

THE BOOK OF MOZI (MO-TZU)

Russell Kirkland

Author: Mozi (Mo Di; ca. 470 -400 BCE)

Major Themes:

People should practice jian'ai ("impartial solicitude"), showing equal concern for the basic physical needs of all people.

Jian'ai is ordained by Heaven (Tian).

Heaven and other spiritual forces enforce jian'ai by punishing those who disregard it. Heaven invests its authority in the ruler, to whom all owe submission.

Mozi (Mo Di) was a social thinker of ancient China. His thought -- a social activism tinged by authoritarianism and justified by a utilitarian ethic and theistic claims -- was quite unlike that of other Chinese thinkers of any age. The work that goes by his name is noteworthy for its attempts to persuade through argument.

Virtually nothing is known about the life of Mozi himself. His origins have been the subject of considerable speculation and debate by Chinese scholars. One chapter of the *Mozi* depicts Mo as a military strategist and engineer. Based upon such reports, and upon the content of his thought, scholars have plausibly inferred that Mo may have been descended from displaced military officers, who had lost their position in society and become "wandering knights" seeking a land where they could play a useful role. Scholars consider it likely that Mo began as a student in one of the Confucian schools of his day. In any case, though he was possibly a native of Confucius' home state of Lu, and was certainly familiar with Confucius' teachings, Mozi clearly did not identify himself with the traditional nobility, whom Confucius had considered the natural leaders of society. He shares the Confucians' esteem for the legendary sage-kings, and, like Confucius, attributes his own principles to them. But, perhaps because of his social background, he rejected Confucius' assumption that the ills of the age could be reversed by restoring the social virtues that Confucius believed the nobility ideally to possess. It is important that Mo was active soon after Confucius, and before the other thinkers of classical China: his teachings were to a significant extent a reaction against several of Confucius' basic positions, and later Confucians like Mencius refined those positions in response to Mozi's criticisms.

Social Values in the Mozi

Mozi is best known for his insistence that all people are equally deserving of receiving material benefit and being protected from physical harm. In one sense, he was an idealist: like Confucius, he believed that society should be led by the wise and the virtuous. But Mozi's definitions of wisdom and virtue revealed a much more practical mentality, as well as an intense dedication to achieving a society in which people worked to save each other from physical harm and deprivation. The key to appreciating Mozi's perspective on life was the constantly escalating wars of expansion among the many states of ancient China: aggressive rulers often attacked neighboring states with no discernible regard for the welfare of the inhabitants. Mozi, outraged

at such injustices, labored to persuade people to look upon others' interests as being equally important as one's own.

It should be noted, however, that Mozi has frequently been misunderstood. Twentieth-century intellectuals have sometimes misinterpreted him as a proponent of democracy (or of socialism, according to the interpreter's own proclivities). Meanwhile, Christian interpreters (Chinese and Western alike) have sometimes portrayed Mo as an exemplar of "devotion to God" and a precursor of Christian virtues like altruism and pacifism. It is important to beware a facile identification of Mozi's principles with alien ideas that he would actually not endorse.

First, it must be noted that despite Mozi's social idealism, his values were strictly materialistic: he cared nothing at all for the emotional happiness or spiritual fulfillment of the individual. In fact, he would readily sacrifice the happiness of any individual on the altar of "the common good." Moreover, Mozi was so single-minded in his pursuit of practical social benefits that he rejected most of the cultural activities that Confucians (and most Westerners) have always considered desirable. In philosophical terms, he might be called a materialistic universalistic utilitarian, for he believed that a given activity is good to the extent that it provides material benefit to people on an impartial basis. By his reasoning, there was thus no value whatever in music, for instance, or in any of the arts: people must be discouraged from indulging themselves in such frivolous pastimes when they could be involved in more socially useful activities. Mozi's ideal society was an "unadorned purely functional culture [having] an abundance of necessities and [a] complete absence of frills" (Schwartz, 154).

In addition, the prima facie egalitarianism of Mozi's teachings is belied both by his endorsement of an inexorable sociopolitical hierarchy and by the authoritarian structure of the historical Mohist community. Mo organized his followers into a communal society that was as much an army as a religious order. One of its purposes was actually to provide military aid to states that were under attack. Within the organization, members were expected not only to accept Mozi's ideas, but also to forswear all other personal attachments, to abandon their homes and families, and to renounce all political allegiances. Moreover, all were expected to submit to the leader's directives with unswerving obedience.

Meanwhile, Mo's ideal for society as a whole assumes an authoritarian monarchy, in which the ruler manipulates his subjects' attitudes and behavior for "the common good." Mozi, like Xunzi (Hsün-tzu) and Hobbes, assumed that human beings are intrinsically self-centered and contentious, and he would have rejected the ideal of individual self-determination. In Mozi's world, truth is always dictated from above, and must never be questioned. Furthermore, despite Mozi's contention that all people deserve equal concern, "there is no call whatever for economic equality or status equality" (Schwartz, 153-54). Hence, while elements of Mozi's thought may have provided a corrective to some of the societal ills of his day, few modern liberals would find the real Mozi very palatable.

Style and Substance in the Mozi

The text that goes by Mozi's name was composed to persuade, not to please. One scholar has said that "one cannot help noting that the *Mo Tzu*, whatever the interest of its ideas, is seldom a delight to read....[Its] style as a whole is marked by a singular monotony of sentence pattern, and a lack of wit or grace that is atypical of Chinese literature in general" (Watson, 14-15). Another adds, "The notoriously graceless style of early Mohist writing, ponderous, humourless, repetitive, suggests the solemn self-educated man who writes only for practical purposes..."

(Graham, 34). There is, however, no evidence that Mozi himself actually wrote any of the text, though scholars are in agreement that the content reflects his mentality.

The text of the *Mozi* is divided into seventy-one chapters, of which only fifty-three survive. Scholars generally agree that substantial segments of the surviving text are by later hands, including the first seven chapters ("the Epitomes") as well as the six "Logical Chapters" and the eleven "Military Chapters." What remains is material of two kinds. By far the best known is "the Essays" (chapters 8-39, minus seven missing sections). With certain exceptions, each Essay consists of three parallel sets of arguments on a fundamental theme; some interpreters view these "synoptic" chapters as the product of three distinct Mohist sects. The other important segment of the *Mozi* is known as "the Dialogues" (chapters 46-50). In form, these chapters resemble the *Analects* of Confucius -- brief anecdotes and verbal exchanges between Mozi and his followers and other acquaintances.

Stylistically, the Essays often come across as a lesson book for Mohist missionaries: they provide arguments intended both to inspire the Mohist activist and to provide him with examples of sermons that could be expected to persuade various types of listener. For instance, some sections provide arguments designed to appeal to rulers (and to those who served rulers, as a number of Mozi's followers are known to have done). Other sections offer techniques for manipulating the behavior of the ordinary person, e.g., by the promise of rewards and the threat of punishments.

While the overriding goal of the Essays is to provide leaders of the Mohist community with tools for persuasion, many of the arguments they present often strike the modern reader as unpersuasive, and some come across as no more than cynical ploys. For example, the famous chapter on ghosts and spirits eventually concedes that such beings might not really exist, and that all that really matters is that people should be led to *believe in* such beings. Such a belief was assumed to render people susceptible to rational or irrational suasions, and such susceptibility was useful for furthering the Mohist program.

The tone of the *Mozi's* Essays is unusually dogmatic: truth could never conflict with Mohist ideals, and there is a moral imperative for the Mohist to do whatever is necessary to cause others to act in accordance with those ideals. Yet, there is an underlying assumption that anyone can be persuaded to fall in line with the Mohist program: the intelligent can be persuaded through appeals to common sense or supposed historical precedent, and the unintelligent can be persuaded through fear of punishment by superiors or by ghosts and spirits. In either case, success is achieved when others are converted to a willingness to act in accord with the Mohist concept of the common good.

Mozi understood morality purely in terms of *doing good*, not of *being good*, so the Mohist's goal was simply to stimulate the desired social activity. Such goals and methods contrast sharply with those of other schools of thought in ancient China. The Confucians also sought a well-ordered society, but insisted that such a society would result only from the individual's dedication to moral self-cultivation, understood as an elevation of the human spirit. The Taoists, for their part, sought to maximize the welfare of individual and society alike by leading people to find within themselves -- and in the world as a whole -- a deeper reality, the Tao, in terms of which people's lives find true meaning. By contrast, the Mohists seem far less idealistic: in the final analysis, their goal was merely to ensure that all people are well-fed and unharmed. The Mohists sought a world of *jian'ai* ("impartial solicitude," usually mistranslated as "universal love"). But their ideal world was not one in which people felt true affection for each other or tried to provide each other with emotional support.

Religion in the Mozi

Among the most famous material in the *Mozi* are four chapters concerning Heaven, ghosts and spirits. The bald theism of those chapters -- so unlike anything encountered elsewhere in Chinese literature -- has astonished Chinese and Western interpreters alike. But the *Mozi's* theistic rhetoric has duped some observers (particularly Westerners) into uncritical admiration of the supposed piety of Mozi and his school. The *Mozi* really just provides arguments by which one could supposedly demonstrate to others that Heaven was a conscious force that ordains the Mohist program. Mohist "theology" lacks the tone of reverence and awe that is found, for instance, in Confucius' teachings. Mozi reduces the divine to a legitimacy device: "all of those doctrines which Mo Tzu constantly went about promoting, such as universal love, anti-aggression, austerity in consumption, and the like, were declared to be the things that Heaven and the spirits liked, while anything running counter to them was said to be that which they abominated" (Hsiao, 246-47). Mohist "theology" was thus completely subservient to the Mohist sociopolitical program.

Moreover, the Mohist missionaries were exhorted to employ theological arguments to manipulate the behavior of the masses: Mozi "attempted to drag men back to the simple, pietistic, and fear-ridden faith of antiquity. For only through such a faith, he believed, could men be frightened into abandoning their evil ways and persuaded to love and benefit one another..." (Watson, 9). It should be remembered, however, that "evil" for Mohists was simply defined as whatever went contrary to Mohist principles. The individual was never to reflect independently upon right and wrong, or upon Heaven and its relationship to humanity: Heaven's will could never be other than what Mozi taught. Without explanation or justification, the *Mozi* presents the leaders of the Mohist community as being able to declare what was or was not Heaven's will. There is even an anecdote in the Dialogues in which Mozi claimed exception to the doctrine that Heaven punishes wrongdoers by afflicting them with illness: when a disciple asked whether Mozi's own illnesses indicated some transgression on his part, he took issue, arguing that such illness could simply be attributed to naturalistic factors. Thus, he claimed exemption to the objection that empirical evidence could disprove the validity of his teachings. But logically, opponents could claim similar exemptions, leaving no objective standard by which human events could be taken as evidence of "Heaven's will."

The "religious faith" of the Mohists actually constituted little more than credulous acceptance of the idea that the Mohist program was enforced by unseen beings. The "Heaven" of Mozi was not a forgiving God, nor one who "loved" people in the sense that it wished them to be happy or spiritually ennobled. It was first and foremost the creator and enforcer of his principle of *jian'ai*. For the average person, Heaven played only the role of disciplinarian, analogous more to a police officer than to a loving parent who facilitates a child's growth toward responsible independence (an unthinkable goal in light of Mozi's negative assessment of human nature). Nor could people attain any real communion with Mozi's "Heaven," either through ritual activity or through any elevation of the human soul. Hence, Mohism was not truly a religion, but rather a sociopolitical program that exploited religious beliefs to manipulate people's social beliefs and actions.

The Mohist Legacy

To many in ancient China, the Mohist concept of life seemed shallow, sterile, and uninspiring, for it envisioned a world in which life ultimately seems to have little meaning

beyond bare survival. These facts, coupled with Mohism's ideological rigidity and its disregard for what some called "natural human feelings," led to the extinction of the Mohist movement by the end of the classical period. The occasional Mohist writers of late antiquity were generally interested only in techniques of argumentation. Still, Mohist influence was significant. The Legalists adopted the Mohists' authoritarian principles. The Confucians and Taoists both gained definition and intensity from reacting *against* Mohist ideals. And the universalistic social vision of Mohism helped inspire similar tendencies in later, post-classical Taoism. In addition, Chinese reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often found Mozi an intriguing exemplar of the dedicated social reformer.