Is Mohism Really *Li*-Promotionalism?

Author Yun Wua\* and Amin Ebrahimi Afrouzib

aDepartment of Philosophy, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, 200240, China,

[wu-yun@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:wu-yun@sjtu.edu.cn);

bSchool of Law, University of California Berkeley, 2240 Piedmont Ave, Berkeley, CA 94720-7200, USA

Is Mohism Really *Li*-Promotionalism?

Abstract: A longstanding orthodoxy holds that the Mohists regard the promotion of *li* (benefit, 利) as their ultimate normative criterion, meaning that they measure what is *yi* (just, 義) or *buyi* (unjust, 不義) depending on whether it maximizes li or not. This orthodoxy dates back at least to Joseph Edkins (1859), who saw Mozi as a utilitarian and an ally of Bentham. In this paper, we will argue that this orthodoxy should be reconsidered because it does not square with several passages from the *Mozi*. That the Mohists place a strong weight on the promotion of ‘*li* for the whole world (*tianxia zhi li*, 天下之利)’ is uncontroversial. We argue, however, that in certain cases the Mohist moral calculus diverges in its rationale or outcome from *li*-promotionalism. This position rejects the orthodoxy by showing that Mohism and *li*-promotionalism are not entirely coterminous.

Keywords: Mohism, *li* (benefit, 利), *yi* (just, 義), promotionalism, deontology

# I. Introduction

A longstanding orthodoxy holds that the Mohists regard the promotion of *li* (benefit) as their ultimate normative criterion, meaning that they measure what is *yi* (just) or *buyi* (unjust) depending on whether it maximizes *li* or not. This orthodoxy dates back at least to Joseph Edkins (1859), who saw Mozi as a utilitarian and an ally of Bentham (p. 167). In this paper, we will argue that this orthodoxy should be reconsidered because it does not square with several passages from the *Mozi*. That the Mohists place a strong weight on the promotion of ‘*li* for the whole world (*tianxia zhi li*, 天下之利)’ is uncontroversial. We argue, however, that in certain cases, the Mohist moral calculus diverges in rationale or outcome from *li*-promotionalism. This position rejects the orthodoxy by showing that Mohism and *li*-promotionalism are not entirely coterminous.

Our roadmap is as follows: in section II, we offer an overview of the orthodoxy. In section III, we reject that orthodoxy by showing that it cannot be squared with some passages from the *Mozi*. Specifically, we consider a) cases in which no amount of *li* can compensate certain wrongs, b) cases where the promotion of *li*, though rendering a choice tolerable, does not suffice to justify it as right, and c) cases where the Mohist moral calculus and a purely *li*-promotionalist framework yield disparate outcomes. In section IV, we compare our stance with earlier and existing challenges to the orthodoxy. In section V, we offer a discussion on interpretative approaches to Mohism and their relation to contemporary and comparative theorizing.

# II. The Orthodoxy

The importance of the promotion of *li* (benefit) as an evaluative and normative criterion in Mohist thought is indisputable. But according to the orthodoxy, for the Mohists, what is *yi* (just) is simply what is calculated to maximize *li*. Accordingly, the orthodoxy maintains that one’s sole duty under Mohism is to act in a way that produces as much *li* as possible. In short, the orthodoxy holds that Mohism is *li*-promotionalism.

We do not mean to suggest that the proponents of the orthodoxy agree about what constitutes *li*. For example, there is disagreement among these scholars about whether *li* is for the benefit of the country or the whole world or whether it is constituted by subjective pleasure alone, or a list of objective goods, and so forth. But the controversial question of what constitutes *li* (i.e., the Mohist theory of the good) is beside the point because the proponents of the orthodoxy agree that once the content of *li* (or the right kind of it) is determined, the Mohist moral calculus will be identical with *li*-promotionalism. In the voice of Dirk Vorenkamp (1992): ‘Mo-tzu is arguing according to the utilitarian method of knowing what you are “for”, and then “weighing” the pros and cons according to the situation so as to bring the greatest “benefit”’ (p.433). The proponents of the orthodoxy sometimes disagree about what the Mohists ‘are “for.”’ However, they agree that once that is determined, the Mohists will base all their normative judgments in terms of its promotion, meaning that they will determine right from wrong based on what produces the greatest amount of *li*.

We can understand the orthodoxy in terms of two distinct trends in the literature. One trend relies on the third marker in the ‘three markers (*sanbiao*, 三表)’ which states that in order to judge whether a statement or a theory is right, it is important to ‘implement it as a basis for the penal code and government and observe that it conforms to the benefit of the state and the people’ (Mozi 35:3).1 This trend relies on this and similar passages2 to conclude that Mohism is a utilitarian theory.3

The other trend interprets the passage ‘*yi, li* *ye* (義，利也)’ (*Mohist Canons* A8) as stating that *li* is both sufficient and necessary for *yi*. For example, Hu Shi (2014) writes: ‘Mozi says, “*yi* is just *li* (*yi bianshi li*, 義便是利)”, *yi* is the name (ming 名), and *li* is the substance (*shi*, 實) …If it is not beneficial, it is not just’ (pp. 120-121). Fraser (2020a) also takes *li* as the ground or source of *yi* and interprets said passage as ‘morality is benefit’. In Fraser’s account, the relationship between benefit and justice in Mohism is similar to their relationship as Mill (2003) understood them, when he wrote: ‘I account the justice which is grounded on utility to be the chief part, and incomparably the most sacred and binding part, of all morality’ (pp. 230-231).

One problem with this trend is that it raises a fabricated tension between said passages with countless other passages of the Mozi in which the promotion of *li* is judged *buyi* (unjust).4 There are two possible ways out and both are well represented in the literature. One is to deny that Mohism is a coherent doctrine,5 and the other is to make a distinction between good and bad forms of *li*.6 Although both approaches are plausible in isolation, both fail to unify Mohism under the banner of *li*-promotionalism. The former fails because denying doctrinal coherence in Mohism would make Mohism incompatible with *li*-promotionalism, which is coherent. The latter fails because it tacitly posits that there is yet a more foundational value in Mohism that renders *li* itself unjust (or alternatively, it posits that there is a feature present in only certain forms of *li* that is actually doing the normative work).

The passages discussed can surely be interpreted in the ways suggested by proponents of the orthodoxy. However, they do not strictly lend themselves to such interpretations. All that the text establishes is a strong connection between *yi* and *li* or the sufficiency of *li* for obtaining *yi* in certain cases. However, it leaves open the possibility for *li* to be dependent on *yi* for its own normative justification in other cases.

These shortcomings raise the question of why start with a restrictive interpretation of said passages to begin with. The champions of this trend were trying to schematize Chinese texts in terms of well-known Western frameworks. As a result, unwittingly or not, they forced something like a utilitarian schema onto the Mohist text. If instead of trying to rescue that artificially narrow interpretation, we approach the text with fresh eyes, we see no indication that *yi* is always determined by what is calculated to produce the most amount of *li*. In short, the far too common orthodoxy is only established conventionally; but it is not—and cannot be—established textually.

# III. The Orthodoxy Cannot Be Squared with Certain Passages of Mozi

Not only is the orthodoxy not established by the Mohist texts, it also directly clashes with certain passages of the Mozi. We consider three such instances in this section.

First is the Mohist statement ‘the killing of one person is spoken of as *buyi* (unjust) and certainly constitutes one capital offense’ (*Mozi* 17:2). This is a blanket prohibition on the unjust killing of a person, which suggests that no amount of *li* can compensate that offense. Scenarios in which the killing of an innocent person would promote immeasurable amounts of *li* are certainly conceivable. If the orthodoxy were right, in some such scenarios the unjust killing of a person would have been right. But the passage does not indicate that this would be the case. The blanket prohibition in the passage states that no amount of *li* can compensate for certain forms of wrongs, like the killing of an innocent person. In fact, the moral calculus in the passage shows no regard for how much *li* may or may not be produced. It first and foremost looks at whether an innocent person was killed. If an innocent person was killed, the calculus ends with an unjust verdict without even taking into consideration what amount of *li* was or was not produced.

Note that this passage cannot be squared with *li*-promotionalism, regardless of what constitutes *li*. Even preventing the killing of more innocent people by killing one innocent person is not allowed. This is because the prohibition cannot be compensated with anything, be it *li* or anything else under the sun. Blanket prohibitions of actions such as this cannot, in principle, be squared with promotionalism, regardless of what value the promotionalism promotes.

The second passage is one where the Mohists consider choices between a greater and a lesser evil. Consider, for example, the following Mohist passage: ‘to cut off a finger or to lose a wrist (or an arm)? To cut off a finger (a wrist) or to lose the whole life?’ (Mozi 44:3a). Unlike the above passage that states a blanket prohibition on an act, here, various alternatives are considered on a sliding scale.

The broader context of the passage suggests that the Mohists maintain that rightness or wrongness need not be absolute but may be relative. The relevant text (‘權非為是也，亦非為非也，權正也 (*quan fei wei shi ye, yi fei wei fei ye, quan zheng ye*)’) is anything but straightforward and its correct translation is contested.7 A great place to start, however, is Fraser’s (2020b) acute commentary on the passage, in which he notes:

The passage describes two types of practical judgments, which it labels ‘weighing’ and ‘exact’. The first is when, weighing relevant factors, we judge that something normally deemed wrong is nevertheless the least harmful course of action in a particular situation and so counts as right. The second is when, after considering something normally condemned as wrong, we reaffirm that in our situation it is indeed wrong (p. 68).

Fraser correctly points out that what lurks in the passage is a distinction between absolute (or ‘exact’) right or wrongness on one hand and relative (or ‘weighed’) right or wrongness on the other. It is no surprise that in these cases, the Mohists recommend the ‘choosing of the lighter’ (*qu qi qing*, 取其輕) or the lesser of two harms, after correctly weighing the various options.

However, as Graham’s translation clarifies, the lesser of two harms is not what one desires directly but rather what one tolerates due to lack of alternatives.8 This nuance gets lost in Fraser’s commentary above when he asserts that the choice of the lesser harm forced upon us ‘counts as right.’ While rendering the text in translation, Fraser (2020b) writes that ‘selecting the lesser among harms is not selecting harm; it is selecting benefit’ or that ‘when one encounters robbers, cutting off one’s finger to save one’s life is benefit’ (p. 68). Even if the lack of excess harm could be construed as benefit, construing the forced choice considered in the passages as ‘right’ is a further step that the Mohists do not take.

What the Mohists seem to explicitly maintain is that the relative forms of right and wrong have a status between *shi* (right, 是) and *fei* (wrong, 非). This is because the greater harm in that process cannot be directly judged as wrong but only appears to be so in light of an alternative against which it is weighed. So too, a lesser harm cannot be directly judged as right, but only appears to be so when juxtaposed to a greater harm. Thus, it is best to conclude that weighing is not about being right or wrong. It is about correctly determining which is the relatively greater evil, which is how Johnston (2000, p. 581) renders the passage (權非為是也，亦非為非也，權正也).9 If this conclusion is right, the Mohist approach to the choice between greater and lesser harms does not square with *li*-promotionalism.

Consider how a similar choice would be regarded from a purely *li*-promotionalist perspective. Remember that by definition, *li*-promotionalism equates ‘what can be directly judged as right’ to ‘what has, on balance, the least amount of harm.’ Thus, from a purely *li*-promotionalist perspective, the lesser harm not only appears to be better than the alternatives but can also be directly judged as right (given that direct judgement of rightness is measured by nothing but having on balance the least amount of harm, or alternatively, the most amount of benefit). Here therefore, *li*-promotionalism and Mohism seem to differ in their rationale, though yielding similar outcomes.

The third is the passage ‘if one kills another innocent person to preserve the world, it is not thereby to benefit the world (*sha yiren yi cun tianxia, fei sha yiren yi li tianxia*, 殺一人以存天下，非殺一人以利天下)’ (*Mozi* 44:3b). This passage, which many editors place immediately following the one just examined, is noteworthy in at least two respects.

First, the rationale here does not match with that of 44:3a, which means that the Mohist calculus does not always straightforwardly consider lack of harm as benefit. This is already incongruent with *li*-promotionalism, for which harms and benefits are merely converse relations.

Second, the sacrifices in 44:3a are at least regarded as *li*. We argued that despite being thus regarded, these are not necessarily regarded as right (*pace* Fraser (2020b), who maintains that they are (p. 68)). Regardless of how the sacrifices in 44:3a are evaluated, it seems reasonable to assume that the specific sacrifice in 44:3b is neither right in an absolute nor direct sense, given it does not even amount to *li*, which at least in our interpretation of 44:3a, is a step lower than being directly right. Moreover, if this sacrifice is not even *li*, it is probably not even indirectly right, that is, it is not even tolerable in the way relatively right actions (like the sacrifices in 44:3a) are tolerable. The upshot here is that Mohism seems not to permit sacrificing one person to preserve the world. This outcome diverges from what a purely *li*-promotionalist framework would have yielded.

To see this latter point, contrast Mohism to a framework that is reducible to the promotionalism of certain value(s). For example, utilitarianism, which is so often mistakenly associated with Mohism, is reducible to utility-promotionalism. Under utilitarianism, one is not only permitted but also required to kill an innocent person in order to secure an outcome that increases net utility (say, by preserving the rest of the world). It is this feature of utilitarianism that inspires literary works such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1975) *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, the story of a city in which the happiness of residents is guaranteed in exchange for the eternal suffering of an innocent child locked and suffering in a dungeon beneath it.

If the orthodoxy were right, in cases like the one considered in Le Guin’s story, Mohism would have ratified the sacrificing of one person, so long as the outcome yielded sufficient amounts of *li* (whatever its content may be). For example, per Hu Shi’s (2014) reading, Mohism’s ultimate standard is ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ (pp. 124-125). If Mohism was reducible to the promotion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, then for any outcome that guaranteed enough happiness to outweigh the suffering of the sacrificed individual, Mohism would have required the sacrificing of the innocent individual. So too in Feng Youlan’s (1948) interpretation who interprets *li* as what is ‘beneficial to the country and the people’ (p. 54). If Mohism was reducible to the promotion of what benefits the country and the people, then for any outcome that guaranteed enough ‘benefit to the country and the people’ to outweigh the suffering of the sacrificed individual, Mohism would have required the sacrificing of the individual. And if Mohism was reducible to the promotion of a set of concrete goods, as is maintained by Fraser and Van Norden,10 then for any outcome that guaranteed enough of those objective goods to outweigh the suffering of the sacrificed individual, Mohism would have required the sacrificing of the individual.

However, the passage from 44:3b which we considered suggests that at least in some cases, Mohism does not require such sacrifices but potentially prohibits them. In the passage, when thinking purely in terms of the net levels of *li*, whatever is taken to constitute it, the deficits created by the sacrifice of the individual would certainly be compensated and more by the preservation of the rest of the world. Yet such a sacrifice is prohibited by the Mohists. This shows that there is more to the Mohist calculus than promoting *li*, be *li* itself constituted by happiness, benefit to the country and the people, or a list of objective goods.

The three cases examined in this section cannot be squared with the orthodoxy. If the Mohist statement ‘*yi, li ye*’ signified the sufficiency of *li* for securing *yi*, then outcomes such as preserving the world could not have been prohibited in Mohism without doctrinal inconsistency. Assuming doctrinal consistency, therefore, necessitates rejecting the orthodoxy.11 This urges an alternative interpretation of that statement and hence an alternative understanding of the relationship between *li* and *yi*.

Admittedly, the passages discussed here, especially the one from 44:3b, are fragmented. Therefore, no holistic interpretation can be made by mere reliance on them. Nevertheless, we think there is enough here to show that what we are dealing with is more complicated or multifarious than pure *li*-promotionalism.

The other qualification we must make is that the Mohist texts were developed by different groups over a few hundred years.12 Here, we maintained that those who equate Mohism with *li*-promotionalism must commit to the internal coherence of Mohism. But one could argue for the existence of more than one internally coherent ethical framework in the text, due to its development over time and at the hands of various groups. On such a premise, one could further argue that the existence of passages suggesting an ethical view different from *li*-promotionalism, such as the ones we have discussed, does not by itself prove that other parts of the *Mozi*, on which they rely, do not amount to a *li*-promotionalist stance.

Our response to this latter objection is as follows: first, many rival ethical theories substantially overlap in their calculus. In fact, any ethical theory worth serious consideration should show preference for benefit over harm. But we would never equate them just because of such overlap. So too, if the moral calculus in many parts of the *Mozi* overlaps with *li*-promotionalism, we should not think that the two are the same. Ethical theories differ in their answers to hard cases, such as those considered in *Mozi* 44:3a and 44:3b. And this is where Mohism and *li*-promotionalism seem to come apart.

Second, and more importantly, we must see whether anything can be gained by labelling certain or even major parts of the Mohists texts as amounting to a *li*-promotionalist, utilitarian, or consequentialist stance. What substantive end would such labelling serve? It may at first appear that such labelling would render the substantive material more familiar, accessible, or digestible. But this is not so, because contrary to appearance, in such labelling, the interesting nuances that make Mohism new, exciting, or worthy of comparative analysis will be lost.

It may also appear that such labelling will lend the Mohists due credit as the champions of enduring and familial philosophical ideas. Fraser’s claim, for example, that the Mohists were the world’s first consequentialists, rings in that tone (Fraser, 2016). Yet, again, though there may be something flattering about being the first consequentialists, we would have not given the Mohists due credit so long as we continued to assign such labels anachronistically. In this paper, we have not evaluated Fraser’s claim that the Mohists were consequentialists. Nevertheless, to give the Mohists credit as the potential pioneers of that enduring ethical theory, we should inquire whether consequentialists were Mohists or maintained some such claim. That form of phrasing will not render Mohism as old news due to its potential equivalence to consequentialism; it will justly render consequentialism as old news.

Thus, we recommend that we should consider Mohism as simply Mohism with no added label. Then we can also be truer to the wealth (and potentially the diversity) of ethical thinking that Mohism encompasses. Finally, if we let go of the urge to reduce Mohism to a familiar framework, we would no longer feel any necessity to slice it into distinct parts that encompass distinct ethical stances.

# IV. Earlier Challenges to the Orthodoxy

Although our emphatic rejection of the orthodoxy in such broad terms and the specific arguments for it—we hope—are novel, we are not the first to raise doubts about it. Interest and debate regarding the orthodoxy’s validity has grown in recent decades, in no small part, thanks to a seminal article by Dennis Ahern. In that paper, Ahern (1976) argues that ‘it is difficult to provide a final answer to the question’ of whether Mohism is a form of ‘strong utilitarianism’ (tantamount to what we have called ‘*li*-promotionalism’) or not (pp. 185-193). Ahern maintains that for the Mohists, the two competing criteria of maximizing *li* and following Heaven’s will serve as independently sufficient criteria to render an action right. Ahern (1976) further maintains that ‘there are no apparent grounds’ to determine which of the two is the more basic, writing: ‘the texts that we have do not provide us with sufficient evidence’ (p. 191). 13 Thus, Ahern (1976) concludes that it is equally possible for Mozi to have been either a strong utilitarian (i.e., *li*-promotionalist) or ‘a religious authoritarian’ (pp. 188-191). This is because, in Ahern’s interpretation, the two criteria of *li*-promotionalism and Heaven’s will yield the same result (i.e., they are coextensive).14,15

Similarly, some years after Ahern, though seemingly independently, Rodney Taylor (1979) raised doubts about the orthodoxy in light of religious undertones in the Mozi (pp. 337-346).16 Taylor’s (1979) main concern was also about whether the Mohists subscribed to li-promotionalism (p 337).17 Taylor shows dismay at ‘the traditional emphasis upon the utilitarian motives’ ascribed to Mozi for having ‘virtually excluded any consideration of the question of [his] religious world-view.’ Taylor (1979) concludes however, that these two dimensions of Mozi’s philosophy are compatible and consistent (p. 337). In a subsection titled: ‘the utilitarian as religious activity’, Taylor (1979) writes:

The utilitarian concern is a major element of Mo Tzu’s thought, but it is not the endpoint. The distinction is important. Presuppositional to any utilitarian motive for Mo Tzu must be the belief in Heaven as the source of righteousness and authority. To define the endpoint for Mo Tzu is to discuss the dominance and centrality of authority of Heaven…The criterion is Heaven’s utilitarian righteousness…Mo Tzu’s utilitarian concerns are not lost, but become the content of his religious world-view and to that degree the utilitarian can be said to assume the nature of religious activity. (pp. 343-345)

On Taylor’s interpretation therefore, Mozi is a religious authoritarian, whose religion dictates *li*-promotionalism (in effect endorsing the Religious Authoritarian interpretation that Ahern considers but for which he deems the evidence to be inconclusive).18

Ahern and Taylor both raise attention to the role of Heaven in Mohist thought and seem ready to even endorse this role as the more basic criterion in Mohism than that which the maximization of *li* plays. However, according to both of their interpretations, the normative calculus and outcomes of Mohism and *li*-promotionalism completely overlap. Thus, though challenging the orthodoxy in its technical details, both interpretations leave the implications of the orthodoxy unscathed.19 This is because in both Ahern and Taylor’s interpretations, both ‘religious authoritarianism’ and *li*-promotionalism can be comfortably attributed to Mohism, except with a potential inconsistency in Ahern’s account and without one in Taylor’s.

The competing criteria that Ahern attributes to Mohism prompted a further debate, with each side implicating Ahern as an adversary while championing one of the two possible interpretations Ahern considers against the other. On the one hand, Dirk Vorenkamp (1992, pp. 423-443) (contra Ahern) and Kristopher Duda (2001, pp. 23-31) (contra Ahern and Soles) argue that Mohism is a form of utilitarianism despite any role Heaven plays in Mohist thought. On the other hand, David Soles (1999) (contra Ahern and Vorenkamp) argues that Mozi is not a utilitarian but a religious authoritarian, or as he puts it, a ‘Divine Will Theorist’ (p. 39).

Thus, we find allies in Ahern and Taylor for having raised doubts about the orthodoxy, and to a greater extent in Soles who, like us, rejects it. Nevertheless, as seen above, we take an entirely different approach by stepping outside the dichotomy between religious authoritarianism and utilitarianism. We have argued that in Mohism, the promotion of *li* is itself constrained by *li*-independent considerations, such as whether some action involves the killing of innocent people. In this way, we hope to have refuted the orthodoxy, while pre-empting a debate about the primacy of either prongs of the persisting dichotomy.20 Specifically, we hope to have shown that there are normative constraints in the Mohist calculus, which cause it to yield a different outcome than *li*-promotionalism in certain cases.

# V. Conclusion

In this paper, we have challenged an orthodoxy that regards the maximization of *li* as the ultimate normative criterion in Mohism. We first argued that the passages that the proponents of the orthodoxy rely on are too equivocal to establish the orthodoxy as a textual matter. We then drew on other Mohist passages to show that the Mohist calculus diverges from a framework of pure *li*-promotionalism. These observations clearly suggest that there is more to Mohism than *li*-promotionalism, regardless of how broadly or narrowly *li* is defined.

In addition to clarifying widespread misconceptions about Mohism, our findings are important in two further ways. First, they relieve Mohism of having to be answerable for the shortcomings of *li*-promotionalism. For example, after taking *li* as equivalent to pleasure, Van Norden (2007) criticizes the Mohists for unequivocally prioritizing it over all else, writing: ‘this raises a variety of questions that the Mohists never, to my knowledge, answer. What if people are pleased by the Ruist practices that the Mohists condemn? What if a sadist is pleased by torturing people?’ (p. 151). Of course, whether *li* is equivalent to pleasure is itself a matter of controversy.21 Our analysis, however, shows that even if *li* and pleasure were equivalent, Mohism would not have faced such problems as Van Norden raises, given that it does not prioritize the promotion of *li* over, say, the torturing of others.

Second, our findings relieve Mohism from tendencies of being read through the lens of well-known Western frameworks. There are two downsides to such tendencies that can in turn be avoided. Above all, interpreting rich traditions through unflattering lenses saddles them with the shortcomings of those frameworks. Van Norden’s criticism of Mohism discussed just now is a case in point, given that widespread ascriptions of utilitarianism to the Mohists is what inspires interpreting Mohism as *li*-promotionalism. Moreover, as we hinted in section III, the ascription of a Western framework to an ancient Chinese tradition can reduce it to old news for those working within the Western tradition. This, in turn, imposes limitations on contemporary and comparative theorizing.

All well-known normative frameworks—whatever their flaws or merits—are far from perfect as a system of first-other ethics. Importantly, the limitations and strengths of such systems are revealed when they are juxtaposed with alternative systems. And it is through such revelations that improvements to first-order ethical discourse can be made. Tendencies of false equations impede such possibilities by shadowing the existent diversities between available frameworks. This, in turn, prevents rich traditions such as Mohism from serving as sources for diversification and innovation in first-order ethical theorizing. Worse, they create the impression that there are no options besides a handful of stale and imperfect systems, no matter where or in which era one looks.

**Notes**

1. Quotations from *The* *Mozi* throughout are our translations of the Chinese text as it appears on in Sun (2001). In our translations, we have closely consulted translations by Mei (1973); Graham (1978); Watson (2003); Johnston (2013); Knoblock and Riegel (2013); and Fraser (2020b); (2020c).

2. Similar texts are such as: ‘Any statements, any actions, if they are beneficial to Heaven, to ghosts, or to the ordinary people, then put them into effect’ (*Mozi* 47:4).

3. For example, Feng (1948, p.54); and Graham (1989, pp.39-40).

4. For example, ‘to benefit oneself at the price of harming others (*kuiren zili*, 虧人自利)’ (*Mozi* 17:1), or ‘to benefit one’s own household at the price of harming that of others’ , or ‘to benefit one’s own state at the price of harming that of others’ (*Mozi* 14:2) are all considered *buyi* (unjust).

5. Following many scholars who insightfully point out that like many early Chinese texts, the book of *Mozi* was probably written by more than one author over an extended period of time, during which its concepts likely evolved in less than fully homogenous ways (see for example, Desmet (2005-06, pp. 99-118); Defoort (2016, pp. 1-22).

6. See for example, Defoort (2008, pp. 153-181). Chiu (2014, pp. 199-214).

7. There are other versions of this text with slight differences, for example ‘權非為是也，非非為非也，權、正也。’ Graham’s (1978) translation: ‘The wrong when weighed turning out to be the right, and the wrong condemned as the wrong, are the judgment after weighing and judgment which is direct’ (p. 253). Johnston’s (2010) translation: ‘“Weighing” is not about right and wrong. It is about the “weighing” being correct (i.e. making the correct choice)’ (p. 581). Fraser’s (2020) translation: ‘Weighing the wrong such that it comes out right and condemning the wrong such that it comes out wrong are “by weighing” and “exact”’ (p. 70).

8. In Graham’s (1978) own words: ‘The wrong when weighed turning out to be the right, and the wrong condemned as the wrong, are the judgment after weighing and judgment which is direct. Cutting off a finger and cutting off an arm are choosing the smaller among harms; one desires them because one has no alternative, it is not that one desires them directly’ (p. 253).

9. Importantly however, Johnston (2010) does not share our conclusions but construes weighing in (rule-)utilitarian terms; see especially (p. 377) and (p. 388).

10. See Fraser (2016, pp. 138-140); Van Norden (2007, p. 145).

11. Note again that this assumption is one held by the proponents of the orthodoxy, for if Mohism is not doctrinally consistent, then it is certainly not reducible to a consistent framework, be it *li*-promotionalism or otherwise. We, on the other hand, can remain agnostic about whether Mohism is doctrinally consistent or not.

12. (See Footnote 5).

13. Thus, on Ahern’s (1976) interpretation, Mohism is a framework in which Heaven’s will and the maximization of li (or deviation from it) are independently *sufficient* for the rightness and wrongness of actions (p.187). This means that for Ahern, Mohism is *more* utilitarian than merely ‘in the weak sense’ (p. 192).

14. Ahern (1976) wrote: ‘it is simply presupposed [in Mohism] that a [strong] utilitarian test of benefit and a non-utilitarian test of authority will sanction the same set of actions as proper’ (p. 191). As we saw above in section III however, this is not always so, since there are cases, such as those involving the killing of innocent people, in which Heaven imposes punishment whether or not *li* is promoted.

15. For Ahern’s (1976) further suggestion that perhaps what he calls ‘the [non-utilitarian] principle of gratitude’ (p. 192) is an even more fundamental criterion than both utilitarian and divine-authoritarian criteria in Mohism.

16. We presume Taylor independently reached similar conclusions because he appears to have been unaware of Ahern’s paper at the time, as he makes no references to it.

17. Taylor (1979) asked whether ‘so-called utilitarian goals do, in fact, stand at the center of [Mozi’s] thought’ (p. 337).

18. See Ahern (1976), especially when writing: ‘As a utilitarian…Mo Tzu may be understood as holding that the values of Heaven should be the values of everyone just because they pass the utilitarian test. As a religious authoritarian and non-utilitarian…Mo Tzu may be understood as holding that the obligations of every individual are grounded in the will of Heaven’ (pp. 190-91).

19. This fact is best observed from the fact that even after these contributions, debates persisted about which form of utilitarianism Mohism should be further specified as, rather than *whether* Mohism is utilitarianism at all. See for example the debate between Hansen (1989), maintaining that Mohism is a form of utilitarianism, which he terms ‘language utilitarianism’, (pp. 355-380) and Brandt (1989), maintaining, *pace* Hansen, that Mohism is what he terms ‘conscience utilitarianism’ (pp. 381-385).

20. In our motivations for pre-empting rather than further entertaining this debate, we also have at least one ally in Lu (2006), who argues with high acumen that this debate rests in part on an illicit conflation of the notion *Tian* in ancient Chinese thought and the Western notion of Heaven (pp. 123-134).

21. Nor is maintaining this equivalence Van Norden’s (2007) own final stance on the matter (p. 151).

**References:**

Ahern, D.M. (1976). Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian? *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 3*(2), 185-193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.1976.tb00388.x>.

Brandt, R.B. (1989). Comments on Chad Hansen’s “language utilitarianism”. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 16*(3-4), 381-385. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-0160304009>.

Defoort, C. (2008). The Profit Does Not Profit: Paradoxes with Li in Early Chinese Texts. *Asia Major, 21*(1), 153-181. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41649945>.

Defoort, C. (2016). The Gradual Growth of the Mohist Core Philosophy: Tracing Fixed Formulations in the Mozi. *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies, 64*(1)*,* 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.2016.1169755>.

Desmet, K. (2005). The Growth of Compounds in the Core Chapters of the Mozi*. Oriens Extremus, 06*(45), 99-118. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24047643>.

Duda, K. (2011). Reconsidering Mo Tzu on the Foundation of Morality. *Asian Philosophy, 11*(1), 23-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360120048825>.

Edkins, J. (1859). Notice of the Character and Writings of Meh Tsi*. Journal of China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2,* 165-170.

Feng, Y. (1948). *A Short Story of Chinese Philosophy.* The Macmillan Company.

Fraser, C. (2016). *The Philosophy of the Mozi: The First Consequentialists.* Columbia University Press.

Fraser, C. (2020a). Mohist Cannons. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/mohist-canons/>.

Fraser, C. (2020b). *The Mohist Dialectics: A supplement to The Essential Mozi: Ethical, Political and Dialectical Writings.* Oxford University Press.

Fraser, C. (2020c). *The Essential Mozi: Ethical, Political and Dialectical Writings.* Oxford University Press.

Graham, A.C. (1978). *Later Moist Logic, Ethics and Science.* Chinese University Press.

Graham, A.C. (1989). *Disputers of the Tao.* Open Court.

Hansen, C. (1989). Mo-Tzu: Language Utilitarianism. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 16*(3-4), 355-380. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.1989.tb00443.x>.

Hu. S. (2014). *中国哲学大纲* [An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy]. Wuhan University Press.

Johnston, I. (2000). Choosing the Greater and Choosing the Lesser: A Translation and Analysis of the Daqu and Xiaoqu Chapters of the Mozi. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 27*(4), 375-407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0301-8121.00023>.

Johnston, I. (2010). *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*. The Chinese University Press.

Johnston, I. (2013). *The book of Master Mo.* Penguin Books.

Knoblock, J., & Riegel, J. (2013). *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings.* University of California.

Le Guin, U. K (1975). The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas. In U. K, Le Guin (Ed.), *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters.* Harper and Row.

Lu X. (2006). Understanding Mozi’s Foundations of Morality: A Comparative Perspective. *Asian Philosophy, 16*(2), 123-134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360600772769>.

Mei, Y. (1973). *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse.* Hyperion Press.

Mill, J.S. (2003). *Utilitarianism and On Liberty.* Blackwell Publishing.

Soles, D.E. (1999). Mo Tzu and the Foundations of Morality. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 26*(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.1999.tb00531.x>.

Sun, Y. (2001). *Mozi Jiangu.* Zhonghua Shuju.

Taylor, R. (1979). Religion and Utilitarianism: Mo Tzu on Spirits and Funerals. *Philosophy East and West, 29*(3)*,* 337-346. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1398936>.

Van Norden, B. (2007). *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy.* Cambridge University Press.

Vorenkamp, D. (1992). Another Look at Utilitarianism in Mo-Tzu’s Thought.  *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 19*(4), 423-443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.1992.tb00125.x>.

Watson, B. (2003). *Mozi: Basic Writings.* Columbia University Press.