The Mohist Conception of Reality

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Introduction

The first systematic philosophers in the Chinese tradition, Mozi and his followers established a general theoretical orientation, conceptual framework, and technical philosophical vocabulary that came to be widely shared throughout pre-Han philosophy, even by thinkers who rejected their substantive views. Mohist thought thus exemplifies characteristic general features of early Chinese metaphysics and in several key respects sets the agenda for the development of classical Chinese metaphysical discourse. This essay will elucidate these points by articulating the conception of reality that emerges from the doctrines concerning the "Three Models" (*san fa* 三法), *tian* 天 (heaven), and *ming* 命 (fate) presented in the core books of the *Mozi* and by exploring the metaphysical, metaethical, and epistemological consequences of these doctrines.[1]

For the Mohists, reality is reliably knowable through sense perception, inference, and historical precedent. It manifests fixed, recognizable patterns. Ethical norms are a human-independent feature of reality, and indeed nature itself operates according to the same ethical norms that apply to human activity. Thus the Mohist *dao* 道 (way) is purportedly the *dao* of reality itself, grounded in tried and tested knowledge of the world. Still, although the cosmos follows a normative *dao,* the outcomes of human personal and political life are not preordained. Human agency plays an important causal role in affecting the course of events, as agents are free to follow or diverge from the *dao* of nature. For students of comparative philosophy, perhaps the most striking feature of Mohist metaphysics is its theoretical focus on *dao* rather than on structures or properties. Mohist metaphysical thought is concerned

primarily with identifying norms, patterns, and processes rather than with explaining the natures of things or the underlying composition or principles that constitute them as what they are. This point will emerge repeatedly as we examine different facets of the Mohist conception of reality.

The first section below suggests four respects in which the Mohist view of reality exemplifies what came to be shared general features of pre-Qin metaphysical discourse: the Mohists' naturalism, their focus on *dao,* their acceptance of the world of perception, and their lack of interest in reductive explanations. The next section explores the view of reality implied by the epistemological doctrine of the "Three Models." The following two sections discuss Mohist views on several specifically metaphysical topics: *tian* (heaven), ghosts and spirits, and *ming* (fate). Finally, I offer some reflections on the metaphysical significance of the concept of a "model" (*fa* 法), which is pivotal to understanding Mohist ethics, psychology, epistemology, and, I argue, metaphysics.

<div align="center">Mohism and Early Chinese Metaphysics</div>

Four central features of early Mohist thought reflect general characteristics of classical Chinese metaphysics.

First, the *Mozi* 墨子 presents the earliest explicit version of what I will call Chinese metaphysical and metaethical "naturalism." The brand of naturalism I am referring to here involves two interrelated claims. One is that reality just is the world of nature and observable natural phenomena, and accordingly whatever exists is to be explained as part of nature. Ultimate reality is not an abstract realm of ideal forms, nor one of a supernatural, transcendent deity or spirits. Instead, it is simply "the stuff of people's ears and eyes," as the *Mozi* phrases it (35/9).[2] This conception of reality as the observable natural world has been widely shared by thinkers throughout the Chinese tradition.

The second claim is that the *dao* (way, course, ethical norms) is a feature of the natural world, in some sense immanent in or determined by nature itself. Again, thinkers throughout the Chinese tradition have attempted in various ways to ground ethical norms in nature. The Mohist version of this idea is that the *dao* is exemplified and embodied by *tian* 天 (heaven, nature), which they revere as a quasi-personal nature-deity. This religious stance may seem at odds with the claim that for them reality is simply the empirical world of sense perception. However, for the Mohists *tian* just is a semi-personified conception of nature—in effect, "Nature" with a capital "N." Although their conception of nature is what we might call, borrowing the Weberian notion, an "enchanted" one, *tian* for them still refers to nature, and not, for instance to a deity that transcends or exists beyond the natural world. In their view, then, *dao* is manifested in how nature itself proceeds. Natural processes reflect or embody ethical norms—severe storms, for instance, are *tian*'s punishment for people's failure to conform to its intent (*Mozi* 11/23–24). This stance is continuous with the earlier, Zhou dynasty doctrine of *tian*'s mandate (*tian ming* 天命), according to which *tian* enforces ethical norms by bestowing its mandate on virtuous rulers and sanctioning the overthrow of vicious ones. Scattered remarks in the Confucian *Analects* also allude to *tian* as a moral force. Only in the *Mozi,* however, is this moralized conception of nature fully developed and integrated with normative ethical theory.

The second major feature can be described as a "*dao*-centered conceptual framework." By this I mean that the notion of *dao* (way), a normative path or course of activity, stands at the heart of the Mohist philosophical framework, shaping its overall orientation and the content of its core concepts. In making this claim, I am building on seminal ideas proposed by A. C. Graham and Chad Hansen more than two decades ago. Graham aptly suggested that for early Chinese thinkers, the crucial philosophical question is not "What is the truth?" but "Where is the Way?"—the proper *dao* by which to govern

society and conduct one's personal life (1989: 3). Hansen (1992) presented a pioneering

account of early Chinese philosophical discourse as developing dialectically through different

texts' responses to this question. Extending this interpretive approach, I suggest that the most

defensible interpretation of Mohist thought—and by extension pre-Han philosophy more

generally—is one that treats it as focusing on courses or patterns of activity instead of, for

instance, questions of structure, constitution, or essence. Rather than inquire, for example,

what underlying structure or essence explains why all *x*'s are *x,* the Mohists and other

classical Chinese thinkers are concerned with the issue of what *dao* or norms to follow in

distinguishing *x*'s from non-*x*'s. This focus on *dao* grounds what Hansen describes as the

"pragmatic" or "practical" orientation of Chinese thought, which he contrasts with the

"semantic" or "theoretical" orientation of Greek thought (1992: 139). The Mohists assign

priority not to the relation between language and the world or to finding an accurate

theoretical description or representation of the world, but to the proper use of language and to

practical guidance of personal and collective conduct. The focus on *dao* structures their

approach not only to metaphysics but to mind, language, ethics, and epistemology. It helps to

explain, for example, why in early Chinese epistemology knowledge is regarded as a form of

competence rather than accurate representation (for details, see Fraser 2011a).

      The third respect in which Mohist thought exemplifies widely shared characteristics

of early Chinese metaphysics is that the Mohists accept as a matter of course that reality just

is the concrete, perceivable world presented by the senses, along with the regular causal

patterns inferable from it.[3] To them, the world of sense perception is no mere veil of

appearances. It is neither the potentially misleading by-product of perception nor the

perceivable artefact of some more basic but imperceptible or abstract structure. Accordingly,

reality for the Mohists does not lie in more basic elements or principles that underlie the

world of perception, nor in some transcendent, abstract structure instantiated by the

perceivable world. The Mohists recognize no appearance-reality distinction and appeal to no

abstract explanatory notions such as forms, essences, universals, or *arche*. Nor is ultimate

reality for them an abstract or transcendent entity along the lines of the unchanging

Parmenidean "one," the Hindu Brahman or Atman, or the Hegelian Absolute. Indeed, they

simply do not raise the issue of whether some more fundamental or ultimate reality obtains

beyond the world as we experience it.[4] Reality just is the world of nature as presented to

human "ears and eyes" (31/10–11).

The fourth feature—directly following from the third and intertwined with the first

two—is that the Mohists propose no reductive explanations of natural phenomena. Indeed,

reductive explanation as a mode of understanding seems wholly absent from their thought.

This absence of reductionism is a trait that in a seminal 1973 article Benjamin Schwartz

rightly emphasized as distinctive of Chinese philosophy. Schwartz defines reductionism as

the tendency to explain "the variety and manifold qualities of reality . . . as appearances

resulting from . . . structures built up out of . . . primary stuff" (1973: 82). For our purposes

here, I suggest we expand this conception of reductionism to include explanation by appeal to

fundamental forms or essences, even if these are regarded as abstract entities rather than

"primary stuff." Since the Mohists regard reality as simply the world of nature as we perceive

it, they see no need to explain objects and processes by analyzing or reducing them to

underlying essences, structures, or parts. The absence of reductionism in Mohism and early

Chinese thought more broadly is interrelated with and partly explained by the architectonic

focus on *dao*. A consequence of the *dao*-centered theoretical orientation is that entities and

phenomena are not explained by reduction to unseen, more basic entities, but by identifying

patterns (*li* 理) and relations in the dynamic path or course of things. Explanation might be

by appeal to similarities between the "shapes" (*xing* 形) of things or to tendencies that they

exhibit, for instance.[5]

To sum up, the question that guides the Mohists' attitude toward reality is not what its fundamental structure is but what its *dao* is—what regular patterns it follows and what course it takes. The theoretical setting within which they formulate their account of *dao* assumes that the perceivable, natural world is real and manifests regular causal and normative patterns by which to guide human activity. The Mohists also hold that the natural world embodies an ethical *dao*, although their conception of nature is a religious one, including ghosts, spirits, and a quasi-personal nature deity, rather than the scientific conception of nature referenced by contemporary naturalism. Given the Mohists' focus on practical utility, an account of the *dao* of reality indicates what courses of action are likely to be successful. Given their view of nature as instantiating ethical norms, it also indicates the ethically appropriate way to organize society and guide action—a *dao* that emulates or conforms to nature's own *dao*. Since such questions about *dao* do not revolve around issues of composition or constitution, they do not invite explanations that reduce reality to basic parts or structures.

These features of the Mohist theoretical scheme set the agenda for much classical Chinese metaphysics, raising issues that are addressed in different texts and laying down presuppositions that guide discussion. No early texts adopt reductive or abstract approaches to explaining reality, for instance. Graham's question—"Where is the Way?"—remains the guiding concern of early Chinese discourse as a whole, and the Mohists' pragmatic, non-essentialist approach to the question frames subsequent developments. The Mohist conception of *tian* places two intertwined sets of issues on the agenda. One is whether and in what ways nature provides or determines the proper ethical *dao*, or norms of action. For example, does the natural world directly provide us with norms, such as by setting an example for us to emulate or by building normative patterns of conduct into our inherent dispositions? Or does it merely establish conditions to which any feasible human *dao* must respond, such as facts about our material environment and human moral and social

psychology? These are central metaphysical and metaethical issues addressed in various ways by texts as diverse as the *Daodejing, Mengzi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi,* and *Lushi Chunqiu* and taken up repeatedly throughout the later history of Chinese thought. The second set of issues concerns the problem of natural and moral evil that emerges from attempts to embed ethical norms in nature. If the cosmos manifests ethical norms, why do bad things sometimes happen to good people? Moreover, if nature provides a *dao* and human agents are part of nature, why do we ever stray from the *dao*?

In what follows, I will explore how the features and issues identified in this section are reflected in Mohist doctrines concerning the "Three Models" (*san fa*), nature or heaven (*tian*), and fate or destiny (*ming*). I will then explain how several strands of Mohist metaphysical thought are woven together by the pivotal concept of a "model" or "standard" *(fa)*.

Reality in Early Mohism: Epistemic Hints

The epistemic methods a philosopher endorses often have implications for that thinker's view of reality. This observation is particularly apposite to the Mohists, who introduce their epistemic doctrine of the "Three Models" (*san fa* 三法) specifically to treat a metaphysical issue, the existence of destiny or fate (*ming*). The content and application of the Three Models help to illustrate the Mohists' conception of reality and their general metaphysical orientation.

The doctrine of the Three Models presents three "models" or "standards" (*fa*) by which to "clearly distinguish" (*ming bian* 明辨) action-guiding "statements" or "teachings" (*yan* 言) as "right or not" (*shi fei* 是非) or as bringing "benefit or harm" (*li hai* 利害) (*Mozi* 35/6–10). As an example of such a statement, the text cites the claim that "If fated to be wealthy, people are wealthy; if fated to be poor, they are poor…Given fate, even if one works

hard, of what advantage is it?" (35/3–4). Statements influence conduct: those who affirm the existence of fate and accept this teaching presumably will not strive to improve their economic circumstances. So the issue for the Mohists is how to distinguish whether such action-guiding statements are "right" and are thus a guideline to the proper *dao.*

The "Three Models" are that statements must have a "root" (*ben* 本), a "source" (*yuan* 原), and a "use" (*yong* 用).[6] The "root" is the historical precedent and evidence provided by the deeds of the ancient sage-kings, moral exemplars who reliably distinguished right from wrong correctly and whose *dao* we thus seek to follow. The "source" is that statements must have an empirical basis: they must be checked against the "reality" or "stuff" (*shi* 實) of people's ears and eyes, or what anyone can see and hear. The "use" is that when adopted as a basis for punishment and government administration, the statement must produce benefit (*li*) for the state, clan, and people. The Mohists explain the function of these three models by analogy to measuring tools or guidelines, such as the wheelwright's compass or the carpenter's set square. To determine whether a corner is square, a carpenter checks it against a set square to see if the two are similar or "match" (*zhong* 中). Analogously, statements or teachings that "match" the three standards are judged right (*shi*) and beneficial (*li*) and are thus to be promulgated and acted on. Those that fail to match them are "wrong" (*fei*) and "harmful" (*hai*) and thus are to be discouraged and rejected as guides to conduct. In repudiating fatalism, for example, the Mohists argue that first, historical examples of the ancient sage-kings' deeds show that security and order depend on government policy, not fate: the sage-kings achieved peace and security under the same social conditions in which the tyrants brought turmoil and danger. Second, no one has ever actually seen or heard fate. Third, fatalism has detrimental social consequences, since if people believe that success or failure are predestined, they will not exert effort to improve their moral or economic circumstances. Statements that assume the existence of fate thus fail to match any of the

models. Hence gentlemen committed to the right *dao*—those who wish "all the world" to be wealthy and orderly—cannot fail to reject "the statements of those who hold fate exists," as these are "great harm to the world" (*Mozi* 35/46–47).

The epistemic stance of the Three Models directly reflects the Mohists' practical focus on ethical and political *dao,* rather than on explaining or analyzing the fundamental constitution or nature of things. The purpose of the models is not to identify or explain the structure of reality, but to distinguish which teachings or dicta (*yan*) are suitable candidates for "regularly" (*chang* 常) guiding action.[7] The third model—utility as an ethical and administrative policy—especially illustrates this practical emphasis. Moreover, the Three Models jointly imply that reality is readily knowable through perceptual observation, inductive inference, historical reports, and causal regularities. The world follows consistent, regular patterns—the precedents of the sage-kings continue to be effective, for instance—and such patterns can be inferred from the sage-kings' deeds, perceptual observation, and practical trial and error. The second model illustrates the Mohist conviction that sense perception is reliable and the perceptual world is real. Indeed, the Mohists' word for the content of what we hear and see—*shi* 實—simply is their word for "real" or "reality." In their argument for the existence of ghosts and spirits, they explicitly claim that the second model is the standard adopted by "all the world" in "the *dao* of investigating presence and absence" (*Mozi* 31/10–11). The text straightforwardly states that the distinction between what does or does not exist is drawn on the basis of whether "someone has really heard it and seen it" (31/11). The theoretical picture assumed by the Three Models thus assigns no role to any unobservable or abstract structure, essence, or mode of existence beyond the "stuff" of perception. This point is illustrated as well by the craft analogies that explain how the models are applied. The carpenter or wheelwright determine whether things are square or round by perceptual comparisons to paradigms, such as the set square or compass. They do not inquire

into the underlying nature or essence of what is square or round. They simply take a known paradigm and check whether the object at hand is relevantly similar to it. The aim is not to describe the basic makeup of reality but to complete a practical task—to build a functional cart or house, for example.

What grounds the Mohists' assumptions that reality is reliably knowable through perception, that the world follows regular causal patterns, and that what is practically beneficial is real? A likely explanation, I suggest, is the same point that epistemically grounds their conviction that the ethical *dao* lies in what promotes the "benefit of all the world": their belief in a providential *tian* (heaven, nature). Let me turn now to the role of *tian* in the Mohist conception of reality.

<center>*Tian* and Reality</center>

The *Mozi* offers the first explicit theory in the Chinese tradition of *tian* or nature as embodying ethical norms. Earlier historical texts, such as the "Announcement of the Duke of Shao" (*Shao Gao* 召誥) and other documents collected in the *Shang Shu* 尚書, depict *tian* as requiring that a sovereign meet certain norms of conduct as a condition for receiving its continued mandate to rule. Only in the *Mozi,* however, do we find an explicit conception of *tian* as a paradigm and enforcer of the proper ethical *dao*—namely, for the Mohists, the *dao* of promoting the "benefit of all the world."

Tian in the *Mozi* is an object of religious reverence and worship, conceptually a blend of a quasi-personal deity and the forces of nature. In Classical Chinese, the word "*tian*" refers to the sky or to nature, and these referents partly constitute the content of the Mohist concept.[8] For the Mohists, however, *tian* is also an agent with "intents" (*yi* 意, *zhi* 志) or "desires" (*yu* 欲) interpretable from its conduct (*xing* 行), who follows and enforces ethical norms. The Mohists consider *tian*'s intent a reliable model (*fa*) of *yi* 義 (right, duty,

morality) because it is impartial, generous, constant, noble, and wise. According to their theology, *tian* created the world in which we live and sustains all people, possessing them as its own and accepting sacrifices from them. It cares about and benefits everyone by providing natural resources sufficient to support humanity. Hence its intent is to care about and benefit all, and the proper *dao* is one by which people all-inclusively care about each other (*jian xiang ai* 兼相愛) and in their interactions benefit each other (*jiao xiang li* 交相利). The proper human *dao* is to obey *tian*'s intent by collectively following the same *dao* that it follows.

In exploring the implications of these beliefs, we should keep in mind that *tian* refers not only to a sky god but to nature or the natural world as a whole. Hence the Mohists are in effect presenting a moralized, enchanted conception of nature, in which the natural world follows and enforces ethical norms. This aspect of their view of reality is colorfully illustrated by their animistic belief in nature spirits, or what they call "sky ghosts" and "ghosts and spirits of the mountains and rivers" (*Mozi* 31/97, 28/21). As elements of the natural world, operating under the sovereignty of *tian,* these nature spirits—along with the ghosts of dead human beings (31/97)—enforce ethical norms, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. A normative *dao* is thus built into nature as the Mohists understand it: nature itself manifests agency and follows what they take to be the correct *dao*. My hypothesis, then, is that the Mohists' confidence that the world is causally regular, that perception reliably indicates reality, and that pragmatically useful distinctions are real is explained by their providential conception of *tian,* which created and maintains a natural environment that follows a "regular" (*chang*) *dao* which facilitates constructive, beneficial human activity.

Of course, since for the Mohists the natural world includes ghosts, spirits, and deities, from a contemporary standpoint their conception of nature is supernatural, not naturalistic.

Still, their stance can be considered naturalistic in a loose sense, insofar as the supernatural components of the Mohist worldview are in their eyes either denizens of the natural world, such as ghosts and spirits, or nature personified, namely *tian*. These components of their conception of reality refer only to what they consider parts of nature and not, for instance, to divine beings that transcend the natural world or abstract entities that subsist beyond it.

Moreover, there is a fairly obvious way that the Mohist worldview can be stripped of its supernatural elements and secularized or naturalized in the contemporary sense of the term. The Mohists' conception of *yi* (right)—the *dao* they attribute to *tian*—is for human society and all of its members to support the "benefit of all the world." This *dao* can be regarded as an ethical extension of our innate, natural disposition to pursue our own utility or flourishing. The Mohists in effect claim that the *dao* of nature as a whole is to facilitate the benefit or flourishing of all of us who live within nature.[9] As members of what we might call "the community of nature," they would maintain, we ought to follow this *dao*, which amounts to an impartial, collective version of our spontaneous disposition to seek our own individual benefit and that of our immediate circle of kin. The Mohists' implied stance is that such a *dao* of jointly acting to further the benefit of all is also natural in being a feasible candidate for a "regular" *dao,* one that can be followed constantly and universally, much as a natural pattern or a law of nature can. This *dao* taps into our natural dispositions and builds on the regular causal connections between beneficial practices and their results.

Such a secularized version of the Mohist *dao* may well be *prima facie* defensible. Much natural, spontaneous activity probably is indeed directed by the action-guiding distinction between benefit and harm, and the Mohist attempt to universalize this distinction into an ethical *dao* is in some respects appealing. Of course, a contemporary Mohist would probably find it difficult to convincingly justify the argumentative step from a descriptive conception of nature's *dao* as facilitating everyone's pursuit of benefit to the normative

conclusion that we should collectively follow a *dao* of promoting the benefit of all. Also, on reflection, it seems clear that benefit-versus-harm is not really a "regular" or "constant" action-guiding distinction in the sense the Mohists seek. Although it surely falls among the distinctions by which we justifiably guide action, it is hardly the only one, nor does it apply in every case. Other action-guiding distinctions that are arguably equally "natural" include just/unjust, beautiful/ugly, and enjoyable/unenjoyable, to give only a few examples. Moreover, the Mohists' stance about the naturalness and "constancy" of the *dao* of furthering the benefit of all the world quickly loses plausibility when we consider the narrowness of their conception of benefit, which includes only material prosperity, social order, and a flourishing population. Even if benefit/harm were our chief action-guiding distinction, benefit for most of us is broader than just these three basic goods, and there is little reason to expect we could converge on any richer yet sufficiently specific conception of benefit.

Rejection of Fatalism

Another important facet of the Mohist conception of reality is their rejection of fatalism or predestination, expressed through their denial of the existence of *ming* (fate/destiny). For some early Confucian thinkers, the doctrine of *ming* provided a potential response to the problem of natural evil. Why do worthy people sometimes live difficult, materially unsuccessful lives? One explanation of undeserved misfortune might be that material outcomes are ultimately beyond even a virtuous agent's control. Perhaps events are sometimes determined by *ming,* or fate, regardless of the course of action an agent undertakes. As the Mohists interpret this idea, to affirm the existence of *ming* is to claim that material outcomes such as wealth, population, social order, and longevity are all fated, rendering human effort powerless to improve them (35/3–4).[10]

As we have seen, the Mohists' explicit argument against this doctrine is that it runs contrary to the Three Models. More fundamentally, however, a belief in fate or predestination as they understand it is deeply incompatible with their moralized conception of nature. If the proper *dao* is to promote the benefit of all, and if *tian* or nature conforms to and enforces this ethical norm, then reality must be arranged such that promoting benefit is within our power, moral worth is rewarded, and viciousness is punished. A world in which the worthy suffered misfortune, the vicious prospered, or rewards and punishments were dispensed for outcomes agents could not control would be unfair and full of unwarranted harm. Such a world would not conform to the right *dao*. Moreover, predestination would sever the regular causal connection between intentions, actions, and outcomes that grounds the Mohists' consequentialist ethics. If fate prevents agents from confirming which sorts of intentions and practices reliably yield good consequences, then consequentialism as a normative theory collapses into incoherence. Agents cannot coherently aim to do what promotes "the benefit of all," because whatever course of action they undertake, fate may prevent a beneficial outcome.[11] The rejection of *ming* and a corresponding confidence in human efficacy are thus basic presuppositions of Mohist ethics and metaphysics.

The Mohist position of course reopens the problem of natural evil. If *tian*'s agency entails that the cosmos has an inherent ethical order, why do terrible events sometimes befall undeserving victims? The Mohists' answer, I suggest, draws on two aspects of their view of reality. The first is causal pluralism. In an anecdote in the Mohist "Dialogues," Mozi explains that even a worthy person may encounter adverse outcomes, such as illness, because events issue from multiple causal factors, some of which may be difficult to identify and control.

> Our Master Mozi was ill. Die Bi went in and asked, "Sir, you take the ghosts and spirits to be sentient and able to bring calamity or blessings. Those who do good they reward; those who do wrong they punish. Now you, sir, are a sage. Why are you ill? Could it be that your teaching has errors, and the ghosts and spirits are not sentient?" Our master Mozi said, "Even supposing I am ill, how is it that they are not sentient? There are many ways people can catch an illness. Some get ill from the cold or heat,

some from exhaustion. If there are a hundred doors and you close one of them, how is it that a burglar has no way in?" (*Mozi* 48/76–79, cf. 49/64–71)

According to the passage, the existence of natural evil does not disprove the Mohist doctrine of sentient ghosts and spirits who enforce ethical norms. Evils such as illness may occur without the spirits' punishment and despite their rewards, since their intervention is but one of many causally relevant factors. All these factors are in principle intelligible, although perhaps not always practically manageable. The key to avoiding misfortune lies in human effort, in working harder to identify and protect against risks.

Still, we might ask, why don't *tian* and the spirits protect the worthy person from these other potential causes of misfortune? Here I suggest the Mohist answer lies in the quasi-naturalistic character of *tian*'s agency. In the Mohist worldview, *tian* generally does not intervene proactively in human activity to prevent adverse outcomes. Its agency is mainly reactive, along the lines of natural causal regularities. Other things being equal, if we follow *tian*'s intent—the normative *dao* of nature—*tian* and the ghosts will respond by facilitating our endeavors. If we diverge from *tian*'s intent, they will not proactively stop us but will merely ensure that harmful consequences ensue. For example, in the Mohist worldview, *tian* beneficently provides materials by which we can build sturdy buildings. Despite this benevolence, if we recklessly decide to jump off a roof, *tian* will not intervene to restrain us, and when we do jump, it will cause us to fall. Similarly, in the Mohist interpretation of history, *tian* does not intervene to prevent wicked tyrants from misgoverning their states and harming their people. Once they do so, however, it responds by punishing them and supporting challengers who depose them.

Similar reasoning can be extended to yield a Mohist response to the problem of moral evil. Given that the cosmos as a whole embodies an ethical *dao,* why do humans sometimes diverge from it and behave unethically? A likely Mohist answer is that humans are agents, who act on their understanding of *shi-fei* 是非 (right versus wrong) distinctions. Improper

action is explained by agents' incompetence—their failure to know how to distinguish *shi-fei* correctly or their inability to act on the correct distinctions (for details, see Fraser 2011b: 91–92). Because of the reactive character of its agency, *tian* does not intervene to prevent human incompetence and error but only responds to it with adverse consequences. The Mohist worldview thus balances precariously between the religious, enchanted conception of nature presented in Mohist theology and a protoscientific attitude about causation that emerges from the Mohists' stance on fate and their explanation of natural and moral evil.

Models and Metaphysics

I want to turn now to explore further the metaphysical significance of the Mohist concept of a model (*fa*) and the role of models in the Mohist view of reality. As I have argued elsewhere,[12] the concept of *fa* is crucial to understanding Mohist ethics, epistemology, psychology, and logic. It is also crucial, I suggest, to Mohist metaphysics. The implications of the concept of *fa* help to explain the absence of reductionism and abstract metaphysics from Mohist thought, along with the Mohists' confidence in the reality of the natural world as perceived by the senses.

We have seen that *tian* plays a core role in the Mohist worldview. A crucial detail of this worldview is that the Mohists explicitly take *tian*'s intent to be a model (*fa*) analogous to the wheelwright's compass or the carpenter's set square (27/73). The concept of *fa* is thus conceptually central to the Mohist theoretical framework. Besides the compass and square, the full list of paradigmatic *fa* includes the string line, plumb bob, and water level (4/2–3). All of these tools function as reliable paradigms or guidelines by which to distinguish whether objects are round, square, straight, and so forth in order to achieve practical ends—as when we compare a curved edge with the arc of the compass to check whether it forms a usable wheel. As the use of *fa* illustrates, in their epistemology, their ethics, and also their

metaphysics, the Mohists are concerned with agents' ability to distinguish kinds of things for practical purposes by comparing them to standards or benchmarks that need not themselves be the kind of thing in question. (The compass itself is not round, nor is a water level itself flat and level.) *Fa* do not purport to capture the constitution, structure, or essence of things; they are merely handy references used to check for relations of similarity and difference and hence to draw distinctions. In proposing various *fa* to guide action, then, the Mohists are not offering definitions of properties such as "round" or "square" or attempting to explain these features by appeal to basic principles. Nor do they imply that the compass or set square present the essence or abstract form of roundness or squareness. Their project is not to describe or capture fundamental structure or composition. It is simply to find reliable models by which to draw distinctions that produce useful outcomes—houses that are sturdy and warm, carriages that are strong and roll smoothly, tables that are solid and level. This intellectual orientation is one aspect of their *dao*-centered conceptual framework—they are concerned with practical norms for carrying out concrete projects. Another way to characterize their outlook might be to say that they adopt an engineering orientation rather than a theoretical one. Instead of an accurate theoretical explanation or analysis of reality, they seek reliable guidelines or procedures for obtaining practical results. To the Mohists, robust practical outcomes are sufficient to justify confidence in the reality of the distinctions at work.

Consequently, certain metaphysical questions that may seem salient to readers steeped in the Western tradition simply do not attract the Mohists' attention. What property do all square things share by virtue of which they are square? What explains why round things are round? Why are the compass and set square appropriate models of what is round or square? What explains why some things match the model while others do not? Early Mohist writings never address such questions.[13] Even the Later Mohist dialectical texts give only the simplest

of answers: "stuffs" or "solids" (*shi* 實) that match a model are "similar" (*tong* 同) or "of a kind" (*lei* 類) by virtue of sharing some similar feature, such their "shape" (*xing* 形) (see Fraser 2005, 2013). Even for the Later Mohist logicians, the task of inquiry is simply to identify the proper *dao* by which to distinguish similar from dissimilar things, with the aid of whatever models or criteria might prove useful. The theoretical role of the concept of *fa* thus epitomizes the anti-reductionist, anti-essentialist tendencies in Mohist thought and the Mohists' concern with practical *dao* rather than questions of structure, composition, or essence. Models are a guide to following *dao,* and what follows the sage-kings' precedent, agrees with what we see and hear, and yields practical benefit is *dao.* Once we have learned how to apply the models to identify the *dao,* no further metaphysical questions are pertinent. A providential *tian* has created the world such that distinctions that conform to the Three Models—and thus produce round wheels, square corners, bountiful harvests, and orderly societies—are real and are the *dao* of nature, the *dao* that *tian* itself follows.

Concluding Remarks

The Mohist conception of reality and the theoretical orientation of Mohist metaphysics significantly influenced the general direction of early Chinese philosophical discourse. Features of Mohist thought that became shared premises of pre-Buddhist metaphysics include their formal focus on *dao,* their explanation of reality by appeal to patterns, relations, and regularities rather than abstract forms or structural constitution, their confidence in the reality of the natural world as known through perception, and their view that *dao* is grounded in nature. At the same time, the Mohists' specific account of the *dao* of nature, their proposed models (*fa*), and their quasi-personal conception of *tian* all prompted sharp challenges from rival thinkers. Some texts, such as the *Daodejing, Mengzi,* and parts of the *Zhuangzi,* offer competing accounts of the *dao* of nature. The *Mengzi, Xunzi,* and

Zhuangzi all reject the Mohists' proposed models (*fa*) as an exclusive guide to *dao.* The *Xunzi* explicitly repudiates a religious conception of *tian* and contends instead that *dao* is primarily cultural, grounded only indirectly in nature. Parts of the *Zhuangzi* question the very idea that nature might ground one *dao* to the exclusion of others. Despite these spirited disagreements about the content of *dao* and its precise relation to nature, the Mohists' general conception of reality presents attitudes and assumptions that are in many respects representative of and set the agenda for early Chinese thought.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[1] The essay will mainly treat the view of reality presented in the "Triads," books 8–37 of the *Mozi,* and the "Dialogues," books 46–49. The degree of overlap between the metaphysics

of these sections and that of the Later Mohist "Dialectics" (books 40–45) is controversial, as the Dialectics are largely silent about the role of *tian* (heaven, nature).

² All citations to the *Mozi* give chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Hung 1986).

³ What we consider supernatural elements of the Mohist worldview, such as ancestral ghosts and the spirits of rivers and mountains, are in their view observable inhabitants of the natural world. The nature-deity *tian* may not be directly observable itself, but the results of its agency are, including the spirit-envoys by which it purportedly conveys messages to humanity.

⁴ Accordingly, they are also unworried by skepticism about the world of sense perception. For more on this general feature of early Chinese thought, see Fraser (2011a).

⁵ On this point, compare Franklin Perkins's suggestion elsewhere in this volume that in early Chinese thought, the identity of *wu* 物 (things) is explained mainly by their "shapes" and not, for instance, by appeal to their nature or essence or by reduction to their parts or the *qi* 氣 from which they are constituted.

⁶ For bevity, I will consider only the first of the three versions of the doctrine in the *Mozi* (35/6–10).

⁷ The Mohists hold that explicit statements or teachings (*yan* 言) can provide guidance in following the *dao.* They strive to identify *yan* that provide "constant" or "regular" (*chang* 常) guidance—that is, *yan* that have consistent, universal applicability. For the importance of such *yan,* see *Mozi* 46/37–38 and 47/18–19.

⁸ The Classical Chinese word "*tian* 天" refers primarily to the sky. It is also the name of the Zhou Dynasty sky-god, whom the Mohists revere. In the compound "*tian-di* 天地" it is paired with "*di,*" the word for earth, to refer to the natural world. When contrasted with "*ren*

人" (human), it refers to nature or natural features. In contexts referring to the origin of things or to their inborn features, it is interpretable roughly as "nature." In such contexts, it contrasts with the products of human culture or acquired traits.

[9] To us, it may seem that such a *dao* should include the benefit of non-human creatures as well, but the Mohists' ethical concern extends only to humans.

[10] The *Mozi* does not consider the alternative view that although agents' actions might affect outcomes, the amount and efficiency of their effort are determined by fate.

[11] Paraphrased this way, the Mohist position might seem too strong, as perhaps a coherent consequentialism requires only that certain courses of action usually or probably produce better or worse results, not that they invariably do. However, the Mohists themselves seem to regard the doctrine of *ming* as sundering any regular causal connection between one's conduct and its outcome, thus making good or bad consequences highly unpredictable. See, for instance, passages such as 35/30–36, which implies that according to the doctrine of *ming,* rewards and punishments are completely detached from worthy or vicious conduct. I thank the editors for prompting me to clarify this point.

[12] See Fraser (2002), (2005), (2011b), and (2013).

[13] Partly this is a matter of genre. Early Mohist texts mainly treat ethical, social, and political issues, not metaphysical or ontological topics.