

The Ethics of the Mohist “Dialogues”

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Introduction

The Mohist “Dialogues” are four books of the *Mozi* (Books 46–49) comprising brief conversations between Mozi and various disciples, opponents, and rulers or officials. The first two of the books also present sayings attributed to Mozi.¹ The Dialogues reflect the Mohists at the height of their influence as a sociopolitical reform movement. They depict Mozi 墨子 traveling to various states and receiving audiences with their rulers, to whom he dispenses moral and political advice. He discusses doctrinal issues with students and

¹ The content of the four books can be summarized very roughly as follows: Book 46, “*Geng Zhu*,” is a mixed collection of anecdotes, conversations, and sayings touching on a variety of themes in Mohist thought. (The book is named after Geng Zhuzi 耕柱子, a Mohist disciple who appears in its opening anecdote.) Book 47, “*Gui Yi* 貴義 (Valuing Morality),” focuses loosely on moral psychology and moral instruction and comprises mainly sayings ascribed to Mozi. Book 48, “*Gong Meng*,” mainly presents Mohist criticisms of the *Ru*. (The book takes its title from Gong Mengzi 公孟子, a *Ru* depicted in several conversations with Mozi.) Book 49, “*Lu Wen* 魯問 (Questions of Lu),” relates conversations tied in various ways to the state of Lu, including several between Mozi and the ruler of Lu. Aside from these general themes, however, books 47, 48, and 49 all contain other miscellaneous material as well. On the whole, the Dialogues are organized only very loosely, although their content is doctrinally fairly coherent. A fifth book, Book 50, *Gong Shu* 公輸, is sometimes also counted among the Dialogues. This book contains a single, extended anecdote about Mozi convincing the King of Chu 楚 to call off an attack on Song 宋 by explaining how his defense tactics could counter all nine means of attack invented by Gongshu Pan 公輸盤, a brilliant military engineer employed by Chu. Since, unlike books 46–49, this book is not a collection of short passages treating doctrinal issues, for the purposes of this paper I will not treat it as part of the Dialogues.

outsiders, including several *Ru* 儒 (Confucians, “erudites”), an opponent named Wumazi 巫馬子,² who defends an ethic of self-interest, and a critic named Wu Lü 吳慮, who opposes moral activism, advocating instead self-sufficient living off the land.³ The Mohist “school” is depicted as a flourishing, disciplined organization that attracts and trains students, recommends them for official posts or dispatches them on military assignments, and is supported by donations from them once they are employed. It is difficult to say to what extent the sayings and events these texts associate with Mozi are grounded in historical fact and to what extent they are retrospective embellishments, projections backward from the status and doctrines of later generations of Mohists. The doctrines and prose style of the Dialogues are more polished than those of the earliest Mohist essays, such as *Mozi* Books 11, 14, and 17, which may record the words of Mo Di himself. Unlike the essays in the the “Triads” — the ten sets of three essay-length “books,” or *pian* 篇, that form the core of the *Mozi* (books 8–37)⁴ — one passage in the Dialogues explicitly arranges the ten core Mohist doctrines into a

² Commentators such as Su Shi Xue 蘇時學 have suggested that Wuma was a *Ru*, either a student of Confucius named Wuma Qi 巫馬期 or his son (Wu 1993, 647). However, in the Dialogues, Wuma is not treated as a representative of the *Ru* (as, for instance, Gong Mengzi 公孟子 is), and he expresses no distinctively *Ru* views. Moreover, he criticizes the practice, shared by both the Mohists and the *Ru*, of praising the “former kings” as moral exemplars (46: 101/1–10). These points suggest he was probably not a *Ru*.

³ Outwardly, Wu Lü’s *dao* (49: 113/13–29), resembles that of the “Agriculturalists,” a movement devoted to economic self-sufficiency (see Graham 1989, 64–74). He may not be aligned with them, however, since instead of mentioning their patron god the Divine Farmer (Shen Nong 神農), he claims to emulate the sage-king Shun 舜. His position overlaps some Daoist views, since he advocates a simple lifestyle and opposes the dissemination of explicit moral teachings.

⁴ Four of the ten triads are incomplete, as seven of these thirty books are lost. The core books are sometimes also considered to include a pair of texts entitled “Condemning the *Ru*” (*Fei*

systematic, coherent platform addressing a range of social and political problems, one or another of which Mohist teachers are to select for initial presentation to a ruler on the basis of the particular problems his state faces (see below). This discussion implies a context in which not only Mozi but his senior disciples have sufficient reputation and social status that they routinely succeed in approaching rulers from “the four quarters” — all parts of the early Chinese world — to offer policy advice. Given the Mohists’ plebeian origins, it seems unlikely that they could have achieved this level of influence within Mozi’s lifetime. So I tentatively suggest that the Dialogues represent the status and doctrines of the movement some time after — perhaps several generations after — Mozi’s death.⁵ Some of the

Ru 非儒), one of which is lost. The surviving member of the pair is devoted entirely to criticizing the *Ru*; its first half resembles a debate handbook recording stock rebuttals of *Ru* teachings. Since, unlike the Triad essays, this text is not organized as a coherent presentation of a specific Mohist doctrine, I place it in a separate category from the Triads.

⁵ A pair of correspondences between the Dialogues and the Confucian *Analects* offer intriguing hints but no conclusive information as to the Dialogues’ chronology. A passage at (46: 101/20–21) appears to cite the exchange in *Analects* 13:16 between Confucius and Zigao, Duke of She 葉公子高, concerning good government — “the nearby are pleased, and the distant come” — and criticizes it for offering no concrete policy proposals. Another passage at (48: 108/26–28) ridicules the defense of the Ruist three-year mourning ritual in *Analects* 17:19. (The *Analects* explains that the three-year mourning ritual reciprocates the three years of care infants receive from their parents; the Mohist reply is that the *Ru* apparently know no better than an infant how to conduct themselves.) These parallels seem to place the Dialogues in the same intellectual milieu as the second, later half of the *Analects*. (See too Brooks and Brooks [1998, 259–62], who explore a more extensive series of potential parallels, some relatively speculative.) In particular, since *Analects* 17:19 probably falls within the very late strata of that text, one might appeal to it to assign a similarly late date to the corresponding *Mozi* passage. (The Brookses [1998, 161] propose a date of ca. 270 BCE for *Analects* 17:19.) However, the absolute dates of the *Analects* passages are difficult to determine, and rather than the *Mozi* passage on the three-year mourning responding directly

conversations they record might go back to Mozi himself, but we probably have no way of determining to what extent they do.

This essay will argue that the ethics of the Dialogues is largely consistent with that of the middle and late books of the Triads,⁶ but that the Dialogues develop characteristic Mohist ethical ideas in several interesting ways. First, they clarify the Mohist conception of *yi* 義 (morality, duty, right) as norms that can be explicitly expressed in *yan* 言 (statements) and publicized and consistently followed by all with good consequences. Second, they present a series of views on moral worth that tie it to agents' character and intentions. Third, they fill out the Mohist view of moral motivation and suggest how the Mohists might approach issues related to weakness of will. Finally, they present a new, demanding ideal of moral sagehood. The following sections explore the continuity between the Triads and the Dialogues and then consider each of these four developments in turn.

Continuity with the Triads

The ethical doctrines of the Dialogues are in many respects continuous with doctrines found in the Triads, particularly the later strata.⁷ As in most of the Triad essays, the standard of right teachings and action is what benefits Heaven (*Tian* 天), the ghosts, and the common people:

子墨子曰：「凡言凡動，利於天鬼百姓者為之。凡言凡動，害於天鬼百姓者舍之。凡言凡動，合於三代聖王堯舜禹湯文武者為之，凡言凡動，合於三代暴王桀紂幽厲者舍之。」

Our master Mozi said, “In all statements and actions, do what is beneficial to Heaven, ghosts, and the common people. In all statements and actions, renounce what is

to the text of the *Analects*, conceivably both might reflect a pre-existing, widely circulated *Ru* saying.

⁶ The twenty-three surviving essays in the Triads fall into several chronological strata. For an overview, see the supplement on “Texts and Authorship” in Fraser (2002).

⁷ For an overview of the ethics of the Triads, see Fraser (2002), sect. 7.

harmful to Heaven, ghosts, and the common people. In all statements and actions, do what conforms to the sage-kings of the three dynasties, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu. In all statements and action, renounce what conforms to the tyrants of the three dynasties, Jie, Zhou, You, and Li.” (47: 104/15–17)

As this passage shows, the Dialogues also follow the middle and later Triad essays in commending the sage-kings as moral exemplars or models by which to distinguish what is right.⁸ Other passages further extol the value of the sage-kings’ teachings:

巫馬子謂子墨子曰：「舍今之人而譽先王，是譽槁骨也。譬若匠人然，智槁木也，而不智生木。」子墨子曰：「天下之所以生者，以先王之道教也。今譽先王，是譽天下之所以生也。...」

Wumazi said to Mozi, “To set aside people of today and instead praise the former kings, this is to praise rotten bones. It’s like a carpenter who knows rotten wood but not living wood.” Our master Mozi said, “That by which the world lives is through the teachings of the *dao* (way) of the former kings. Now praising the former kings, this is praising that by which the world lives.” (46: 101/9–11)

子墨子曰：「古之聖王欲傳其道於後世，是故書之竹帛，鏤之金石，傳遺後世子孫，欲後世子孫法之也。今聞先王之遺而不為，是廢先王之傳也。」

Our master Mozi said, “The ancient sage-kings desired to pass their *dao* on to later generations. So they wrote it on bamboo and silk and engraved it on metal and stone in order to pass it down to their descendants, desiring that their descendants would emulate it. Now to hear what was passed down from the former kings but not practice it, this is to discard the traditions of the former kings.” (47: 105/16–17)

As in most of the Triads, benefit (*li* 利) — the criterion of what is morally right — is understood to comprise wealth, population, and social order (*zhi* 治). Where the Triads typically include state security within the scope of social order, a passage in the Dialogues treats it as a separate item.

子墨子曰：「和氏之璧，隋侯之珠，三棘六異，此諸侯之所謂良寶也。可以富國家，眾人民，治刑政，安社稷乎？...今用義為政於國家，人民必眾，刑政必治，社稷必安。所為貴良寶者，可以利民也，而義可以利人。故曰：義，天下之良寶也。」

Our master Mozi said, “The jade of He, the pearl of Sui, and the nine caldrons — these are what the various lords call “precious.” Can they enrich the state, increase the population, bring order to the government, and bring security to the state? . . . Now if

⁸ On the role of the sage-kings, see Miranda Brown in this volume.

one governs a state by employing *yi* (morality), the population will surely be large, the government will surely be orderly, and the state will surely be secure. The reason we value precious things is that they can benefit people, and *yi* can benefit people. So I say, *yi* is the most precious thing in the world.” (46: 101/14–18)

Consistent with many of the Triads, a person with moral wisdom or know-how obeys Heaven, sacrifices to the ancestral ghosts and nature-spirits, cares about others, and moderates expenditures:

子墨子曰：「夫知者必尊天事鬼，愛人節用，合焉為知矣。」

Our master Mozi said, “A wise person must respect Heaven, serve ghosts, care about others, and moderate expenses. Combining these constitutes wisdom.” (48: 107/27)

Like many of the triad essays, the Dialogues oppose wars of aggression, profligate spending, extravagant burial and mourning practices, luxurious entertainment, and fatalism. Several exchanges with rulers of different states depict Mozi condemning military aggression, as in the following:

子墨子謂魯陽文君曰：「攻其鄰國，殺其民人，取其牛馬粟米貨財，則書之於竹帛，鏤之於金石，以為銘於鐘鼎，傳遺後世子孫曰：莫若我多。今賤人也，亦攻其鄰家，殺其人民，取其狗豕食糧衣裘，亦書之竹帛，以為銘於席豆，以遺後世子孫曰：莫若我多。亅可乎？」魯陽文君曰：「然吾以子之言觀之，則天下之所謂可者，未必然也。」

Our master Mozi said to Lord Wen of Luyang, “[Warlike rulers such as yourself] attack neighboring states, kill their people, seize their oxen and horses, food, and goods, and then write their deeds on bamboo and silk, engrave them on metal and stone, and inscribe them on bells and cauldrons to pass on to their descendants, saying, ‘No one’s achievements equal mine.’ Now suppose a commoner were similarly to attack neighboring families, kill their people, seize their dogs and pigs, food, and clothing, and similarly write his deeds on bamboo and silk and inscribe them on vessels and dishes to pass on to his descendants, saying, ‘No one’s achievements equal mine.’ How could this be permissible?” Lord Wen of Luyang said, “So if I view it on the basis of your statement, what all the world calls permissible is not necessarily so.” (49: 112/14–18)

This passage is also significant because it emphasizes the distinction, introduced in the “Moderation in Burial” essay in the Triads (25: 41/18–27), between prevailing customs and objective moral norms: what “all the world” considers permissible might nevertheless be

morally wrong. Another passage has Mozi castigating a minister of Wei 衛, a small state surrounded by wealthier, more powerful rivals, for spending resources on luxuries and a harem rather than defense, which would be of greater benefit:

今簡子之家，飾車數百乘，馬食菽粟者數百匹，婦人衣文繡者數百人，吾取飾車食馬之費，與鏽衣之財以畜士，必千人有餘。若有患難，則使百人處於前，數百於後，與婦人數百人處前後，孰安？

Now if we examine your house, there are hundreds of decorated vehicles, hundreds of grain-fed horses, and hundreds of women clothed in finery. If we took the cost of decorating the vehicles and feeding the horses and the materials needed for the fine clothing and used them to maintain soldiers, surely they would exceed a thousand men. If there were a crisis, you could station several hundred in the front and several hundred in the rear. Compared with stationing several hundred women in the front and rear, which would be more secure? (47: 105/26–28)

The Triad essays on fatalism, economic moderation, and music phrase their condemnation of fatalistic beliefs, excessive funeral practices, and wasteful entertainment generally, directing them at what are depicted as widespread views and customs the Mohists see as detrimental to the general welfare. By contrast, the Dialogues incorporate these points — along with a criticism of their supposed impiety — into an attack targeted specifically against the *Ru*:

儒之道足以喪天下者，四政焉。儒以天為不明，以鬼為不神，天鬼不說。... 又厚葬久喪，重為棺槨，多為衣衾，送死若徙，三年哭泣，扶後起，杖後行，耳無聞，目無見。... 又弦歌鼓舞，習為聲樂。... 又以命為有，貧富壽夭，治亂安危有極矣，不可損益也。為上者行之，必不聽治矣，為下者行之，必不從事矣。

The *dao* (way) of the *Ru* includes four policies that are each enough to ruin the world. The *Ru* treat Heaven as insentient and the ghosts as inanimate, [and so] Heaven and the ghosts are displeased. . . . They also conduct rich burials and prolonged mourning. They have several inner and outer coffins and many layers of shrouds, and their funeral processions are like moving house. For three years they cry and weep, until they cannot stand up without support or walk without a cane, their ears unable to hear and their eyes unable to see. . . . They also sing to the accompaniment of strings and dance to drums, practicing songs and music. . . . And they take fate to exist, holding that poverty or wealth, longevity or early death, social order or disorder, security or danger have fixed limits and cannot be increased or decreased. If rulers practice this, they will surely neglect to govern; if their subjects practice it, they will surely neglect their work. (48: 109/4–8)

The subtext of these criticisms is that the *dao* of the *Ru* fails to promote the benefit of all and

is thus morally wrong. *Ru* practices displease Heaven and the spirits, waste resources, and interfere with economic production and good social order.⁹

An interesting difference between the Dialogues and the Triads, then, is the emergence of the *Ru* as rivals whose doctrines and practices the Mohists explicitly denounce, often in face-to-face discussions with individual *Ru*. Many essays in the middle and later chronological strata of the Triads condemn practices such as rich burials or elaborate musical performances and rebut criticisms of Mohist doctrines, but without identifying particular opponents or rival groups by name.¹⁰ By contrast, the Dialogues confront opponents such as Wumazi and Wu Lü and direct a series of scathing criticisms at the *Ru*.¹¹ One explanation for this difference may simply be the different genres or purposes of the two sets of texts. The Triads focus on promulgating and defending Mohist doctrines, not refuting rivals. Where they attack harmful practices or answer criticisms, their purpose is not to diminish particular opponents so much as to justify the Mohist *dao*. By contrast, the Dialogues have broader aims and a more diffuse focus. Besides promoting Mohist doctrines, they depict exchanges in which Mozi debates and criticizes opponents, answers disciples' questions, provides moral coaching or other practical advice, and offers various observations or words of wisdom.

⁹ Besides the points in the quoted passage, the Dialogues also criticize the *Ru* for their excessive conservatism (46: 102/19–2, 48: 107/20–23) and their passivity (48: 106:25–31, 48: 107/5–9), two attitudes that in the Mohists' view squander opportunities to benefit the world.

¹⁰ The “*Fei Ru*” chapter attacks the *Ru* by name, but, as explained in footnote 4, I believe we should classify this text separately from the Triads. Although its chronological relationship to the Triad essays is not entirely clear, stylistic and thematic features suggest it is of later origin than the early and middle strata, and its content has more affinities with the Dialogues. A detailed discussion of “*Fei Ru*” is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

¹¹ Among the individual *Ru* mentioned in the Dialogues are Confucius, an unnamed follower of Confucius's student Zixia 子夏 (46: 101/5), Gong Mengzi (book 48, *passim*), and Chengzi 程子 (48: 109/4).

Another explanation for the greater prominence of the *Ru* in the Dialogues may be that when most of the Triad essays were composed, the *Ru* did not strike the Mohists as especially significant rivals.¹² The *Ru* movement may have developed in parallel with Mohism, such that the *Ru* became prominent adversaries for the Mohists only after the bulk of the Triads were produced.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Dialogues explicitly organize the ten core Mohist teachings into a platform comprising five pairs of doctrines targeted at a range of social problems:

子墨子游魏越，曰：「既得見四方之君子則將先語？」子墨子曰：「凡入國，必擇務而從事焉。國家昏亂，則語之尚賢尚同，國家貧，則語之節用節葬，國家說音湛湎，則語之非樂非命，國家淫辟無禮，則語之尊天事鬼，國家務奪侵凌，則語之兼愛非攻，故曰擇務而從事焉。」

Our master Mozi visited Wei Yue, who said: “Having been granted an audience with the rulers of the four quarters, what would you expound first?” Our master Mozi said, “Whenever you enter a state, you must select a task and work on it. If the state is in disorder, expound ‘promoting the worthy’ and ‘identifying upward’; if the state is impoverished, expound ‘moderation in use’ and ‘moderation in burial’; if the state overindulges in musical entertainment, expound ‘condemning music’ and ‘condemning fatalism’; if the state is dissolute and indecorous, expound ‘respecting Heaven’ and ‘serving ghosts’; if the state is devoted to aggression and intimidation, expound ‘inclusive care’ and ‘condemning aggression’. So I say, select a task and work on it.”¹³ (49: 114/7–10)

This passage underscores the consistency between the Dialogues and the Triads. It suggests that the writers of at least some parts of the Dialogues were consciously concerned to provide clear, concise reformulations of key doctrines from the Triads, along with guidance for Mohist adherents in applying them.

Let me now move beyond these points of continuity to explore developments in the ethics of the Dialogues.

¹² For a detailed discussion of the identity of the early Mohists’ opponents and the significance of the *Ru* for the Mohists, see Robins (2008).

¹³ For a summary of the ten doctrines, see Fraser (2002), sect. 2.

Role of *Yan* 言

A cornerstone of Mohist ethics is the conviction that the proper moral and political *dao* 道 (way) can be expressed and transmitted explicitly in verbal formulations as *yan* 言 (statements, doctrines, teachings). Such *yan* are treated as dicta or instructions that guide action. Like many early Chinese texts, the *Mozi* frequently pairs *yan* conceptually with *xing* 行 (conduct, practice).¹⁴ People's conduct is expected to correspond to their *yan*, and those who endorse contrasting *yan* can be expected to act in contrasting ways (e.g., 16: 28/4–5).¹⁵ As illustrated in the Mohist doctrine of “identifying upward” (*shang tong* 尚同), people are expected to follow their rulers' *yan* (11: 16/19–23), and moral education involves emulating the *yan* and *xing* — in effect, the words and deeds — of worthy political leaders. A major aim of the Triads is to present the *yan* of Mozi, which the texts propose as a guide to right conduct. Opponents' objections to Mohist doctrines are characterized as *yan* (e.g., 16: 27/28, 25: 40/28), as are views the Mohists seek to refute concerning funerals, the non-existence of

¹⁴ In various contexts, the pairing *yan* and *xing* may correspond roughly to the English “word and deed,” “theory and practice,” or “principle and application.”

¹⁵ Of course, people sometimes endorse *yan* that they fail to carry out completely, as the Mohists complain concerning officials' failure to practice their doctrine of “promoting the worthy”: “Now the officer gentlemen of the world in their personal lives and statements all promote the worthy. But when it comes to public administration and ruling the people, none know to promote the worthy and employ the capable. Thus we know that the officer gentleman of the world understand minor things but not major ones” (10: 14/6–7). As the Mohists see it, officials know enough to practice the doctrine in minor, personal matters, as when they insist on hiring an expert butcher to cut up an ox or tailor make a suit of clothes, but not in major affairs such as selecting appointees for government office, when they instead practice nepotism or favoritism. Such cases are an example of partial incompetence in following *yan* or the *dao*. Notice that the criticism is that officials do not “know” (*zhi* 知) to employ the capable in government. I discuss the Mohists' views on such partial incompetence further below.

ghosts, and the existence of fate (e.g., 25: 38/26–39/6, 31: 55/7, 35: 58/15–16). The Mohists specifically identify the pernicious *yan* of the fatalists as a cause of poverty, inadequate population, and social disorder, since applying this *yan* to guide conduct leads to economically and politically harmful negligence (35: 60/7–10):

子墨子言曰：「古者王公大人，為政國家者，皆欲國家之富，人民之眾，刑政之治。然而不得富而得貧，不得眾而得寡，不得治而得亂，則是本失其所欲，得其所惡，是故何也？」子墨子言曰：「執有命者以雜於民間者眾。」執有命者之言曰：「命富則富，命貧則貧，命眾則眾，命寡則寡，命治則治，命亂則亂，命壽則壽，命夭則夭。命雖強勁何益哉？」上以說王公大人，下以駟百姓之從事。故執有命者不仁。故當執有命者之言，不可不明辨。

Our master Mozi stated (*yan*), “Ancient kings, dukes, and grandees in governing the state all desired that their state be wealthy, their population large, and their government orderly. However, they obtained not wealth but poverty, not a large population but a small one, not order but disorder. This is failing to get what they originally desired and instead getting what they detested. What is the reason for this?” Our master Mozi stated, “There were many fatalists mixed in among the people.” The *yan* (statement) of the fatalists says, “If fated to be wealthy, then wealthy; if fated to be poor, then poor. If fated to be many, then many; if fated to be few, then few. If fated to be orderly, then orderly; if fated to be disorderly, then disorderly. If fated to be long-lived, then a long life; if fated to be short-lived, than a short life. Given fate, even if one devotes great effort, of what advantage is it?” Above, they persuaded kings, dukes, and grandees of this, below they interfered in the work of the common people with it. So the fatalists are morally bad. So as to the *yan* (statements) of the fatalists, we cannot fail to clearly distinguish them.¹⁶ (35: 58/13–18)

The link between *yan* and conduct is what makes promulgating incorrect *yan* not merely intellectually misguided, but morally despicable. Since people tend to act on *yan*, the Mohists deem it crucial to establish explicit, reliable criteria for evaluating “the distinctions between *shi* 是 (this/right) and *fei* 非 (not/wrong) and between benefit and harm” with respect to *yan* (35: 58/19–20). The major criteria they propose are their “three models” (*san fa* 三法): *yan* should be “rooted” (*ben* 本) in or “tested” (*kao* 考) against the deeds of the ancient sage-kings (that is, they should have some historical precedent); they should have a “source” in what the common people can hear and see (they should have some empirical basis); and

¹⁶ That is, we should apply objective models or criteria to “clearly distinguish” whether they are *shi* 是 (right) or *fei* 非 (wrong).

they should be successful in “application” (*yong* 用) — specifically, when applied as a basis for government administration and penal law, they should benefit the state, clan, and common people (35: 58/19–22).¹⁷

The Dialogues underscore and develop this conception of correct *yan* as an expression of and guide to *dao*. *Yan* that are effective in guiding or improving conduct are to be made regular or “constant” (*chang* 常) — that is, repeated frequently and promulgated widely (and, presumably, followed consistently). Regularly uttering *yan* that are of no use in guiding conduct is “verbal depravity” (*dang kou* 蕩口):

言足以復行者，常之，不足以舉行者，勿常。不足以舉行而常之，是蕩口也。

Yan adequate to repeatedly guide conduct (*xing*), make them constant (repeat them regularly); those not adequate to guide conduct, do not make them constant. To make constant those not adequate to guide conduct is verbal depravity. (46: 101/30–31)¹⁸

In another important passage (46: 102/24–103/1), Mozi accuses Wumazi of “verbal depravity” because his *yan* is of “no benefit.” Benefit (*li* 利), of course, is the third of the three models for distinguishing *yan* that are *shi* from those that are *fei*.¹⁹ The *yan* in question is apparently Wuma’s slogan that “For me there is killing others to benefit myself, but not killing myself to benefit others” (我有殺彼以利我，無殺我以利彼), which Mozi refers to as “your *yi*” (子之義) and Wuma himself calls “my *yi*” (我義) (my norm or standard of right). The passage thus implies that such *yan* articulate conceptions or aspects of *yi*, here probably referring to norms governing what is right or morally correct. It also implies a

¹⁷ One version of the theory refers to the three models as the three “markers” (*biao* 表) (35: 58/19). Another substitutes “documents of the former kings” for what people hear and see as the “source” and adds “the intent of Heaven and ghosts” as part of the “root” (36: 60/19–20).

¹⁸ A nearly identical statement also appears at (47: 104/19–20).

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, the third model is that a *yan* applied as a basis for government administration and penal law should benefit the state, clan, and people.

conceptual link between the notion of *yi* and the Mohist view that appropriate *yan* should be made “constant” (*chang* 常, 46: 101/30). Mozi refutes Wumazi’s *yi* by showing how publicizing it would have self-defeating consequences: those who endorse it would be inclined to kill Wuma to benefit themselves, while those who reject it would be inclined to kill him to stop the spread of his malicious *yan*. Either way, although his proposed *yi* (norm) aims to protect or promote his interests, publicizing it is instead likely to bring him harm. The implication is that besides benefiting society, an adequate *yi* or *yan* must meet a publicity condition and, most likely, a universalizability condition. *Yi* or *yan* can be justified only if they can be publicized and regularly followed by all without negative or self-defeating consequences. These conditions probably also follow from the idea that an effective action-guiding *yan* should be made “constant” (*chang*), or widely and regularly promulgated, combined with the Mohists’ expectation that people normally act on the *yan* they promulgate and endorse. The import of Mozi’s refutation of Wuma is that the latter’s slogan, and thus his *yi*, cannot consistently and effectively be made “constant” (*chang*).

The dialogue with Wu Lü 吳慮, the opponent who criticizes Mozi’s activism, presents a justification for the Mohists’ devotion to promulgating their ethical and political *yan* (49: 113/13–29). Wu is a rural recluse who spends the winter making pottery and the summer farming. He compares himself to the sage-king Shun 舜, also traditionally said to have worked in the fields. Probably, then, he takes his eremitic way of life to be the sagely *dao*, and he apparently takes the Mohists’ activism to be misguided. Challenging Mozi, Wu claims that one should simply do what is *yi* (morally right), without promulgating *yan* (statements) about it:

義耳義耳，焉用言之哉？

Be *yi*, that’s all; be *yi*, that’s all. What’s the use of making *yan* about it? (49: 113/14)

However, at Mozi's prompting, Wu assents to the consequentialist view that what is *yi* yields material benefit for others. So Mozi responds by defending moral activism on the grounds that — in the prevailing circumstances, at least — for him, Mozi, to research and promulgate the *dao* and *yan* (statements) of the sage-kings ultimately benefits the world more than directly producing food or clothing. As a single, individual worker, his economic output would necessarily be limited, but promoting the *dao* could potentially bring about extensive benefit: if rulers follow his *yan*, they will bring order to their states, and if the common people follow them, they will improve their conduct. Moreover, Wu agrees as well that teaching or encouraging others in a worthy activity is a greater contribution than simply performing it oneself. Many people know little about *yi* (morality), Mozi claims, so why not disseminate *yan* (teachings) about it? Promulgating *yan* to reform people's conduct is thus morally justified on the grounds of its good consequences.

In their treatment of *yan*, the Mohists define a seminal position on what became one of the core issues of early Chinese philosophy: the role of explicitly formulated models or guidelines in directing action. Adopting a stance later shared by Xunzi, Han Fei, and others, they contend that the most effective way to promulgate the *dao* and lead people to follow it is to set forth explicit guidelines articulated through *yan*. This is the mainstream stance that parts of the *Daodejing* 道德經, Mencius 孟子, and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 reject in various ways.²⁰ Each of these texts expresses a skeptical stance concerning whether explicit models or *yan* can guide action effectively and, in the case of the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, about whether such *yan* should be actively disseminated.

²⁰ For instance, *Daodejing* chapter 2 describes the sage as practicing an “unstated” (*bu yan* 不言) teaching, Mencius privileges the heart over *yan* in guiding action (2A:2), and the *Zhuangzi* advocates “fasting the heart” (*xin zhai* 心齋) rather than directing action by explicit guidelines (Zhuangzi 1956, 4/1–34).

Moral Worth

The Dialogues also include several interesting passages addressing moral worth, an issue not explicitly treated in the Triads. These texts are significant because they tie moral worth to action-guiding attitudes such as intentions and commitments and to robust, stable aspects of agents' character. The Dialogues thus provide strong evidence against the view that Mohist ethics concerns only outward compliance with the *dao* and neglects issues of character, motivation, and moral worth.²¹

According to the Dialogues, the moral worth of agents' actions and character rests on their *yi* 意 (intentions, aims) or *zhi* 志 (intents, commitments).²² To evaluate people's character, we must determine their intent by observing the results of their conduct over the long term. Observation of only limited or restricted instances is not enough, for others could be merely luring us into trusting them.

魯君謂子墨子曰：「我有二子，一人者好學，一人者好分人財，孰以為太子而可？」子墨子曰：「未可知也。或所為賞與為是也。鮒者之恭，非為魚賜也，餌鼠以蟲，非愛之也。吾願主君之合其志功而觀焉。」

The lord of Lu said to our master Mozi, "I have two sons. One of them is keen on study; one of them is keen on sharing wealth with others. Which would be acceptable as the crown prince?" Our master Mozi said, "We can't yet know. Perhaps they act this way for the sake of reward or praise. The bowing motion of a fisherman, it's not done for the sake of expressing gratitude to the fish; baiting rats with worms, it's not done out of care for the rats. I hope your lordship will observe them to see how their intents match up with their results." (49: 113/6–8)

Short-term observation cannot yield reliable knowledge of people's motives. Virtues such as

²¹ For examples of such interpretive views, see Wong (2002, 454) and Schwartz (1985, 147).

²² The concepts of *yi* 意 (intentions, aims) and *zhi* 志 (intents, commitments) largely overlap. *Zhi* may tend to refer to relatively long-term commitments. However, as illustrated below in the dialogue about feeding versus extinguishing a fire (46: 100/20–23), *yi* can refer to either the intention to perform a particular act (such as extinguishing a fire) or a long-term commitment (such as benefiting the world).

ren 仁 (moral goodness) comprise stable traits and associated patterns of conduct. Acting properly in a few cases does not qualify one as *ren*, just as temporarily standing on tiptoe does not make one tall.

二三子復於子墨子曰：「告子勝為仁。」子墨子曰：「未必然也。告子為仁，譬猶跂以為長，隱以為廣，不可久也。」

Several disciples reported to our master Mozi, saying, “Gaozi excels in *ren*.” Our master Mozi said, “It’s not necessarily so. Gaozi’s being *ren* is analogous to standing on tiptoe to make oneself taller or spreading one’s shoulders to make oneself broader. It cannot last long.” (48: 111/10–11)

These examples concern long-term evaluation of motives or character. But the texts extend this view to cover individual actions as well. Moral worth lies in intending to do what is *yi* (right), even if the good consequences of one’s conduct have yet to materialize.

巫馬子謂子墨子曰：「子兼愛天下，未云利也，我不愛天下，未云賊也。功皆未至，子何獨自是而非我哉？」子墨子曰：「今有燎者於此，一人奉水將灌之，一人摻火將益之，功皆未至，子何貴於二人？」巫馬子曰：「我是彼奉水者之意，而非夫摻火者之意。」子墨子曰：「吾亦是吾意，而非子之意也。」

Wumazi said to our master Mozi, “You inclusively care for everyone in the world, but have yet to benefit them; I do not care about everyone, but have yet to injure them. Both sides having yet to achieve results, why do you deem yourself alone right and me wrong?” Our master Mozi said, “Suppose something is burning. One person is carrying water to pour on it, one person is holding fuel to add to the fire. Both sides having yet to achieve results, which of the two people do you value more?” Wumazi said, “I deem the intention of the one carrying water right and the intention of the one holding fire wrong.” Our master Mozi said, “I likewise deem my intention right and yours wrong.” (46: 100/20–23)

One aspect of moral worth is to pursue moral ideals regardless of the prospect of reward or punishment:

巫馬子謂子墨子曰：「子之為義也，人不見而助，鬼不見而富，而子為之，有狂疾。」子墨子曰：「今使子有二臣於此，其一人者見子從事，不見子則不從事；其一人者見子從事，不見子亦從事，子誰貴於此二人？」巫馬子曰：「我貴其見我從事，不見我亦從事者。」子墨子曰：「然則是子亦貴有狂疾者。」

Wumazi said to our master Mozi, “As to your practicing *yi* (what’s morally right), people do not see and assist you, the ghosts do not see and reward you, yet you do it. You’re crazy.” Our master Mozi said, “Suppose you have two servants. One of them works when he sees you and doesn’t work if he doesn’t see you. One of them works

whether he sees you or not. Which of the two do you value more?” Wumazi said, “I value the one who works whether he sees me or not.” Our master Mozi said, “So then you too value craziness.” (46: 100/30–101/3/)

Another aspect is that the virtuous agent takes the initiative to pursue what is right. This is a point on which the Mohists contrast their *dao* with that of the *Ru*. In one passage, Gong Mengzi cites a Ruist saying to the effect that a gentleman offers counsel only when asked:

公孟子謂子墨子曰：「君子共己以待，問焉則言，不問焉則止，譬若鐘然，扣則鳴，不扣則不鳴。」

Gong Mengzi said to our master Mozi, “The gentleman folds his hands on his chest and waits. When asked, he speaks; when not asked, he ceases. He is like a bell. When struck, it chimes; when not struck, it does not chime.” (48: 106/25–26)

Mozi responds that this maxim applies only to predicaments in which a violent ruler is unlikely to heed counsel. In other cases, as when the state is endangered or the ruler is contemplating harmful military action, the gentleman should step forward with advice:

“Though not struck, one must chime” (48: 106/31). Elsewhere, the Dialogues reiterate this point with respect to the virtue of loyalty (*zhong* 忠). A loyal minister is proactive in serving his ruler’s interests:

魯陽文君謂子墨子曰：「有語我以忠臣者，令之俯則俯，令之仰則仰，處則靜，呼則應，可謂忠臣乎？」子墨子曰：「令之俯則俯，令之仰則仰，是似景也。處則靜，呼則應，是似響也。君將何得於景與響哉？若以翟之所謂忠臣者，上有過，則微之以諫，己有善，則訪之上，而無敢以告。外匡其邪，而入其善，尚同而無下比，是以美善在上，而怨讎在下，安樂在上，而憂感在臣，此翟之所謂忠臣者也。」

Lord Wen of Luyang said to our master Mozi, “Someone explained to me his view of a loyal minister: If you command him to bow, he bows; if you command him to bend backward, he bends backward. If standing by, he is quiet; if called, he responds. Can this be called a loyal minister?” Our master Mozi said, “If you command him to bow, he bows; if you command him to bend backward, he bends backward — this resembles a shadow. If standing by, he is quiet; if called, he responds — this resembles an echo. Of what use are a shadow and echo to you? As to what I call a loyal minister, when his superior is at fault, he observes and warns. When he has a good idea, he advises his superior without announcing it to others. Outside, he corrects his own flaws, while he brings his good points inside. He identifies with his superior and does not ally with other subordinates. Thus the excellent and good are attributed to the superior, and complaints and grudges go to the subordinates. The

superior is at ease and happy, while the ministers handle the worries and troubles. This is what I call a loyal minister.” (49: 112/30–113/3)

Though morally worthy agents take the initiative in pursuing the good, not everyone need contribute to *yi* (morality) in the same way. There may be a division of labor on the basis of people’s different abilities:

「為義孰為大務？」子墨子曰：「譬若築牆然，能築者築，能實壤者實壤，能欣者欣，然後牆成也。為義猶是也。能談辯者談辯，能說書者說書，能從事者從事，然後義事成也。」

“In practicing *yi* (moral rightness), what is the greatest task?” Our master Mozi said, “It is like building an [earthen] wall. Those who can build it up, build it up; those who can refill the earth, refill the earth; those who can measure, measure; and eventually the wall is completed. Practicing *yi* is like this. Those who can discuss and argue, discuss and argue; those who can explain texts, explain texts; those who can work, work; and eventually the work of *yi* is completed.” (46: 100/16–18)

Although the Triads treat issues pertaining to moral worth less directly, I suggest that they too devote attention to agents’ motivation and character, rather than merely their conduct. The Triads are concerned not only with modifying what people say and do, but with developing the evaluative, action-guiding *shi-fei* attitudes that motivate proper statements (*yan*) and conduct (*xing*). According to the Mohist theory of “identifying upward” (*shangtong* 尚同), for instance, people are to emulate virtuous political superiors in order to acquire evaluative attitudes that conform to unified norms for distinguishing *shi* (right) from *fei* (wrong). Villagers, for example, are instructed to model themselves on the virtuous official who governs their district:

凡里之萬民，皆尚同乎鄉長。...鄉長之所是，必亦是之，鄉長之所非，必亦非之。去而不善言，學鄉長之善言，去而不善行，學鄉長之善行。

The myriad people of the village will all identify upward with the district head. . . . What the district head deems *shi*, you must also deem *shi*; what the district head deems *fei*, you must also deem *fei*. Eliminate your bad *yan* (statements) and learn the good *yan* of the district head; eliminate your bad conduct (*xing*) and learn the good conduct of the district head. (12: 18/9–10)

Agents who have learned to distinguish *shi* from *fei* properly exercise their moral

know-how (*zhi* 知) by reliably doing what is *yi* (moral) and refraining from what is not. Failing to distinguish *shi* from *fei* properly yields grounds for concluding that they do not really “know the difference” between *shi* and *fei* (17: 31/1–4). The Mohists seem to assume that to have appropriate *shi-fei* attitudes is to have the right sort of motives, and to possess reliable moral know-how is to have a virtuous character. The aim is for people to acquire the relevant *shi-fei* distinctions and normative responses so that they acquire a stable, reliable disposition to respond properly to morally pertinent situations.²³ This aim dovetails with the Dialogues’ position that agents’ moral worth is to be evaluated on the basis of their attitudes and conduct over the long term and that temporary or strained adherence to moral norms does not qualify as virtue.

Moral Psychology

A third area of development in the Dialogues is moral psychology. Several essays in the Triads touch on issues in this area, especially when describing people’s conduct in a state of nature or how people can be motivated to practice the Mohist norm of inclusive care (*jian ai* 兼愛). Among the major claims the different essays advance are that even in a political state of nature people generally are spontaneously motivated to act on what they deem *shi* 是 (right, correct) or *yi* (morally right) (11: 16/10); that they tend to reciprocate beneficial or detrimental attitudes and conduct (15: 26/10–12; 16: 16:29/23–24); that they are inclined to follow political leaders (15: 25/22–26/9; 16: 29/25–30/4), though they may resist if the latter are not perceived as acting in the public interest (12: 20/2–3); and that they are motivated by community approval and discouraged by disapproval (12: 20/5–8).²⁴ On the whole, however, the Triads devote relatively little direct attention to moral psychology, since their major focus

²³ I discuss these points in more detail in Fraser (2011).

²⁴ For further discussion of these points, see Fraser (2008) and (2011).

is normative doctrines and policy proposals. The Dialogues flesh out the Mohists' views on moral psychology and develop their positions on several points.

The Dialogues' core psychological generalization resonates with the account of people in a state of nature presented in the Triad essays on "Identifying Upward." Both these essays and the Dialogues hold that people tend to be strongly committed to *yi* (morality) and will generally act on their conception of it. According to "Identifying Upward I," for instance, prior to the establishment of government and universal moral education, people all "deemed their [conception of] *yi* (morality) right, on that basis deemed others' *yi* wrong, and so deemed each other wrong 是以人是其義以非人之義，故交相非也" (11: 16/10–11).

The motivational force of these convictions is so strong that they lead to violent social turmoil. The Dialogues reiterate the idea that people are generally motivated by their conception of *yi*, at least when its demands are not too strenuous. Anyone would help someone struggling with a heavy load, for instance, because doing so is *yi* (morally right):

今有人於此，負粟息於路側，欲起而不能，君子見之，無長少貴賤，必起之。何故也？曰：義也。

Suppose there is a man carrying grain who is resting by the roadside. He wants to get up but cannot. On seeing him, whether old or young, of high rank or low, gentlemen would surely help him up. Why? I say, because it is *yi*.²⁵ (47: 106/4–5)

Indeed, people value *yi* even more than life. They would never sacrifice a limb for a piece of clothing, nor their life to rule the world, but they will fight to the death over *yan* (statements,

²⁵ Passages such as this one 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 (Cai 1978, 83).

doctrines) that they think violate *yi*.²⁶

子墨子曰：「萬事莫貴於義。今謂人曰：予子冠履，而斷子之手足，子為之乎？必不為，何故？則冠履不若手足之貴也。又曰：予子天下而殺子之身，子為之乎？必不為，何故？則天下不若身之貴也。爭一言以相殺，是貴義於其身也。故曰：萬事莫貴於義也。」

Our master Mozi said, “Nothing is more valuable than *yi*. Suppose we said to someone, ‘I’ll give you a hat and shoes but cut off your hands and feet, will you do it?’ Surely he wouldn’t do it. Why? It’s that a hat and shoes are not as valuable as hands and feet. And suppose we said, ‘I’ll give you the empire but take your life, will you do it?’ Surely he wouldn’t do it. Why? It’s that the empire is not as valuable as one’s life. Yet people will kill each other fighting over a single *yan*. This is valuing *yi* more than one’s life. So I say, nothing is more valuable than *yi*.” (47: 103/23–26)

Moreover, people like to think of themselves as *yi*: they are pleased to be praised for it even when the praise is unmerited and they see themselves as needing no help to achieve it.

子墨子曰：「世俗之君子，貧而謂之富則怒，無義而謂之有義則喜，豈不悖哉！」

Our master Mozi said, “The gentlemen of the age, if they are poor and you say they are rich, they are angry, but if they are immoral and you say they are moral (*yi*), they are pleased. Isn’t it perverse!” (46: 102/11)

子墨子曰：「世之君子，欲其義之成，而助之修其身則慍，是猶欲其牆之成，而人助之築則慍也，豈不悖哉！」

Our master Mozi said, “The gentlemen of the world want to become moral, but if you help them cultivate themselves, they resent it. This is like wanting to build a wall, but if people help you build, resenting it. Isn’t it perverse!” (47: 105/13–14)

These passages are two of many in the Dialogues that criticize “the gentlemen of the age” for failing to understand and pursue correct moral norms — often while paying lip service to morality — and even opposing the Mohists’ moral activism. On the one hand, anyone would help the man carrying grain to lift his load, because it is the right thing to do. But on the other

²⁶ This statement is comparable to Mencius’s claim that people will generally give priority to *yi*, even when doing so conflicts with the only available means of preserving their life. Even a beggar, Mencius suggests, would not accept food given with a deliberate show of disrespect (Lau 1970, 6A:10).

hand:

今為義之君子，奉承先王之道以語之，縱不說而行，又從而非毀之。則是世俗之君子之視義士也，不若視負粟者也。」

Now gentlemen who practice *yi* (morality) carry on the *dao* of the former kings and expound it, but not only are [the gentlemen of the age] not pleased to practice it, they even condemn and slander it. This is the gentlemen of the age holding the moral person in less regard than a carrier of grain. (47: 106/5–7)

Although people tend to be motivated by their conception of *yi*, their grasp of *yi* is often inadequate, and so society falls short of Mohist moral ideals. The Dialogues are optimistic about people's commitment to the general idea of *yi*, but they also express deep frustration with — and even alienation from — the actual moral attitudes of many “gentlemen of the age” (世俗之君子, 47: 106/4). Given society's low moral standards, proper moral, social, and political order can be achieved only through active dissemination of correct moral doctrines — a stance which converges with that of the Triads.

According to the Dialogues, people are inclined not only to act on what they take to be *yi*, but to respond positively to others who practice *yi*. If treated with care and respect, people feel close to and identify with others; without care and respect, they can easily become estranged. In one story, the famous inventor Gongshuzi 公輸子 challenges Mozi to explain whether his *yi* (moral norms) has “hooks and rams” analogous to those Gongshu developed for naval warfare, which can stop the retreat or block the advance of enemy boats.

Mozi replies:

我義之鉤強，賢於子舟戰之鉤強，我鉤之以愛，揣之以恭。弗鉤以愛則不親，弗揣以恭則速狎，狎而不親，則速離。故交相愛交相恭，猶若相利也。今子鉤而止人，人亦鉤而止子，子強而距人，人亦強而距子，交相鉤交相強，猶若相害也。故我義之鉤強，賢子舟戰之鉤強。

The hooks and rams of my *yi* are superior to yours for naval battles. I hook people with care and push them with respect. If you do not hook them with care, they will not be close to you; if you do not push them with respect, they will quickly become contemptuous. If they are contemptuous and not close to you, they will quickly leave you. So caring about and respecting each other amounts to benefiting each other. Now

if you forcibly hook people to stop them, they too will hook and stop you; if you forcibly ram them to repel them, they too will ram and repel you. Hooking and ramming each other amounts to harming each other. So the hooks and rams of my *yi* are superior to yours for naval battles. (49: 115/15–19)

This passage echoes two important psychological generalizations found in the Triads. One is that people generally reciprocate each other's attitudes and conduct (15: 25/24–25, 16: 29/23–24), a tendency that for the Mohists helps explain why the norm of all-inclusive care for everyone (*jian ai* 兼愛) is practically feasible. The other is that people — specifically, competent officials — will not feel “close” (*qin* 親) to, and will hesitate to serve, a leader who fails to show them appropriate care and esteem — specifically, by paying them well and delegating genuine responsibility to them (9: 11/13–16). A significant feature of this passage is that it introduces an explicit concept of respect (*gong* 恭) for others, a notion absent from the Triads.²⁷ In their emphasis on the comparatively proactive moral attitude of care (*ai* 愛), which involves a positive inclination to benefit others, the Triads tend to overlook the more neutral moral attitude of respect, which — for contemporary moral philosophers, at least — might involve only an inclination to treat others fairly and avoid harming them. Having introduced the notion of respect, however, the Dialogues do not go on to develop a distinctive theoretical role for it.²⁸

²⁷ A passage in one of the “Promoting the Worthy” essays states that to recruit talented personnel for employment in government, one should show them reverence (*jing* 敬) (8: 9/16). But none of the Triad essays mention respect for others as a core moral attitude on a par with care (*ai* 愛) for others.

²⁸ This point is unsurprising, given the Mohists' tendency (discussed below) to emphasize increasingly stringent moral standards. Moral norms that emphasize respect for all are typically less demanding than those that seek to promote everyone's welfare, as the Mohist *dao* does.

“Valuing *Yi*” 貴義, the second book of the Dialogues, contains a series of remarks providing advice on personal moral discipline, a topic that receives little attention in the Triads.²⁹ A likely explanation for its inclusion here is that the Dialogues may have been directed primarily at Mohist followers, rather than the broader audience addressed by the Triads, many of which explicitly appeal to the entire hierarchy of government officials, along with other “gentlemen of the world.” Where the Triads resemble a series of public advocacy pamphlets, the Dialogues may be more comparable to a handbook for Mohist adherents, which treats the concrete practice of the Mohist *dao*. Among other points, the Dialogues urge their audience to engage only in speech and actions that benefit all (47: 104/15–17); to repeat or “make constant” *yan* (statements) that improve conduct while refraining from those that do not (47: 104/19–20); and to persevere in the path of *yi* even if they fail occasionally (47: 104/22–23).

This last remark is of particular interest, for it suggests an intriguing approach to weakness of the will that coheres with, but is not articulated in, doctrines presented in the Triads. As I mentioned above, the Mohists consider the ability to draw and act on *shi-fei* distinctions properly a form of competence or know-how (*zhi* 知), akin in some respects to the ability to perform a skill. Accordingly, their primary explanation for an agent’s failure to act morally 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 *shi* from *fei* and responding accordingly. Mohist texts depict three overlapping

²⁹ Two illustrations of such personal moral discipline that we do find in the Triads are the gentleman and the ruler depicted practicing inclusive care in the arguments intended to show that inclusive care is practically “applicable” (16: 27/28–28/10). Both guide their conduct by reciting to themselves statements (*yan*) about how an exemplary gentleman or ruler is as committed to the good of his friends or subjects as to his own.

types of cases of such ignorance or incompetence. The first occurs when the agent simply does not know how to distinguish *shi* from *fei* properly, as when people fail to distinguish wars of aggression as *fei* (wrong) and even deem them *yi* (morally right) (17: 30/27–30/3, 28: 49/7–8). The texts especially call attention to cases of partial incompetence, in which people distinguish *shi* from *fei* properly in some but not all relevant instances. One example is when they rightly condemn theft and murder but wrongly approve of unprovoked warfare aimed at seizing the wealth and slaughtering the populace of other states.

子墨子謂魯陽文君曰：「世俗之君子，皆知小物而不知大物。今有人於此，竊一犬一彘，則謂之不仁，竊一國一都，則以為義。譬猶小視白謂之白，大視白則謂之黑。」

Our master Mozi said to Lord Wen of Luyang, “The gentlemen of the age all know minor things but not major ones. Suppose there is a man here. If he steals a dog or pig, they call him morally bad (not *ren*). If he steals a state or a city, they take him to be *yi* (morally right). It’s like seeing a small amount of white and calling it white, yet seeing a large amount of white and calling it black.” (49: 112/20–22)

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: 14/6–16).³⁰ Such cases represent a failure fully “to know (*zhi*) the distinction between right (*yi*) and not-right” (17: 31/3).

The second type of case is when the agent verbally draws distinctions correctly but then fails to act properly. An 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: 33/15–17). These are cases in which agents’ conduct (*xing*) fails to conform to their statements (*yan*).

子墨子曰：「今瞽曰：鉅者白也，黔者黑也。雖明目者無以易之。兼白黑，使瞽者取焉，不能知也。故我曰瞽不知白黑者，非以其名也，以其取也。今天下

³⁰ See note 15 above.

之君子之名仁也，雖禹湯無以易之。兼仁與不仁，而使天下之君子取焉，不能知也。故我曰天下之君子不知仁者，非以其名也，亦以其取也。」

Our master Mozi said, “Now the blind say, ‘What’s bright is white, and what’s dark is black.’ Even the clear-sighted have no basis for changing this claim. But combine white and black things together and make a blind man select among them, and he cannot know them. So as to my saying the blind do not know white and black, it’s not on the basis of their naming, it’s on the basis of their selecting. Now as to how the gentlemen of the world name *ren* (moral goodness), even [the sage-kings] Yu and Tang have no basis for changing it. But combine *ren* and not-*ren* things together and make the gentlemen of the world select among them, and they cannot know them. So as to my saying the gentlemen of the world do not know *ren*, it’s not on the basis of their naming, it’s on the basis of their selecting.” (47: 105/4–7)

To count as having moral know-how, the agent must respond to *shi-fei* 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 *dao* and undertakes to act on it, yet fails to do so. The agent commits to the *dao*, 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 *dao* 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 *dao* one has embarked on. The Triads do not treat this issue explicitly, but a passage from the Dialogues addresses it as follows:

為義而不能，必無排其道。譬若匠人之斲而不能，無排其繩。

If you undertake to practice *yi* (morality) but are not able, you must not abandon the *dao*. To give an analogy, a carpenter who saws [a straight edge] but is not able does not abandon the marking line. (47: 104/28)

The emphasis on ability (*neng* 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.³¹ This incompetence is analogous to a defect 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 *dao* 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.³²

Sagehood Ideal

The fourth development in the Dialogues is an explicit ideal of personal moral sagehood not found in the Triads. On the whole, the Dialogues present a more demanding view of the moral life than the Triads do. The main requirement the Triads place on the typical member of society is to conform to the norms of *yi* (moral rightness), which, if generally followed, would promote the benefit of all. These norms comprise inclusive care;

³¹ This interpretation is consistent with passages in the Triads that discuss whether the Mohist norm of inclusive care is too difficult. According to “Inclusive Care” I and II, the major obstacles to the widespread practice of inclusive care are “just that rulers do not adopt it as a basis for government and officers do not adopt it as a basis for conduct” (特君不以為政而士不以為行故也, 15: 26/12) and that “no rulers delight in it” (無有上說之者, 16: 30/4). Both texts claim that people can be brought to practice inclusive care through their inclination to conform to their ruler’s wishes. The key problem is not that it is difficult, but that rulers have not promulgated it as their society’s *dao* and accordingly people have not adopted it as a norm. Of course, the ruler’s approval, along with any rewards and punishments he institutes, will contribute to people’s motivation to practice it. But the chief reason they fail to practice it is not a lack of motivation; it is that the ruler has not established it as a norm, and so people have not acquired the relevant competence. For a detailed discussion of Mohist views on motivation, see Fraser (2008) and (2011).

³² This sketch rebuts Nivison’s claim that the Mohists have no explanation of akrasia beyond “sheer perversity” on the agent’s part (1996, 84).

refraining from war, theft, oppression, and exploitation; sharing surplus labor, knowledge, and surplus 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.³³ 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. Being *yi* (moral) lies largely in playing one's part in a system that promotes the benefit of all.³⁴

The Dialogues, by contrast, suggest that *yi* lies largely in helping others, as Mozi seems to imply when he asks Wu Lü whether what he calls *yi* is, as for Mozi, a matter of “having strength to work for others and wealth to share with others” (有力以勞人，有財以分人) (49: 113/14–15).³⁵ Moreover, if *yi* does not prevail in the world, one can only work

³³ For particularly clear examples, see *Mozi* (26: 43/7–8, 26: 43/25–27, 27: 44/26–45/2, and 28: 48/23–28).

³⁴ Besides the minimal requirement of *yi* (moral rightness), the Triads also present a more stringent ideal of *ren* 仁 (moral goodness). The mark of *ren* people is that they “take as their business promoting the benefit of the world and eliminating harm to the world” (15: 24/26–27), an end potentially much more demanding than the basic norms of *yi*. But *ren* may simply have been a virtuous attitude, rather than a standard of conduct, and the Triads do not suggest that people are generally expected to go beyond the demands of *yi* and dedicate themselves to directly pursuing the benefit of all. A person who lives up to the requirements of *yi*, without directly seeking to promote the benefit of the world, is not blameworthy. (I discuss the ideal of *ren* further below.)

³⁵ Precursors of this characterization of *yi* can be found in several Triad essays. According to one passage, Heaven desires that “people who have strength work for each other, who have *dao* teach each other, and who have wealth share with each other” (27: 44/28). This ideal echoes the description of social disorder in the first two “Identifying Upward” essays, which

even harder to achieve it, whether or not others do their share.

子墨子自魯之齊，即過故人，謂子墨子曰：「今天下莫為義，子獨自苦而為義，子不若已。」子墨子曰：「今有人於此，有子十人，一人耕而九人處，則耕者不可以不益急矣。何故？則食者眾而耕者寡也。今天下莫為義，則子如勸我者也，何故止我？」

Traveling from Lu to Qi, our master Mozi passed an old acquaintance, who said to him, “Now no one in the world practices *yi*. You alone toil to practice *yi*. You’d be better off quitting.” Our master Mozi said, “Suppose there were a man with ten sons. One worked the fields while nine sat around. Then the one who worked the fields could not but work even more urgently. Why? Those who eat are many, while those who work are few. Now if no one in the world practices *yi*, you should encourage me. Why stop me?” (47: 103/28–104/1)

Here we find hints of the self-sacrificing extremism that, according to the *Zhuangzi* “Under Heaven” essay (1956, 33/27ff.), became prevalent among some Mohist factions late in the movement’s history. In this respect, the Dialogues may reflect a general tendency as Mohism developed to shift toward more demanding norms of conduct,³⁶ eventually culminating in the legendary selflessness of late Warring States Mohist militias.³⁷

Among the remarks on personal moral discipline in the Dialogues is a striking passage that advocates eliminating the influence of emotions and other potential sources of bias and dedicating oneself wholly to *yi*, so as to become a sage or moral saint.

子墨子曰：嘿則思，言則誨，動則事，使三者代御，必為聖人。必去六辟，必去喜，去怒，去樂，去悲，去愛而用仁義。手足口鼻耳，從事於義，必為聖

claim that as order breaks down, people cease to share surplus labor, surplus wealth, and “good *dao*” (11: 16/12–13, 12: 17/18; see too 10: 15/16–17). By implication, when society conforms to *yi*, people are expected to share surplus labor and wealth. Two key differences from the Dialogues are the qualifiers “each other” and “surplus.” The sharing is depicted as reciprocal, rather than purely altruistic, and in the “Identifying Upward” essays it is specifically *surplus* labor and goods that are shared, not all labor and goods.

³⁶ Later versions of the doctrine of inclusive care (*jian ai* 兼愛), for instance, seem more demanding than earlier ones (see Defoort in this volume).

³⁷ The dedication and heroism of these bands of Mohists are vividly depicted in the *Annals of Lü Buwei* and the *Huainanzi*. See Knoblock and Riegel (2000, 487–88) and He (1998, 1406).

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Our master Mozi said, “When silent, ponder; when speaking, instruct; when acting, work. Make these three alternate one after the other and you will surely be a sage. You must remove the six biases: you must remove happiness and anger, joy and sorrow, fondness [and dislike] and apply *ren* and *yi*. Your hands, feet, mouth, nose, and ears being employed for *yi*, you will surely be a sage. (47: 104/22–26)

The “six biases” are affective attitudes or passions — happiness, anger, joy, sorrow, preferences, and aversions. The text takes these as unreliable grounds for guiding action and urges us to reject them in favor of guidance by *ren* (moral goodness) and *yi* (moral rightness). This passage has been cited as evidence that the Mohists advocate guiding action by “dispassionate intellect” instead of “unreasoned attachment” (Wong 2002, 453). I suggest, however, that such a reading imports a Western concern with the contrast between reason and passion that is alien to the *Mozi*. The Mohists themselves draw no clear distinction between intellect and emotion,³⁸ nor do they employ any concept that corresponds directly to that of reason. The text mentions only applying *ren* and *yi*, not “dispassionate intellect,” and its argument is that the other attitudes are prone to bias, not that they are “unreasoned.” Nor, I think, does the passage entail that we should become wholly dispassionate or emotionless. *Ren* and the relational virtues of *hui* 惠 (benevolence), *zhong* 忠 (faithfulness), *ci* 慈 (compassion), *xiao* 孝 (filial devotion), and *ti* 悌 (brotherliness) — which many of the Triad essays count among the goods that constitute *yi* (morality) — are likely to include affective components, though these may be calmer or less intense than happiness, anger, joy, and sorrow. The text’s point is rather that conduct should be guided by the virtue of *ren* and the objective, impartial norms of *yi*, rather than by easily biased emotions and preferences.³⁹

³⁸ I argue for this point in Fraser (2011).

³⁹ The passage thus presents an interesting contrast with Mencius, who holds that some emotions, such as our alarm at seeing an infant in danger, naturally align with correct moral norms and morally worthy motivation, and that personal moral development lies in extending

The Mohist stance on the passions here is defensible, insofar as the six attitudes the text mentions are indeed highly susceptible to bias. Even when they do align with correct moral judgment, they alone cannot properly be the basis for conduct, but must be checked against moral norms. Still, the passage invites several lines of criticism. One could argue that the passions are part of human life and, in some cases at least, are a modality through which we more fully appreciate the moral status of certain events or situations. (The torture of innocent children, for instance, is not merely wrong, but horrendous.) The passage proposes that the path to moral sagehood lies in setting aside our personal, potentially biased passions and acting on *ren* and *yi* alone. An important alternative view, one sometimes associated with Ruism, is that sagehood might lie instead in integrating the passions with *ren*, so as to bring them into line with correct moral judgments. Instead of ignoring joy and sorrow, for instance, we would seek to feel joyful about things that are morally good or right and sorrowful about those that are bad or wrong. One might argue that this latter view more adequately recognizes the place of emotions in moral life. In the Mohists' defense, however, the passage is not describing the psychology of the sage or the *ren* person, but advocating an approach to personal moral development. The Mohists might agree that the sagely person feels joy about the good and sorrow about the bad. But this is irrelevant to the text's claim, which is that to *become* such a person, we should set aside the bias-prone emotions and preferences we feel *now* and in their place "apply *ren* and *yi*."

Another question is whether the distinction between preferences and *shi-fei* distinctions grounded in our conception of *yi* is as sharp as the passage assumes (see Griffin 1996, 19–36). The Mohists themselves are committed to the view that to distinguish or filling these out appropriately. Mencius's chief point is that such passions show we are "capable" (*neng* 能) of being morally good. He is vague about the criteria for discriminating morally relevant passions from irrelevant or bad ones, but two he clearly thinks especially important are care for parents and respect for brothers (Lau 1970, 7A:15).

something as *shi* or *fei* is at the same time to approve or condemn it, and thus to have a preference for or against it.⁴⁰ Of course, the point of the passage is that we should eliminate subjective bias, not all preferences. But a more defensible way to make this point might be to advocate bringing our preferences into line with objective norms, rather than simply “removing” (*qu* 去) them.

These quibbles aside, the most striking aspect of the passage is its ideal of total dedication to morality. One is to devote every thought, utterance, and action to *ren* and *yi*, setting everything else aside. No room is left for any activity without positive moral value, derived, according to Mohist normative theory, from contributing in some way to the benefit of all. Morality here is not merely a constraint on our conduct, a normative status our actions should have, or one good among others. It is an all-encompassing end in itself. The sage ideal presented here is thus considerably more demanding than the moral doctrines of the Triads, which require only that everyone live by norms whose collective practice promotes the benefit of all.

To grasp the place of this passage in Mohist thought, however, I suggest that again we need to consider its likely audience. As I proposed above, the Dialogues may be directed at committed Mohist followers, who have already dedicated themselves to promoting the benefit of all — to becoming paradigmatic *ren* people who “take as their task promoting the benefit of the world and eliminating harm to the world” (15: 24/26–27). The passage may thus present a supererogatory ideal, not a basic moral norm that all are obliged to follow. Given the religious character of the Mohist movement, the injunction to purge the “six biases” and devote oneself wholly to *ren* and *yi* probably should not be compared to a general moral guideline, such as “Do not harm the innocent,” but to the strict norms of self-discipline adopted by members of an ascetic religious order. In this context, the conception of sagehood

⁴⁰ See Fraser (2011).

presented here is understandable, even admirable. It is easy to imagine, in a world of scarcity and turmoil such as the Mohists', people choosing to organize their lives around the project of bringing about a morally more satisfactory state of affairs — such as by working, as the Mohists did, to prevent war and alleviate poverty. In the context of Mohist religious beliefs, this commitment to sagehood can also be regarded as a profound expression of spirituality or religiousness.⁴¹ For devoted Mohist believers, the sagehood ideal would have represented a way of more directly conforming to the intent of Heaven and thus in effect achieving a form of unity with the divine. Indeed, the pursuit of such moral and religious ideals may have been among the few constructive life choices open to many Mohists (especially if, as generally thought, they came largely from the lower classes of society). These ideals may have seemed all the more attractive and empowering because of the chance they offered to make a difference in the world. Given the adverse, war-ravaged economic and political circumstances in which Mohism arose, it is hardly surprising that some people might have been inspired to emulate the heroic altruism of the fabled sage-king Yu 禹, as the *Zhuangzi* reports some dedicated Mohists sought to do.

Absent a comparable religious background or a similarly harsh historical and economic context, however, this ideal of sagehood is difficult to justify. Indeed, to secular, contemporary readers, it is bound to seem narrow and impoverished. We view moderate indulgence of passions or preferences as compatible with the demands of *yi*, and we cannot easily see *yi* filling up all of life in the way the sagehood ideal implies. Indeed, it is difficult to envision how *yi* should or even could come to dominate life in this way unless we were to share two things with the Mohists: a consequentialist view on which *yi* lies in the promotion of a narrowly specified set of goods, and a historical setting in which securing those goods is immensely difficult.

⁴¹ I thank Roman Malek for suggesting this point.

Conclusion

To sum up, the ethics of the Dialogues is in many respects consistent with the views in various Triad essays, but the Dialogues present at least four important extensions of Mohist ethical ideas. They elucidate the Mohist conception of *yi* 義 (morality) or the *dao* 道 as norms that can be promulgated through *yan* 言 (statements, teachings) and “constantly” (*chang* 常) followed by all with beneficial, self-consistent consequences. They clarify an interesting stance on moral worth that ties it to agents’ character and intentions. They develop the Mohist view of moral motivation and indicate an intriguing approach to cases of action failure comparable to weakness of the will. They also set forth a stringent ideal of personal moral sagehood. On the whole, the Dialogues present a more demanding conception of the moral life than the Triads do. This difference may be due partly to a general tendency in later generations of the Mohist movement to embrace increasingly stringent ethical norms. But it may also be explained by the different audiences to which the two sets of texts are directed. Whereas most of the Triads are explicitly addressed to rulers, officials, and gentlemen, few of whom would have been Mohist adherents, the Dialogues appear to be addressed primarily to committed Mohist disciples. Indeed, they may be comparable to a handbook or commonplace book of teachings for adherents, as in many places they discuss the concrete practice of Mohist doctrines or issues that might arise in actual dialogue with opponents. Hence in places they may depict ideals adopted specifically by devout followers, rather than norms the Mohists applied to the typical member of society.⁴²

⁴² An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on “The Many Faces of Mozi,” Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, June 25–28, 2009. I am grateful to the conference participants for helpful comments, especially Roman Malek (the discussant for the paper). I am also indebted to the editors of this volume, Carine Defoort and Nicolas Standaert, for many useful comments.