

Austerity in Mohist Ethics

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1. Introduction

Contemporaneous critics of Confucius' early followers included the Mo[hists] (墨); these thinkers were inspired by Mozi (墨子), whose name was used for the traditional text containing Mohist teachings.¹ Mohism (i.e. Mohist practical philosophy) is commonly labelled the first utilitarianism on Earth. It is easy to see why. What makes an action right (*yì*, 義) for Mozi is that it brings benefit (*lì*, 利) to the world and the way that one should benefit the world is characterized as *jiān ài* (兼愛), which might be translated 'impartial care' insofar as the doctrine is widely assumed to involve universal moral consideration; when benefitting the world, we are not weighing some people's interests while ignoring others' (Back 2017: 1095, Chiu 2013: 427–30, Fraser 2016: 36–37, 158–59, Loy 2013: 500, Robins 2012: 78–79, Zhang 2007: 244).

Confucius won the day and Mozi faded into obscurity, although the maturation of Confucian thought occurred largely by way of responding to Mozi's challenges; the *Mencius* is framed as a defence of Confucianism against Yang Zhu's egoism, on one extreme, and

¹ I generally refer to 'Mozi' rather than 'the Mohists', for economy; at any rate, the *Mozi*'s authors use Mozi as their mouthpiece. For helpful historical and textual background, see the Introduction of Fraser 2016, a book essential to Mohist studies.

Mozi's impartiality, on the other (3B.9).² Despite Mozi's historical defeat, scholarly interest in Mohism has rapidly increased in the past few decades, at least partly because Mohism offers a 'Western'-style, impartial counterpoint to the Confucian filial partiality that would proceed to dominate East Asian philosophy at large. Much of the literature has centred around a debate, started by Ahern 1976, as to whether Mohism is in fact utilitarian; for, besides saying that an action is right that benefits the world, the texts also say that an action is right that conforms to the will of Heaven, suggesting a divine command theory. Another (relatively) well-explored issue is the exact meaning of *jiān ài*, care that is impartial, inclusive or universal, etc.

One issue, however, has received little attention. Whatever the relation between the will of Heaven and benefit, and whatever the scope of *jiān ài* that would determine how benefit is distributed, it is a very austere benefit that Mozi exhorts us to distribute to our fellow humans (as distinguished from ghosts and Heaven, entities that occupy another significant sector of the literature and that I will bypass in this paper). And so Fraser's seminal book (2016), while mostly sympathetic to Mozi, offers the following among its few extended and recurring criticisms. To summarize, Fraser claims that Mozi is guilty of:

(1) Having an (overly) austere axiology.

(1) results in Mozi being guilty of:

(2) Denying a third way between austerity and excess.

(1) and therefore (2) in turn may be a result *of* the fact that Mozi is guilty of:

² Many have argued that Mencius interprets Mozi uncharitably (see Radice 2011 for a piece dedicated to this). We can at least say that Mencius' charge, that Mozi encourages neglect of one's family, is somewhat extreme.

(3) Assuming a background of (perpetual) scarcity (214–16; see also 131–32, 153–56, 229–30).

This paper simultaneously responds to Fraser's criticism of Mohist austerity and develops some central implications for the study of Mozi. First, I expound upon this austerity; the sorts of goods we should pursue are limited to what is strictly needed for survival. Second, I give Mozi's reason for this limit. Namely, beyond this limit to goods there is no definite limit; there is a hedonic treadmill effect that leads to what was once normal to seem deficient, leading to an insatiable cycle of luxury. Since there is then no third way, no principled stopgap between austerity and excess, and since excess is wrong, there is only austerity. How does this address Fraser? First, while Mohists may have been concerned with the degraded material conditions of their time, the hedonic treadmill operates independently of (3) background assumptions about scarcity. So (1) and (2) are unlikely to be the result of (3). Second, it is not that Mozi assumes (1) austerity and that this results in (2) denying a middle position between austerity and excess. It is rather that he holds (2) and *this* results in (1). Moreover, the hedonic treadmill makes (2) at least plausible.

This enquiry has two central implications for the study of Mozi. First, it directly addresses what is one of the least attractive aspects of Mohism. Instead of conjecturally attributing this aspect to historical happenstance, as Fraser does, the present account appeals to the text to make the aspect at least philosophically interesting. Second, the enquiry explains an important distinction between Mozi and the utilitarianism we find in Mill; the strict limitation of goods pursued that is a response to the hedonic treadmill explains why Mohism lacks the Millian-utilitarian language of maximization.

2. The extent of Mohist austerity

I will be brief in my exposition of Mohist austerity, for the texts do not raise exegetical problems so much as they do philosophical ones. The ‘Moderation in Use’ books of the *Mozi* give us the basic principles of austerity (I use Fraser’s 2020 translation and section numbers). ‘Moderation in Use I’ suggests that...

... when a sage governs a single state, the state can double its resources; in the larger scale in which he governs the world, the world can double its resources. (20.1)

How do sages, ideal agents meriting our emulation, efficiently produce benefit? They do this by eliminating ‘useless expenses’ (20.1). Clothes protect against the elements, weapons protect against criminals, houses protect against both the elements and criminals, transports facilitate travel, food replenishes and...

... what doesn’t add... [to these uses, the sages] eliminate it. In all cases of their making these things, they did nothing that did not add usefulness. Thus they used resources without wasting anything, the people were not worn out, and they promoted much benefit. (20.2; see also ‘Avoiding Excess’ and ‘Moderation in Use II’).

In short, the policy of the sage is that ‘in all cases, produce what is sufficient to provide for the people’s use, then stop’; ‘anything that added expense without adding to the people’s benefit, the sage-kings did not do it’ (‘Moderation in Use II’ 21.2).

Applications of these general principles yield criticisms of specific Confucian precedents. ‘Moderation in Funerals III’ denounces the elaborate rituals of the Confucian tradition. ‘Condemning Music I’ targets Confucian ideas about music being essential to moral life and education (Cooper 2009: 649, Fraser 2016: 224); while conceding that what is ornamental and elaborate is beautiful, ‘making music is wrong’ because it does not promote ‘the benefit of the myriad people’ (32.2). 32.3 rejects, in the first place, what one would make the relevant music with; musical instruments are proscribed, not just because they as a matter of fact incur heavy costs, but because they in principle fail to provide benefit analogous to

that of boats and carts (see also ‘Avoiding Excess’, 6.1–2, 4). Even *listening* to music is proscribed, insofar as this allegedly causes all workers to not do their tasks of bringing about benefit, which leaves the community in disorder and without sufficient food; these workers include those in higher strata, to whom the aforementioned points about Confucian moral life and education would apply, and those in lower strata, those traditionally excluded from Confucian education (32.7b). Whether this general assault on the ornamental leaves any room for what might be called ‘art’ is a matter of controversy, but it fairly clearly leaves much less room than is intuitive for some (including a diverse array of ancient thinkers; see Footnote 6).³

Mohism then allows only the most basic goods in its schema; benefitting humanity amounts simply to guarding the population from depletion by conflict, the elements and hunger. Notice that this question of austerity is orthogonal to debates about *what* is actually good. For example, Plato’s *Republic* seems to side with Aristotle against the Stoics in conceding that external goods are in fact goods, while saying that the rulers should *not* have

³ Fraser argues that Mozi’s target is *overly* elaborate music and not music *simpliciter* (2016: 222; see also Lai 1993: 135). However, it is unclear how this implied third way of moderate music is consistent with Mozi’s all-or-nothing austerity, which we have seen Fraser admit and criticize and which he in fact does in his discussion of Mohism on music (2016: 224–26). Now, while Mozi concedes that the sage-kings had music, he clarifies that they had so little as to count as nothing (‘Three Disputations’, 7.3); Mozi then qualifies this concession even further by claiming that the extent to which various kings had music, to that extent there was disorder in the world (7.2).

most of them.⁴ Likewise, Mozi recognizes that ornamental things are beautiful ('Condemning Music I', 32.2) but says that we should not pursue them. Their point can be put this way; various goods *do* exist and life *can* be about more than necessity but it does not follow that we *should* pursue these goods or that life *should* be about more than necessity.

3. *The reason for Mohist austerity*

But as Fraser has asked, what if everyone has enough basic goods? Should we not then pursue goods beyond what is strictly useful? Putting aside the fact that thousands of years of technological development after Mozi, wide swaths of the population still do not have enough basic goods, and that famine, plague and warfare may yet prolong or even exacerbate this dynamic, how much there is to go around is a fact that is irrelevant to the justification of Mozi's policies. The reason Mozi stops at the question 'is it sufficient to provide for the peoples' use?' is that otherwise there is no limit to what is 'enough' and the quest for progress is conducted on a hedonic treadmill.

The hedonic treadmill is the psychological phenomenon of an organism's automatically adjusting standards of pleasure to events.⁵ This operates independently of

⁴ At any rate, Aristotle and Plato never deny that things such as money and food are goods (*agatha*, ἀγαθά), in the way that the Stoics famously claim that only virtue is good and everything else are indifferents (*adiaphora*, ἀδιάφορα); for passages across numerous authors on this last claim, see Long and Sedley 1987, Chapter 58.

⁵ See Klausen et al. 2022, for a recent literature survey. They suggest ways in which the discussion of the hedonic treadmill should be more nuanced, but the empirical complexities involved go beyond the scope of this paper, which will restrict itself to the classic, core account with which the ancients themselves contend (in outline). For an interesting

background conditions of scarcity or of plenty. Positively, the ‘set-point’ of someone, whether impoverished or not, might adjust to new, luxurious circumstances such that these circumstances become the new normal and something better is required for a ‘high’. Negatively, someone’s set-point might adjust to disaster. The details of the hedonic treadmill are a matter for empirical psychology, but for the sake of basic elaboration it suffices to appeal to some ancient attestation of the phenomenon. Plato sets the maximum of goods for the guardians to what is strictly necessary for their tasks (*Republic* 415e–17b, 419e–21c), echoing concerns we have seen Mozi express about music;⁶ prior to this restriction, Plato has implied that if we go beyond a city of bare necessities (369a–72b), admitting goods beyond what is necessary, there is no limit to the resulting desires and to the wars required to fulfil those desires (372b–73e). Plato assumes the hedonic treadmill (see also *Gorgias* 493a–94a); this is in the background of his prescribing austerity for the most important people in his ideal city, even the elite guardians who rule and are equipped with the full extent of moderation and wisdom that would presumably help navigate between austerity and excess. Two key Roman Stoics are more explicit about the hedonic treadmill. Seneca claims that...

... desires that exceed the bounds of nature cannot but go on to infinity. Our nature has its own limit, but empty and perverse desires are inherently unbounded. Our needs

discussion of policy implications of the hedonic treadmill, see Kupperman 2003. Kupperman proposes a focus on skilled activities which cannot be found in Mozi’s discussion of the hedonic treadmill, but the piece should make intuitive the potential policy implications of the *Mozi*.

⁶ Yet Plato (*Republic* 376e–77b, 401d–3b, 404b–e, 410a–11e, 441e, *Laws* 654d–57b, 668a–70e, 673a, 802d–e) shares with Confucius (*Analects* III.3, VIII.8) and Aristotle (*Politics* 1340a6–b13) the idea that music is essential to moral education (Cooper 2009: 643–45).

are measured by utility; beyond that, what line is there to draw? (*Letter* 39.5, trans. Graver and Long 2015).

Epictetus claims that ‘Each person’s body is the measure for his property’ and that ‘as you’ve passed beyond the measure, there is no limit’; one passes beyond regular to gilded, purple, then embroidered shoes (Epictetus, *Handbook* 39, trans. Hard 2014).

Now, the Mohists were unique among their contemporary philosophers in generally being of non-aristocratic stock and anti-aristocratic stance, but we need not take them as spitefully proposing to strip the aristocrats simply for the sake of equality. Rather, there are deeper grounds for their austerity, similar to the Greco-Roman thoughts above. Let me quote a paraphrase by Fraser of a passage he cites as evidence for Mohist austerity and the passage itself. Fraser says one ‘passage even implies that an interest in attractively decorated clothing leads people to become licentious and unruly’ (2016: 213): ‘they make clothing not for the body but all to look good. Hence their people are dissolute and difficult to put in order’ (‘Avoiding Excess’ 6.2). One could leave the passage at that, a bald populist assertion that aristocratic aesthetics entail licentiousness. But the compressed idea is similar to what we see in the Stoics. Once one pursues certain items beyond reasons of usefulness, say, to aesthetics, there is no limit to one’s pursuits and the result is dissolution and disorder.⁷ It is this lack of a limit that explains why Mozi does not entertain the possibility of difficult but practicable reform towards moderate desires.

Or consider a later text in the *Mozi*, one of the dialogues. In response to Mozi’s attack on Confucian ceremonies and music as wasteful, an interlocutor offers a contextual solution:

⁷ Whether this claim about the lack of a limit is *purely* a point about human psychology or *also* verges, as the quote from Epictetus does, into a point about the metaphysics of the good, goes beyond this paper.

If the state is in disorder, order it; if it is in order, perform ceremonies and music. If the state is poor, undertake work; if the state is wealthy, perform ceremonies and music. (48.8)

This is basically Fraser's criticism: why be austere if there is plenty? Mozi implies that the threat of the hedonic treadmill does not depend on scarcity:

As to the state's being in order, we put it in order, and so it is in order. If putting it in order is abandoned, then order in the state is also abandoned. As to the state's wealth, we work and so it is wealthy. If work is abandoned, the state's wealth is also abandoned. So even if a state is orderly, only if we encourage order without cease will things be acceptable. (48.8)

Whether in scarcity or plenty, Mozi prescribes austerity. The apparent reason is that only *constant* austerity will guard from disaster or, conversely, easing austerity will *immediately* lead to disaster. To avoid interpreting Mozi as begging the question against his interlocutor, we should understand him as suggesting that the reason easing austerity will immediately lead to disorder is that there is no principled limit to pursuing goods beyond what is strictly useful. The temporal point about *constant* austerity and *immediate* disorder is ultimately one about logical space. As 'Condemning Music I' puts it, if people, whether rulers or farmers, 'are pleased by music and listen to it, then *surely they cannot* (*bì bùnéng*, 必不能)' do their jobs (32.7b, emphasis mine).

Admittedly, Mohist worries about the hedonic treadmill have required more reconstruction than with the Stoics, and so the Mohist dismissal of a moderate third way may appear quick in comparison to the Stoic dismissal. Yet this quickness may reflect the fact that the Mohists were totally unimpressed by Confucius' amorphous appeal to pursuing the mean (*Doctrine of the Mean*, see especially XIV), an appeal echoed (to some degree) by Aristotle (*Eudemian Ethics* II.3, 5, III, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6–9, III.6–IV) and that has traditionally

failed to impress commentators. One wonders if it is accidental that this appeal to some moderate amount of goods comes absent major worries about the hedonic treadmill, for axiological conservatives like Confucius and Aristotle, whereas austerity comes alongside major worries about the hedonic treadmill, for axiological revisionists like Mozi, Plato and the Stoics.

So against Fraser, Mozi does not (3) assume background scarcity and then proceed to axiological points. Rather, Mozi assumes the hedonic treadmill, which operates independently of background scarcity. In turn, this treadmill leads Mozi to (2) deny a principled stopgap between austerity and excess, a denial held plausible by at least Plato and the Stoics against Fraser. And finally, it is this denial that justifies his (1) holding austerity; *pace* Fraser, Mozi does not beg the question by (1) assuming austerity and *then* (2) denying any other option, that is, excess or a third way.

4. An implication of Mohist austerity

This hedonic treadmill not only explains an important *concrete* point about Mohist ethics, that the scope of goods sought is austere, a point that is one of Mohism's greatest stumbling blocks. It also explains an important *structural* point, one noted but not explained by Lum (1977: 191) and Zhang (2007: 248), that Mohism does not follow utilitarianism vis-à-vis Bentham and Mill in taking the form of maximization *simpliciter* (as distinguished from maximization of goods *to the point of bare usefulness*). Loy posits three ways to interpret Mohist injunctions to bring benefit to the world (2013: 497–99). We might understand the injunction to benefit as merely not harming certain others, leaving these 'others' unspecified as the present enquiry is not about the scope of impartial care but about the scope of what benefit this care involves. More ambitiously, the Mohist injunction might be helping certain others meet their basic needs. Or more ambitiously still, it might be benefiting in a wide

sense, that is, in *any* way. The last of these is not restricted to basic needs; to appropriate Loy's example, benefiting a person in the wide sense includes giving her an iPod (2013: 499). There is no doubt that the Mohists are more ambitious than to enjoin *merely* not harming others. The plausible additions then are helping others meet their basic needs or benefiting others in the wide sense. Now, the former has a natural limit; give people sufficient tokens of specific types of goods to fulfil their basic needs. Conversely, it is harder to understand why such goods, goods that are so basic as to be needed and nothing more, *should* be maximized. Benefiting in the wide sense, by contrast, is amorphous in terms of types and tokens of goods; given the hedonic treadmill, there is no stable distinction between sufficient benefit and maximum benefit. In light of this, Loy's amusing example has rather serious implications; to update the example, there is a risk that only ad hoc mechanisms will keep us from being obliged to supply certain others a smartphone with at least a 4G internet connection. While Loy admits that some texts might *allow* for the wide-benefiting interpretation of the injunction to benefit the world, none of the texts *require* it (2013: 498), and the considerations in this paper indicate that Mozi would *reject* it.

What keeps Mohism in the realm of sufficient provision, then, rather than in the Millian realm of maximal provision, is precisely the restriction to the most basic goods. So while austerity may be the most controversial concrete aspect of Mohism, it is also what fundamentally distinguishes this system from Millian utilitarianism.⁸

⁸ Stephens (2021) argues that the later and very textually difficult dialectical chapters of the *Mozi* shift away from an austere 'objective-list' utilitarianism to a much more permissive 'preference-satisfaction' utilitarianism that defines benefit simply in terms of whatever pleases people; here, the structure of maximization is presumably more fitting. Now, Stephens in fact concedes that the relevant texts are neutral between an 'objective' and

5. Conclusion

In sum, Mozi assumes not background scarcity but the hedonic treadmill, and this leads him to deny, on top of excess, a third way between austerity and excess. Beyond providing at least

‘subjective’ interpretation of benefit (402–6), so his main argument appeals to the wider context of debate between the Mohists and others; in short, the Mohists expand their conception of benefit in response to external challenges of pluralism (406–12). Now while it is true that the Mohists recognize a plurality of views (see especially the ‘Identifying Upwards’ books), it is unclear that they in any period embrace this plurality rather than see it as a problem. To show that they *do* embrace plurality, Stephens appeals to texts theoretical in content and without clear ethical entailments (406–8); for example, he makes much of ‘Canons and Explanations’ B30–31’s implication that price is negotiated by supply and demand, and seems to go too far in inferring a substantive value pluralism. Moreover, when Stephens turns to how Mohists engage with opponents, he has them concede far too much. The mere fact that *everyone* appeals to *the* criterion of benefit inadequately avoids the *Zhuangzi*’s axiological scepticism if the criterion ‘countenances a diversity of preferences’ in that ‘different people may each be pleased to get different things’ (409). Likewise, it seems too concessive to answer Mencius’ charge, that Mohist impartial care undercuts filiality, via the model of preference satisfaction: when people simply prefer to care for and be cared for by their near and dear, the Mohists will deem this ‘benefit’ (411). All of this and the fact that preference-satisfaction utilitarianism would run afoul of the hedonic treadmill that the Mohists take to already sink the less permissive, moderate third way, indicate that preference-satisfaction utilitarianism is an unlikely candidate for adoption by the later Mohists (at least not every faction).

plausible grounds for austerity, the hedonic treadmill also explains why Mohism lacks the maximization principle of Mill's utilitarianism; unless we *stop* at meeting people's basic needs, there is an indefiniteness to what benefit entails.

For all that, is Mohism implausibly austere? If one takes certain psychological facts for granted, for example, that the human soul needs certain levels of music to flourish, we might answer affirmatively. One might then charge Mozi with saving the impoverished simply by lowering the standards of flourishing to implausible levels. Mozi might respond to his critics that they are overly optimistic about the stability of what counts as lifting people out of poverty. The choice that Mozi would think faces us is this. We can enjoy life as we have traditionally conceived of it. Or we can benefit the world in a stable way instead of on a treadmill on which people continue to be dissatisfied with the increasingly excessive types and tokens of goods they consume (where the wastefulness ensuing from this 'subjective' scarcity might very well lead to 'objective' scarcity). We then have a problem of demandingness similar to that facing the Millian-utilitarian; both Mozi and Mill face the charge of impoverishing one's life, but for Mozi this is a result of minimizing the scope of goods for everyone whereas for Mill this is the result of one's pursuing the *maximization* of everyone's good, which is moreover broadly conceived in scope.⁹

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