Mozi

**Introduction**

Mozi 墨子, “Master Mo,” (c. 480–390 B.C.E.) founded what came to be known as the *Mojia “Mohist School”* of philosophy and is the figure around whom the text known as the *Mozi* was formed. His proper name is Mo Di 墨翟. Mozi is arguably the first true philosopher of China known to us. He developed systematic analyses and criticisms of his opponents’ positions and presented an array of arguments in support of his own philosophical views. His interest and faith in argumentation led him and his later followers to study the forms and methods of philosophical debate, and their work contributed significantly to the development of early Chinese philosophy. Mozi himself was probably of quite humble origins. He may have been a member of the craft or artisan class, and his philosophy is distinctively antiaristocratic. Early in life, he may have studied with followers of Confucius. However, he went on to become a serious critic of the emerging Confucian tradition.¹

Mozi was not just a philosopher. He led an organized utopian movement whose members engaged in direct social action, including the military defense of states and cities that he judged to be victims of wars of expansion. He was a strong and charismatic leader who inspired his followers to dedicate themselves to his unique view of social justice. This required them to lead austere and quite demanding lives under his direct control and command. Mozi could tax his followers, judge, and punish them; under certain circum-

¹During Kongzi’s life and after his death, people began to declare themselves followers of Kongzi and his Way. At this point, it makes sense to describe these people as constituting a “Confucian” tradition or “Confucianism.”
stances he could even put them to death. The discipline that defined his movement is reflected in a number of his philosophical positions. His ideal state is highly centralized, orderly, and ideologically unified.

Mozi saw ideological differences and the factionalism they spawned as the primary source of human suffering. Therefore, he sharply criticized the family-based ethical and political system of Kongzi for its inherent partiality and advocated a strict chain of command leading up through a monarch and resting in Heaven. In place of Confucian ren 仁 “benevolence” he advocated a form of state consequentialism, which sought to maximize three basic goods: the wealth, order, and population of the state. As an alternative to Confucian familial love, he argued for jian'ai 兼愛, which is often translated as “universal love” but is better understood as “impartial care.” In Mozi’s view, the central ethical problem was excessive partiality, not a lack of compassion. His primary goal was to change and shape behavior—in particular the way people are treated—not to cultivate emotions, attitudes, or virtues. He showed little interest in what one would call moral psychology and embraced a simple and highly malleable view of human nature. This led him away from the widely observed Chinese concern with self-cultivation. His general lack of appreciation for psychological goods and the need to control desires and shape dispositions and attitudes also led him to reject categorically the characteristic Confucian concern with culture and ritual. These views are expressed in his arguments against elaborate funerals and musical performances, two mainstays of Confucianism.

While Mozi was not a self-cultivationist, he believed that human beings can change even apparently deeply held attitudes and dispositions quickly and easily. For a variety of reasons, he maintained that people could be induced to take up almost any form of behavior, even behavior that was suicidal. He shared a commonly held early Chinese belief in a psychological tendency to respond in kind to the treatment one receives. He further believed that in an effort to win the favor of their rulers, many people are inclined to act as their rulers desire. Those who do not respond to either of these influences can be motivated and controlled by a system of strict rewards and punishments, enforced by the state and guaranteed by the support of Heaven, ghosts, and spirits. Most important of all, Mozi believed that properly crafted rational arguments provide strong if not entirely compelling motivation to act for anyone who is able to understand them; presented with a superior argument, thinking people act accordingly.

Mozi’s later followers lasted until the time of the short-lived Qin dynasty when the movement seems to have suddenly come to an end. The reasons
for this are not well documented, but most likely a paramilitary group such as the Mohists would never have been tolerated by and could not survive during the centralized and militarized regime of the Qin. There is some irony in this as several prominent ideas in the Fajia “Legalist” thought that served as the state ideology of the Qin find clear precedents in Mozi’s philosophy. The later Mohists continued Mozi’s early interests and developed sophisticated systems of logical analysis, mathematics, optics, physics, defensive warfare technology and strategy, and a formal ethic based upon calculations of benefit and harm. All of these philosophical concerns can be found in the early strata of the Mozi that are represented in the following selections.

Chapter Eight: Honoring the Worthy

Our teacher Mozi says, “The kings, dukes, and great officials who now rule the various states all want their states to be wealthy, their populations great, and their administrations orderly, and yet instead of wealth they get poverty, instead of great populations they get meager ones, and instead of order they get chaos. In this way they fundamentally miss what they desire and get what they dislike.”

What is the reason for this?

Our teacher Mozi says, “This is because the kings, dukes, and great officials who rule the various states are not able to honor the worthy and employ the capable in carrying out their rule. And so in a state where there are many worthy men, good order will be secure, and in a state where there are few worthy men good order will be tenuous. This is why it is the proper

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2There are multiple versions of many of the central chapters of the Mozi; these probably reflect the views of the three different sects of Mohism, which appeared after Mozi’s death. I have chosen what I consider to be the most interesting version of each chapter translated here. Our chapter headings refer to the primary divisions in standard editions of the complete text.

3The Mozi is unique among early Chinese philosophical texts in the manner in which it refers to its author. Most philosophers of the period were referred to as “Master so-and-so” by adding the honorific zi 子 after the person’s surname (see Important Terms). In the case of Mo Di 孟子 this would yield “Mozi.” But the Mohists refer to their master as zimozi 子墨子. This probably meant “Our teacher Master Mo.” A similar prefixed use of zi is found in the Gongyang commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals.

4The Mozi often employs the literary device of an unnamed interlocutor to carry forth the dialogue.
'Whenever you hear of anything either good or bad, you must report it to the Son of Heaven. Whenever the Son of Heaven approves of something all of you must also approve of it. Whenever the Son of Heaven condemns something all of you must also condemn it. Eliminate any bad teachings that you may have and study the good teachings of the Son of Heaven. Eliminate any bad practices that you may have and study the good practices of the Son of Heaven. If you do this then how could the world ever become disordered?’

“If we look into how good order was maintained in the world, what do we find? Was it not simply because the Son of Heaven was able to unify the norms followed within the world that he was able to maintain good order in it?

“If the people of the world all obey their superiors on up to the Son of Heaven but do not obey Heaven, then Heavenly disasters still will not cease. Now, the hurricanes and torrential rains that regularly are visited upon the people is how Heaven punishes them for not obeying its will.”

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “In ancient times, sage-kings created the Five Punishments to facilitate good order among their people. These are like the main thread of a skein of silk or the drawstring of a net. They are how the sage-kings gathered in those in the world who refused to obey their superiors.”

Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring

Our teacher Mozi says, “The business of a benevolent person is to promote what is beneficial to the world and eliminate what is harmful.”

Granted that this is true, what are the greatest harms that are being done in the world today? Our teacher Mozi says, “It is things such as great states attacking small states, great families wreaking havoc with lesser families, the strong robbing the weak, the many doing violence to the few, the clever deceiving the ignorant, and the noble acting arrogantly toward the humble. These are some of the great harms being done in the world. In addition, there are rulers who are not kind, ministers who are not loyal, fathers who are not loving, and children who are not filial. These too are some of the great harms being done in the world. There are also those of low character

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13 The Five Punishments are said to be tattooing the face, cutting off the nose, cutting off the feet, castration, and death.
who use weapons, poison, water, and fire to injure and steal from one another. These too are some of the great harms done in the world."

If we try to discover the origin of these different harms, where do we find they come from? Do they come from caring for and benefiting people? This clearly must be rejected as the origin of these harms. We must recognize that they come from hating and stealing from people. If we wish to distinguish those in the world who hate and steal from people, do we refer to them as impartial or partial? We clearly must call them partial. And so it is those who are partial in their dealings with others who are the real cause of all the great harms in the world.

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “I condemn partiality.”

Now those who condemn another’s view must offer something in its place. If one condemns another’s view without offering something in its place this is like adding water to a flood or flame to a fire. Such appeals prove to have no merit.

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “Replace partiality with impartiality.”

Since this is what is correct, how then can we replace partiality with impartiality?

Our teacher Mozi says, “If people regarded other people’s states in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own state to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people’s cities in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own city to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people’s families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. And so if states and cities do not attack one another and families do not wreak havoc upon and steal from one another, would this be a harm to the world or a benefit? Of course one must say it is a benefit to the world.”

If we try to discover the source of these different benefits, where do we find they come from? Do they come from hating and stealing from people? This clearly must be rejected as the source of these benefits. We must recognize that they come from caring for and benefitting people. If we wish to distinguish those in the world who care for and benefit people, do we refer to them as impartial or partial? We clearly must call them impartial. And so it is those who are impartial in their dealings with others who are the real cause of all the great benefits in the world.
This is why our teacher Mozi says, “I approve of impartiality. Moreover, earlier I said that, ‘The business of a benevolent person is to promote what is beneficial to the world and eliminate what is harmful.’ And now I have shown that impartiality gives rise to all the great benefits in the world and that partiality gives rise to all the great harms in the world.”

This is why our teacher Mozi says, “I condemn partiality and approve of impartiality for the reasons given above. If one takes impartiality as the correct standard and truly seeks to promote and procure what is beneficial to the world, then those with sharp ears and keen eyes will listen and look out for others. Those with stout legs and strong arms will work for others, and those who understand the Way will educate and instruct others. And so men who reach old age without finding a wife and having children will get the support they need to live out their years. Young and helpless orphans, who are without father or mother, will find the support they need in order to reach maturity. Now such benefits can be attained only if impartiality is taken as the correct standard. And so I don’t see what reason any person in the world who has heard about impartiality can give for condemning it.”

Though this is so, there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality, saying, “It is surely a fine thing. Nevertheless, how can it possibly be applied?”

Our teacher Mozi says, “If it could not be applied even I would condemn it! But is there really anything that is fine that cannot be put to use? Let us consider both sides of the matter. Suppose there were two people: one who maintains partiality and one who maintains impartiality. And so the person who maintains partiality would say, ‘How can I possibly regard the well-being of my friends as I do my own well-being? How can I possibly regard the parents of my friends as I do my own parents?’ And so when his friends are hungry, the partial person does not feed them. When his friends are cold, he does not clothe them. When his friends are ill, he does not nurture them. And when his friends die, he does not bury them. This is what the partial person says and what he does. But this is not what the impartial person says nor is this how he acts. The impartial person says, ‘I have heard that in order to be a superior person in the world, one must regard the well-being of one’s friends as one regards one’s own well-being; one must regard the parents of one’s friends as one regards one’s own parents. Only in this way can one be a superior person.’ And so when the impartial person’s friends are hungry, he feeds them. When his friends are cold, he clothes them. When his friends are ill, he nurtures them. And when his friends die, he buries them. This is what the impartial person says and what he does.
Now the words of the two people that we have considered contradict each other and their actions are diametrically opposed. Let us suppose, though, that both are trustworthy in what they say and reliable in what they do. And so their words and deeds fit together like the two halves of a tally, and they always follow through and act on what they say. If we grant all of this, there is a further question I would like to ask. Suppose one must put on one’s armor and helmet and go to war in a vast and open wilderness where life and death are uncertain; or suppose one was sent by one’s ruler or high minister to the distant states of Ba, Yue, Qi, or Jing and could not be sure of either reaching them or ever returning from one’s mission. Under such conditions of uncertainty, to whom would one entrust the well-being of one’s parents, wife, and children? Would one prefer that they be in the care of an impartial person or would one prefer that they be in the care of a partial person? I believe that under such circumstances, there are no fools in all the world. Even though one may not advocate impartiality, one would certainly want to entrust one’s family to the person who is impartial. But this is to condemn impartiality in word but prefer it in deed, with the result that one’s actions do not accord with what one says. And so I don’t see what reason any person in the world who has heard about impartiality can give for condemning it.”

Though this is so, there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality, saying, “It is an acceptable way for choosing reliable people but one can’t use it to choose one’s ruler.”

Our teacher Mozi says, “Let us consider both sides of the matter. Suppose there were two rulers: one who maintains impartiality and one who maintains partiality. And so the ruler who maintains partiality would say, ‘How can I possibly regard the well-being of my myriad subjects as I do my own well-being? This is profoundly at odds with the way people in the world feel. How brief is the span of a person’s life upon this earth! It rushes by like a galloping team of horses glimpsed through a crack!’ And so when his subjects are hungry, the partial ruler does not feed them. When his subjects are cold, he does not clothe them. When his subjects are ill, he does not nurture them. And when his subjects die, he does not bury them. This is what the partial ruler says and what he does. But this is not what the impartial ruler says nor is this how he acts. The impartial ruler says, ‘I have heard that in order to be an enlightened ruler in the world, one must first worry about

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14Ba, Yue, Qi, and Jing are four ancient states that were far removed from the center of Chinese civilization at the time.
the well-being of one’s people and then worry about oneself. Only in this way can one be an enlightened ruler.’ And so when the impartial ruler’s people are hungry, he feeds them. When his people are cold, he clothes them. When his people are ill, he nurtures them. And when his people die, he buries them. This is what the impartial ruler says and what he does.

“Now the words of the two rulers that we have considered contradict each other and their actions are diametrically opposed. Let us suppose, though, that both are trustworthy in what they say and reliable in what they do. And so their words and deeds fit together like the two halves of a tally, and they always follow through and act on what they say. If we grant all of this, there is a further question I would like to ask. Suppose there were a terrible epidemic in which most of the people suffered bitterly from hunger and cold and many lay dead and unburied in the ditches and gullies. Between these two rulers, which one would the people then follow? I believe that under such circumstances, there are no fools in all the world. Even though one may not advocate impartiality, one would certainly want to follow the ruler who is impartial. But this is to condemn impartiality in word but prefer it in deed with the result that one’s actions do not accord with what one says. And so I don’t see what reason any person in the world who has heard about impartiality can give for condemning it.”

Though this is so, there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality saying, “Impartiality is benevolent and right but how can one practice it? The impossibility of practicing impartiality is like the impossibility of picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He.” And so impartiality is something they want to do but feel is impossible to practice.

Our teacher Mozi says, “As for picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He, this is something that no human being has ever done. But as for impartially caring for and benefitting one another, this is something that we know the four former sage-kings of themselves practiced.”

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15 People lying unburied in the ditches and gullies was a common trope used to illustrate a state of profound misrule. Cf. for example, Mengzi 1B12, 2B4. (not in this volume).

16 Picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across a vast expanse of water is a common trope for an impossible task. Cf. Mengzi 1A7 where the vast expanse of water is the North Sea. The Chang Jiang or “Yangtze River” and the Huang He or “Yellow River” are the largest rivers in central China.

17 Kings Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu.
As even as a whetstone.
It is what the noble man follows;
And the common man admires.

What I have been talking about here is not just some notion or theory. In ancient times, when Kings Wen and Wu ruled, they allocated everything equitably, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked without showing any partiality to their relatives or brothers. Such was the impartiality of Kings Wen and Wu. And the impartiality that our teacher Mozi talks about here takes Kings Wen and Wu as its models. So I don’t see what reason any person in the world who has heard about impartiality can give for condemning it.

Though this is so, there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality, saying, “It does not seek what is beneficial for one’s parents, so does it not harm filial piety?”

Our teacher Mozi says, “Let us consider the case of a filial son who seeks what is beneficial for his parents. Does a filial son who seeks what is beneficial for his parents want other people to care for and benefit his parents or does he want other people to dislike and steal from his parents? According to the very meaning of filial piety, he must want other people to care for and benefit his parents. Given this, how should one act in order to bring about such a state of affairs? Should one first care for and benefit the parents of another, expecting that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting one’s own parents? Or should one first dislike and steal from other people’s parents, expecting that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting one’s own parents? Clearly one must first care for and benefit the parents of others in order to expect that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting one’s own parents. And so for such mutually filial sons to realize unlimited good results, must they not first care for and benefit other people’s parents? Or should they let it be the case that filial sons are the exception and not the rule among the people of the world?

“Let us consider what is said in the writings of the former kings. In the Elegies it says,