Mohism and Motivation

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Mòzǐ and his followers saw themselves largely as social and political reformers, dedicated to eliminating war, eradicating poverty, and promoting prosperity and social order. The aim of Mohist ethical and political thought thus was not just to elucidate the *dào* 道 (the right way or norms), but to lead society as a whole to follow it. Despite this practical orientation, however, the Mohists are widely regarded as having only a thin, crude view of human motivation — one so simplistic as to leave them without a plausible account of how to lead people to practice their *dào*.[1] The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the Mohist view of motivation and to defend it against this criticism. I will show that in fact the *Mòzǐ* presents a rich, nuanced picture of a variety of sources of moral and prudential motivation that the Mohists can reasonably view as sufficient to guide people to practice the core tenets of their ethics. The widespread opinion to the contrary is probably due mainly to two factors. One is a misunderstanding of just what Mohist ethics demands, which I address briefly in the first section below. The other is a failure to understand the Mohist conception of action and motivation, which I address in the subsequent section. One reason for this failure may be a tendency in the literature to focus on ideas prominent in Mencian and Xunzian discussions of motivation, such as the role of spontaneous affective responses or that of desires arising from people's nature (*xìng* 性). Because the Mohist approach does not center on affects or desires, it is considered simplistic. As I will show, however, once the Mohists' conception of action and motivation is elucidated, they can be seen to have a sophisticated, defensible approach to motivation.

Let me begin by clarifying the conceptual and methodological basis of my discussion. By "motivation," I will refer broadly to psychological states and dispositions that play, or potentially play, a direct causal role in producing action. For the purposes of this essay, I will

include beliefs and analogous cognitive states among an agent's motivating states, since, as we will see below, the Mohists themselves seem to do so. Besides such states and dispositions, a treatment of motivation will typically also touch on a range of other psychological traits and capacities less directly connected to action. I take it that to be justified, claims about motivation or about these other aspects of human psychology need not state exceptionless, universal truths, but only credible generalizations about how people tend to think, feel, and act. The features they describe need not be innate or spontaneous, nor aspects of human *xìng* or nature, however understood. For my present purposes, it is enough that they obtain regularly and widely, and thus count among the conditions that a moral theory or reform program such as the Mohists' can or must work with — what features such a theory or program can take for granted, for instance, and what obstacles or constraints it faces. Thus I take the Mohists' depiction of certain features as widely observed in people as grounds for including them in my interpretation of their view of motivation.

Unlike the three major classical Confucian anthologies—the *Analects* 論語, *Mencius* 孟子, and *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 — the *Mòzǐ* contains relatively few passages that focus specifically on motivation. A likely explanation is that the core Mohist essays are roughly the equivalent of political reform pamphlets, aimed mainly at convincing rulers and officials to adopt Mohist policies. They are neither theoretical treatises (as much of the *Xúnzǐ* is), nor records of a master's day-to-day coaching or instruction (as much of the *Analects* and *Mencius* seems to be). Still, in the course of presenting and defending their ethical and political doctrines, the Mohists frequently make claims about human traits, dispositions, or behavior that bear on the topic of motivation. Other claims they make seem best explained by attributing to them certain implicit assumptions about motivation. My approach here will be to draw some of these explicit claims and implicit assumptions together into a sketch of their view of how to motivate people to practice their *dào*.

In the next section, I outline the nature and content of the Mohist ethical and political project, since we cannot evaluate their view of motivation fairly without understanding just what they hoped to lead people to do. In the following section, I reconstruct their conception of action and contrast it with familiar conceptions based on the practical syllogism and the belief-desire model. I then explain how their understanding of action affects their approach to motivation. The following two sections survey the major motivational techniques the Mohists employ and the sources of motivation on which they rely. The paper concludes with a brief critical evaluation.

The Mohist Reform Program

The Mohists' approach to motivation is intertwined with their ethical and sociopolitical reform program. To understand and evaluate their approach to motivation, then, we need to understand the nature of this program and the normative ideals that they hope people will pursue. In this section, I highlight three aspects of Mohist ethics that are crucial to understanding their practical aims.

First, the Mohists are concerned primarily with social reform, and only secondarily with the individual moral life (Hansen 1992, 108).[2] This is not to suggest that personal moral development is unimportant to them; their doctrinal essays do address individual moral agents, particularly officials of various ranks. But their theoretical and practical focus is social and collectivist. The central question for them is not "How can I be good?" but "What is the *dào,* and how can we collectively lead everyone to follow it?" In their doctrinal essays, at least, their approach to guiding people to practice the *dào* emphasizes political policy and social interaction, rather than individual reflection and self-improvement.[3] One reason for this orientation lies in the nature of moral discourse in their time. Their primary audience, as they saw it, was not individual members of society, but government officials, from rulers of states down to low-level officers, who they hoped would lead society to follow the *dào*. Another

reason is that the Mohists, like most early Chinese thinkers, tended to employ a communitarian, rather than individualist, conception of what it is to be human. They regarded people primarily as members of social groups — specifically, the family or clan and the political community — and not as atomic individuals. A further reason is that central Mohist normative ideals presuppose collective practice of the *dào*. The Mohist ideal of social order (*zhì* 治), for instance, requires collective adherence throughout society to a unified set of moral norms. The norm of inclusive care (*jiān ài* 兼愛) is explicitly reciprocal: people are to "care inclusively about each other and in interaction benefit each other" (15/10–11).[4] Hence a single agent alone cannot practice inclusive care; for the norm to be realized, it must be practiced by the majority of a community. A corollary is that some of the motivational resources the Mohists invoke to explain how people can practice inclusive care — such as people's tendency toward reciprocity — are contingent on others' practicing it as well. For all of these reasons, the Mohist approach to motivation is oriented mainly at leading communities to follow the *dào*. This orientation helps to explain, among other features of their position, why they assign a central role to encouragement and enforcement by political authorities.

A second point is that the ethical norms by which the Mohists seek to reform society are not exceptionally demanding. One factor driving the impression that Mohist moral psychology is untenably simplistic is the assumption that Mohist ethical norms are heroically difficult — so much so that no one could live up to them without elaborate, extensive training (Nivison 1996, 131). Many writers assume, for instance, that Mohist ethics demands complete impartiality toward others, in the sense that we have an equal obligation to benefit all people, regardless of their relationship to us.[5] The Mohists themselves clearly do not regard their *dào* as especially demanding, however. Though they acknowledge that opponents perceive inclusive care as difficult, for instance, they insist that this is a misconception.

Compared with genuinely difficult feats, they claim, inclusive care is actually quite easy to practice (16/81, 15/19). In fact, as I have argued previously, Mohist ethical norms appear to be only moderately stringent, amounting roughly to what many people today would consider basic moral decency (Fraser 2002, sect. 7; cf. Loy 2006, ch. 6).

A few distinctions will help to clarify this point. A famous passage in the *Zhuāngzǐ* indicates that some Mohists sought to emulate the laborious altruism of the mythical sage-king Yǔ (*Zhuāngzǐ* 1956, 33/27ff.). Other early sources make it clear that by the middle of the third century B.C.E., Mohist militias were renowned for fanatical devotion to their cause (Knoblock and Riegel 2000, 487–88; Hé 1998, 1406). However, these texts describe committed Mohist followers, who had dedicated their lives to their moral ideals. Contemporary analogues would be members of an elite military unit, ascetic religious order, or other organization committed to a demanding code of conduct. Just as we do not expect everyone to join the Marines or the Jesuits, the Mohists give no indication that they expect the entire populace to pursue moral sagehood or enlist in a Mohist militia.

The general norms that the Mohists do apply to everyone are those of *rén* 仁 (moral goodness) and *yì* 義 (moral rightness). There is an important distinction between these, however. As a normative ideal, *rén* is more demanding than *yì*. Yet it is probably *yì,* not *rén,* that constitutes the minimal moral standard the Mohists expect everyone to meet. *Yì* is the standard that, according to the Mohists, *Tiān* 天 (Heaven, Nature) intends that people comply with. To fall short of *yì* is to do something wrong and so to be blameworthy. By contrast, to be *rén* is to achieve a degree of moral goodness that goes beyond the threshold of *yì*. A person whose conduct conforms to *yì* yet falls short of *rén* has room for moral improvement, yet may not be blameworthy.

The criterion of *yì* for the Mohists is what *Tiān* intends (27/73), and what *Tiān* intends is only that each individual conform to norms that, if generally followed, would promote the

benefit of all. The norms the *Mòzǐ* specifies include inclusive care (26/22); refraining from war, theft, oppression, and exploitation; sharing labor, knowledge, and resources; performing one's social role conscientiously, thus contributing to social order and economic prosperity; helping to provide for orphans and the childless elderly; and exercising the relational virtues of kindness toward subordinates, loyalty toward superiors, compassion toward one's children, filial devotion toward one's parents, and fraternal love toward siblings (27/14–20, 26/36–38, 28/35–39). By today's standards, all this adds up roughly to being a caring and considerate family member, a responsible member of society, and a decent neighbor willing to offer others a helping hand and to contribute to charity for those with no other means of support. The Mohist conception of *yì* may be more demanding than a minimalist conception of morality on which we have only negative obligations to others. But I suggest it is at most only slightly more demanding than the generally accepted morality of most citizens of contemporary liberal societies.

The third point is that people's natural tendency to feel special affection for and obligations toward family and friends presents no obstacle to the practice of Mohist ethics, because the Mohists endorse distinctive concern for and treatment of those closest to us. As noted above, the Mohists are often taken to hold that we should be impartially concerned for everyone, regardless of their relationship to us, and so should devote no special attention or treatment to our family, friends, or community. The main grounds for this interpretation are that the *Mòzǐ* characterizes inclusive care as being "for others as for oneself" (16/10) and as viewing others' states, families, and persons "as one views one's own" (15/11–12). Let's grant that these formulations depict a form of equal consideration for all. Even so, given what else the Mohists say about inclusive care, it clearly is not only compatible with, but actually requires special caring attitudes and treatment toward those with whom we have close personal relationships. For the Mohists justify inclusive care by arguing that it promotes,

among other goods, the practice of the relational virtues — virtues they associate with the core social relationships of ruler and subject, father and son, and elder and younger brother (Fraser 2002, sect. 7). They hold that inclusive care is right partly because, for example, it leads sons to exercise filial devotion to their fathers and subjects to exercise loyalty toward their rulers (15/13, 16/85). Virtues such as filiality and loyalty are normally understood to entail distinctive emotions, obligations, and treatment toward those to whom we stand in the relevant relationships, and nothing suggests the Mohists think otherwise.

In advocating that we be committed "for others as for oneself," then, the Mohists do not intend to displace traditional kinship and political relationships from the center of social and ethical life. What they probably mean is that we should have the same degree of consideration for others' welfare that we do for our own. "Inclusive care" amounts to a label for the attitudes and conduct of an agent who has such equal consideration for all and accordingly has internalized a *dào* that promotes the welfare of all. It contrasts not with special concern for the welfare of one's family and associates — people simply could not be filial or loyal without special concern for their parents and associates — but with the attitude that others can be disregarded and freely harmed in pursuit of our interests (15/12–15).

The Mohist Conception of Action and Motivation

A key to understanding the Mohists' approach to motivation is to grasp their conception of practical reasoning and the psychological antecedents of action. This conception is the basis for their view of how to prepare people psychologically to act in a normatively correct way — that is, how to educate and motivate them to follow the *dào*.

The conception of action in the Western tradition has been deeply influenced by argument-like models of practical reasoning. Aristotle's practical syllogism is one such model; the belief-desire model is another.[6] Such models inspire the view that the psychological antecedents of action are states whose content corresponds to premises in

pieces of practical reasoning. According to the belief-desire model, for instance, action springs from a combination of a cognitive state — a belief — represented by one premise in a practical argument and a conative state — a desire or other pro-attitude — represented by another.

The Mohists are similar to Aristotle, Hume, and other Western thinkers in tying their conception of the structure of action to their conception of the structure of practical reasoning. However, their conception of the structure of reasoning is significantly different from Aristotle's and from the sentential, deductive models that inspire the belief-desire model. The Mohist conception of reasoning is not syllogistic, nor even deductive. It is analogical and concerns mainly terms, not sentences. The Mohists understand reasoning as a process of discrimination or distinction-drawing, which they call *biàn* 辯. Discrimination typically proceeds on the basis of comparisons of similarity to a model or standard (*fǎ* 法), resulting in an attitude of deeming something *shì* 是 (this, right) or *fēi* 非 (not, wrong) (35/6). These attitudes are typically indexed to a contextually specified kind (*lèi* 類) of thing, denoted by a general term, such as "ox" or "horse." They correspond functionally to the judgment that an object is or is not of that kind, and thus that the term for the kind can correctly be predicated of it. The kind may be an aggregate of similar concrete objects, such as oxen or horses, or an aggregate of events or situations that share some abstract status, such as being *yì* (morally right). Examples of particular *shì* or *fēi* attitudes, then, include the attitude, directed at some animal, that it is or is not an ox and the attitude, directed at some course of conduct, that it is or is not morally right. Besides alluding to a contextually specified kind, *shì* and *fēi* can also be used to refer generally to anything that is correct, right, or prudent, on the one hand, or incorrect, wrong, or imprudent, on the other. Thus they can also be construed as general "pro" and "con" attitudes.

Consistent with this model of reasoning and judgment, the Mohists apply what I call a

discrimination-and-response model of action. The structure of action, as they understand it, is that the agent discriminates an object, a situation, or a course of conduct as *shì* or *fēi,* typically with respect to some kind, and then responds to it according to norms appropriate for interacting with things of that kind. For example, an agent might distinguish an animal as *shì* with respect to the kind *ox* and then respond to it by calling it "ox" or using it to pull a cart. Or the agent might distinguish some course of conduct as *fēi* with respect to the kind *yì* (morally right) and respond by condemning or refraining from it. What drives action is a combination of *shì-fēi* 是非 attitudes and the norm-governed responses to various kinds of things that these attitudes prompt. Some of these responses may be innate, such as an infant's response to food. Most are probably acquired in roughly the same way we learn manners or skills. At the highest, most abstract level, when no specific kind is invoked by the context, *shì* and *fēi* themselves can directly prompt action via their role as generic pro and con attitudes (Hansen 1992, 120). Aside from occasional instances of akratic thought or action, then, to deem something *shì* is to be motivated to do, endorse, or promote it, while to deem it *fēi* is to be motivated to avoid, condemn, or eliminate it.

Shì and *fēi* are not the only motivating attitudes the Mohists recognize. They also see action as sometimes following from a state they call "desire" (*yù* 欲). For instance, they claim that *Tiān*'s (Heaven's) conduct provides evidence of its desires (4/10–13), and they assume that people who desire to do what is right will act on the conclusions of cogent normative reasoning (19/62–64, 25/86–88). They also sometimes refer to action as following from the attitudes of "intention" (*yì* 意) or "commitment" (*zhì* 志) (46/14–15, 49/59). When discussing their ethical and political proposals, however, the motivating attitudes they generally focus on are those of deeming things *shì* or *fēi*.

The conception of action I have been sketching is illustrated by the Mohists' hypothetical account of the state of nature that obtained before the advent of political society.

According to the Mohists, people in the state of nature are strongly, even obstinately committed to their personal conception of *yì* 義, or what is right. Since different people's conceptions of *yì* disagree, however, this commitment leads to conflict and eventually violent disorder. The Mohists describe people's attitudes by saying that they "*shì* their *yì* and on that basis *fēi* others' *yì,* and thus *fēi* each other" (11/2). That is, they each deem their *yì* to be *shì,* on those grounds deem others' *fēi,* and thus fall into a cycle of reciprocal condemnation. A key observation is that people's attitude of deeming their *yì* to be *shì* and others' *fēi* is accompanied by a strong motivation to act on their convictions, which ultimately leads to social turmoil. This correlation between *shì-fēi* attitudes and conduct is underscored by the tight link Mohist political theory draws between emulating the *shì-fēi* attitudes and statements (*yán* 言) of political superiors, who serve as moral role models, and emulating their conduct (*xíng* 行).

The Mohist position that *shì-fēi* attitudes are typically sufficient to move agents to act converges in some respects with the views of influential contemporary writers who argue that rational or moral agents normally tend to do what they believe there is most reason to do (Nagel 1970, 27–32; Korsgaard 1986; Scanlon 1998, 33–36). Other things being equal, moral agents do not need some further motivation to move them to act beyond their discrimination (*biàn*), based on what they hold are compelling grounds, that something is right or *shì*.[7] That they sometimes fail to act as they deem best shows only that a breakdown has occurred between motivation and action, not that they lack sufficient motivation.

The theoretical role of *shì* and *fēi* attitudes corresponds at least partly to that of judgment or belief, and the Mohists apparently hold that these attitudes alone can be sufficient to motivate action. Hence their position can to some extent be characterized as anti-Humean.[8] However, they do not necessarily hold that purely cognitive attitudes alone are sufficient for motivation, without the influence of conative or affective attitudes. Without

question, *shì-fēi* attitudes generally have a cognitive aspect or component. The Mohists see them as shaped by cogent reasoning, and indeed they play a central role in the Mohist conception of cognition. To recognize a square object as square or an ox as an ox is to distinguish it as *shì* with respect to the kind *square* or *ox.* In some contexts, *shì-fēi* attitudes may verge on being purely cognitive. But in ethical contexts, they can express approval or disapproval (e.g., 17/1), and so they may also have a conative aspect, intertwined with their role as general pro and con attitudes. They may have an affective aspect as well. When the Mohists condemn as *fēi* such conduct as theft, murder, war, and exploitation of the poor, their words ring with moral indignation (e.g., 32/22–23). Conversely, when they approve a practice as *shì,* their claims often carry a tone of moral satisfaction, even exultation (16/15). In their account of the state of nature, they envision people's *fēi* attitudes toward others as motivationally so potent that they lead to violence. Family members' *fēi* attitudes toward each other spark resentment intense enough to overwhelm familial love and respect, driving them to split up (11/3).[9] Given the passion apparently associated with *shì-fēi* attitudes in morally fraught contexts, they probably either incorporate affective elements or are closely associated with affective states.[10] Most likely, they are neither purely cognitive, conative, nor affective, but, depending on the context, may incorporate all three aspects.[11] In focusing on the motivational role of *shì-fēi* attitudes, then, the Mohists are probably not overlooking conative and affective attitudes. Rather, they may subsume these within the scope of *shì-fēi* attitudes.[12]

The Mohists consider the ability to draw and act on *shì-fēi* distinctions properly a form of competence or know-how (*zhī* 知), akin in some respects to the ability to perform a skill. Hence their primary explanation for an agent's failure to act properly is that the agent lacks the relevant know-how. As they understand it, such failure is typically due not to insufficient motivation, but to ignorance or incompetence in distinguishing *shì* from *fēi* and

responding accordingly. Mohist texts depict three overlapping types of cases of such ignorance or incompetence. The first occurs when the agent simply does not know how to distinguish *shì* from *fēi* properly, as when people fail to distinguish wars of aggression as *fēi* and even deem them *yì* (morally right) (17/9–13, 28/50). The texts especially call attention to cases of partial incompetence, in which people distinguish *shì* from *fēi* properly in some but not all relevant instances — as when they rightly condemn theft and murder but wrongly support unprovoked warfare aimed at seizing the wealth and slaughtering the people of other states. Another is when they apply a norm such as "employing the capable" properly in some cases, as when hiring a professional bowyer to repair a bow or veterinarian to cure a sick horse, but not others, as when they appoint an inexperienced relative to an official post (10/10–20). Such cases represent a failure "to know (*zhī*) the distinction (*biàn*) between right (*yì*) and not-right" (17/13).

The second type of case is when an agent verbally draws distinctions correctly but then fails to act properly. The agent may mouth the right words about morality, yet lack the practical know-how to reliably distinguish and choose what is right and reject what is wrong (19/4–6, 47/23–26). These are cases in which agents' conduct (*xíng*) fails to conform to their statements (*yán*). To count as having moral know-how, the agent must respond to *shì-fēi* distinctions not just by making the appropriate sort of statements, but by reliably performing appropriate actions.

A third type of incompetence is when an agent endorses the *dào* and undertakes to act on it, yet fails to do so. The agent commits to the *dào,* and presumably has some grasp of the distinctions and responses it entails, but falters in carrying it out, perhaps because of doubt or confusion about what to do, a lack of self-confidence, or motivational inertia. In the Mohist theoretical scheme, this sort of failure to follow a *dào* one endorses is comparable to akrasia, or weakness of will, since it amounts to a failure to do what one intends or deems best.

However, rather than framing the problem as a failure to act on one's best judgment or to carry out one's intention to perform some discrete act, the Mohists view it as a lack of ability or competence in carrying out a *dào* one has embarked on. One *Mòzǐ* passage addresses the issue as follows: "If you undertake to do *yì* (right) but are not able, you must not abandon the *dào*. To give an analogy, a carpenter who saws [a straight edge] but is not able does not abandon the marking line" (47/20–21). The emphasis on ability (*néng* 能), paired with the carpentry analogy, suggests that — as in the second type of case above, when people say the right things but then fail to act properly — the Mohists ascribe this sort of akratic failure to a form of incompetence, not insufficient motivation. This incompetence is analogous to a deficiency in performing a skill, such as sawing a straight edge. So they probably see the remedy for akratic failure as analogous to that for ineptitude in a skill: the agent should continue training himself to recognize and act on evaluative distinctions properly, with the *dào* as his guide, until he can do so reliably — just as the novice carpenter should keep practicing his sawing technique, with the marking line as his guide, until he masters his craft. For the carpenter, the eventual outcome is skill mastery; for the moral agent, it is virtue.[13]

The discrimination-and-response model should not be confused with psychological behaviorism, the view that action can be explained without appeal to mental states and controlled simply through conditioning. The model does not imply that the Mohists see agents as capable only of primitive, unreflective pro/con attitudes and conditioned responses. The point is that their conception of the psychological states and processes that produce action is different from conceptions associated with the practical syllogism or the belief-desire model. On their model, our most basic psychological operation is one of distinguishing different kinds of things and adopting *shì* or *fēi* attitudes toward them accordingly. The content and consequences of these attitudes vary depending on the context. Reasoning lies in adopting further *shì* or *fēi* attitudes on the basis of perceived analogical relations between

things. This model of cognition and reasoning is at least initially plausible, given that discriminating between kinds is simply pattern recognition, a basic cognitive process that underlies many more complex processes.

Nor does the Mohist approach to action entail a concern only with outward conformity to the *dào,* rather than character development aimed at following the *dào* spontaneously, from virtuous motives.[14] The Mohists are clearly concerned not simply to modify what people say and do, but to have them develop the underlying *shì-fēi* attitudes that motivate proper statements (*yán*) and conduct (*xíng*) (11/9–22). To suggest they are concerned only with behavior, and not motives or character, would be to overlook the role of *shì-fēi* attitudes. Having the right *shì-fēi* attitudes just is having the right motives, and developing reliable moral know-how just is developing a virtuous character. The Mohists' aim is for people to internalize the relevant *shì-fēi* distinctions and normative responses so that they acquire a reliable disposition to respond, smoothly and directly, to morally pertinent situations according to the *dào.* Of course, pending development of the appropriate *shì-fēi* attitudes, the Mohists might provisionally settle for behavioral conformity, partly as a second-best outcome and partly as a means of habituating agents into the right attitudes.[15] Thus in some contexts, as we will see below, they appeal to prudential, non-moral considerations either to help motivate people or to show that those who do not yet endorse their *dào* on moral grounds nevertheless have other good reasons to follow it (or at least not to oppose it). But the fundamental aim is to win people's moral approval of the Mohist *dào* and to bring their evaluative and motivating attitudes fully into line with it. This stance is clearly reflected in *Mòzǐ* passages that tie moral worth to action-guiding attitudes such as intentions (*yì* 意) and commitments (*zhì* 志) and to robust, stable aspects of agents' character (see, e.g., 46/12–15, 48/84, 49/36–38).[16]

Framing the Practical Project

The Mohists' model of action and motivation affects how they frame the practical project of leading people to follow the *dào*. Because they see *shì-fēi* attitudes as the key form of morally relevant motivation, they view this project as one of guiding people to distinguish *shì-fēi* correctly and to act accordingly.

The overall project can be divided into two parts. The primary task is to use education, including persuasion and training, to modify how people distinguish *shì-fēi*. In some respects, education can be regarded as a process of redirecting existing motivation, rather than developing new motivation. It aims to redirect people's existing general motivation to do what they deem *shì* by convincing them that courses of action they previously did not endorse are indeed *shì*. It also appeals to motivating attitudes the Mohists assume are shared by all — such as valuing social order (*zhì* 治) — and seeks to redirect these toward practicing the Mohist *dào*. In other respects, however, education can be regarded as producing new motivating attitudes, as it may lead people to acquire entirely new habits of distinguishing *shì-fēi,* some of them perhaps in areas of conduct that they previously did not attend to. It may also reshape people's motivational structure in various ways. For instance, it may eliminate inappropriate motivation by helping people see that certain of their *shì-fēi* attitudes are mistaken, as when the Mohists seek to show war-mongering rulers and their supporters that wars of aggression are in fact *fēi,* not *yì* (morally right) (17/12–14). Or it may remove motivational obstacles by showing people that certain apparently conflicting attitudes actually converge with the *dào,* as when the Mohists seek to show that filial devotion is consistent with inclusive care (16/64–72).

Because *shì-fēi* attitudes are normally sufficient to produce action, successful persuasion and education will be sufficient to lead most people to conform to moral norms with some degree of reliability. People occasionally fail to act on their *shì-fēi* attitudes,

however. So the second major part of the practical project is to improve the reliability with which people translate *shì-fēi* attitudes into action. This task can be conceived of abstractly as one of strengthening people's character. More concretely, the aim is to improve their moral competence or know-how so that they more smoothly and reliably perform the actions that follow normatively from their *shì-fēi* attitudes. This part of the project is carried out through concrete practice in acting properly, backed by moral coaching in the form of instructions and encouragement, presentation of role models, praise and material incentives for success, and criticism and disincentives for failure (11/9–22, 12/12–31). Such coaching may come from social superiors, peers, or oneself.[17] The Mohists recognize that the process of strengthening people's character and moral competence is gradual, not instantaneous. They claim only that leading people to practice inclusive care would be much easier than getting them to perform more difficult practices — such as dieting to the point of starvation or wearing uncomfortable clothing — that rulers in the past nevertheless led their subjects to adopt "within a generation" (16/80).[18]

Given this conception of their practical project, the central question to ask in evaluating the Mohist approach to motivation is whether they offer a plausible account of how people can acquire the discrimination-and-response dispositions — that is, the virtues — needed to practice their *dào* reliably. The next two sections aim to show that they do.

Motivational Techniques

The Mohists either employ or propose to employ at least five interrelated techniques for educating and training people to distinguish *shì-fēi* properly and act accordingly. All five, I think, are widely agreed to be effective methods of guiding and modifying people's conduct.

The most prominent of these techniques is probably normative persuasion and explanation. Since *shì* and *fēi* attitudes have motivational force, a convincing argument or

explanation that some practice is *shì* or *fēi* will generally be sufficient to move agents to perform or avoid it. This point partly accounts for the emphasis on normative argument throughout Mohist ethical writings. It is also reflected in the concluding summaries of many Mohist essays, which urge people who desire to do what is morally good and right, or who desire the goods that Mohist ethics takes to be criteria of morality, to carefully "examine" Mohist doctrines (e.g., 10/46, 19/63, 25/86). The underlying assumption is probably that if people evaluate for themselves the grounds for Mohist teachings, seeking to understand them and distinguish whether and why they are *shì* or *yì* (morally right), they will generally be led to practice them.[19]

A second, interrelated technique is to establish explicit verbal teachings or statements (*yán* 言) and verbal or non-verbal models (*fǎ* 法) by which people can direct their conduct. By committing to a statement or model as a guide to conduct, people become motivated to act in line with it, and repeatedly doing so trains them to act on the values it articulates. The Mohists allude to this technique when they remark that statements (*yán*) that are effective in guiding conduct should be repeated frequently (46/37–38, 47/18–19).[20] It is reflected in their concern with evaluating whether particular statements (*yán*), such as those of fatalists (35/5) or of advocates of rich burials and prolonged mourning (25/12), are right or wrong, and thus whether they should be taken as a guide to conduct. It is also reflected in the emphasis throughout the *Mòzǐ* on guiding and evaluating conduct by comparison with clear, measurement-like models (*fǎ*), akin to the carpenter's setsquare or wheelwright's compass (26/41ff.).[21] Among the models the Mohists introduce are general goods, such as "the benefit of the state, clan, and people" (35/9); general norms of conduct, such as "inclusively caring for each other and in interaction benefiting each other" (15/10); concrete guidelines, such as detailed specifications for burial practices (25/83); and exemplary figures or role models, such as the historical sage-kings (35/8) and the "superior person" (16/26). Guiding and

checking one's performance by such models amounts to a training process that habituates agents to follow the *dào*.

A third approach to motivating people to act according to the *dào,* intertwined with the preceding, is model emulation. The Mohists seek to harness people's tendency to emulate admired role models, including political leaders, exemplary historical figures such as the sage-kings, and ideal types such as the "morally good person" or the "filial son." They explicitly employ forms of model emulation to justify their doctrines (25/1–16), demonstrate their feasibility (16/47–63), and educate people to follow them (11/9–22). I suggest that in all three of these sorts of cases they also implicitly invoke the motivational power of model emulation. People are likely to become motivated to follow the Mohist *dào* because it is the *dào* of respected leaders, heroic historical figures, and paradigmatic archetypes.

A fourth method of motivation is social encouragement and pressure, from both superiors and peers. Mohist political theory proposes a society-wide scheme for moral education and training in which virtuous political leaders serve as moral teachers, instructing people to conform to a unified set of moral norms and setting a good example for them to follow, while members of society provide positive and negative reinforcement by praising each other's good conduct and criticizing transgressions (11/9–13).

A fifth, final technique is material incentives and disincentives. To help ensure conformity to the *dào* even among those who are not motivated by normative considerations or social pressure, the political system also incorporates material rewards and penalties for proper or improper conduct. The Mohists expressly state that the aim of criminal punishment is not retribution, but to bring into the fold those who will not identify with political leaders in following unified moral norms (11/24–25, 12/48–49).

Sources of Motivation

The Mohists identify at least six distinct sources of motivation that they seek to bring

into play through the techniques just described. All six may contribute to a particular agent's overall motivation to practice the *dào*.[22]

Perhaps the most prominent source of motivation for the Mohists is people's normative attitudes. As we have seen, the Mohists take *shì-fēi* attitudes to be inherently motivating. Since whatever people deem *yì* (morally right) they will normally also deem *shì*, the motivational force of *shì-fēi* attitudes carries over to the distinction between *yì* and not-*yì*: people are normally motivated to do, endorse, or defend what they deem *yì* and to avoid, condemn, or prevent what they deem not-*yì*. The motivational role of the *rén* 仁 versus not-*rén* (morally good versus bad) distinction is similar, though perhaps more complex. Conceivably, the attitude that something is *rén* may motivate people to endorse and defend it, without feeling compelled to pursue it themselves. However, Mohist argument strategies make it clear that people are expected to find the *rén* person's deeming something *shì* or *fēi* convincing grounds for deeming it *shì* or *fēi* themselves and becoming motivated accordingly (15/1–15, 32/1–7).

Numerous passages in the *Mòzǐ* illustrate the assumption that distinguishing something as *yì* or not-*yì* normally motivates agents to act accordingly. Most prominent is the account of the hypothetical state of nature, discussed above. Other examples include a passage claiming that people will fight to the death over a statement (*yán*) because they value *yì* over everything else and another claiming that anyone would give a hand up to a worker struggling with a heavy load, because doing so is *yì* (47/1–3, 47/43–44).[23] Particularly telling is the Mohists' explanation of why war-mongering rulers and their supporters wage immoral wars of conquest: they do not know that doing so is morally bad and wrong, but instead take their actions to be *yì* (17/9–14, 19/4–6, 28/50–55). The rhetorical strategy of the Mohists' central moral argument against such wars rests on the assumption that how people distinguish *yì* from not-*yì* determines their conduct. The argument aims to show that, like robbery and

murder, such wars are not-*yì* (immoral), for if rulers were to deem them not-*yì,* they would desist from them.

Besides a formal commitment to doing what they deem *yì,* according to the Mohists, people also share substantive beliefs about *yì* that can be expected to help motivate them to follow the *dào*. Mohist political theory assumes, for instance, that people share the conviction that *yì* comprises public, objective norms of conduct to which everyone should conform, that such a unified *yì* is a prerequisite for social order, and that a unified *yì* can be achieved only by having everyone in society obey the leadership of morally worthy political authorities (Fraser 2008, 440–44).

A second source of motivation to which the Mohists appeal is widely shared values that they contend are promoted by their *dào*. They assume that most people value social order, economic prosperity, and sufficient population, the goods they identify as constituting "the benefit of the world," their criterion of what is morally right. One component of social order, as they understand it, is the exercise of the relational virtues, goods that again they assume most people value. Hence they plausibly hold that people's pre-existing motivation to promote these goods carries over into motivation to practice the Mohist *dào*.

A third important source of motivation is prudential self-interest, in the broad sense of an interest in both one's own welfare and that of one's immediate kin. That self-interest is a common, even universal motive is presupposed by the "Caretaker" and "Ruler" arguments defending the "applicability" of inclusive care (16/22ff., 16/35ff.) (Fraser 2008, 449–51).[24] Self-interest also grounds the Mohists' belief in the power of social and material incentives and disincentives to modify people's attitudes and conduct — though only, they specify, if these are perceived as distributed fairly (12/52–55), with equal opportunity for all (8/9–14), and in a way that makes people feel cared for, rather than merely used as means (9/23–24). The Mohists expect self-interest to converge with, and perhaps contribute to, people's

motivation to practice their ethics, since they hold that their *dào* is consistent with and even tends to promote self-interest. One's own interests count among "the benefit of all," the Mohists' basic criterion of morality. So morally right practices are expected to promote one's own interests as much as everyone else's.

A further source of motivation engaged by Mohist ethical norms is people's general tendency to reciprocate beneficial or detrimental attitudes and conduct (15/18–19, 16/70–71). The abstract phrasing the Mohists use to describe this tendency — "Those who care about others will surely be cared about" — suggests they expect not only those with whom we have previously interacted directly, but people in general to treat us as we treat others. This tendency is thus a potentially powerful source of motivation that converges with the norm of inclusive care. For as we saw earlier, inclusive care is a reciprocal ideal: it calls for us each to care about everyone else such that we interact in ways that benefit each other. A tendency toward reciprocity thus means that people are predisposed toward just the sort of attitudes and conduct that constitute the practice of inclusive care. Of course, this tendency is only a formal inclination to respond to others in kind, whether they have treated us well or badly. It is not a substantive inclination to care about and benefit each other. Still, it does predispose people to sustain the sort of virtuous cycle of care and benefit that the Mohist *dào* calls for.[25]

A fifth important source of motivation is people's inclination to respect and follow leaders (16/72–81). According to the Mohists, an effective political leader can motivate people to carry out difficult, even life-threatening acts, let alone follow moral norms that are not particularly stringent and promote the benefit of all. They emphasize, however, that such motivation is conditional on people's confidence that the leader governs fairly and in the public interest. If people perceive that their ruler fails to meet these criteria, they will ally together in resistance against him (12/53–55). The motivational force of a leader's influence is thus constrained and, when the political system functions properly, reinforced by a sixth

and final source of motivation, people's tendency to seek peer approval. The Mohists emphasize that people live together in communities, and community approval or disapproval ultimately has a greater influence on their conduct than any reward or penalty from a ruler whose judgment the community rejects (12/56–59).

In the ideal Mohist political society, the ruler employs the techniques sketched in the preceding section to govern in such a way that all six of these sources of motivation converge to support practice of the *dào*. He explains, exemplifies, and enforces unified norms of conduct grounded in values people either already share or find it easy to endorse, thus winning their respect and support. He sets forth explicit statements and models as guides to the norms and brings into play people's tendency to conform to authority and seek peer approval. By fairly and reliably enforcing the norms, he gives miscreants and free riders an incentive to cooperate and prevents them from harming the interests of the morally conscientious. He thus helps to ensure that conformity to the *dào* converges with self-interest and that people's tendency toward reciprocity is engaged in a beneficial rather than harmful direction.[26]

Concluding Remarks

Is the Mohist approach to action and motivation plausible? I think the Mohists' understanding of the structure of action is at least initially plausible, and indeed it may provide rich material for comparative work in the philosophy of action. Their conception of *shì-fēi* attitudes as inherently motivating is highly plausible, as is the view I have tentatively ascribed to them, that such attitudes can comprise both cognitive and conative or affective aspects. The five motivational techniques identified from their texts I think are widely agreed to be effective. Of course, we might question whether some are as powerful as the Mohists claim. For educated adults, for instance, model emulation and encouragement from political leaders may be less compelling than the Mohists think. But commonsense experience

strongly suggests that all of these methods do work, within certain constraints (some of which the Mohists explicitly recognize).

The sources of motivation to which the Mohists appeal probably are indeed genuine features of the typical agent's motivational system. People do tend to be motivated to act on what they endorse as right.[27] They do tend to share at least some of the values the Mohists appeal to, and they obviously tend to pursue self-interest at times. Respect for authority and peer pressure can indeed play a role in motivating action, and people probably do tend to reciprocate others' attitudes and treatment, though perhaps less consistently than the Mohists envision. Even if none of these sources of motivation by itself is perfectly reliable, jointly they could add up to a powerful, reliable inclination to follow the Mohist *dào*. I think we can conclude that the Mohist approach to motivation is rich, nuanced, and reasonably plausible, even if in some respects incomplete.

Difficulties in motivating people to practice the Mohist *dào,* I suggest, probably would not arise from defects in the Mohist approach to motivation, nor from any failure to provide for the character development agents need to become virtuous, reliable performers of the *dào*. Mohist texts sketch a thorough, sophisticated program for character development. Motivational obstacles would be more likely to stem from weaknesses in the Mohists' normative conception of the *dào*. Without question, many aspects of Mohist ethics are compelling. There are good reasons to think that unprovoked wars of aggression are indeed wrong, that others' welfare should count in determining how we act, that society should help provide for the care of orphans, and that impoverished farmers should not be taxed to buy luxuries for despots, to cite just a few Mohist ethical views. But other aspects of the Mohist *dào* — such as their extreme parsimony — are much less convincing. By the Mohists' own lights, the most serious motivational obstacle to practicing an ethical teaching is a cogent argument that it is unjustified. My contention is that the normative justification for some

Mohist doctrines is not wholly persuasive, and thus people may reasonably lack the motivation needed to practice them.[28]

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Notes

[1] See, e.g., Nivison (1996, 96), Shun (1995, 515), Ivanhoe (1998, 451–55), and Van Norden (2007, 309).

[2] I am pleased, in this volume dedicated to Chad Hansen, to acknowledge that this and other points cited below are developments of seminal ideas introduced in his work. Of particular relevance is his discussion of the structure of "*dào* ethics" and the Mohist conception of agency (1992, 140–43).

[3] Personal moral development is a more prominent theme in the Mohist "Dialogues" (books 46–49 of the *Mòzǐ*), especially Book 47, "Valuing Morality."

[4] References to the *Mòzǐ* cite chapter and line numbers in (*Mòzǐ,* 1986).

[5] See, for instance, Nivison (1996, 133), Táng (1986, 115), Cài (1978, 44), Wong (1989, 251), Liu (2006, 110), and Van Norden (2007, 179).

[6] Arguably, the belief-desire model is itself an extension or generalization of the practical syllogism.

[7] In this respect, the Mohist position seems to converge with what Shafer-Landau calls "motivational judgment internalism," the view that if an agent judges an action to be right, the agent is thereby (defeasibly) motivated to perform it (2003, 142–45).

[8] Here I am construing Humeanism as the view that beliefs and desires are mutually independent types of states, that desires are necessary for motivation, and that beliefs are not sufficient to motivate. Anti-Humeanism I construe as the view that beliefs — or in the Mohists' case, states with a theoretical role largely comparable to that of beliefs — can be sufficient to motivate.

[9] Kwong-loi Shun sees the breakup of families in the Mohist state of nature as evidence that the Mohists think people lack affection for kin (1997, 34). But to explain the breakups, they need assume only that people's commitment to conflicting norms can overpower their affection for kin, not that they lack affection.

[10] Hence I think the Mohists would reject the distinction David Nivison draws between doing something one recognizes as morally right and doing it "with the inner *feeling* that it just is the thing to do" (1996, 131, his emphasis). For them, the conviction that something is *shì* or *yì* probably carries with it the sort of feeling Nivison alludes to. The role of *shì-fēi* attitudes also makes it question-begging to criticize the Mohists for neglecting "the problem of my ability to feel the way I would have to to be genuinely moved" to do what is right (Nivison 1996, 96). To have the appropriate *shì-fēi* attitudes just is to be "genuinely moved."

[11] In contemporary ethics, James Griffin has articulated a related position, arguing that cognitive recognition and affective reaction are inextricably intertwined (1996, 20–36).

[12] The Mohists are thus unlikely to advocate guiding action by "dispassionate intellect," as David Wong suggests they do (2002, 453), for they draw no clear distinction between intellect and the passions. The passage Wong cites as emphasizing intellect over emotions in fact instructs followers to guide their conduct by objective norms of moral goodness and rightness rather than their personal emotions and preferences, because the latter are too easily biased (47/19–20). Intellect is not mentioned.

[13] This brief account should be sufficient to rebut Nivison's claim that the Mohists have no explanation of akrasia beyond "sheer perversity" on the agent's part (1996, 84).

[14] For the claim that the Mohists advocate a "wholly outer-directed" ethics and are unconcerned with whether agents act from the right motives, see Wong (2002, 454) and Schwartz (1985, 147).

[15] I thank Loy Hui Chieh (personal communication) for suggesting I include this observation.

[16] For a fuller discussion of these points, see Fraser (forthcoming).

[17] A practitioner of inclusive care is depicted engaging in a bit of self-coaching at 16/26–27.

[18] Nivison holds that for the Mohists, there is "*no* problem of inner psychic restructuring or nurturing needed to make a person morally perfect" (1996, 83, his emphasis). Similarly, Wong suggests that for them "no transformation of human character is needed to act on the right values" (2008, sect. 3). I suggest that, on the contrary, the Mohists' emphasis on education and practice indicates that they consider a process of "nurturing" or "transformation" crucial to ensuring correct performance of the *dào.* They seek to transform how people distinguish *shì-fēi,* the norms they follow in acting on these attitudes, and the reliability with which they do so.

[19] According to Nivison, the Mohists' assumption that people will respond to normative arguments by modifying their attitudes and conduct commits them to a form of voluntarism, namely the view that agents have direct, voluntary control over their motivational states (1996, 130; cf. 83, 93). This interpretation is shared by Ivanhoe (1998, sect. 2) and Slingerland (2003, 128–29). In fact, voluntarism is probably inconsistent with the role the Mohists assign to normative argumentation. Were they voluntarists, the Mohists could not assume that cogent arguments are a reliable means of influencing what people deem *shì* or *fēi* and how they act. For if people's *shì-fēi* attitudes were under their voluntary control, they could at will ignore the force of any argument. Nivison's view seems premised on the assumption that the Mohist reform program is aimed primarily at changing people's affections (1996, 130), which he seems to regard as the only reliable source of morally worthy motivation (1996, 99, 142–45). I am arguing that the Mohists are instead concerned mainly with changing people's *shì-fēi* attitudes and associated patterns of conduct. Note that in calling for people to "examine" their doctrines, the Mohists implicitly allow that conversion to their *dào* may take time and psychological effort.

[20] For further discussion, see Fraser (forthcoming).

[21] On this point, see too Hansen (1992, 99–100).

[22] This section thus rebuts the view that the Mohists take self-interest to be people's predominant source of motivation. For versions of this view, see Nivison (1996, 83), Schwartz (1985, 145), Ivanhoe (1998, sect. 4), and Shun (1997, 35). For a detailed discussion, see Fraser (2008).

[23] Passages such as these also refute skepticism about whether the Mohists ascribe to people any sort of morally worthy motivation. Nivison (1996, 83) and Ivanhoe (1998, sect. 4), for instance, seem to think that for the Mohists there is no such thing as virtuous motivation. Contemporary New Confucian writers have expressed similar views (Cài 1978, 83).

[24] Briefly, both arguments contend that inclusive care can be applied in practice as a social *dào,* because agents concerned to choose a caretaker or a ruler to protect their own or their family's interests would choose a candidate who practices inclusive care over one who disregards others. For detailed discussion, see Fraser (2008).

[25] Thus I suggest that the Mohists' claims about reciprocity answer a worry raised by Kwong-loi Shun, namely that, because they do not regard their *dào* as "the realization of certain inclinations that human beings already share," they may have difficulty explaining how people can come to practice it (1997, 34–35). A tendency toward reciprocity is a shared inclination that is realized in the practice of the Mohist *dào*.

[26] As this section indicates, the Mohist reform project does not require wholesale changes in people's motivation, but mainly seeks to build on existing motivation, particularly people's commitment to *yì* (right) and values such as social order, filiality, and self-interest. The widely repeated claim that the Mohists see human nature as "extremely plastic" (Ivanhoe 1998, 451) or "highly malleable" (Van Norden 2007, 195) is thus unsustainable.

[27] Of course, people's substantive beliefs about *yì* — such as their view on whether *yì* must be unified — may diverge from the Mohists' assumptions, thus potentially reducing their motivation to practice the Mohist *dào*.

[28] I am grateful to Bill Haines, Loy Hui Chieh, Dan Robins, and Timothy O'Leary for extensive comments on earlier versions of this paper.