Mozi (Mo Tzu), or Mo Ti was China’s second philosopher, after Kongzi (Kung Tzu, Confucius; sixth century BCE). In Mozi’s own lifetime (fifth century BCE) and for two hundred years following his death, Moism was at least as influential as Confucianism or any other early Chinese school of philosophy had been. But by the time of the Han dynasty (200 BCE–200 CE), Confucianism and another school of thought, Taoism, had absorbed all the other schools. For nearly two thousand years, little was heard about Mozi. However, in the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars began to research pre-Han writing. They rediscovered Mozi and several other long-forgotten but important early schools of philosophy.

Philosophy first arose in China at the end of the feudal period (around 600 BCE). Many scholars believe that the Confucians were former ritual advisors to the early feudal lords, while the Moists emerged from the feudal warrior class. Certainly Mozi’s philosophy is much more practical, and less elitist, than Confucianism is.

Mozi opposed Kongzi on several grounds, but three stand out as most important: (1) right action is determined by its practical consequences and not, as Kongzi had urged, because duty requires it; (2) one should not privilege members of one’s own family; and (3) we should not base our ethics on the assumption that there is an eternal, universal human nature, but on our ability to transform people into moral individuals through education and law.

Mozi argued that the world’s ills stemmed from the fact that people loved each other “partially”; for example, you love your mother and your countrymen more than you love my mother and my countrymen. The cure for the world’s ills is therefore embracing universal, “impartial” love, in which everyone loves everyone else equally.

Mozi’s Confucianist critics, who strongly supported the traditional Chinese virtue of “filial (or family) piety,” vigorously opposed Mozi’s views on “impartial love.” This feeling does not come naturally to people, they pointed out; therefore, no one could follow Mozi’s advice even if he were
right. Nonetheless, Mozi maintained that through a system of reward and punishment, people can learn to practice universal love.

Specifically, Mozi insisted that if a ruler urged people to love one another impartially, they would strive to do so. Moreover, because God had created human beings and loves them all impartially, God wants us to love each other impartially. God will reward us if we succeed in loving this way, and punish us if and when we fail. It’s not that Mozi believed that we are born with a capacity for universal love of humanity—only that we can be trained to feel it. In this regard Mozi viewed human beings as infinitely pliable.

Contrary to Kongzi, Mozi also believed that we ought to do the right thing because of the rewards we will receive in this life and the next. By emphasizing the possibility of reward and punishment in the afterlife, Mozi provided a partial answer to the question, why be moral? Yet at times this great thinker also said that we ought to do what will produce the best results for everyone, not just for ourselves. Here, he foreshadowed the nineteenth-century British Utilitarians (Jeremy Bentham, and James and John Stuart Mill), who stressed the importance of producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Still, the same question arises: Why should I do something to benefit other people? I might agree that the world would be a better place if everyone did whatever would benefit everyone else generally. But why should I act to promote the general good, as opposed to my own personal good? Perhaps the answer has something to do with common attitudes toward egoism. Because every society has a moral code that puts limits on selfish behavior, egoism is seldom considered a legitimate foundation for moral theory. Not surprisingly, altruism garners a lot more attention. But who exactly are the “other people” I am supposed to help through my altruism? Do they include everyone in the world, or only my family, friends, and close associates? How far beyond myself should my altruism extend? According to Mozi, we can be taught to extend our altruism infinitely.

Many people today talk about the virtue of loving everyone equally. What do you think this means? Do you agree with the Confucianists that we have obligations to our parents and children that we do not have toward other people’s families? If so, does this mean that we don’t love other people’s families? Which kind of love—“partial” or “impartial”—do you think is better? Which kind do you think could lead to the sort of “ethnic cleansing” that we see in many parts of the world today? Why?
Mo Tzu said: What the man of humanity devotes himself to surely lies in the promotion of benefits for the world and the removal of harm from the world. This is what he devotes himself to.

But what are the benefits and the harm of the world?

Mo Tzu said: Take the present cases of mutual attacks among states, mutual usurpation among families, and mutual injuries among individuals, or the lack of kindness and loyalty between ruler and minister, of parental affection and filial piety between father and son, and of harmony and peace among brothers. These are harms in the world.

But when we examine these harms, whence did they arise? Did they arise out of want of mutual love?

Mo Tzu said: They arise out of want of mutual love. At present feudal lords know only to love their own states and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their states to attack others. Heads of families know only to love their own families and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their families to usurp others. And individuals know only to love their own persons and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their own persons to injure others. For this reason, as feudal lords do not love one another, they will fight in the fields. As heads of families do not love one another, they will usurp one another. As individuals do not love one another, they will injure one another. When ruler and minister do not love each other, they will not be kind and loyal. When father and son do not love each other, they will not be affectionate and filial. When brothers do not love one another, they will not be harmonious and peaceful. When nobody in the world loves any other, the strong will surely overcome the weak, [The many will oppress the few], the rich will insult the poor. The honored will despise the humble, and, the cunning will deceive the ignorant. Because of want of mutual love, all the calamities, usurpations, hatred, and animosity in the world have arisen. Therefore the man of humanity condemns it.

Now that it is condemned, what should take its place?

Mo Tzu said: It should be replaced by the way of universal love and mutual benefit.

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What is the way of universal love and mutual benefit?

Mo Tzu said: It is to regard other people’s countries as one’s own. Regard other people’s families as one’s own. Regard other people’s person as one’s own. Consequently, when feudal lords love one another, they will not fight in the fields. When heads of families love one another, they will not usurp one another. When individuals love one another, they will not injure one another. When ruler and minister love each other, they will be kind and loyal. When father and son love each other, they will be affectionate and filial. When brothers love each other, they will be peaceful and harmonious. When all the people in the world love one another, the strong will not overcome the weak, the many will not oppress the few, the rich will not insult the poor, the honored will not despise the humble, and the cunning will not deceive the ignorant. Because of universal love, all the calamities, usurpations, hatred, and animosity in the world may be prevented from arising. Therefore the man of humanity praises it.

But now gentlemen of the world would say: Yes, it will be good if love becomes universal. Nevertheless, it is something distant and difficult to practice.

Mo Tzu said: This is simply because gentlemen of the world fail to recognize its benefit and understand its reason. Now, to besiege a city, to fight in the fields, and to sacrifice one’s own life for fame are what all people consider difficult. And yet when a ruler likes them, his multitude can do them. Besides, to love one another universally and to benefit one another mutually is different from these. Those who love others will be loved by others. Those who benefit others will be benefited by others. Those who hate others will be hated by others. And those who harm others will be harmed by others. Then, what difficulty is there with this universal love? Only the ruler does not make it his governmental measure and officers do not make it their conduct.

Formerly, Duke Wen of Chin liked his officers to wear coarse clothing. Therefore all his ministers wore [simple] sheepskin garments, carried their swords in [unadorned] leather girdles, and put on hats of plain cloth. Thus attired, they appeared before the ruler inside and walked around the court outside. What was the reason for this? It was because the ruler liked it and therefore the ministers could do it. Formerly, King Ling of Ch’u wanted people to have slender waists. Therefore all his ministers limited themselves to one meal a day. They exhaled before they tied their belts. They leaned against the wall before they could stand up. Within a year all at court looked thin and dark. What was the reason for this? It was because the ruler liked it
and therefore the ministers could do it. Formerly, King Kou-chien of Yüeh liked his officers to be brave. He trained his ministers, gathered them together, set his palace boat on fire and, to test his officers, said that all the treasure of Yüeh was there. The King of Yüeh himself beat the drum to urge them on. As the officers heard the drum, they rushed in disorder. More than a hundred stepped into the fire and died. Then the King of Yüeh beat the gong to let them retreat.

Therefore Master Mo said: Now, to eat little, to wear coarse clothing, and to sacrifice one’s life for fame are things all people in the world consider difficult. But if the ruler likes them, the multitude can do them. Besides, universal love and mutual benefit are different from these. Those who love others will thereby be loved by them. Those who benefit others will thereby be benefited by them. Those who hate others will thereby be hated by them. And those who harm others will thereby be harmed by them. What difficulty is there in this (universal love)? Only the ruler does not make it his governmental measure and officers do not make it their conduct.

But now gentlemen of the world would say: Yes, it will be good if love becomes universal. Nevertheless, it is something impracticable. It is like grappling with Mount T’ai and leaping over the Chi River.

Mo Tzu said: The analogy is wrong. To grapple with Mount T’ai and leap across River Chi would be truly an extreme feat of strength. From antiquity down to the present day none has been able to do it. Besides, universal love and mutual benefit are different from this. Ancient sage-kings did practice them....

In ancient times, when King Wen ruled the Western Land, he shone like the sun and the moon all over the four quarters as well as the Western Land. He did not permit a big state to oppress a small state, or the multitude to oppress the widow or widower, or the ruthless and powerful to rob people’s grains or live stocks. Heaven recognized his deeds and visited him with blessings. Consequently, the old and childless were well adjusted and enjoyed their full life span, the lonely and brotherless had opportunity to fulfill their work among mankind, and the orphaned had the support to grow up. This is the story of King Wen’s accomplishment. It shows that my doctrine of universal love has been practiced....

Therefore Mo Tzu said: If rulers of the world today really want the empire to be wealthy and hate to have it poor, want it to be orderly and hate to have it chaotic, they should practice universal love and mutual benefit.
This is the way of the sage-kings and the principle of governing the empire, and it should not be neglected.

Mo Tzu said: Gentlemen of the world today know small things and do not know great things. How do we know? We know from their conduct at home. If in their conduct at home they should offend their elders, there are still the homes of neighbors to which to flee. Yet relatives, brothers, and acquaintances all warn and admonish them, saying, “You must be cautious. You must be careful. How can it be to offend elders in one’s conduct at home?” Not only is this true of conduct at home. It is also true of conduct in the state. If in one’s conduct in the state one should offend the ruler, there are still the neighboring states to which to flee. Yet relatives, brothers, and acquaintances all warn and caution him, saying, “You must be cautious. You must be careful. How can it be to offend the ruler in one’s conduct in the state?” These are people who have places to flee. Yet the warning and caution to them are strong like this. Should the warning and caution not be much stronger for those who have no place to flee? There is a saying: “If one commits a sin in daylight, where can he flee?” I say: There is no place to flee. For Heaven should not be regarded as a forest, a valley, or an obscure gate where no one is present. It will surely see the evil action clearly. But with regard to Heaven, gentlemen of the world today are all negligent and do not warn and caution one another. This is how we know that the gentlemen in the world know small things but do not know great things.

Now what does Heaven want and what does Heaven dislike? Heaven wants righteousness and dislikes unrighteousness. Therefore, in leading the people in the world to engage in practicing righteousness, I should be doing what Heaven wants. When I do what Heaven wants, Heaven also does what I want. Now, what do I want and what do I dislike? I want happiness and wealth, and dislike calamities and misfortunes. [If I do not do what Heaven wants and do what Heaven does not want,] then I should be leading the people in the world to devote themselves to calamities and misfortunes. But how do we know that Heaven wants righteousness and dislikes unrighteousness? I say: With righteousness the world lives and without righteousness the world dies, with it the world becomes rich and without it the world becomes poor, with it the world becomes orderly and without it the world becomes chaotic. Now, Heaven wants to have the world live and dislikes to have it die, wants to have it rich and dislikes to have it poor, and wants to have it orderly and dislikes to have it chaotic. Therefore I know Heaven wants righteousness and dislikes unrighteousness. . . .
To obey the will of Heaven is to use righteousness as the method of control. To oppose the will of Heaven is to use force as the method of control. What will happen if righteousness is used as a method of control? Mo Tzu said: A ruler of a big state will not attack a small state. A ruler of a large family will not usurp a small family. The strong will not plunder the weak. The honored will not despise the humble. And the cunning will not deceive the ignorant. This is beneficial to Heaven on the highest level, beneficial to spiritual beings on the middle level, and beneficial to man on the lower level. Being beneficial to these three means being beneficial to all. Therefore the whole world gives them a good name and calls them sage-kings.

Those who use force as the way of control will act differently. Their words will be different and their action will be the opposite, like galloping back to back. A ruler of a large state will attack a small state. A ruler of a large family will usurp a small family. The strong will plunder the weak. The honorable will despise the humble. And the cunning will deceive the ignorant. This is not beneficial to Heaven on the highest level, not beneficial to spiritual beings on the middle level, and not beneficial to people on the lower level. Not being beneficial to these three means not being beneficial to all. Therefore the whole world gives them a bad name and calls them wicked kings.

Mo Tzu said: The will of Heaven to me is like the compasses to the wheelwright and the square to the carpenter. The wheelwright and the carpenter apply their square and compasses to measure all square and circular objects in the world. They say that those that fit are correct and those that do not fit are not correct. The writings of the scholars and gentlemen of the world today cannot all be loaded in carts and the many doctrines they teach cannot all be enumerated. They try to persuade the feudal lords above and various minor officials below. But as to humanity and righteousness, they are far, far off the mark. How do I know? I say; I have the shining model in the world (the will of Heaven) to measure them....

Mo Tzu said: Any word or action that is beneficial to Heaven, spiritual beings, and the people is to be undertaken. Any word or action that is harmful to Heaven, spiritual beings, and the people is to be rejected....

Now does it mean that to annex a state and destroy an army, injure and oppress the people, and throw the heritages of sages into confusion will benefit Heaven? But to recruit the people of Heaven to attack the cities of Heaven is to murder the people of Heaven, smash altars, demolish shrines, and kill sacrificial animals. In this way, on the higher level no benefit to Heaven can be attained. Does it mean to benefit spiritual beings? But people
of Heaven are murdered and spiritual beings are denied their patron sacrifices. The spirits of past rulers are neglected. The multitude are injured and oppressed and the people are scattered. Thus on the middle level no benefit to spiritual beings can be attained. Does it mean to benefit the people? The benefit to the people from killing the people of Heaven is slight indeed! And calculate its cost! This is the root of destruction of life. It exhausts the people to an immeasurable degree. Thus on the lower level no benefit to the people can be attained.

The reason why Mo Tzu condemns music is not because the sounds of the big bells, resounding drums, harps, and pipes are not delightful. . . . But set against the past it is not in accord with the deeds of the sage-kings and checked with the present it is not in accord with the benefits of the people. Therefore Mo Tzu said: To engage in music is wrong. . . .

Mo Tzu said: To levy heavy taxes on the people in order to produce the sounds of big bells, resounding drums, harps, and pipes does not help the promotion of benefits and the removal of harms in the world. Therefore Mo Tzu said: To engage in music is wrong. . . . To have men engage in music is to waste their time for ploughing and planting. To have women engage in music is to waste their effort for weaving and spinning. Now, kings, dukes, and great officials engage in music. To strike musical instruments to produce music, they loot the people’s resources for food and clothing to such an extent! Therefore Mo Tzu said: To engage in music is wrong.

Now, the sounds of big bells, resounding drums, harps, and pipes are produced. It is no pleasure for the great lords to play and listen alone. They must enjoy it either with the common people or with the rulers. If with the rulers, it will cause them to neglect their attention to government. If with the common people, it will cause them to neglect their work. Now kings, dukes, and great officials engage in music. To strike musical instruments they loot the people’s resources for food and clothing to such an extent! Therefore Mo Tzu said: To engage in music is wrong.

How do we know elevating the worthy is the foundation of government? The answer is: When the honorable and the wise run the government, the ignorant and the humble remain orderly, but when the ignorant and the humble run the government, the honorable and the wise become rebellious. Therefore we know that elevating the worthy is the foundation of government. . . .

How is order brought about in the empire? There is order in the empire because the emperor can bring about a unified and agreed concept of right in the empire. If the people all agree with the emperor but not with the Heaven, then calamity still remains. Now, the frequent arrival of hurricanes and tor-
rents are the punishment from Heaven upon the people for their failure to agree with Heaven. . . .

How do we know that the principle of agreement with the superior can be used to govern the empire? Well, why not examine the theory of the origin of the government? In the beginning when man was created, there was no ruler. People existed as individuals. As they existed as individuals, there was one concept of right for a hundred men, a thousand concepts of right for a thousand men, and so on until there were a countless number of concepts of right for a countless number of men. All of them considered their own concepts of right as correct and other people’s concepts as wrong. And there were strife among the strong and quarrels among the weak. Thereupon Heaven wished to unify all concepts of right in the world. The worthy was therefore selected and made an emperor. The emperor, realizing his inadequate wisdom and ability to govern alone, selected the next best in virtue and appointed them as the three ministers. The three ministers, realizing their inadequate wisdom and ability to assist the emperor alone, divided the country into states and set up feudal lordships. The feudal lords, realizing their inadequate wisdom and ability to govern the land within the four borders by themselves, selected the next best in virtue. . . . Therefore, in appointing the three ministers, the feudal lords, the great officers, the prime minister, the village elders, and the heads of households, the emperor of old did not select them because of their wealth, high position, or leisure, but employed them to assist in bringing political order and administering the government. . . . When order prevails in the empire, the emperor further unifies all concepts of right as one in the empire and makes it agree with [the will of] Heaven. Therefore the principle of agreement with the superior can be applied by the emperor to govern the empire, by the feudal lords to govern the state, and heads of households to govern the family. . . .