be applied,” an interpreter might take them to suggest that for the Mohists, self-interest explains why or how people will practice inclusive care.<sup>11</sup>

In the next three sections, I will examine these parts of the *Mòzǐ* to determine how well they support the Self-Interest Thesis. For brevity, I will not address all aspects of the Mohists’ discussions, but will focus only on features directly relevant to the role of self-interest.



#### IV. Self-Interest in Mohist Political Theory

The Mohist theory of the state begins by supposing that people in a hypothetical state of nature, before the origin of government, would probably each follow their own *yì* (義).<sup>12</sup> The word “*yì*” is often used in early Chinese texts to refer to what is morally right. But for the moment let us take *yì* just to be a norm or code representing what one considers proper, leaving open the form of propriety involved. The texts depict people as each so committed to their own *yì* and so adamant in condemning others’ that even family members are unable to live together harmoniously and society descends into violent disorder. As the Mohists imagine them in the state of nature, then, people are autonomous agents who are strongly, even obstinately committed to their *yì*. The first version of the theory describes their attitude by saying that they “*shì* their *yì* and on that basis *fěi* others’ *yì*, and thus *fěi* each other” (11/2)—that is, they each deem their *yì* to be *shì* (是) (right/this), on those grounds deem others’ *fěi* (非) (wrong/not), and thus fall into a cycle of reciprocal condemnation (*fěi*) of each other that eventually leads to social turmoil. This statement has two important implications. First, people apparently assume that since their own *yì* is *shì*, any other *yì* is therefore *fěi* and thus mistaken. Thus, though they each have their own individual conception of *yì*, they seem to assume that *yì* by its nature is a public, objective standard of conduct to which everyone should conform, not only themselves.<sup>13</sup> They thus share a belief that *yì* should be unified across society. Second, people’s attitude of deeming their *yì* to be *shì* and others’ to be *fěi* is apparently accompanied by a strong motivation to act on their convictions, which in the hypothetical scenario leads them into conflict with each other. I suggest that the best explanation of this point is that the Mohists take the attitude of deeming something

*shì* or *fěi* to have inherent motivational force. Other things being equal, to deem something *shì* is to be motivated to do, endorse, or respect it, while to deem it *fěi* is to be motivated to avoid, condemn, or eliminate it.<sup>14</sup> Since people normally deem their *yì* to be *shì*, this motivation carries over to *yì* as well: people are normally motivated to do, endorse, or respect what they consider *yì*.

Are people in the Mohist state of nature predominantly self-interested, as Schwartz suggests? If the Self-Interest Thesis is the claim that they are all motivated only by self-interest, then it has difficulty explaining why they are depicted as motivated by their *shì* and *fěi* attitudes, not self-interest. Nor is it easy to see how self-interest, rather than normative disapproval, would motivate people to clash with others simply on the grounds that they had different *yì*. But perhaps the thesis is better understood as claiming that the *content* of everyone's *yì* is self-interested. As Schwartz says, "the people's 'view of what was right' (*yì*) was simply that they should serve their own individual interests."<sup>15</sup> I think we can assume that *some* of the diverse *yì* are self-interested in content. Indeed, an anecdote in the "Mohist Analects" gives us an example of such an *yì*: the policy of a man named Wūmǎzǐ that he would kill others to benefit himself, but not himself to benefit others (46/52–60). But the thesis that all the *yì* are self-interested is implausible, for several reasons. First, if the Mohists do see all the *yì* as self-interested, it is difficult to explain why they do not directly say so. Elsewhere, they attribute social disorder to people pursuing their own interests at others' expense (14/5). If the state of nature scenario is meant to illustrate a similar idea, why not use similarly direct language? Another problem is that there may not be enough distinct versions of a self-interested *yì* to account for the radical plurality of norms the Mohists envision. "Serve your own individual interests" is a single *yì*, not

a plurality. There are other formulations of self-interested *yì*, of course, such as Wūmǎzǐ's. But diversity on the order of “one person, one *yì*” (12/2) would be more likely if the *yì* were not restricted to different norms for furthering one's own interests. A third problem is that elsewhere the *Mòzǐ* gives examples of alternative *yì* that are not self-interested. In the “Economy in Funerals” essay, the Mohists point out that people sometimes erroneously “take custom to be *yì*”—that is, they mistakenly confuse contingent customs with what is genuinely *yì*, or right (25/75). Examples they give of such customs include rending and eating one's firstborn son, abandoning one's widowed grandmother, allowing the flesh of the dead to rot away before burial, cremation, and extravagant funerals. Apparently these practices could all be considered different *yì*, or perhaps aspects of different *yì*.<sup>16</sup> However, none is self-interested in content. So the most plausible interpretation of the statement that “people had different *yì*” is probably that people followed a plurality of fundamentally different norms, rather than only self-interested ones.

In the Mohists' scenario, people recognize that the violent disorder they face—which is apparently a disvalue by everyone's standards—arises from the absence of political authorities who could unify society's *yì* (11/5, 12/5–6). So a morally and intellectually qualified leader is chosen to establish a government and unify *yì*. This leader appoints high officials to assist him, who in turn appoint a hierarchy of lower-ranking officials down to the level of village head. Once the officials are in place, the ruler initiates a scheme to unify *yì*. Leaders at each level are to guide their subordinates in “identifying upward” with the good example set by their superiors. People are to emulate how their leaders discriminate between *shì* and *fěi*, to learn from their good words and practices, and to report others' good and bad conduct. Successful emulation is

encouraged with praise and rewards; failure is punished by criticism and penalties. By unifying people's *yì* at each level of political organization, from the village up to the empire, this scheme brings order to the world and thus justifies the existence of the state.

Does this account of the origin of the state support the Self-Interest Thesis? I think there are two distinct issues to examine here. The first is whether the Mohists depict political society as fundamentally grounded in self-interest—that is, whether self-interest provides the primary motivation for the transition from anarchy to political society. The second is whether the scheme for promulgating a unified *yì* relies principally on self-interested motives.

The Mohists depict people as implicitly committed to the view that *yì* should be unified and as recognizing that it is the absence of a unified *yì* that leads to disorder, which everyone finds intolerable. The origin of the state thus lies in people's shared conviction that normative unity is needed and that it can be achieved only by employing political authority. The Mohists apparently assume that in a state of normative anarchy, discourse among peers cannot yield normative unity or even a partial, overlapping consensus on a set of core values. This is not, I think, because they bizarrely fail to envision that the content of the various *yì* might overlap. It is because there are no shared standards on which people could base a consensus—the fact that they all have different *yì* entails that they simply cannot reach agreement. An *yì* is a norm or set of norms governing people's evaluative attitudes and conduct. If two people follow different *yì*, then even if their attitudes do agree in places, they may lack shared grounds for privileging these points of agreement as a basis for interacting with each other. Ideas such as organizing public life around an overlapping consensus or respecting others and thus seeking compromise with them are

themselves *yì* that, *ex hypothesi*, people in the state of nature disagree on. So the very nature of the hypothetical scenario rules out people's finding any middle ground on which to develop a shared, compromise *yì*. In fact, most of them probably agree that disorder, for instance, is a disvalue. But agreement on this point is not enough of a basis to develop a shared *yì*. Society as a whole is trapped in a kind of bootstrapping problem. Everyone agrees that a unified *yì* is needed, but there is no means of arriving at one.

This is the problem that political authority is invented to resolve. For the Mohists, political authority is a necessary condition for the shift from normative anarchy to a unified normative order. The key is not, I think, the coercive power of the state, though coercion undoubtedly plays a role. It is the very nature of authority as such. In the state of nature, people lack any sort of authoritative standard by which to arrive at a unified *yì*. Everyone's *yì* is on a par with everyone else's, and there are no privileged or unified grounds on which to build a consensus. Assigning authority to a leader instantly solves this problem. Now there is one *yì*, the leader's, that has an authoritative status and can be taken as a basis for determining the content of a unified *yì*. Moreover, the Mohists apparently believe that people have an inherent respect for authority that predisposes them to identify with and follow leaders (16/72–81). Thus simply acknowledging the leader's status as leader will help motivate them to adopt the unified *yì* he promulgates.<sup>17</sup>

The Mohists thus portray people as having a complex set of motives. Their initial motivation to cooperate in the transition from anarchy to political society is twofold: they see *yì* as something that should be unified, and they wish to eliminate disorder. The creation of political authority then invokes further motivation to conform to the unified *yì*, namely the inclination to

follow leaders and to act on social and material incentives. At both stages, self-interest may contribute to people's motivation, since widespread, violent disorder runs against everyone's self-interest and incentives are powerless without it. But self-interest is surely not the whole story. It does not explain the motivational role of people's conviction that *yì* should be unified, for instance, nor their tendency to identify with leaders. There is no reason to think it is their predominant source of motivation.

In fact, taken together, the “Identifying Upward” essays depict a delicate balance between people's respect for authority, their responsiveness to incentives, their commitment to a unified *yì*, and their original inclination to act on what they themselves autonomously deem *yì*. People are depicted not as mere passive subjects of indoctrination, following their rulers blindly, but as active participants in the process of realizing social order through a unified *yì*. In principle, at least, they are expected to reproach their leaders for errors—presumably instances in which the leaders themselves stray from the unified *yì* they have promulgated (11/10, 12/14). If they see the ruler appointing officials merely to surround himself with cronies and flatterers, rather than to properly bring order to the people, they will form cliques against him and follow an *yì* different from his (12/53–55). The unified *yì* then fractures. The ruler's scheme of incentives and disincentives loses its power to motivate people, since they now reject his standards for reward and punishment (12/55–61, 13/18–22). Society falls back into normative disunity and the political system fails (12/59–61). To guard against such a breakdown in authority, in the third essay the Mohists modify their approach to unifying *yì*. Instead of having people emulate the *shì/fēi* distinctions and conduct of their leaders, they now advocate unifying *yì* by establishing

incentives for people to report “care and benefit” and “contempt and injury” at the level of the clan, state, and world (13/22–42). By specifying in this way that the content of the unified *yi* should correspond to that of their ethical theory, the Mohists probably aim to ensure that the *yi* promulgated by the state is one people can genuinely endorse for themselves.

Mohist political theory thus presents a rich, nuanced picture of people’s motivation, in which self-interest is just one of several factors. The Self-Interest Thesis cannot explain people’s initial normative motivation in the state of nature. Nor can it explain people’s motivation to defy, *against* their material self-interest, the ruler’s system of incentives and disincentives because they disagree with his *yi*.

#### V. The Objection from Difficulty

The Mohists themselves indicate that a major worry about the doctrine of inclusive care in their day was that it might be impracticable or too difficult. Two of the “Inclusive Care” essays address a series of objections to the doctrine, all but one of which concern its difficulty, practicability, or applicability. In this section and the next, I will discuss the objections from difficulty and applicability, passing over the objection from practicability, which has no bearing on the role of self-interest.<sup>18</sup>

The Mohists address the charge that inclusive care is too difficult in two passages (15/15–29, 16/72–83). The main point of both responses is that inclusive care is not too difficult, because according to familiar historical accounts, rulers have led people to perform far more demanding deeds in the past, such as dieting until weak from hunger, wearing coarse, uncomfortable clothing, and charging into a fire to save national treasures. Thus rulers could easily lead people

to practice inclusive care. The first response further contends there is no difficulty in inclusive care, because it is beneficial (to society at large, apparently) (15/16–17) and because people reliably reciprocate beneficial or detrimental attitudes and conduct. Those who care about and benefit others will be cared about and benefited in turn; those who show contempt for and injure others will likewise themselves be loathed and injured (15/18–19). Let me refer to this pattern of attitudes and behavior as “reciprocity.” The first response claims that, given people’s inclination toward reciprocity, all that is needed to put inclusive care into practice is for rulers to take it as policy and commoners to take it as a basis for conduct. The second response contends that, because inclusive care is “beneficial and easy” (16/81), rulers need only delight in it and promote its practice through suitable incentives, and people will take to it readily, “as fire tends upward and water tends downward” (16/83). The general principle behind this claim is that “within a generation, the people can be changed” because they seek to identify with their rulers (16/80–81).

Between them, then, the two responses propose four reasons that inclusive care is not difficult to practice: (1) It is beneficial. (2) It is not particularly difficult—or at least far easier than other things people have done, such as dieting nearly to starvation. (3) People tend to conform to their leaders’ wishes, especially if these are backed by praise and material incentives. (4) People tend to practice reciprocity. All four of these reasons are plausible, given certain qualifications. I will not pause to defend this claim, however, since their plausibility is not directly relevant to the role of self-interest in the arguments.<sup>19</sup>

I suggest that these four reasons in turn commit the Mohists to four plausible claims about motivation. (1) It is relatively easy to motivate people to perform a practice that is beneficial to



everyone, especially if it is not physically challenging. (2) People tend to be motivated to conform to their leaders' wishes. In this context, the contention is not that people normatively should identify with their leaders, nor that they can be expected to do so because they see this is the path to a unified *yì*. It seems instead to be the psychological generalization that people typically just do follow their leaders. (3) People can be motivated by praise and material incentives. (4) They tend to be motivated to reciprocate others' attitudes and treatment. The first and third of these claims directly invoke self-interest (assuming that people are motivated to do what benefits everyone at least partly because they themselves benefit in the process). The other two do not, however. Of course, one might argue that obeying leaders and practicing reciprocity ultimately further the agent's own interests. But this is not how the Mohists present these points. They do not imply that people do these things out of self-interest, but just that they are inclined to do them.

To properly understand the significance of these claims, it is crucial to attend to their context. They are presented as an explanation of why inclusive care is not inordinately difficult, not as an account of people's motivation for practicing it. They are only part of the Mohists' overall account of how people can be motivated to practice inclusive care. In particular, they do not allude to motivation on specifically normative grounds—on the grounds that something is *shì* or *yì*—which, as we have seen, the Mohists think is a powerful form of motivation possessed even by people in the state of nature. Nor do they touch on people's normative motivation to follow a unified *yì*. In fact, the Mohists probably expect that many, perhaps most people's primary motivation for practicing inclusive care will be normative—either that they deem it *yì* or that it

promotes goods they consider it *yì* to promote. This is suggested by the conclusions of the second and third “Inclusive Care” essays, which call on people who desire the goods the Mohists take to be criteria of *yì* to practice inclusive care as a means of promoting them (15/41–42, 16/83–86). It is also suggested by their depiction of a hypothetical practitioner of inclusive care—the “inclusive” caretaker—who is shown reflecting on the exemplar of a morally superior person and then emulating it (16/25–28). In their responses to the objection from difficulty, however, the Mohists do not appeal to these sorts of motivation. Probably they aim to show that inclusive care can be practiced, without much difficulty, even by people who initially lack the normative motivation to do so.

The claim that people are inclined toward reciprocity I suggest is the core of the Mohists’ explanation of why inclusive care is not difficult. It is the centerpiece of the first response to the objection from difficulty. Though unmentioned in the second response, it is probably assumed there, because it is the key premise in the immediately preceding argument that inclusive care is consistent with filiality (*xiào*), since its practice benefits one’s parents (16/64–72). The claim plays two roles. It helps explain why inclusive care can be expected to benefit those who practice it, and thus, other things being equal, why people are unlikely to find it difficult. Even more important, it asserts that people are predisposed to realize patterns of attitudes and conduct that have a formal structure congruent with that of inclusive care. Recall that inclusive care is a reciprocal, not an altruistic norm: people are to “inclusively care about each other and in interaction benefit each other” (15/10–11). In claiming that people have an inclination toward reciprocity, the Mohists are asserting that people have predispositions that align with the norm of

inclusive care in such a way as to facilitate their developing the attitudes and habits that constitute its full-fledged practice. Of course, the inclination toward reciprocity is a purely formal inclination to respond to others in kind, covering bad attitudes and treatment as well as good. It is not a substantive inclination to care about and treat each other well. Still, it does predispose people to sustain the sort of virtuous cycle of care and benefit that constitutes the practice of inclusive care. Thus, the Mohists think, inclusive care is not difficult: “It’s just that rulers don’t adopt it as a policy and commoners don’t adopt it as a practice” (15/19–20).

As this last remark suggests, reciprocity helps explain how the practice of inclusive care can be sustained, but not how it gets underway in the first place. Even if people have a reliable inclination toward reciprocity, this need not translate into an inclination to practice inclusive care. For inclusive care involves not only a reactive inclination to respond to others in kind, but a proactive one to take the initiative in caring about and benefiting people, such as by lending a neighbor a hand with a task or by donating aid to orphans (16/18–20). We have seen that the Mohists recognize four sources of motivation that, singly or in combination, could yield such a proactive inclination: People tend to be motivated to do what they think is *shì* or *yì*, to do what their leaders urge, to promote social order (and perhaps other goods), and to pursue their own interests. Thus they can be motivated to practice inclusive care if they think doing so is right, if it is part of the unified morality promulgated by the ruler, if they think it promotes goods they value, or if it is in their interest. However, we can easily imagine circumstances in which one or more of these conditions do not hold, and people thus either lack the motivation to practice inclusive care or have conflicting motivation. For instance, suppose we were to find ourselves in

circumstances in which practicing inclusive care—by aiding the numerous orphans in an impoverished, war-torn society, say—entailed a great sacrifice to our parents’ welfare, with no reasonable expectation of any long-term benefit to them. Practicing inclusive care might then conflict with the exercise of filiality (*xiào*). But filiality is among the goods whose promotion morally justifies the practice of inclusive care. So in this scenario there might be strong moral grounds for refraining from practicing it. Or suppose we lived in a society in which those who practiced inclusive care were regularly exploited by free riders seeking to selfishly profit from others’ kindness without reciprocating. Here there might be grounds for reasonable doubt about whether inclusive care genuinely promoted “the benefit of all” and thus was morally justified. Moreover, in this scenario, people’s nonmoral inclination toward reciprocity would probably lead them to refrain from practicing inclusive care. So both people’s moral motivation to practice inclusive care (on the grounds that doing so is *shì* or *yì*) and an important source of nonmoral motivation (their inclination toward reciprocity) are contingent, to some extent at least, on their having a well-founded expectation that most other people will practice it as well. This point about motivation dovetails with the conceptual structure of inclusive care. Since inclusive care is a reciprocal norm, rather than an altruistic one, a necessary condition for its successful practice in some community is that people regularly return each other’s kindness.

These considerations help explain the Mohists’ emphasis on the ruler’s part in leading people to practice inclusive care. Here again, as in the transition from normative anarchy to a normatively unified political society, the ruler plays a crucial bootstrapping role, providing the necessary conditions under which the practice of inclusive care can get underway and be

sustained. Indeed, ensuring that these conditions obtain is part and parcel of the ruler's role in unifying *yì*. The ruler publicizes and enforces inclusive care as a unified code, thus giving people a reasonable expectation that others will practice it and that they will not be exploited if they do. He brings into play the motivational power of people's tendency to conform to authority. Through incentives and disincentives, he motivates those who otherwise lack sufficient motivation of their own. But equally important, he eliminates potential normative and motivational obstacles to practicing inclusive care for those who *do* have sufficient motivation of their own. The ruler thus plays an essential, complex role that complements and reinforces people's existing motivation.<sup>20</sup>

What motivates the ruler himself? The same set of factors, I think, that we have identified as motivating other agents.<sup>21</sup> The difference in the ruler's case is that since he has all of society's resources at his disposal and the authority to compel others to follow his *yì*, his motivation to practice inclusive care cannot be trumped by contingent obstacles such as limited resources or others' failure to cooperate.

To sum up, what do the responses to the objection from difficulty indicate about the role of self-interest in Mohist ethics? If inclusive care does benefit those who practice it, as the Mohists claim, then they must allow that self-interest helps make inclusive care easier to practice and that it may help motivate some people to practice it. But nothing they say implies that they expect self-interest to be people's principal motivation for practicing inclusive care. Their first response focuses on reciprocity, not self-interest; their second on the inclination to identify with one's ruler. To be sure, both reciprocity and identifying with superiors may ultimately contribute to

one's self-interest. But the Mohists do not formulate their arguments that way. They do not contend that inclusive care is not difficult because reciprocity promotes one's interests; they argue simply that it is not difficult because reciprocity is not difficult (15/27–28). Nor do they contend that inclusive care is easy because conforming to leaders is in one's interest; they argue simply that people follow their leaders. The Self-Interest Thesis thus has difficulty explaining the direction of their arguments, specifically their emphasis on reciprocity and identifying with superiors. If they thought self-interest were people's principal motivation for practicing inclusive care, we would expect it to play a more prominent role here. Indeed, we would expect a direct statement that inclusive care is not difficult *because* it is in one's own interest. But that is not what we find.

## VI. The Caretaker Argument

The Caretaker is among the Mohists' most provocative and controversial arguments. Interpretations of it differ widely.<sup>22</sup> Several important issues raised by these interpretations are beyond the scope of this article, in particular the question of whether the Caretaker constitutes a cogent normative argument for inclusive care or a cogent confutation of a contrasting ethical code. Here I will focus instead on the argument's implications for the role of self-interest in Mohist ethics, though my interpretation will unavoidably have certain consequences concerning its normative import. The Caretaker is in fact the first of a pair of parallel arguments, the other being the Ruler argument (16/34–45). For brevity, I will omit discussion of the Ruler, which is similar to the Caretaker except in concerning political policy rather than a moral code.

As with the Mohists' response to the objection from difficulty, in interpreting the Caretaker

argument it is essential to consider its context. The argument is presented as a response to what I call the objection from applicability. The objection grants that inclusive care is morally good, but questions whether it can be “applied” (*yòng*) (用) (16/22). Elsewhere, the Mohists typically use the word *yòng* to refer to applying or adopting a doctrine, policy, or plan by putting it into practice as a public norm of action. The most prominent example is probably that *yòng* is the third of the Mohists’ three standards for distinguishing whether a statement or doctrine is right (*shì*) or not (*fěi*) (35/7–10). As the third standard, *yòng* refers to observing whether a statement or doctrine has beneficial consequences when promulgated as a basis for public administration and the penal code (35/9).<sup>23</sup> This and other examples suggest that *yòng* typically refers to adopting a doctrine or code as a social norm—as a *dào* (道) to be followed by all.<sup>24</sup> So the challenge the Mohists take themselves to be addressing here is: Granted that inclusive care is morally good, can it realistically, practicably, be adopted it as a social norm?

To demonstrate that it can, the Mohists offer a hypothetical choice argument which, they claim, shows that, in at least some circumstances, even someone who verbally rejects inclusive care would prefer it as a code to be followed by others (16/23–33). They posit a scenario in which a man departing on a distant, hazardous mission has a choice of entrusting his family during his absence to either a caretaker who practices “inclusion” (i.e., inclusive care) or one who practices “exclusion” (*bié*) (別). The “inclusive” caretaker is committed to his friends’ and their families’ welfare just as he is to his own and his family’s, and so he reliably aids friends in need. The “exclusionist” caretaker scoffs at the idea of such concern for others and so offers no help to friends facing hardship. The Mohists contend that, in such a situation, even people who

verbally reject inclusive care will make the (supposedly) obviously wiser choice and entrust their family to the inclusive caretaker. We can generalize this point—though the text itself does not do so—as the claim that anyone concerned for her family’s welfare would prefer “inclusion” over “exclusion” as a code to be practiced by others. Thus inclusive care “can be applied” as a social norm: on the basis of robust, widely shared interests of their own, people can choose it as society’s moral code.

The argument may seem obviously to be a false dilemma.<sup>25</sup> For it limits the hypothetical choice to “inclusion” versus “exclusion,” when it seems there could be other codes in which moral concern varies in scope or degree between these extremes. I myself think there are ways to interpret the Caretaker so that it is not a false dilemma. Even so, however, the argument is at best only a very weak response to the challenge to show that inclusive care can be applied as a social code. For the fact that people would select “inclusion” as a code in a narrowly specified hypothetical scenario in which their family’s welfare were at risk simply does not justify the claim that it can be applied generally, in actual circumstances. It amounts at most only to a consideration in favor of that claim. So the Caretaker is either faulty or at best makes only a weak case for the conclusion that inclusive care is “applicable” as a social code.

The underlying point of the Caretaker, I think, parallels that of the Mohists’ response to the objection from filiality (16/64–72). The objection is that practicing inclusive care might run against one’s parents’ interests and thus interfere with the exercise of filiality. The Mohists reply that a filial son would want others to care about and benefit his parents, and the way to bring this about is to practice inclusive care toward others’ parents, leading others to reciprocate in kind.



Both arguments attempt to show that inclusive care as a social practice tends to promote, or is at least consistent with, certain robust values that people already share, namely broad self-interest and filiality. The Caretaker is an imperfect but vivid attempt to make this point by placing us in a hypothetical scenario in which assistance from others, through the practice of inclusive care, might be crucial to securing such values. The filiality argument is considerably more persuasive, however, precisely because it is not hypothetical. It claims, plausibly, that the practice of inclusive care in actual circumstances would contribute to, rather than interfere with, the ends of filiality.

What are the implications of the Caretaker for the role of self-interest in Mohist thought? The argument contends that, in at least some circumstances, inclusive care as a social norm tends to promote self-interest, and thus it is “applicable.” The Self-Interest Thesis can indeed explain this contention. But so can the simpler, weaker thesis that the Mohists take promoting people’s self-interest to be a sufficient condition for the “applicability” of a social norm. The argument commits the Mohists to allowing that self-interest might provide part or even all of some people’s motivation to practice inclusive care. But it does not commit them to holding that self-interest will generally be people’s primary motivation for practicing it. In fact, the Caretaker does not directly address the issue of how people generally will be motivated to practice inclusive care. As I pointed out earlier, the one person it depicts practicing it—the “inclusive” caretaker—acts on moral grounds, not from self-interest. The Self-Interest Thesis has no way of explaining this point.

## VII. Conclusion

The Self-Interest Thesis explains relatively poorly, if at all, the very parts of the *Mòzǐ* that proponents might cite as grounds for it. None of the passages we have examined commits the Mohists to the view that self-interest is people's sole or predominant source of motivation, nor that it will generally be people's major motivation for practicing Mohist ethics. The Mohists recognize self-interest—in the broad sense that includes the interest of one's dependents—as among the important motives for which people tend to act. They must allow, I think, that nonmoral self-interest could be a factor in some people's overall motivation to follow the Mohist ethical code. Moreover, since “the benefit of all” includes one's own interests and inclusive care covers oneself as well as others, they might hold that a suitably moralized form of self-interest *should* count among people's motives. But they also recognize a range of other sources of motivation, including motivation on the grounds of *shì* or *yì*, an inclination to identify with leaders, an inclination toward reciprocity, and motivation to promote goods such as social order and filiality. The Self-Interest Thesis is thus untenable.

Why, then, do one's own interests figure so prominently in the Caretaker and Ruler arguments? I think that in these arguments—and in their responses to the objections from difficulty and filiality—the Mohists are concerned to show that inclusive care works in people's own interest because they regard a *conflict* between a proposed moral code and self-interest as legitimate grounds for concluding that the code is impracticable, too difficult, or normatively mistaken.<sup>26</sup> Self-interest for the Mohists thus functions as a constraint on a practicable, normatively justifiable moral code, though it is not people's only, or even primary, motivation.<sup>27</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (La Salle: Open Court, 1996), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 145. Cf. 262.

<sup>3</sup> Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 35. Shun does not, however, hold that the Mohists assume people are concerned *only* for their own interests (*Mencius*, 33).

<sup>4</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Mohist Philosophy,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 451–55. Citations are to sections in the on-line version at <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G008>. The quotation is from section 4.

<sup>5</sup> References to the *Mòzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in *A Concordance to Mòzǐ (Mòzǐ Yǐndé)* (《墨子引得》), Supplement no. 21, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (reprint) (Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi Gǔjí, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> The convenient labels “Ruler” and “Caretaker” for the arguments at 16/35 and 16/22 are due to Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180–91.

<sup>7</sup> *World*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> *Ways*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Ways*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Shun, *Mencius*, 35. I assume Ivanhoe is expressing a similar idea when he suggests that Mòzǐ thought people could be motivated to care for others only by seeing that doing so guaranteed them an equitable distribution of goods (“Mohist,” sect. 4).

<sup>11</sup> None of the writers I have cited makes this argument. However, it is a fairly obvious route a proponent of the Self-Interest Thesis might take.

<sup>12</sup> I take the statement that “probably the saying was that people have different *yì*” (11/1, 12/1) to imply that this scenario is hypothetical.

<sup>13</sup> Hui-Chieh Loy makes this point well in “On a *Gedankenexperiment* in the *Mozi* Core Chapters,” *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005/06), 149.

<sup>14</sup> Chad Hansen expresses a similar view when he says that “*Shì* and *fěi* are not merely assignments, but assignments with behavioral consequences—like pro and con attitudes.” See *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120. This hypothesis also helps explain the emphasis in the Mohist program for unifying *yì* on having people emulate how their leaders discriminate *shì* from *fěi*.

<sup>15</sup> *World*, 142.

<sup>16</sup> This is one reason I resisted interpreting people’s *yì* in the state of nature as different conceptions of morality as such. Such customs might not be understood as conceptions of morality even by those who practice them.

<sup>17</sup> Since the Mohists hold that *Tiān* (天) (Heaven) provides a reliable standard of *yì* with which even leaders must “identify upward” (13/42, 27/73), why do they not envision people in the state of nature solving the unification problem simply by appealing to *Tiān* as a standard of *yì*? I think the proposal to take *Tiān* as a standard would still amount to just one of the many diverse *yì* and

thus would not be recognized as a basis for a unified *yì*. For the Mohists, the shift from anarchy to political society is simultaneously the origin of authority and of the very idea of something having authoritative status. So the conception of *Tiān* as an authoritative standard is probably a product of this shift. Prior to it, the proposal to assign this status to *Tiān* would have had no purchase.

<sup>18</sup> The objection concerns whether inclusive care might be practically impossible, on the order of picking up a mountain and jumping over a river (15/30). The Mohist response is that it is possible, because accounts of the benevolent acts of the sage-kings show they practiced it.

<sup>19</sup> The only one that is controversial is the claim that inclusive care is not difficult. I have argued elsewhere that in terms of conduct, at least, inclusive care is not excessively demanding. See Chris Fraser, “Mohism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2002 edition), ed. Edward Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2002/entries/mohism> (Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab, 2002), section 7. For a detailed argument to a similar conclusion, see Hui-Chieh Loy, *The Moral Philosophy of the Mozi “Core Chapters”* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2006), chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> Notice that nothing in this account or in Mohist political theory suggests that the ruler must effect extensive changes in people’s motivation. The widely asserted claim that for the Mohists human motivation is a blank slate or “highly malleable” (Van Norden, *Virtue*, 195, Ivanhoe “Mohist,” Introduction) is thus untenable.

<sup>21</sup> As holder of the highest political office, the ruler of course has no human political superior. But the Mohists hold that he too is to identify upward with the model set by *Tiān*, the deity that is the highest authority in the cosmos (12/31–33).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Hansen, *Daoist*, 112–13; Van Norden, *Virtue*, 180–89; and Loy, *Moral*, 281–95.

<sup>23</sup> For other examples of the use of *yòng*, see 10/27, 13/43, and 25/12.

<sup>24</sup> Hansen rightly emphasizes this point (*Daoist*, 113).

<sup>25</sup> As Hansen (*Daoist*, 112) and Van Norden (*Virtue*, 188) point out.

<sup>26</sup> As Shun says, “Showing that the interests of oneself and those to whom one is specially related coincide rather than conflict with the interests of others helps remove an obstacle to the practice of [inclusive care]” (*Mencius*, 31).

<sup>27</sup> I thank Hui-Chieh Loy, Bill Haines, and Dan Robins for very helpful comments.