

Moism: Misunderstood?

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I.

Today's rampant cynicism causes us to reject the concept of "universal love" as hokey and fake. We derisively conjure up images of hippies holding hands in parks, while swaying gently to the lilting rhythm of "Kumbaya." Historically, similar proposals of policies of "universal love" have not fared any better in the realm of public opinion. The concept has been rejected by many generations across many cultures, albeit for various reasons in each occurrence. Ancient China was no exception. They eventually came to the same conclusion: namely, that 'universal love' is overly idealistic, and thus not a tenable philosophical position. However, unlike some cultures, the Ancient Chinese hotly debated the validity of the concept, as presented in the writings of Mozi in the mid 400s B.C.E. For over a century and a half, Moism developed and flourished in parts of China, until Mencius's harsh condemnations, in the third century B.C.E., slew this fledgling philosophy. Yet to outrightly dismiss Moism is premature. Moism is a competent philosophy which developed a sharply distinct position in Chinese thought, independent of the stranglehold that Confucian ideals had begun to take on Chinese society. It warrants a deeper investigation of its primary tenets, especially in light of the fact that Mencius's interpretations and criticisms misunderstood the true spirit of Mozi's writings. In particular, Mozi's most fundamental concepts of universal love and utilitarianism deserve further clarification and scrutiny since the criticisms of these two concepts are misguided. Additionally, in the 20th century, many scholars drew conclusions that Moism and communism are distinctly similar. These arguments – though they present a compelling link between the philosophical psyches of Ancient China and the China of today – are based on an inaccurate reading of Moism. Therefore, this paper will se

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rive to clarify Mozi's arguments, and defend his work against Mencius' criticisms and the communism-Moism link.

II.

One of the core components of Moism is the belief in "universal love." Mozi values "universal love" as a solution to the many social ills that plague the Chinese society. Mozi abhors the problems he sees in the current state of affairs in China. The *status quo* of Ancient Chinese society is "mutual attacks among states, mutual usurpation among families, and mutual injuries among individuals... the lack of kindness and loyalty between ruler and minister... and of harmony and peace among brothers. These are the harms in the world" (Chan 1963a, p. 213). These problems, if unchecked, have the potential to disintegrate Chinese society because they erode the very stitching of civil life; they create war and crime, which are antithetical to a properly functioning society. However, unlike the Confucian tradition, Moism does not describe these problems in terms of morality or human nature, and humans are not evaluated in terms of what are traditionally conceived of as moral or value judgments. Instead, it prescribes norms on society that deal with civil functioning, as opposed to values of personal righteousness. Social ills are not a result of immorality or evilness, but a result of erroneous thinking or a misplacement of the proper value system – in short, a deficiency of mutual, or universal, love. People harm each other because they are without mutual love.

But this is not to say that people are without the ability to love. Mozi recognizes that people are able to love, which is partly responsible for the problems society faces. People only show love to their own family, government, and state. Mozi claims that people have no sense of love or filiality outside of the Confucian Five Relations. Strangers and outsiders are not regarded as creatures of equal worth or status. Consequently, people are able to easily "attack others... usurp others... and injure others" (Chan 1963a, p. 213). Without a realization of the commonality of the human condition, the strong will abuse the weak because they can. It is, in essence, *machtspolitik*, or might makes right. Therefore, to absolve the cause of these problems, Mozi advocates that people love universally. He reasons that if

one imposes no distinctions on others, and instead recognizes the communal plight all humans face, while learning to love all humans for this – or, perhaps, in spite of this – then one will be incapable of harming others. If love and respect are shown to all humans, as they are shown to one's own father, brother, and ruler, then "all the calamities, usurpations, hatred, and animosity of the world may be prevented from arising" (Chan 1963a, p. 214). Universal love is the prescription for allaying the problems of society. According to Mozi, people will be unable to cause grief and harm to each other if they regard one another with love (Chan 1963a, pp. 213-217).

Yet, as Mozi acknowledges, the panacea of universal love is not readily apparent to many people. Therefore, the justification for an advocacy of universal love must also rely on some palpable reasoning. Though people often converse about abstract principles like justice, hatred, dishonesty, and respect, these abstract principles do not often guide their actions. People search for more concrete, and personal, reasons to support their behavior. In order to convince people that universal love is a worthwhile basis for action, a value system with clear goals and objectives must also support it. Mozi finds this support in utilitarianism. Universal love is important because of its utilitarian nature, that is the consequential advantages of practicing it.

Mozi recognizes that people are practical and are not motivated to act based on abstract moral principles. People are motivated by personal gain, or the utility of an action. If an action is beneficial, people will take it. Mozi terms it in this manner, "Any word or action that is beneficial... is to be undertaken" (Chan 1963a, p. 226). Mozi even believes that this calculus of benefit is the motivating factor behind the actions of sages and the 'superior man.' People might praise the eradication of conceptualized social ills like hatred, dishonesty, disobedience, *etc.*, but that alone will not provoke them to act in this manner. Practicality and personal gain are the motivating factors behind peoples' actions.

Mozi proposes that all humans should practice universal love because of the benefits procured by such a worldview. In other words, "Those who love others will be loved by others. Those who benefit others will be benefited by others" (Chan 1963a, p. 214). The primary goal is not to practice

universal love for the intangible benefit of righteousness, but because of the mutual benefit of universal love. The practicality of universal love is the proof of its crucialness, and the only important source of its legitimacy. Mozi remains confident that the mutual benefits of universal love will be cause enough to love others as one loves one's own.

Still, to further combat skepticism, Mozi, like Confucius, cites historical examples of sage kings who successfully embodied universal love, and demonstrated the benefit their whole kingdom received for it. But these historical examples are not as imperative to the proof of the requisite nature of universal love as the mutual benefit of universal love is. Finally, through the mechanism of mutual benefits, or utility, Mozi transfers the importance of universal love from an individual perspective to a global one. The onus of practicality and benefit rest on results accrued on a grand scale, as opposed to the results made by individuals. Mutual benefit for the whole of society is achievable by loving all others equally (Chan 1963a, p. 213-217, 226-227).

Mozi espouses that universal love will cure the problems facing society because people will reject the differences they impose on one another. Mozi recognizes that humans decimate others only if they do not love those people. Moists attempt to unite China under a doctrine of universal love, for universal love bestows universal benefits to all of society. Nonetheless, two controversies developed based on Mozi's concepts of universal love and utilitarianism. The first is Mencius's attacks against universal love as a corroding agent in society. The second, and much newer controversy, is the similarity of Moism and communism.

III.

To begin with, Mencius levels his attacks against Mozi's belief in universal love, and how that belief dismisses the Confucian distinctions of society. Although the writings of Confucius are relatively new at the time of Mozi's work, Confucius already has a powerful influence in all aspects of society. In part, Confucianism commandeers the existing social moral system so quickly because Confucius aligns his virtues with the traditional hierarchical social and filial structure. But Confucianism is also wildly popular based on

its own merits of personal righteousness. In short, Confucianism is embraced with fervor in Ancient China.

Yet, Mozi breaks from this tradition and redefines the Confucian social class configuration in egalitarian terms. Mozi believes that all people should be loved, regardless of social class, gender, or race. Mencius views this assertion as intolerable. Mencius supposes that Mozi is extending his argument to the extreme by demanding that one feel the same love for all people, and that one must manifest it in exactly the same way. Mencius thinks that loving universally distorts the obviously special bond between families. It is, Mencius maintains, implausible and grotesquely unnatural that one can love a stranger as equally as one's own father, for to "deny the special relationship with the father and the ruler is to become an animal" (Chan 1963a, p. 72). He argues that Mozi's concept of universal love degrades the filial hierarchy and sacrosanct love of the Five Relations. This will have a monumental impact in Chinese society, since the Five Relations govern moral and civil interactions in all aspects and are passed down through Confucius from the ancients. Mencius cannot tolerate what he perceives as the extremism of Mozi's position; indeed, Chinese thought is historically unable to tolerate extremism. Mencius rejects Mozi because he believes his philosophy is not in moderation, and that his philosophy distorts natural civil life (Chan 1963a, p. 72, 80).

Unfortunately, though, Mencius does not accurately reflect the true spirit of Mozi's writing. Mozi is not nullifying the special love between the family. He never advocates this extremist position. In fact, Mozi's model for universal love is learned from the bonds of family. According to Mozi, one learns to love from the family, and then this love extends to all to obtain the benefit of universal love. Mozi's philosophy of universal love touts that all people should extend love permanently, inclusively, and without segregation. Love cannot be given conditionally, as a means to gain benefits. Using love manipulatively would not beget the mutual benefit that loving universally does. Mozi's assertions are not an unnatural distortion of the Chinese social order.

Ultimately, Mencius fails to grasp two important principles. First, Mencius feels that universal love degrades the love of the Confucian Five Relations by requiring one to reduce the quality of love in order to make it equal with

those whom the Confucian Five Relations do not require to be loved. A similar criticism is often leveled against communism's advocacy of socio-economic equality for all. But the difference between the argument against communism and the argument against Moism is that there are a limited amount of economic resources, while there is an infinite amount of love. Mencius assumes that there is a limited quantity of love available, but Mozi realizes that love is infinite. Consequently, it is not necessary to reduce the amount of love in order to spread it universally. Rather, one can increase love for others, without any change in the level of love one bestows on members of the family. Mozi does not advocate altering the love of the family, though ideally he wants the love for all others to be augmented to the same quality as the love for the family. Secondly, and most importantly, Mencius does not comprehend the gigantic shift in Mozi's conception of human nature. Mencius and the Confucians focus on the cultivation of personal virtue. Values, to them, are judged on their personal righteousness. Thus, human nature is a pursuit of proper virtues and ethics in order to improve one's moral standing. Human nature is moral cultivation. But Mozi abandons this paradigm entirely. His focus, as mentioned above, is on the social benefit of loving people. Mozi recognizes that the foundation of virtue is love. Human nature is not about the pursuit of virtues, but the pursuit of love. This is the fundamental point of Moism. Loving actions produce benefit for society because they confirm what is most natural and fundamental to our human essence. Human nature is loving others. Mencius's misrepresentations of Mozi's doctrine of universal love leaves scholars with an illegitimate impression of Moism, an impression that is still being painstakingly explored today (Tseu 1965, pp. 230-267).

IV.

In the twentieth century, another controversy developed over a theory that asserts that Moism is similar to modern communism. This conclusion is based on several 'isms' that are common to both philosophies. At first glance, one notices that both Moism and communism are inherently egalitarian. Communism sees all people as equals, particularly in an economic sense. Moism believes that all people are equal in

both a legal and a moral sense. In addition, both Moism and communism are utilitarian. Both philosophies use an utility calculus as a basis for taking action. Plus, both philosophies are globally motivated in their utility focus. Utility is calculated based on the utility for the greatest good, not the benefits individually gained. Each places a foundational emphasis on absolute gains, not the relative gains of any individual member. In sum, neither philosophy embraces hedonism. Next, both philosophies propose an authoritarian system of government to manage the political affairs of the society. Communism asserts that authoritarianism is the best way to plan and oversee the society. Dictatorship is required in the first phase so that the elites can instill the collectivism necessary for communism to thrive. Moism believes that the authoritarian ruler is able to lead by example and show others how to live a life of universal love. Lastly, both philosophies are utopian, though communists might balk at the term. This is not to say that the philosophical outcomes are necessarily unreachable, but they are utopian philosophies in the sense that they stipulate recommendations for achieving the 'perfect life.' Communism envisions a life where everyone lives and works to fulfill everyone's needs. Moism dreams of a society where peoples' actions are guided by harmony and love for mutual benefit. Proponents of the communism-Moism link theory believe that the egalitarian, global, utilitarian, authoritarian, and utopian roots of communism and Moism show indubitable similarities. (Tseu 1965, pp. 319-330; Chan 1963b, pp. 213-230).

On the contrary, the aforementioned connections are superficial and based on misinterpretations of Mozi's writings. Though both philosophies are utopian, authoritarian, utilitarian, global, and egalitarian, their reasoning for espousing such canons are quite disparate, rendering the analogy as illogical. First of all, the egalitarian basis of Moism and communism do not necessarily guarantee their similarity. Many philosophies espouse egalitarian treatment of people, including democratic theories. Egalitarianism can be practiced in widely different ways, as the differences between democratic egalitarianism and communist egalitarianism clearly demonstrate. Simply because both philosophies are egalitarian does not illustrate

an inherent similarity. Secondly, the utilitarian aspects of each philosophy are drastically different. The difference between the two lies in how a single unit of utility is measured. For the communist, one unit of utility is an economic unit. Communism is an economic-political paradigm that focuses on increasing the absolute relations of economic standing between every member, while equalizing their political status. For the Moist, utility is a social benefit derived from universal love. By loving one's neighbors, the Moist benefits oneself by fulfilling one's human nature, and others through their mutual integration in society and nature. The Moist unit of utility, love, is completely ignored in communist theory because it is not based on economic or historic reality. The notion of universal love is out of place in the more mechanistic communist theory, at least, in its current and past applications. Finally, Moism does not focus on the dialectical development of its concepts. Though Mozi does utilize historical examples of past sages who loved universally, these examples are not the focus of his argument and the sages themselves do not necessarily have to even truly have been historical figures for the argument to function properly. It does help that these kings did exist and acted the way that Mozi describes them, but the point of the story is that these actions, regardless of who took them, or when they were taken, produce beneficial results for the self and society. Moism has no focus on the evolution of society, and is uninterested in the productive forces that shape relationships. Moism's lack of a dialectical perspective is extremely difficult to rectify with communism, and its emphasis on the evolution of society through economic exploitation.

In the end, the analogy between Moism and communism fails because the two theories do not share enough common properties. Their similarities are based on an incomplete and superficial reading of each text. However, there are some philosophers who assert that there are similarities between the Moist doctrine of universal love and the Christian ethic of love. Though an examination of this theory is beyond the scope of this text, the idea does pique one's interest. (Tseu 1965, pp. 319-330).

V.

Mozi's work has not received a fair investigation. Mencius' criticism served to falsely discredit Mozi's work for over two millennium. Mencius's misread and distorted Mozi's claims to advance Confucianism. Under further scrutiny, Mencius' criticism does not hold up. Mozi's doctrine of universal love does not threaten society or degrade the family. It is, instead, an affirmation of the commonality of the human experience. Furthermore, in recent decades, some philosophers have asserted that communism and Moism are similar theories. This analogy is largely untenable because the two philosophies simply do not have enough in common to support such a profound conclusion. The drastically differing conceptions of egalitarianism and utility in the theories render them dissimilar. Additionally, Moism's lack of a dialectical history increases the divide between the two philosophies. The comparison is awkward and unapt. At best, the similarities between the two philosophies exist only on the descriptive level.

Mozi's independent and innovative thinking is impressive. His philosophy, free from the Confucian and Daoist stranglehold on Chinese thought, carves a distinctly separate path towards manifesting the 'good life.'

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