**Transcript of video on Mozi**

This is a transcript from a video in an EdX course by Ted Slingerland, at UBC: [Chinese Thought: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science (Part One)](https://www.edx.org/course/chinese-thought-ancient-wisdom-meets-ubcx-china300-1x-1#!).

The video can be seen [on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPg1t2wOcnw) also.

# Transcript:

So in Lecture 2 we talked about the fact that Mozi wanted objective standards for rightness. He wanted to set out some public objective standard for what the right thing is and he believed this was modeled on heaven. So he got the standard from heaven. But we didn't talk about what that standard is.

So that's what we're going to do here in Lecture 3 is talk about what the central principle of Mohism is.

There really is one central principle and it is impartial caring, "jian ai." So he has an entire-- the Mozi has an entire chapter dedicated to this concept of "jian ai." We want to unpack what this means.

Now, sometimes it's been translated as universal love, so if you get another translation of the Mozi you may see this translated as universal love. Both sides of that are wrong, so we want to unpack this term and talk about each part of it.

So "jian," so the "jian" part refers to not universal but even, or impartial. So it's a term that refers to distribution and what it means is basically distribution that's done in a fair, objective way. So I think impartial is the best way to render that term.

Now this is important because this is one of the key features of Mohism is the idea of impartiality. We need to get away from our partial view, our partiality that's our nature, and view things objectively and impartially.

And again very different from Confucianism. For the Confucians, we're naturally partial to our family. So the key virtue for Confucius is-- one of the first virtues you develop is filial piety. Filial piety by definition is partial. You obey your parents, you're not just obeying any old person who's around in the environment. And he thinks that for the Confucians you develop these partial ties. And you get them so they're fully developed virtues and then you can start to extend them to other people but you can't try to do that right away.

For Mozi this is completely wrong. It's exactly this type of partiality to our family members that creates the chaos of the Warring States. The way to get out of this is to get out of the chaos. So impartiality versus partiality is very important for Mozi.

The second component of this, "ai" is translated as love because it does mean this in modern Chinese-- it comes to mean this in classical Chinese in a bit later period. But for Mozi, we have to understand "ai" has a very specific meaning of really caring and caring for someone materially. What "ai" describes is not an emotional state of love, what "ai" describes is a behavior. Caring for something.

So it is important-- and it's not just Mozi there are other texts from classical China where "ai" is used in this way. So you "ai" livestock. Now maybe these are lonely shepherds but I don't think that what these texts-- if that was going on the texts aren't talking about that. What they mean by ai-ing your livestock is taking care of them, feeding, making sure that they're safe, they're warm, they have shelter.

So you got to see this is a really important point. It's not about an internal emotional feeling,

it's about an external behavior of benefiting someone.

Another way to do it-- translate it-- would be benefiting someone. So caring, or benefiting, is really how to translate "ai." For Mozi so it's not an emotional state, it's benefiting something materially.

And this goes along with this broader theme we're going to see in the Mozi of him not caring about emotional states. He really doesn't care what you're feeling on the inside, he's not trying to change the way you're feeling on the inside. What he's trying to do is affect your external behavior,

affect the way you act in the world.

Now again this attitude would horrify Confucius. We want to think back to The Analects, this passage 2.7, so this passage about filial piety. Ziyou, one of the disciples, asked about filial piety

and the master says "Nowadays 'filial' means simply--"filial" in scare quotes-- "means simply being able to provide one's parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?"

So you see here-- maybe this is actually a hint even in 2.7-- that there were doctrines like the Mohist doctrine circulating around. But Confucius is explicitly saying filial piety is about inner stuff, it's about respect. It's not just about making sure your parents are fed.

But this is precisely what Mozi's claiming. For him filial piety is about care, he wouldn't even understand 2.7. You care for horses and dogs and you also care for your parents.

nd it's the same type of thing, it's the same type of external behavior.

He also-- Mozi uses the word benevolence, but for him ren-- so "ren" comes to mean benevolence once we get past The Analects, not goodness in this general sense. Mozi uses this term a lot, but again it's not an emotional thing for him. It's about-- someone who's "ren" is someone who benefits other people, who behaves in a generous way, in a caring way. Caring in a physical sense not an emotional sense.

There are a lot of these words that if you take them the wrong way you're misunderstanding what's going on in the Mozian framework. He really is concerned with external consequences, he's concerned with regulating your external behavior. He doesn't really care what you feel on the inside, and in fact he seems to expect that you're not going to like it.

He seems to feel that our hot cognition is not in accordance with impartial caring-- this thing that he wants you to do-- and so almost by definition, you're not going to like acting in accord with impartial caring. But you've got to suppress your inside feelings, your natural feelings, adopt this objective standard, and just force yourself to do it. So that's the Mohist view, it's very much about overriding your hot cognition by using these cold insights. And the cold insight-- we're going to see--is that impartial caring is obviously the only logical way to behave towards other people if you're going be a moral human being.

Another important consequence of this lack of interest in internal states is that wu-wei is not an ideal for Mozi. Practicing impartial caring is never going to be something you can do spontaneously. It's never going to be something that becomes natural, it's never going to be something that you can follow your heart's desires and just do. It's always going to be a slog, it's always going to involve something like that Stroop task we saw in module one. There's always-- it's always going to be the case that your hot tendencies are going to be to favor your family and to act in a way that's not in accordance with jian ai. And you're going to have to tamp that down, exert cognitive control,

and act in a different way

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So Mozi-- very importantly-- doesn't have wu-wei as an ideal, and he actually thinks that spontaneity has nothing to do with morality. Actually spontaneity leads to immorality.

Mozi anticipates that people aren't going to like impartial caring, it goes against our nature. He's also going to anticipate that these ideas are counterintuitive. The idea that you should care impartially for everyone and not just your own parents, for instance, is going to be a strange idea for people. So he's worried about convincing people that they should act this way, and he seems to have different levels of doing this.

So he's going to try to persuade different types of people in different ways. And the way it seems to work-- he seems to have this idea that there's the worthies-- the people who eventually become the people that he's going to call worthies. The people who are going to be the worthies in a Mohist society are going to be people who get the logic of his argument. So you see him in the chapter on impartial caring laying out the rational argument for why you should treat everyone impartially.

Heaven, when it sends down rain it rains on everyone impartially, heaven doesn't favor one group over another group. We should act the same way. If you act toward other people's fathers the way you want them to act toward your father, then your father's going to be better off in the end. He thinks it's objectively the fact-- and we can verify this through observation and looking at history, and looking at just people's behavior nowadays--that practicing impartial caring leads to the greatest benefits for the state overall.

The worthy people are people who get this. They get the logic, and then they're able to just put it into practice. They say oh yeah, you're right, I naturally favor my father but I see now why that's actually counterproductive and it hurts other people, and actually my father in the end will be better off if I just practice impartiality, and they do it.

So these are the worthy people, they get it through logic and then they can immediately put it into practice. They're the highest level of the Mohist society that's going to come, the new society that he's going to put into place.

At the next level down are these people who seem like they're not quite smart enough--or they're not quite self controlled enough-- to get that argument and then put it into practice, but they're motivated by rewards. And so they see that people who practice impartial caring get rewarded. They have high salaries, they have big houses, they have nice carriages they ride around in. They say, oh, I want those things, I'm motivated by material goods, what do those guys do to get those things? Oh, they practice-- they watch them-- they practice impartial caring, I guess I'll do impartial caring, too.

So this is kind of the next layer down below the worthies, are the people who can't quite get it rationally, and can't quite do it on their own, but the promise of these material rewards moves them. And that's fine, Mozi doesn't care. It's good, as long as they actually walk the walk he doesn't care how they were brought to the way. So they're the next level down.

And then finally he does seem to feel like there's going to be a mass of people who just lack the intellectual capacity, and the self control, to both understand impartial caring and put it into practice. And those are the ones you're just going to have to use the stick with. So basically you're just going to have to set up a very strict regimen of punishments for people who practice partiality. And the common people will fall into line just because they're afraid of getting punished. So this is kind of the people who will be the common people are the ones who just have to be controlled through punishment.

You can see this strictly-- you got a pyramid, you've got this hierarchy, everyone's kind of sharing the same sense of rightness. The people at the top get it intellectually, the people in the middle kind of follow it willingly, and then the people at the bottom just have to be compelled. But this is Mozi's image of how you wrest order out of the chaos of the Warring States.

So to sum this up, we want to contrast this Mohist attitude towards ethics with the Confucian one. Let's talk about reason. So for Confucius moral behavior without emotion is not moral behavior. Virtue involves feeling the right things at the right time. For Mozi emotion has no place in morality at all. It's a completely cold cognition undertaking and he doesn't care what you feel. And that's because he believes that what you feel is going to be amoral, or immoral, it's going to lead to chaos. Human partiality, Confucius thinks it's inevitable. So human ties are what make us human, our family ties and our friendship ties. So partiality is at the heart of human sociality and that means that if we're going to develop a kind of organic virtue, it's got to be grounded in these basically partial feelings that we have for our parents and for our family members.

Mozi thinks that the family can be superseded, family ties can be overridden, we don't have to be nepotistic, we don't have to favor our relatives, and the goal should be impartiality. So taking the view of heaven and viewing everything impartially rather than looking at it from our own narrow human point of view.

Now it's interesting, it's a very powerful vision-- we're going to talk about the psychological plausibility of it-- but it looks very much like some modern positions on ethics. So anyone familiar with contemporary philosophy is familiar with Peter Singer, the most famous utilitarian probably today, and he would like Mozi, I don't know if he's familiar with Mozi. They have very similar ideas, so he's a consequentialist, rightness is about maximizing certain consequences. He's an extreme rationalist, so morality is about rationality, it's about having an objective rational view of what's right. And he's also deeply-- Singer's very deeply suspicious of human nature, of human partiality. So Singer's view is like Mozi, is that we're naturally selfish, we naturally favor our family over other people. But if we actually use our reason and think about it we'll realize that it's irrational and wrong that we do so.

Now this is an interesting view, we're going to look at a short clip of Singer

talking about this. This is him describing the essentially rational feature of the kind of impartiality that he advocates.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

Reason helps us to understand that other people, wherever they are, are like us. That they can suffer as we can, their parents grieve for the deaths of their children as we do. And that just as our lives and our well-being matters to us, it matters just as much to all of these people.

So I think the reason is not just a mutual tool to help you get whatever you want, it does help us to put perspective on our situation.

[END VIDEO PLAYBACK]

We'll talk about psychological plausibility of the view of either Singer or Mozi on this, but I think it's impossible not to-- if you're a thoughtful person-- not to see the appeal of it.

So there is something deeply warped about the way human beings act in normal life. So if you have kids the amount of resources you lavish on your children are typically ridiculous. So my daughter has more toys than she really can use any given day, she's got her own room. The amount of money that we spend our daughter by the standards of a developing country is just absurd.

When Singer argues that if we're really being rational we should actually just stop giving her all this stuff and send this money to people who use it. For the price of some toy that she thinks she wants, that she gets bored of the next week, we could save a kid from malaria or we could get clean water for a village.

I like wine, I like to drink nice wine. If I just actually got bad wine, still does the same job, it helps me digest my food, it lubricates dinner and you have a nice time with your friends. Why can't I just drink bad wine and then take the money that I saved and send that to malarial relief, send it to one of these highly effective charities that Singer has measured.

So Singer's got a website where they measure the impact of charities and say these are charities where you can give money to them and they will do this incredibly efficient thing with it that will help so many people for the price of a nice dinner out. That instead you stay in and make yourself some tofu and rice you send this money to this charity, they're going to be able to get water for a village in Africa. It's really hard to argue against that.

And whenever these arguments are presented I think that thoughtful well-meaning people, they should be moved by them. This is a disturbing thing, the amount of wealth that we have that we don't need and that really could go to other people who do need and we know about these people now. We have enough access to media that we know what sort of things are problems in the world. And yet the fact is very few of us do that.

So Peter Singer does it, in his talks he'll often show people who also do it. So there's certain people-- people who give away their organs and people who give up their jobs to go work for charities. This clearly happens and Mozi was one of these people, too, so they've existed throughout time. People have had both the same insight and the strength of will and kind of the motivation to follow through on it.

And yet you do have to explain why it is the fact that most of us don't do this. I don't do this, and in fact, I predict that 99.8% of the people watching this video don't do it. So why is that?

So later when we get to Mencius we're going to talk about the tensions between this incredibly moving vision of impartiality and goodness and objectivity. But what happens when that bumps up against the limits of human nature and human psychology? And this is not-- this is actually a very fraught issue and it's a very live issue, and I'm not sure actually even what the right answer is. But it's something we're going to look at in a bit more detail when

we get to the Mencian critique of Mozi.