

MOHIST THOUGHT

“Mohism” is the name given to the philosophical school founded by a man named Mozi 墨子 (Master Mo, his actual name was Mo Di 墨翟), who lived during the fifth century BCE. Mozi was the first man to offer a strong intellectual challenge to Confucianism. His followers became a highly disciplined band of men committed to certain extreme doctrines of political and ethical action. They were very influential during the Warring States period, but the school died out during the decades following the Qin conquest of 221.

We know very little about most non-Confucian Classical thinkers, and Mozi is no exception. Some sources tell us that he was a disenchanting Confucian from the state of Lu, whose early training in ritualism later made him an effective adversary to Confucian doctrines. Other texts say he was from the state of Sung and do not speak of any Confucian connection, but note instead that the surname “Mo,” which means “ink mark,” is a very rare one, and may refer not to Mo Di’s family but rather to the fact that he had been subjected to “tattooing,” a punishment often meted out to criminals in the Classical era. This account interprets “Mozi” as meaning “the tattooed master.”

The notion that Mozi was a commoner who had fallen afoul of the law fits with the rhetoric of the text that he and his followers compiled: the *Mozi*, which is unstylish and even crude (this shows through even in translation). Moreover, the analogies, metaphors, and examples offered in Mozi’s book are frequently connected with the activities of the common soldier or of the members of the artisan class. At the least, we may say that it is likely that most of Mozi’s followers were commoners, perhaps principally the sons of peasants and artisans who had been drafted into the endless wars of the era.

During the Warring States period, the Mohists were organized in tight-knit paramilitary bands. They were specially trained in what we may call the arts of defensive warfare. One of the major doctrines of Mohism was that offensive warfare was evil and the cause of most of the suffering of the time. Mohists were famous for matching their actions to their beliefs, and Mohist groups made careers of racing from one area of China to another, offering their services to rulers whose states were under attack. Rulers who accepted Mohists into their service found them skilled in engineering devices designed to repel attacks on walled cities and fortresses.

Mohism's rejection of offensive warfare was one of a set of clearly defined and argued doctrines that distinguished this cult from all others. These doctrines rested upon the belief that the good was whatever produced the greatest well-being among the people. Mohists argued that this was, indeed, the standard that Heaven used when rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked, and they also claimed that the sage rulers of the distant past had used this criterion to rule effectively, rather than the ritual patterns of Confucianism.

Mohist doctrines advocated thrift in government, the elimination of extraneous ritual and music, and the enforcement of a strict political hierarchy under the ruling Son of Heaven, whom, Mohists believed, was always selected by Heaven and in close touch with that ethereal being. Mohists were enthusiastic supporters of the belief in ghosts and spirits. They held that religious belief was essential to a well ordered society; the more cautious approach of the Confucians on the issue of the existence of the spirits they saw as socially subversive atheism.

Like Confucianism, Mohism was a type of radical conservatism. When the Mohists searched the distant past for a model for the present, they discovered not Confucian precedents of ritual rule, but a meritocracy that raised to power people who resisted the lure of personal enrichment and showed the ability to treat the masses of common people with fairness and courage. Their philosophy reflects the spirit of the warriors whom the Confucian Mencius described as models for nurturing the vital energy, or *qi* 氣 (see the [Glossary](#)). Mohists were no respecters of high rank, but they were arduous in demanding discipline of themselves, fair treatment of others according to their deserts, and dedication to the restoration of political order under a single Son of Heaven.

What Mohists shared with Confucianism and other conservative philosophies was a faith in the bedrock foundation of Zhou political culture: social order is dependent upon the personal virtue of the ruler.

But the most dramatic and famous doctrine of Mohism, one which the Mohists viewed as the essence of their beliefs, was their doctrine of universal love. What the Mohists meant by "universal love" was this: an attitude towards all others that viewed each of them as of equal value with oneself, with no distinctions of affection made among any. Under such an imperative, an individual was charged to have no special regard for parents, spouse, or children, nor for his or her own person. The demand was to cultivate an attitude where

the needs of any stranger would have as strong an impact upon you as the needs of your family or friends, and your response to that stranger would be as immediate, generous, and unreserved as it would be to your intimates. (The Mohists used the term “love” to denote a responsive sensitivity towards others, rather than in the sense of romantic love.)

The following anecdote, recorded about 250 BCE, conveys the radical emotive commitment that Mohists were viewed as making in taking the public good rather than personal feelings to be so absolute an imperative:

There was in the state of Qin a Mohist master named Fu Tun whose son murdered a man. King Hui of Qin (r. 337-311) said, “You are old, Sir, and you have no other sons. I have already ordered the officers not to execute your son. I pray that you will permit me to spare your boy.”

“The laws of the Mohists,” replied Fu Tun, “say: ‘Murderers shall die and those who inflict injury shall be maimed.’ This law prevents people from committing murder and assault. Preventing the commission of murder and assault is an act of great righteousness. Your Majesty may wish to grant me the gift of sparing the life of my son, but I cannot do other than carry out the laws of the Mohists.” And so he refused the King’s offer and his son was executed.

A son is one’s dearest personal possession. To bear to have what is dearest to one killed in order to implement righteousness -- Fu Tun may indeed be termed one who acted in the interests of all.

Needless to say, non-Mohists found such radical ethical demands outlandishly incompatible with normal human psychology. But for Mohists, to value all other people as highly as one spontaneously values those within one’s private sphere was the pivot of their entire philosophy. They allowed no emotional issues to cloud their closely reasoned position that there was neither a logical nor an ethical basis for regarding some people differently from others.

Unlike almost all other types of early Chinese philosophy, Mohism exhibits a deep commitment to the power of Reason. In fact, Mohists were in some ways the only true rationalistic thinkers in Classical China (some would say in the entire history of traditional China). As you will be able to see very easily in the translation of “Universal Love” below, the Mohists argued in a rational fashion, always attempting to justify their claims through careful arguments. What is more, they clearly believed that the power of rational “proof” was so overwhelming to the intellect that it was almost inconceivable that people could fail to accept and act upon the doctrine of universal love once it was explained to them.

It is possible to argue that the greatest significance of Mohism lay not in its various explicit doctrines, but rather in the fact that through the Mohists, Chinese culture was presented with the option of making Reason the pivot of intellectual inquiry, as it was in Greece, Rome, and their later cultural descendants. Many of the fundamental differences between the cultures of China and of Western Europe are reflected in the fact that Mohism did *not* find an enduring audience in China, whereas the generally rationalistic approaches of Plato and Aristotle became fundamental to Western traditions.

Reason vs. authority in the Mohist School

Although the reputation of the Mohist School is dominated by the doctrine of universal love, the school actually elaborated an impressive number of clearly articulated and distinctive positions. These are all presented in a very straightforward and accessible style in the *Mozhi*, but it is not always easy to see how the individual doctrines fit together. The basic barrier to their overall coherence, is that Mohists tried to combine two approaches to the quest for certain knowledge that do not easily complement one another: a reliance on the individual's power of reason to discover certain truths on his own, and a demand that people equally rely on knowledge from authority, specifically the teachings that are reported to reflect the ethical values of the ancient sages and of Heaven itself.

On the side of reason, the Mohists, apart from their relentlessly logical style of argumentation, formulated a set of explicit criteria for justification (the brief discussion of these in the *Mozhi* appears among the briefer text passages translated in this coursepack). The *Mozhi* tells us that for an argument to be accepted, it must pass three tests: (1) it must conform to the evidence of past pronouncements by sages (there must be some basis in preserved texts); (2) it must conform to "the eyes and ears of the people" (it should represent what ordinary commonsense or experience confirms); (3) acceptance must have a good social effect.

Now if a contemporary philosopher wanted to persuade us that Mohists were the most modern thinkers in Classical China, he or she might revise these three criteria by telling us that (1) essentially means that arguments must be tested against textually recorded evidence, that (2) means that we must confirm arguments according to the experience of our own senses, and that (3) means that a good ethical argument must propose courses of action that may actually be put into effect. All of these proposals are consistent with a rational

approach to truth-seeking, that links logical reasoning with careful assessments of different kinds of evidence. And, in fact, the *Mozzi*'s position has often been interpreted this way.

But when we look more closely at the statement of these criteria, and at the way these tests are actually carried out in many of the arguments the *Mozzi* makes in other places, it is very clear that the Mohists were actually not licensing individuals to employ reason in sifting evidence on their own, but rather to make our judgments accord with authority in three ways. First, we should only accept arguments that are confirmed by records of legendary figures whom Mohists regard as sages; second, we should only accept arguments that accord with facts that ordinary people believe to be true; third, we only accept arguments that will promote the Mohist ethical agenda in practice. In other words, don't use your own reasoning powers or challenge commonly accepted facts, rely on cultural legend, popular belief, and Mohist teachings.

The force of these intellectually authoritarian positions is most evident in one particular Mohist doctrine -- the Mohists insisted that it was imperative that we believe in the existence of ghosts. The underlying reason for their insistence was that Mohists wished to set up Heaven as an ultimate authority figure in their philosophical system, and for this to have persuasive force, it was necessary that people possess a strong belief in the supernatural. Now Mohists never claim that *they themselves* have experienced ghosts, not that the existence of ghosts can be *explained*. Instead, they make three arguments: (1) The records of the sages' words clearly show that *they* believed in the supernatural; we should accept their authority. (2) Many people have reported encounters with ghosts, and their accounts are accepted by ordinary people; majority belief rules. (3) Belief in the supernatural promotes community togetherness through religious ritual and ethical responsibility through fear of divine retribution; the argument must be so because accepting it will lead to good social results.

Mohists use this sort of reasoning in very tightly constructed arguments in support of two major doctrines:

1. **Illuminating the nature of ghosts.** The position that ghosts exist.
2. **The will of Heaven.** A doctrine that Heaven communicates its will to mankind, that it wills that people act righteously, and that righteousness is precisely conduct in accordance with universal love.

In addition, this type of argumentation is used to supplement other, better reasoned positions, in particular:

3. **Anti-fatalism.** A doctrine designed to refute a supposed Confucian belief that all important events in life are determined by fate.

The authoritarian strain in Mohist thought reaches its highest pitch in a separate chapter devoted entirely to a justification of aligning one's thoughts and actions with authority:

4. **Accordinging with one's superiors.** A chapter in the *Mozhi* by this title portrays an ideal society as a strict command structure, composed of commoners ruled by officers who are in turn ruled by the king's ministers. The ministers follow all instructions from the king, who receives his own instructions directly from Heaven (the instructions, of course, are for universal love).

It is a remarkable paradox that the most rational of all early Chinese schools of thought was also the most authoritarian, but it should be recalled that Mohist authoritarianism was not confined to its doctrines. Because the Mohists were a paramilitary group that relied on strict discipline to attack the social crisis of a multi-century civil war, responsiveness to authority was a key to their practical success.

In the context of the Mohist social enterprise and the authoritarian tendencies of Classical Chinese society as a whole, it is not at all surprising that Mohist thought should reflect a belief that knowledge derived from authority could be accepted with certainty. What is more impressive is that despite this, Mohists virtually invented the method of rational argument in China and were profoundly moved by the power of reason to generate certainty.

It seems quite likely that Mohists were led in this direction because their ranks were largely filled by individuals drawn from the lower classes of ancient society. Without the prestige of high birth and good connections, Mohists would have needed a tool such as rational argumentation to establish *their* authority in trying to persuade rulers and others to adopt their beliefs. In any event, judging from the nature of later Mohist writings, the philosophical history of the Mohist school shows a gradual progression towards an ever-deepening interest in reason and critical thought for its own sake.

Later Mohist philosophy

Mohism is the only Classical school that did not outlive the Classical era in China. When we speak of “later Mohism” we mean a group of chapters included in the *Mozi* that seems to reflect a new direction Mohism was moving during the fourth and third centuries BCE. That direction was towards a highly technical analysis of the nature of language, logic, and validity in argumentation. It is possible that some of this interest was spurred by the logician Huizi, Zhuangzi’s friend, who lived during the fourth century and who seems to have adopted many Mohist positions (without, apparently, risking his security by joining the Mohists’ paramilitary organization). But whether or not Huizi contributed to this new direction in Mohism, its accomplishments were unique. They reinforce the impression that Mohist thought offered China an invitation to reorient its philosophical enterprise in directions closely aligned with those taken by major Greek schools.

Consider, for example, the following features of later Mohist writings:

1. Great effort was made to assign precise, unambiguous definitions to words, and where ambiguity could not be eradicated from ordinary terms, new words were coined.
2. A technical vocabulary meant to clarify grammatical and logical features of discourse was devised.
3. Logical paradoxes in ordinary speech were analyzed in order to discover the linguistic ambiguities that gave rise to them, and so resolve them. (For example, Mohists worked on explaining why you can say, “A boat is wood,” but you can’t conclude that, “Entering a boat is entering wood.”)
4. Mathematics and geometry were explored for clarification of basic concepts that pertained to philosophical concepts and paradoxes.
5. A simultaneous exploration of scientific fields of engineering and optics was undertaken in a search for clarification of the nature of empirical evidence.

These philosophical directions are remarkable for their analytic quality, and the text chapters that include them are so rigorous in their terse and highly technical explications that they remain the single most challenging group of ancient Chinese texts.

The accomplishment of the Mohists in these areas alerts us to the fact that no constraints of language, culture, or history in ancient China dictated that Chinese thinkers could not undertake as an enterprise the construction of a well grounded system of critical analysis. Rather, it appears that the early demise of the Mohist school and the enduring influence of practice-based Dao schools was a matter of conscious selection. In the context of early Chinese society, the Daos of schools like Confucianism and Daoism seemed to promise more important results than the analytics of the Mohists.

Mohist anti-Confucianism

More than with any other school, Mohism was inspired by a determined opposition to Confucianism. Among the most prominent of Mohist doctrines are a number that were directed solely at discrediting the Confucian school through arguments for frugality.

Economy in expenditures. Mohists regarded Confucian valuation of ritual as both arbitrary and socially dangerous. They viewed the expenditure of state resources on ritual as a waste of public resources, and promoted the ideal of the thrifty society, unconcerned with superfluous ritual ornamentation.

Economy in funerals. Mohists bitterly attacked Confucian pronouncements that lavish funerals were an appropriate expression of filiality. In one of the most entertaining passages in all early literature, Mohists depict Confucian advocacy of lavish funerals as a device to persuade rich people to give Confucian morticians huge fees for the garish funeral displays they orchestrate.

Rejection of music. Stressing arguments of frugality, Mohists dismissed Confucian arguments for the aesthetic and morally transformative value of music, and picture it as an extravagance promoted by Confucian music masters solely out of economic self-interest.

Apart from these arguments, other key doctrines incorporate substantial anti-Confucian dimensions. Mohist belief in the supernatural is cast as opposition to Confucians, whom the Mohists portray as atheists. The doctrine of anti-fatalism is also directed against the Confucians, who, the Mohists quite cogently argue, habitually rationalized their social failures with specious appeals to the power of fate. Even in the Mohists' famous rejection of offensive warfare they were cast as adversaries of Confucian doctrine. Confucians held that there were instances where offensive war was justifiable as the action that a virtuous state

must take against a neighboring evil ruler who oppresses his own people. Mohists were (rightly) suspicious that such arguments would be manipulated by unscrupulous rulers for ends that no moral person could approve.

In only one major area were Mohists and Confucians aligned. Both schools energetically supported the free promotion of people of worth to high position, without consideration for issues of high birth. This valuation of “meritocracy” (the distribution of power according to merit) was, in fact, a common feature of every philosophical school of the Classical period. However, the definition of “merit” was different for every school. While Confucians envisioned their position as promoting the advancement of people transformed by ritual training, the Mohists pictured ritualists as little better than criminals. For them, meritocracy meant the advancement of people who demonstrated a universalist ethic in their actions.

Action vs. virtue as an ethical foundation

Mohist texts convey a fundamentally different feeling from Confucian or Daoist texts. They are relentless in their argumentation, and often very formulaic in their prescriptions for society. They tend to impress readers as highly impersonal texts. Most important, although they are very clear in telling us how we should act, they virtually never tell us *how* to become the ideal type of person they exhort us to be. In fact, this is because Mohist ethics belongs to a fundamentally different genre of ethical enterprise than Confucianism and Daoism.

Confucianism and Daoism both hope to persuade people to act in good ways (if the Daoists will allow us to attach the value word “good” to their ideals), but they see the process leading to that outcome in terms of *transforming people* rather than in terms of *transforming their actions*. For these schools, the pivot of good social behavior is to cultivate in society’s members strong virtues and the skills to apply them appropriately in the ever-changing contexts of actual life. Although Confucians and Daoists have different visions of virtue, for both schools, nurturing virtue and skills in people is the key to making the world good.

Ethical philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism can be called “virtue ethics,” because they see identifying and cultivating the proper virtues as the basis of their philosophical enterprises.

The *Mozzi* is generally much more concerned with the question of determining what sorts of actions are right. Its philosophy is largely anchored on a single formula for determining right action: “Always act in such a way as to create the greatest benefit for mankind at large, without regard for the specific benefits to yourself or those you love.” This formula is an action rule rather than a virtue, and the most philosophically interesting features of Mohism are its selection and justifications for action rules that can guide us towards creating a good world. Ultimately, the relevant question to ask about an action in the world is whether its consequences promote an ethical outcome, not whether the actor was a good person.

An ethical philosophy that is focused on identifying cardinal rules that can guide our action choices can be called an “action ethics,” because it sees the key to goodness as lying in generating right actions. An action ethics will not tend to ask whether people are virtuous; it will identify good people as people who do good.

The great strength of Confucianism and Daoism, as virtue ethics, lies in the complex and interesting visions they have of human excellence and the paths to attain it. Confucianism, in particular, is also very strong in the specificity of the path it prescribes for the attainment of excellence. A weakness common to both is that neither school offers us firm rules that we can rely on in making action choices. Both suggest that right action is ultimately an interplay between a trained virtuous actor and a unique situational context. Every act must follow a unique rule, and the thread that strings them together is the practical wisdom of the sage. Such an approach gives tremendous authority to those who claim sagehood, and deprives us of firm grounds to argue that specific acts of self-claimed sages may be immoral.

The great strength of action ethics like Mohism is that the action rules they propose can usually be attacked or defended through rational arguments accessible to anyone, and their rules can immediately be put into action and subjected to the complex tests that real life provides. No extended initiation period of study is necessary before one is able to take an informed position vis à vis the doctrines of such an ethical school. All that’s necessary is an effort of logical reasoning. A weakness of such an approach is that action ethics often tend to reduce the complexities of ethical life to a small number of rules that often seem inadequately to reflect our deepest feelings about what is ethical and what is not in real life. Rules are also subject to distortion through self-justifying arguments by people who pretend

to morality while acting out of self-interest. Perhaps most important, action ethics very often prescribe rules that we agree we ought to follow, but do not tell us how to build the strength of character that will actually enable us to follow these rules in the face of the complex desires and pressures that real life involves.

While Mohism contrasts strongly with Confucianism and Daoism in being structured as an action ethics, in fact any ethical philosophy will involve elements of both styles. For example, Mohism always discusses its good actions in terms of the consequences that “people of humanity” wish to promote, and the ultimate ground of the Mohist system is the highest authority of virtue: Heaven. Confucianism, despite the fact that its doctrine of “timeliness” states that the rightness of an action is always determined by specific contexts rather than rules, still does use rules in important ways. The virtuous actor is trained through conformity with the very narrowly defined rules of ritual, and important action guides, such as the rule “never do to others what you would not want done to you,” serve as broad guideposts for those whose insight has not yet reached the idealized (and in real-life unattainable) level of sagehood.