

The Philosophy of the Mòzǐ: The First Consequentialists

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Preface

History has not been kind to Mòzǐ and the social and intellectual movement he founded. The Mohists were tremendously influential grass-roots social reformers and one of the most prominent and respected schools of thought in pre-imperial China. They were instrumental in setting the early Chinese philosophical agenda, and their theories and arguments represent a quantum leap in clarity and rigor over anything that preceded them. In texts from the early imperial era, Mòzǐ is regularly paired with Confucius (Kǒngzǐ) as one of the two great moral teachers of the past.¹ Central Mohist concepts such as all-inclusive care for the welfare of others and the importance of clear, objective models for action strongly influenced Ruist (Confucian) thinkers such as Mencius (Mèngzǐ) and Xúnzǐ. The Mohist ideal of inclusive care appears ultimately to have been absorbed into Ruism itself.² During the Western Hàn dynasty (206 B.C.E.–8 C.E.), however, the Mohist movement faded away, probably largely because changing social, political, and economic factors in first-century B.C.E. China eliminated much of its intellectual appeal and sociopolitical relevance. With the exception of their dialectics, the Mohists' philosophy no longer attracted much attention, and their texts fell into neglect. Throughout Chinese history, classical texts have been sustained as living, comprehensible intellectual resources through a lively commentarial tradition. But the only significant ancient commentary on the *Mòzǐ* was the now-lost work of Lǚ Shèng (fl. 300 C.E.), which covered only the dialectical chapters.

During the seventh century C.E., chance events contrived to prevent Mohist philosophy from receiving serious consideration from Chinese intellectuals for nearly a millennium. The unabridged text of the *Mòzǐ* was gradually pushed out of circulation by the publication of an abbreviated version comprising only the first thirteen of the seventy-one chapters. This truncated version was the edition read by Táng (618–907) and Sòng dynasty (960–1279) scholars such as Hán Yù (768–824) and Chéng Yí (1033–1107), whose remarks on Mòzǐ indicate that they never laid eyes on the essays expounding inclusive care or condemning the *Rú* (Confucians, Erudites). Fortunately, the unabridged text was preserved in the *Dào Zàng* (the Daoist Patrology scriptures), from which it was eventually recovered during the Míng

¹ I have in mind texts such as *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, *Hánfēizǐ*, *Huáinánzǐ*, and *Lùn Héng*. (The first two of these precede the imperial era by a decade or two.) For instance, the *Annals* says that “Confucius and Mòzǐ desired to put the great *dào* into practice in the world but did not achieve it, though this was enough for them to achieve an eminent reputation” (13/7).

² This claim is due to Fukui Shigemasa, who noted Mohist-like formulations of ethical ideals in Ruist texts. See Graham, *Later Mohist*, 64–65, n. 79.

dynasty and published again whole in 1552.³ Had the text not been included in this vast Daoist collection, many details of Mohist thought, including the main expositions of Mohist ethics and all of the Mohist dialectical writings, might have been lost forever.⁴

With the development of rigorous philology in the Qīng dynasty, scholars set out to clarify or emend the many obscure or corrupt graphs in the *Mòzǐ*, explain its often peculiar grammar, and reconstruct the damaged, misarranged, and corrupt dialectical chapters. This work began with the pioneering efforts of Bì Yuán (1730–1797) and Sūn Xīngyǎn (1753–1818) and culminated in the comprehensive commentary of Sūn Yíràng published in 1894.

The Qīng philologists provided would-be readers of the *Mòzǐ* with a legible, intelligible text. But the availability of such a text does not ensure that it will be understood or appreciated. By and large, the *Mòzǐ* has fared badly at the hands of philosophical interpreters during the modern era. To be sure, the *Mòzǐ* found appreciative readers during the early decades of the twentieth century, when prominent public intellectuals such as Hú Shì and Liáng Qǐchāo turned to Mohism to explore alternatives to Ruism in the Chinese intellectual tradition. Chinese Marxists in the mid-twentieth century admired Mohism for its egalitarian and communitarian tendencies and its concern for the welfare of the common people. Some Chinese Christians felt Mohist religious beliefs resonated with their own.

But the general trend in both Chinese and international scholarship has been deeply uncharitable toward Mohism. Indeed, few philosophers in any tradition have been the victims of such bad press. The Mohists are regularly the targets of an implicit prejudice that casts Ruist views and practices as norms from which Mohist positions are deviations—even when the practice at stake is deeply questionable, such as the three-year mourning custom, and opposition to it surely reasonable. All too often, *Mòzǐ* is treated as a dull, misguided foil against which to contrast favored Ruist views, particularly those of Mencius, a self-described arch-opponent of Mohism. Mohist ideas are routinely misconstrued and frequently twisted into implausible caricatures wildly counter to common sense. Mencius himself called *Mòzǐ* a “beast” for advocating all-inclusive moral care, which Mencius equated with denying one’s father (*Me* 6.9). A related line of interpretation was taken up by the influential twentieth-century Ruist Táng Jūnyì, who suggested that on the Mohist conception of mind, agents lack any way of conceptualizing or caring about the particular, concrete man who is their father, as distinct from the entire set of men who together constitute the kind *fathers*.⁵ Another prominent twentieth-century Ruist, Móu Zōngsān, claimed that Mohism fails to recognize any source of genuinely moral motivation.⁶

³ For a detailed account of the textual history of the *Mòzǐ*, see Graham, *Later Mohist*, 64–72.

⁴ Why was the *Mòzǐ* included in a collection of Daoist texts? A likely conjecture is that religious Daoists found Mohist beliefs about Heaven, spirits, and ghosts similar enough to their own that they included the *Mòzǐ* as part of their heritage.

⁵ See Táng, *Introduction*, 114–15. For a discussion of Táng’s interpretation, see Fraser, “Táng Jūnyì on Mencian and Mohist Conceptions of Mind,” 203–33.

⁶ Móu, “*Mòzǐ*,” 121. Móu’s view is repeated verbatim by Còi, *Mohist Philosophy*, 83. Táng, *Introduction*, 109–10, holds a similar view.

Among Western interpreters, David Nivison attributes to Mòzǐ a bizarre form of voluntarism, on which agents can simply choose, easily and immediately, to feel an emotion or believe a claim, just as they can choose to move their limbs.⁷ Benjamin Schwartz claims that the Mohists saw all people as fundamentally unloving and self-interested.⁸ David Wong calls Mohist arguments defending inclusive care “wishes masquerading as arguments.”⁹ He charges the Mohists with advocating a “wholly outer-directed” ethics focused on mere behavioral conformity rather than “ensuring that one has the right motives for acting correctly.”¹⁰ Bryan Van Norden takes the Mohists to assume that “the structure of human motivations and dispositions is almost infinitely malleable.”¹¹ Most notorious of all is the curt, uninformed dismissal of Mohism by Wing-tsit Chan, dean of an earlier generation of scholars of Chinese thought: “One thing is certain, and that is, philosophically Mohism is shallow and unimportant.”¹² As this book will show, all of these characterizations of Mohist thought are unjustified.

Among scholars publishing in English, defenders of the intellectual importance of the Mohists have been few and far between. We have already mentioned Hú Shì, who assigned the Mohists a prominent place in his pioneering 1922 work *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China*. Another important early advocate of the Mohists’ importance was Yi-Pao Mei, author of the earliest monograph on Mòzǐ in English, who rightly called the Mohist doctrine of inclusive care “one of the epoch-making discoveries in the evolution of human relations.”¹³ In the Preface to Mei’s book appear these remarks, happily less accurate today than when he wrote them in 1934 but still pertinent:

The growing conviction through the work is that Confucianism is not the only valuable way of life that China has ever possessed and can offer, that that system has won its place of supremacy by accidental circumstances as well as intrinsic worth, and that Western attention in Chinese systems of thought has been led to distribute itself unjustly—a large amount to Confucius, only a little to Laotse, and none to speak of to Motse, to mention only the three most original thinkers. (ix)

Mei described his project as “a positive endeavor to remedy the situation by presenting the much neglected author to the public” (ix). Two important more recent contributors to this endeavor have been A. C. Graham and Chad Hansen.¹⁴ Graham’s 1978 *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* recognized the pivotal role of the Mohists in the development of classical Chinese thought and showed how a detailed account of Mohist dialectics was crucial to fully understanding the ethics, philosophy of language, epistemology, and psychology of early Ruist, Daoist, and other thinkers. Hansen’s 1992 *A Daoist*

⁷ Nivison, *Ways*, 83, 130.

⁸ Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 145. Cf. 262.

⁹ Wong, “Universalism,” 263.

¹⁰ Wong, “Mohism,” 454. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 147, presents a similar view.

¹¹ Van Norden, “A Response to the Mohist Arguments,” 53.

¹² Chan, *Sourcebook*, 212.

¹³ Mei, *Neglected Rival*, 193.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Chinese Philosophy*, also recognized some of the Mohists’ contributions.

Theory of Chinese Thought went further in articulating the Mohists' role as a driving force—perhaps the single most influential driving force—in classical Chinese intellectual discourse. He identified numerous presuppositions common to Confucius and Mohism and showed how the early Mohists articulated much of the shared conceptual framework of pre-imperial thought. Hansen was probably the first to point out that, by our contemporary understanding of what philosophy is—not merely ethical instruction, but a process of critically questioning values, concepts, and beliefs while seeking answers supported by good arguments—it is Mòzǐ, not Confucius, who deserves the title of China's first philosopher.¹⁵

This book is intended as a contribution to what Hansen called the philosophical “rehabilitation” of Mohism.¹⁶ It does not aim to establish that Mohist positions in any particular area are correct—I myself disagree with many aspects of Mohist ethics—but to show that, properly understood, numerous features of Mohist thought are interesting, instructive, and worthy of attention. As Franklin Perkins remarks, in an introduction to a recent collection of essays on Mohism, “in a global philosophical dialogue, the Mòzǐ has valuable things to say.”¹⁷ One aim of this book is to help us see more clearly what some of those things might be.

In particular, I hope to elucidate the Mohist ethical theory—notable as history's first version of consequentialism and perhaps the earliest systematic normative theory of any kind—and to show that it is both more plausible than it is typically taken to be and deeply instructive as to the shape a convincing normative theory might take. It does not, as often suggested, have the unappealing consequence that we have an equal moral obligation to promote the well-being of all persons, regardless of their relation to us.¹⁸ To the contrary, it emphasizes the central place of special kinship and political relationships in human life while also systematically developing the fundamental moral insight that the right way to live must take into account not only those with whom we share such relationships, but those with whom we have no personal or political relationship at all. An especially significant achievement of Mohist ethics, which I will explore at length, is their discovery of the centrality of impartiality—and, indirectly, universalizability—in ethical theory. Despite their tremendous contributions on this point, however, the Mohists' approach to articulating impartiality constitutes a major flaw in their ethics. I will examine this issue in detail and argue that the Mohists' mishandling of impartiality is among the most instructive features of their ethical theory.

A second topic to which I will devote special attention is the Mohists' fascinating non-mentalistic, non-subjectivist psychology, which permeates their epistemology, political theory, and ethics. The Mohists regard perception, inference, and action as based not on an innate capacity to form inner, mental representations or to grasp logical relations between propositions, but on the public, often socially acquired ability to distinguish different kinds of things and respond to each kind in a consistent way. This

¹⁵ *Daoist Theory*, 97.

¹⁶ *Daoist Theory*, 95.

¹⁷ Perkins, “Introduction: Reconsidering the *Mozi*,” 380.

¹⁸ Writers who take the Mohists to be committed to this claim include Nivison, *Ways*, 133; Táng, *Introduction*, 115; Càì, *Mohist Philosophy*, 44; Wong, “Universalism,” 251; Liu, *Introduction*, 110; and Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics*, 179.

model is the basis for a plausible philosophy of mind and action intriguingly different from the familiar individualist, subjectivist, and representationalist picture that has come down to us from the Judeo-Christian tradition and Enlightenment conceptualism. It is valuable both for its inherent interest and as a potential inspiration for contemporary philosophy of psychology. The failure to recognize the place of this model in Mohist thought is among the main factors driving the pervasive misunderstanding of their moral psychology.¹⁹

This book seeks to fill a gap in the literature on early Chinese thought by providing an extended, in-depth discussion of Mohism from a philosophical perspective. To my knowledge, it is one of only a handful of monographs on the Mohists in English and the first by a philosopher.²⁰ It is intended as a philosophical study, not a work of intellectual history. Hence I devote only limited attention to the Mohists' historical background, to philological issues, and to relations between the Mohists and other thinkers. The content is deliberately imbalanced, in that the book devotes much attention to aspects of Mohist thought I find philosophically rich while touching only briefly on, or sometimes passing over entirely, other features that, despite their historical or anthropological value, seem philosophically less interesting. A further imbalance is that to address Mohist ethical and political thought in the detail it deserves, I have had to forgo an originally planned chapter on later Mohist philosophy of language, epistemology, and logic. This seems a reasonable tradeoff, since I have previously published an easily accessible chapter-length account of later Mohist thought, which readers are invited to consult.²¹

I have tried to write the book to appeal to a broad audience, so that it will have something to offer university undergraduates and general readers as well as specialists. As a result, in a few places professional scholars may find the exposition too elementary, while in others general readers may find it too technical. Overall, however, I hope to have maintained a satisfactory balance between accessibility and depth.

Throughout the book, all translations from Chinese sources are my own. To complement this philosophical study, I have also completed a new, abridged translation of the *Mòzǐ*, which is forthcoming. Readers may wish to consult previous English translations of Mohist ethical and political writings as well. These include Yi-Pao Mei, tr., *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*, which can be accessed on line at Ctext.org, a rich electronic resource created by Donald Sturgeon; Ian Johnston, tr., *The Mozi*; and John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, tr., *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings*. Partial translations are available in Burton Watson, tr., *Mozu: Basic Writings* and Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Readers will find that my renderings of key Mohist philosophical terms often diverge from those of previous writers, such as my use of “inclusive care” where most translations have “universal love” or “impartial love.” These interpretive choices are

¹⁹ Few writers have appreciated the consequences of the Mohist view of perception, reasoning, and action. The prominent exception is Hansen (*Daoist Theory*, 140–43).

²⁰ The others are Mei, *Neglected Rival*; Tseu, *Moral Philosophy*; Graham, *Later Mohist*, which mainly concerns the “Dialectics”; and Lowe, *Religious Blueprint*, which is a Sinological dissertation, not a philosophical study.

²¹ See Fraser, “Mohist Canons,” available on line in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

explained in the relevant chapters below.

I have rendered all Chinese terms in the Hànyǔ Pīnyīn romanization system. The correct pronunciation of Hànyǔ Pīnyīn is typically not obvious to speakers of English, so I encourage readers to consult one of the many useful pronunciation guides available on line. The Chinese characters for key terms are included at their first appearance in each chapter, and characters for all Chinese terms and proper names appear in a glossary at the end.