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The Tension Between Divine Command Theory and Utilitarianism in Mozi and George Berkeley

A Comparison

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Introduction

Mozi and George Berkeley are philosophers that are not often put into conversation. However, I argue that comparing them can shed some light on the relationship between certain philosophical positions and their resulting moral philosophies. Specifically, I will draw attention to the way that their lack of interest in an appearance-reality distinction and in “essence” gives rise to a tension between consequentialism and divine command theory. These similarities exist despite the fact that Mozi and Berkeley otherwise have quite distinct views. For example, Mozi’s *dao*-centered theoretical orientation leads him to assume that the world simply *is* as it is given through our senses, whereas Berkeley holds that the world is *nothing but* ideas present in our consciousness.

This paper will proceed as follows: first, I discuss what I mean when I describe Mozi and Berkeley’s moral philosophies as containing a “tension” between divine command theory and consequentialism. Then, I outline evidence for this tension in both Mozi and Berkeley’s moral philosophies. Finally, I identify similarities between their views that, despite some striking differences in their philosophical systems, give rise to this tension in both cases. Specifically, I argue that this tension is a result of the absence of an appearance-reality distinction in their systems (whether this is because their philosophies do not contain one, or because this is simply not a question of interest to them), and a lack of interest in establishing

any kind of “essence” of morality. As a result, both Mozi and Berkeley believe that we can take moral guidance (though *only* guidance) from the natural world. Since their concern is therefore with nature as a *measuring stick* for morality, the issue of whether morality is ultimately grounded in divine will or in consequences becomes unimportant. Hence, they do not clearly identify – and are not concerned about – whether their moral philosophies should be fundamentally taken as divine command theories or as consequentialism, and this opens their views to being plausibly interpreted as *either* divine command theories or utilitarianism (or as simply inconsistent).

Tension

Before surveying the views of Mozi and Berkeley, we should consider what is meant when we describe both philosophical systems contain a “tension.” Here, I understand “tension” as being a “*prima facie* inconsistency.” Understood in this way, “tension” is not wholly a property of the text. For instance, in the case of Mozi, I discuss a range of interpretations, only one of which ultimately claims that Mozi is inconsistent. Mozi therefore may not be inconsistent at all: it may be, as Xiufen Lu argues, that understood correctly conflict between the will of heaven (divine command theory) and the benefit of the world (consequentialism) does not arise in the Mozi.¹ If she is right, then it is not correct to describe the “tension” in Mozi as consisting of an inconsistency *in the text*, because there is, in fact, no such inconsistency.

At the same time, however, “tension” is not wholly a matter of interpretation: it is not fully “in the literature”. There has to be something *in* the text that lends itself to being interpreted as inconsistent for us to be able to describe the philosophy as containing a tension. This does not mean that the *best* interpretation (if there is one) of the text contains an inconsistency, but rather that the text is ambiguous in such a way as to make an inconsistency

a strongly plausible reading of it. To put it another way, the text is ambiguous such that there is an *apparent* inconsistency that requires an *explanation*. Whether or not an explanation is ultimately forthcoming is a separate issue: what matters is that *if* no explanation were forthcoming, *then* we would be justified in interpreting the text as containing an inconsistency. If there were an *obvious* inconsistency in the text – if it were clear that the text was inconsistent – then this would not be a “tension” in the text, but merely an inconsistency. By contrast, if it were obvious that there were *no* inconsistency in the text, then this would not be a tension either. For something to be a tension, then – for there to be a *prima facie* inconsistency – there has to be sufficient ambiguity in the text about whether there is or is not different claims are consistent with one another.

For example, Lu argues that if we properly understand the role of Heaven (*tian*, 天) in classical Chinese philosophy, we would see that no inconsistency arises in the first place in Mozi, since *tian* “is not a person,” and therefore ‘cannot be divided into two separate entities, the deity as the agent vs what the deity wills.’² Similarly, David E. Soles argues that there is no inconsistency in Mozi, since he is a divine will theorist, and Kristopher Duda thinks there is no inconsistency because Mozi is an act utilitarian. If any of these philosophers are correct, then there is not *really* an inconsistency in Mozi. Yet, the fact that an *explanation* is required in order to explain *why* there is no inconsistency in Mozi tells us that there *is* a *prima facie* inconsistency; there is *some* ambiguity in the text that, if not properly explained, strongly suggests an inconsistency. Hence, there is a “tension” in Mozi.

Of course, this approach does not entirely avoid the worry that the inconsistency is in the literature, rather than in the text. After all, Lu’s argument is that modern interpreters of Mozi are bringing to the table a completely different conception of *tian* than Mozi’s contemporaries would have possessed, and that for them it would have been obvious that there was no tension between divine command theory and consequentialism. If so, then the *prima*

facie inconsistency *does* appear, in a certain sense, to be in the literature rather than in the text. Nevertheless, since the Mozi is textually ambiguous enough about *tian* that *without* interpreting it as Mozi's contemporaries (arguably) would have, there could be an inconsistency, then we might still want to say that the tension *is* in the text. If the text itself was clear enough about *tian* that no reader could interpret it in such a way as to give rise to an inconsistency between divine command theory and consequentialism, then there would be no "tension" in Mozi. But it is not that clear, and so there is one.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to settle the question of whether Mozi or Berkeley are divine will theorists, or consequentialists, or something else entirely. It is not to *explain* the apparent inconsistency. Nor am I concerned here with claiming that Mozi or Berkeley *really do* contain an inconsistency (in fact, I am inclined to agree with Lu that, in Mozi's case at least, there *is* no inconsistency, though I am less sure about Berkeley). Rather, my purpose is to identify features of both philosophers that lead to a *prima facie* inconsistency; to identify aspects of their philosophies that require that an explanation as to how these philosophers' moral theories are consistent be *forthcoming*. To put it simply, I am interested in what it is about Mozi and Berkeley's philosophies that should make us ask *in the first place* whether or not they are both consistent in one particular way: whether their statements about the role of Heaven/God and the role of consequences in morality can be made to fit with one another.

Mozi's Ethics

In Mozi's view, we ought to always "conform upwards" in our behavior. That is, he expects us to look to our superiors for instruction. Of course, this requirement gives us a *command* theory, but not quite a *divine* command theory. Nevertheless, Mozi is also very clear where the ultimate

authority for morality lies: our “conforming upwards” continues from rank to rank, and only culminates when the Son of Heaven, i.e. the highest ranked early ruler, the Emperor, conforms upwards to Heaven’s will.

Mozi is quite explicit that Heaven is righteousness. As he puts it, ‘I do not know whether there is something even more eminent and wise than Heaven. But, as I have said, Heaven is pure eminence and wisdom. Therefore righteousness in fact originates with Heaven.’³ We have good reason to think, then, that for Mozi Heaven is the standard for right and wrong. He says that we should use conformity with Heaven to,

measure the government of the rulers and ministers above, and the writings and words of the multitudes below. He observes their actions, and if they obey the will of Heaven he calls them good actions, but if they disobey the will of Heaven, he calls them bad actions. He observes their words, and if they obey the will of Heaven, he calls them good words, but if they disobey the will of Heaven, he calls them bad words. He observes their government, and if it obeys the will of Heaven, he calls it good government, but if it disobeys the will of Heaven, he calls it bad government. Thus he employs this as a standard, establishes it as a measurement, and with it measures the benevolence or unbenevolence of the rulers and ministers of the world, and it is as easy as telling black from white.⁴

This is at least suggestive of divine command theory: we ought to obey the will of Heaven, and it is that will that determines whether something is right or wrong.

On the other hand, Mozi is quite clear that “practical results” is *also* a key standard by which we can judge actions. In fact, this is where Mozi’s most famous ethical concept comes in: *jian ai*, sometimes translated as “Universal Love,” or “Universal Concern,” or perhaps “Impartial Concern.” According to this ethical principle, an action is judged by how well it

benefits society as a whole. *Jian ai* is commonly seen to be a close cousin to the idea of “each to count for one, and none for more than one,” Jeremy Bentham’s famous utilitarian dictum.

An interesting series of articles, starting with Dennis M. Ahern, with responses by Dirck Vorenkamp, Soles and Duda, and more recently Lu, among others, discusses which of the two principles – follow the will of Heaven, or *jian ai* – is fundamental in Mozi’s moral philosophy.⁵

Ahern argued that Mozi is simply confused; that his philosophy is inconsistent, due to its reliance on two competing principles.⁶ In his view, we can interpret Mozi as holding the following biconditionals:

B₁ ‘x is a right action’ if and only if ‘x is an action that is beneficial to the world’

B₂ ‘x is a wrong action’ if and only if ‘x is an action that is harmful to the world’⁷

but that, at the same time, he also accepts these biconditionals:

B₃ ‘x is a right action’ if and only if ‘x is in accord with the will of Heaven’

B₄ ‘x is a wrong action’ if and only if ‘x is not in accord with the will of Heaven’⁸

If this description is right, Ahern argues, Mozi’s moral philosophy is inconsistent.

Of course, these biconditionals alone do not necessarily demonstrate an inconsistency in Mozi. It may be, after all, that right actions *always* lead to the best consequences *and* always follow the will of Heaven. We need to add to Ahern’s biconditionals, then, the assumption that one or the other sets of biconditionals do not just *tell us* whether an action is right or wrong – they are not simply a guide to picking out good from bad actions – but are instead trying to explain *what makes* an action right or wrong, i.e. the biconditionals are offering competing accounts of the *source* of morality. In other words, if we take the biconditionals as mere tests to determine the moral status of an action, then it is not obvious that they are in conflict. If we

understand Ahern as claiming that Mozi is committed to saying that both sets of biconditionals are *fundamental*, then it makes more sense to think of Mozi as confused or inconsistent. In the latter case, it seems that source of morality is either *consequences* – in which case, the will of Heaven always accords with the best consequences, since Heaven wills what is best. Or, the source of morality is the *will of Heaven* – in which case, Heaven contingently prefers actions that have the best consequences. But we cannot have it both ways. From this starting point, then, the other participants in this debate tend to fall in one camp or the other

Vorenkamp, for instance, suggests that Mozi is not inconsistent. Instead, he is a consistent *rule* utilitarian. There *may* be cases – in principle at least – in which Heaven’s dictates lead to sub-optimal outcomes, but as a general rule, following Heaven’s will ‘maximizes the intrinsic good at both the individual and community levels.’⁹ For Mozi, then, following the utility criterion and following Heaven’s will amounted to the same thing. Following Heaven’s will is good, therefore, because doing so leads to the most good overall. As Vorenkamp puts it, Mozi ‘feels he can say without contradiction that Heaven’s rules are good because they are conducive in all cases to both individual and social profit.’¹⁰ What Mozi’s view amounts to, then, is that we ought to follow the single rule: ‘always obey Heaven’s will.’ We should not do this merely *because* it is Heaven’s will, but rather because this particular rule is the rule that maximizes the good.

Soles argues, by contrast, that Mozi is a consistent divine will theorist; all the talk about benefit is simply a secondary principle for working out what Heaven’s will might be (since Heaven, contingently, desires that we benefit). In Soles’ view, ‘[w]hat makes an action right [for Mozi] is that it is willed by Heaven,’ thus ‘the fundamental principle of morality is “An action is right iff it is in accord with the Will of Heaven”.’¹¹ It is nonetheless useful, Soles thinks, to consider benefit, since it just so happens that Heaven does desire that the world benefit. If we want to know what Heaven wants, considering benefit is therefore a useful

shortcut. Nevertheless, the will of Heaven is the fundamental grounding of morality, and it is perfectly possible for Heaven to will other than benefit in principle (even if this never occurs in practice). If Heaven *did* will other than benefit, then we ought to follow Heaven's will, rather than the principle of benefit. In this way, the tension between the two set of biconditionals is resolved, though only by subordinating one set to the other. In Soles' words,

Since Heaven wills the benefit of the world, if an action (government, policy, etc.) is one that benefits the world, then it is one that is in accord with Heaven's will and ipso facto right. Thus, while we cannot analyse 'is right' in terms of the production of benefits, we can determine which actions are right by determining which actions benefit the world.¹²

Finally, Duda suggests that Mozi is a consistent act utilitarian. When Mozi speaks of the will of Heaven as the standard by which to measure our actions, he is *not* suggesting that its following or not following Heaven's will *makes* an action right or wrong, but rather than Heaven's will is a useful *measuring stick*.

As Duda puts it, we look to Heaven for guidance on what we ought to do, in the same way that we would look to a mathematics expert for guidance on how to solve a difficult mathematics problem. The mathematics expert can tell us the right answer, without thereby *making* that answer the right one: the answer was the right one all along; it was merely uncovered by the expert. Similarly, Heaven is the expert when it comes to *dao* –how we ought to act – and so if we want to know what to do, Heaven is the best guide. But the fact that Heaven knows what we ought to do, does not *make* Heaven responsible for that thing *being* what we ought to do; Heaven simply illuminates the truth for us.

As Duda explains,

It is perfectly consistent to maintain that right and wrong are determined according to the utility principle while at the same time using Heaven's will to test the moral status of actions. The reason for this becomes clear in Mo Tzu's conviction that Heaven aims to 'bring mutual benefit to all creatures'. Since whatever Heaven commands is sure to benefit the world, and whatever Heaven forbids is sure to harm the world, one can test whether or not certain courses of action are right (i.e. beneficial) by seeing if they are endorsed or rejected by Heaven through its commands.¹³

In other words, since Heaven's will happens to track what benefits the world, then we can look to Heaven to *discover* what actions *will* best benefit the world. But it is the benefit that grounds morality, not Heaven's will. In this way, contrary to Soles, Duda subordinates the second set of biconditionals to the first.¹⁴

In short, Mozi's moral philosophy seems to contain elements that make it unclear which position he is ultimately taking. Plausible arguments can be made (and have been, by the philosophers mentioned) for Mozi being merely inconsistent, or a rule or act utilitarian, or a divine command theorist. Or, following Lu, that it is simply inconceivable (in Mozi's milieu at least) that there could be benefit to the world that does not accord with Heaven's "will"; in which case, there is no inconsistency, and no need to fall down on one side or the other when it comes to Ahern's biconditionals. However, whichever position ends up being correct, it is worth noting that Mozi's view *does* involve a tension between utilitarianism and divine command theory, since there is at least a *prima facie* inconsistency that requires explanation. Even if there is no inconsistency *in fact*, then, Mozi's seemingly inconsistent statements about Heaven and benefit need to be explained through *some* strategy or another.

Berkeley's Ethics

According to Berkeley, we – and the world we live in – are the creation of God. It is self-evident, in Berkeley's view, that 'a created being possessed of a will has a duty to obey such precepts as its creator may issue.'¹⁵ If so – if Berkeley thinks that the commands of God are self-evidently binding on us, regardless of their content – then he seems committed to the view that morality is grounded in the will of God. This would, of course, make Berkeley a divine command theorist.

However, this is not all there is to Berkeley's moral philosophy: there is the question of *what* God's will *is*, and *how* we go about establishing it. Though Berkeley was himself a clergyman, he did not think that God's will need be established solely through theological authority. Scripture *can* help; Geoffrey Warnock notes that, in Berkeley's view, 'due attention to scripture and the teaching of the Church would indeed apprise us of our moral duties.'¹⁶ However, it is perfectly possible to come to know our moral duties through argument alone.

For Berkeley, 'God is a benevolent creator; as such he desires the welfare and flourishing of his human creatures.'¹⁷ If we are to live good lives, then, we ought to try to promote such welfare and flourishing. The question becomes, as with Mozi, what the grounds of morality are. Is it merely contingent that God wills our welfare and flourishing? If so, and if Berkeley thinks that, should God will otherwise, our duty lies in following God's will, then Berkeley certainly *is* a divine command theorist. On the other hand, if God wills our welfare and flourishing *because* it (and God) is good, then Berkeley would seem to be committed to some form of consequentialism, since morality is about consequences, the evaluation of which is external to God's will.

According to Warnock, however, Berkeley's consequentialism is *not* act utilitarianism. Rather, it might be better to think of Berkeley as a proto-rule utilitarian. According to Warnock,

there cannot be, for Berkeley, ‘just one, single precept of morality: “Always act so as to promote, so far as possible, human welfare and flourishing”.’¹⁸ Berkeley thinks this for many of the same reasons as motivate rule utilitarians to reject act utilitarianism:

It would be much too difficult, and besides would take far too long, for every agent on every occasion to try to calculate, for every alternative course open to him, which would most effectually promote the general good of humanity; and would there not also, inevitably, be frequent and damaging disagreement as to whether such calculation had been correctly done?¹⁹

Hence, we ought to rely on a set of subsidiary principles. This set of subsidiary principles are that set that ‘would most effectually promote the welfare and flourishing of mankind.’²⁰ Instead of trying to bring about human welfare and flourishing directly, then, we ought to follow these subsidiary principles. The following of these principles will, in turn, lead to the most good overall. As such, Berkeley can be plausibly interpreted as a rule utilitarian.

Nevertheless, as with Mozi, Berkeley seems to be faced with the same two pairs of biconditionals. We can subordinate the first pair to the second and get divine command theory. Or, we can subordinate the second pair to the first, and get (in Berkeley’s case) rule utilitarianism. But it is not fully obvious which way Berkeley himself would like us to go. The talk of a “self-evident duty” to obey God is certainly suggestive of divine command theory. But the foregrounding of “welfare and flourishing” points in the opposite direction. Hence, there is a tension in Berkeley’s moral philosophy between these two views, as there is with Mozi.

This tension exists not because we cannot, at the end of the day, interpret Berkeley in one way or the other: arguments can certainly be made that Berkeley is either a divine command theorist or a rule utilitarian. Rather, there is a tension because there is a *prima facie*

inconsistency that needs to be addressed – that requires an explanation – even if that explanation is ultimately forthcoming. Hence, even if Berkeley does hold one or the other position, he simply has not made it clear enough in his extant work for us to state this with certainty. Even if we decide when interpreting Berkeley that we should mobilize what evidence we can find (as Ahern, Vorenkamp, Soles and Duda do in the case of Mozi) to argue for one interpretation over the other, the *existence* of this tension – the fact that it *is* a matter of philosophical debate how to categorize both of these philosophers’ moral systems – is worth exploring in and of itself.

Particularly in comparative perspective, examining *why* this tension exists to begin with can illuminate the relationship between certain metaphysical and epistemological views and the presence of just this kind of ambiguity. That is, the fact that Mozi and Berkeley could be interpreted both as divine will theorists and as consequentialists is an outcome of some of their other philosophical commitments. The similarities between the two philosophers that leads to this tension, despite their holding some extremely divergent views in other respects, are therefore interesting and instructive.

The main features in common between Mozi and Berkeley that are worth drawing attention to are the absence of an appearance-reality distinction in their philosophical systems, as well as their lack of interest in establishing an “essence” of morality. Whether these absences are because they do not think there *are* essences or an appearance-reality distinction, or because they simply have not considered these as issues worthy of exploration, the result is that both philosophers hold that nature itself in some ways *speaks*. They come at this position from quite distinct starting points, and from different philosophical traditions, but nevertheless both think that nature communicates to us; that it is, we might say, patterned in such a way as to be like a book from which we can read off moral guidance. This view, I suggest, is in large part responsible for why both Mozi and Berkeley can be plausibly interpreted as divine command

theorists *or* as consequentialists, and therefore gives rise to the tension in their moral philosophies.

Mohist *Dao*

In the case of Mozi, the idea of nature being like a book is grounded in *tian* – Heaven – which Chris Fraser argues is ‘conceptually a blend of a quasi-personal deity and the forces of nature.’ Heaven, for Mohists, has “intents” and “desires” that we can interpret from its “conduct”. *Tian* also follows and enforces ethical norms. Hence, we can use our observations of nature as a *fa* (model, 法) for morality; we can see in nature the way we ought to be. Specifically, Mozi takes *tian*’s intent to clearly demonstrate impartiality – the root of *jian ai*.²¹ After all, *tian* provides the basic conditions for all life, and seems to do so impartially.

What complicates the easy division between divine command theory and consequentialism here is that, for the Mohists, they are simply not interested in the metaphysical issues that give rise to an appearance-reality distinction. They assume that *tian* displays moral principles to us *directly*; there may or may not be a *true* reality lying behind what we experience, but this question simply does not arise for Mohists. Hence, there is no reason, from their perspective, to think that morality is anything more than what we can read in nature; to think that nature is merely an appearance that is *suggestive* of morality, but not morality itself. Nature is a *fa* – a model – for our conduct, but the *fa* that Mohists identify do not even *attempt* to try to capture some underlying essence beneath our perceptions. Instead, Mohists have a *dao*-centred – a practice-centered – theoretical orientation that is not concerned fundamentally with *what things really are*, but rather with the practical task of identifying patterns of activity that can help us with whatever practical task we are concerned with: here, living well. Hence, they accept that,

reality just is the concrete, perceivable world presented by the senses, along with the regular causal patterns inferable from it. To them, the world of sense perception is no mere veil of appearances. It is neither the potentially misleading by-product of perception nor the perceivable artifact of some more basic but imperceptible or abstract structure.²²

Mohists do not explain phenomena in terms of abstract entities, but rather by identifying patterns (*li*, 理) that are simply and directly present in the world around us. They are not interested in trying to discover more basic elements, or universals, or essences. Nor are they after ‘some transcendent, abstract structure instantiated by the perceivable world.’²³ The patterns that we can observe in the world around us are therefore treated as if they are able to directly serve as *fa* for our actions.²⁴

The role of *fa*, then, for Mohists – and hence the role nature plays in disclosing the *dao* to us – is the same role played by *fa* in practical crafts. As Fraser puts it,

The carpenter or wheelwright determines whether things are square or round by perceptual comparisons to paradigms, such as the set square or compass. They do not inquire into the underlying nature or essence of what is square or round. They simply take a known paradigm and check whether the object at hand is relevantly similar to it. The aim is not to describe the basic makeup of reality but to complete a practical task – to build a functional cart or house, for example.²⁵

Similarly, the purpose of using nature as a *fa* is not to understand some underlying essence of morality but is rather to complete the practical task of living well. *Tian* is merely a model to compare actions to. The *dao* – the way – is therefore, in every way that matters to the Mohists, directly manifested in how nature – *tian* – proceeds. Our observations of *tian* can give therefore us a clear, unambiguous model to follow in terms of moral action.

But, of course, if we are treating *tian* as a *model* – if our interest is merely reading off from *tian* how we ought to act – then the question of which comes first – the intents and desires of *tian*, or goodness itself – is not a pressing issue. The focus of the Mohists’ attention is far more practical. Hence, it becomes unclear whether they are divine command theorists or consequentialists; not because they are *unsure*, but merely because their primary concern is *that tian is a model, not why it is*.²⁶

Berkeleyan Ideas

Berkeley also treats nature as a book that discloses to us the way we ought to act. While his reasons for thinking this are similar to Mozi in certain respects, his justification for this view intersects with Mozi from a quite different starting point.

Unlike the Mohists, for instance, Berkeley certainly does not agree that we have any kind of direct knowledge *of the world*. In fact, the reverse is true: one of Berkeley’s most striking claims is that we perceive *only* ideas. At the same time he argues that there simply is not anything beyond these ideas. As Martha Brandt Bolton puts it: ‘the whole of the sensible world with its trees and rocks, sun and stars, consists of nothing but idea sequences... we eat, drink and clothe ourselves in ideas.’²⁷ Ideas do not represent anything, for Berkeley. There is no underlying reality that they help us to perceive; they are all there is.

Ideas, then, do not represent other things. There is no further world that is being occluded by our inability to *get beyond* our perceptions. For Berkeley, our perceptions of ideas give us direct access to the world, but only because there *is* no world beyond – standing behind – these perceptions. Unlike the Mohist view discussed above, then, Berkeley collapses the distinction between ideas and sensible things simply by denying that there is anything beyond the ideas themselves, rather than by assuming that perceptions give us direct (perhaps causal)

knowledge of the world itself. Either way, though, our knowledge of *reality* is immediate, hence, in both cases there is no appearance-reality distinction.

As a result, and again like Mozi, Berkeley is not interested in *essences*, at least in the sense of a quality that can be abstracted from concrete things. The Mohists see in nature – *tian* – causal regularities that they can use as a measuring stick for how they ought to behave; but they are not concerned with thereby establishing an “essence” of morality. Even the principle of *jian ai* is a *method* for understanding how to bring about benefit and avoid harm, rather than the essence of morality itself. Similarly, Berkeley holds that it is impossible to have any kind of quality – any abstract entity – that is conceivable outside of concrete manifestations of that quality. For instance, we cannot know what *extension* is like exclusive of all of the different ways of being extended.²⁸ We cannot know color outside of conceiving of concrete objecting having one color or another. As Berkeley puts it,

when we attempt to abstract extension and motion from all other qualities, and consider them by themselves, we presently lose sight of them, and run into great extravagances. All which depend upon a two-fold abstraction: first, it is supposed that extension, for example, may be abstracted from all other sensible qualities; and secondly, that the entity of extension may be abstracted from its being perceived. But whoever shall reflect, and take care to understand what he says, will, if I mistake not, acknowledge that all sensible qualities are alike sensations, and alike real; that where the extension is, there is the colour too, to wit, in his mind, and that their archetypes can exist only in some other mind: and that the objects of sense are nothing but those sensations combined, blended, or (if one may so speak) concreted together: none of all which can be supposed to exist unperceived.²⁹

Hence, Berkeley thinks that we can perfectly well conceive of the *parts* of concrete things; we can, he acknowledges, conceive of a hand or foot in the absence of the rest of a body. What we *cannot* do is to conceive of a hand or a foot that does not have ‘some determinate shape and color,’ or an idea of what a color would be like, all by itself, if no other qualities, like shape or size, were present.³⁰ Presumably, too, as with the Mohists, we cannot conceive of a *moral* essence – an abstract moral quality of goodness or badness – outside of its manifestations in the world itself. Hence, also like the Mohists, we might be able to see morality in the world itself (or, in Berkeley’s case, the ideas that make up the world). But what we cannot do is to extract from those observations anything but *tools* or *models* for helping us to act morally. That is, the principles we uncover from the world simply help us to act in the best possible way: they do not *ground* morality.

But why should we think, according to Berkeley, that *nature* offers a guide to morality in the first place? The answer to this comes from a solution Berkeley offers to the counter-intuitive implications of his view of ideas. Specifically, one of the characteristics of ideas is that they are present in a consciousness. An idea that is not present in a consciousness does not exist. Hence, if the world *is nothing but* ideas, then the world has to be present in a consciousness. This would not be a problem, of course, if Berkeley held there to be a distinction between ideas and the sensible world, since the sensible world is quite well able to persist even when not present in the consciousness as an idea. But Berkeley’s most striking and central claim is that there *is* no such thing as a sensible world beyond ideas: there are only ideas themselves. If ideas only exist when present in a consciousness, and there is no world beyond ideas themselves, then Berkeley’s view implies that there *is* no world when no one is perceiving it; that the world comes and goes as it comes and goes from our consciousness. In other words, he would be forced to accept that there really is no such thing as an objective, persisting world.

It may be quite possible to bite the bullet on the issue of the “objectivity” of the world of ideas. However, Berkeley wanted to resist the conclusion that the world fails to persist when we are not attending to it: he wanted to hold that ideas – all ideas – continue to persist even if no human being currently has them present in their consciousness. For Berkeley, it is God that makes this possible. Even if *we* do not – even if no human beings – have an idea present in their consciousness, that idea still has what we can think of as an “objective” reality, since *God* continues to perceive it.

If nature – if the “objective” world – gains its objectivity *solely* through God’s decision to perceive it, then we have good reason to think that the world itself directly discloses God’s will. God did not merely create, but also *maintains* the universe that He has created, and does so, presumably, in accordance with His perfect goodness. Hence, through God’s decisions about what to maintain and what not to maintain through his divine attention, Berkeley suggests that ‘the system of nature is not random, but regular; it is, in fact, a divine language in which God makes his intentions known to us, and demonstrates his wisdom and benevolence.’³¹ As with Mozi, then, if we want to know what God (or *tian*) requires of us, we can simply *read* this off nature itself; nature speaks to us with God’s voice.

Berkeley even draws similar conclusions to Mozi. Berkeley holds that our interests must be rational, in order to truly benefit ourselves over the long run. He identifies mutual cooperation between the parts of a whole in nature (such as a plant) as leading to the good of the whole, and, by analogy, mutual cooperation amongst the parts of a social whole lead to the good of that whole (which is his primary concern).³² When it comes to morality, then, Berkeley’s main focus, like Mozi’s, is ‘the general well-being of mankind.’³³ Berkeley is also quite clear that the *purpose* of moral principles is to ‘procure the well-being of mankind,’³⁴ and not to establish some kind of essence of morality. In fact, he even uses the language of *fa*: for

instance, in his claim that ‘the general good of mankind [is] to be regarded as a rule *or measure* of moral truths.’³⁵

Conclusion

We can see here, I argue, distinct similarities between Mozi and Berkeley. Since there is no appearance-reality distinction in either system (though for very different reasons), both agree that we can read the divine will directly from nature. Both, too, have no interest in abstracting from what they observe any kind of “essence” of morality. Instead, nature acts as a measure against which we can compare our actions, rather than as illuminating the source of normativity itself.

For both Mozi and for Berkeley, the primary concern of either moral philosophy is *not* to establish which comes first: the divine will, or goodness. Rather, the divine will and goodness collapse into each other. We can directly perceive in the natural world the divine will. At the same time, we can directly perceive in the natural world the measuring stick for how we ought to behave. In which case, it is a secondary consideration – if it is seen to be a consideration at all – which comes first. Nature *is* the divine will, and its guidance is a reflection of the divine will. Since there is no further essence of morality to be ascertained from our observations of nature, it is not really very important to establish which of these two features of our observations are *the* source of normativity. All that matters is that our observations tell us *how* we ought to act.

Following the divine will and following our reasoning about morality based on our best understanding of the natural world therefore amounts to the same thing. It simply is not important for either philosopher to answer that further question of whether it is the will that grounds morality, or the benefit. Hence, the tension between divine command theory and

consequentialism arises, not because Mozi or Berkeley are *confused* about which is fundamental, but merely because the question of which is fundamental is not of concern to them. All we have are our observations of nature, and the distinction between divine command theory and utilitarianism has already collapsed prior to those observations being made, thanks to Mozi and Berkeley's lack of abstractions and essences, and the absence of an appearance-reality distinction.

The fact that neither Mozi or Berkeley are *interested* in providing an answer as to whether their moral philosophy is voluntarist or consequentialist, however, does not mean that no answer can be forthcoming, and that we should conclude that they are both *neither* divine command theorists nor consequentialists. For both, the appearance-reality distinction disappears. In the case of the Mohists, this is *epistemological*, i.e. perception gives us direct knowledge of reality. For Berkeley, by contrast, the issue is metaphysical, since he claims that our perceptions *are* reality. In both philosophical systems, however, the appearance-reality distinction plays no role. Both philosophers also proceed as if there is no "essence" of morality, and that nature directly discloses Heaven's will. Once again, in the Mohist case this is a result of their *dao*-centered approach to philosophy, and in Berkeley's case because of his metaphysical commitments. But regardless of their reasons, both hold that what Heaven wills and what benefits always, as a matter of practice, go hand in hand. Hence, it is understandable that neither philosopher thought it all that important to address where the source of morality lies.

Nevertheless, *conceptually* this question does not go away simply because they are not interested in answering it, and this is where the tension in their views arises. As philosophers read and interpret their work, trying to fully develop a coherent and consistent picture of their philosophical systems, the question of whether the source of morality is voluntarist or consequentialist becomes of interest. Even if Heaven's will and benefit never come apart in

practice, they could in principle; and if so, should we obey Heaven, or follow the consequences? Because of some of their metaphysical commitments, Mozi and Berkeley were (justifiably) not so concerned with this question, but as interpreters of their work, we can and should be. But since they never explicitly address this question – for the reasons outlined above – the question of which way to go on this question is unclear, and therefore their work presents interpreters with a tension: a *prima facie* inconsistency.

In conclusion, the question of whether we should obey the divine will for its own sake, or whether we should obey the divine will because *tian*/God is good is not a question that is desperately requiring of an answer for Mozi or for Berkeley. This lack of interest is not due to a lack of sophistication in their philosophical systems, but rather because their philosophical systems themselves push this question into the background. But *because* this question is pushed into the background, interpreters of Mozi and Berkeley are faced with an uncertainty about where their ultimate allegiances lie, and it is this that constitutes the “tension” in their work.

¹ Xiufen Lu, “Understanding Mozi's Foundations of Morality: a Comparative Perspective,” *Asian Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2006).

² Lu, “Understanding Mozi's Foundations of Morality,” 132.

³ Mozi, *Mo Tzu: The Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 85.

⁴ Mozi *Mo Tzu*, 92-93.

⁵ The purpose of discussing this debate is not to argue in favor of one side or the other. Rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that this debate is occurring *in the first place*. It is the fact that an explanation for an apparent inconsistency in Mozi is sought for by interpreters at all – than an explanation seems to be *required* – that justifies saying that there is a “tension” in Mozi’s moral philosophy. It is the existence of this tension that is of interest to me here.

⁶ Denis M. Ahern, "Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian?," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 3 (1976).

⁷ Ahern, "Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian?," 187.

⁸ Ahern, "Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian?," 189.

⁹ Dirck Vorenkamp, "Another Look at Utilitarianism in Mo-Tzu's Thought," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 43, no. 1 (1992), 431.

¹⁰ Vorenkamp. "Another Look at Utilitarianism in Mo-Tzu's Thought," 431.

¹¹ David E. Soles, "Mo Tzu and the Foundations of Morality," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (March 1999), 39.

¹² Soles, "Mo Tzu and the Foundations of Morality," 43.

¹³ Kristopher Duda, "Reconsidering Mo Tzu on the Foundations of Morality," *Asian Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2001), 27.

¹⁴ A more recent paper by Xiufen Lu (2006) persuasively argues that, given an interpretation of *tian* in line with that likely held by Mozi's contemporaries, the whole debate over which set of biconditionals Mozi agrees with proceeds from mistaken foundations. However, since my purpose in this paper is not to settle the question of where Mozi stands with regards to consequentialism and divine command theory, but to identify aspects of Mozi's views that lead to disagreement about this issue, and since Lu's paper deserves more attention than I am able to give it here, I have chosen not to discuss it at length. However, as a striking addition to this conversation, it is well worth reading.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Warnock, "Moral Theories: Berkeley's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 16 (1990), 48.

¹⁶ Warnock, "Moral Theories," 48.

¹⁷ Warnock, "Moral Theories," 48.

¹⁸ Warnock, "Moral Theories," 48.

¹⁹ Warnock, "Moral Theories," 48.

²⁰ Warnock, “Moral Theories,” 49.

²¹ Chris Fraser, “The Mohist Conception of Reality,” in *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems*, ed. Chenyang Li & Franklin Perkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 77.

²² Fraser, “The Mohist Conception of Reality,” 72.

²³ Fraser, “The Mohist Conception of Reality,” 72.

²⁴ Fraser, “The Mohist Conception of Reality.”

²⁵ Fraser, “The Mohist Conception of Reality,” 76.

²⁶ Of course, the fact that the Mohists are not interested in discovering what lies behind the *li* does not mean that *nothing* does; that there is no Mohist “essence” of morality; that we ought not try to consider the metaphysical foundations of Mohist philosophy; and that a more highly developed Mohist view might not draw on metaphysical claims or postulate essences. However, here I am concerned merely with the implications that the Mohist lack of interest in developing metaphysical foundations and establishing essences has for their moral philosophy (and the tension identified in it). I am not making any claims about whether this lack of interest is justified. In other words, the fact that *their* interest in morality is highly practical does not stop us from asking foundational questions *ourselves*; *my* interest, however, is in what this practical focus means for the tension in Mohist moral philosophy.

²⁷ Martha Brandt Bolton, “Berkeley’s Objection to Abstract Ideas and Unconceived Objects,” in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), 61.

²⁸ Margaret Atherton, “Berkeley’s Anti-Abstractionism,” in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987).

²⁹ George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. David R. Wilkins (2002), XCIX.

³⁰ Atherton, "Berkeley's Anti-Abstractionism," 49.

³¹ Paul J. Olscamp, "Some Suggestions about the Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (April 1968), 148.

³² Olscamp, "Some Suggestions about the Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley."

³³ Olscamp, "Some Suggestions about the Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley," 148.

³⁴ George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne in nine volumes*, Volume 2, ed. A.A. Luce & T.E. Jessop (London: Nelson, 1948), 6.

³⁵ George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne in nine volumes*, Volume 3, ed. A.A. Luce & T.E. Jessop (London: Nelson, 1948), 50