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Normative Ethics in Ancient China: A Debate Between Mozi and Mengzi

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From late 700s to early 200s BCE, China was in an age of chaos. During this period, kingdoms were constantly at war with one another, local states became corrupt, and general disorder was established present in Chinese society. Acknowledging this turmoil, many philosophers emerged throughout the kingdoms to provide solutions in order to restore China to its former glory. One such philosopher was Mozi, who is most recognized for his normative ethical theory of partiality (the selfish action of putting yourself before others) and its opposite, impartial care. Mozi was also a strict dissident of Confucianism and its practices, a philosophy named after its leader, Confucius, another philosopher during this time. A devoted supporter of Confucius, Mengzi was a philosopher who frequently disagreed with Mozi, comparing him to a wild animal in one of his writings (*Mengzi* 3A5). In one such debate, Mengzi criticizes Mozi's theory of impartial care as an improper way to promote societal behavior. Similar to many Confucian followers, Mengzi advocates the use of filial piety as a better method to bring harmony back to China. However, as I argue in this paper, the debate between impartial care and filial piety is more complex, with each philosopher being ultimately unclear about the other's argument. I begin by describing both philosophers main normative ethical theories, first Mozi's impartial care, then Mengzi's filial piety. I then proceed to go deeper into how each philosophers

uses and defines filial piety, concluding that they have different views of the term. Regarding the normative ethics debate between Mozi (who supports impartial care) and Mengzi (who argues for filial piety) both philosophers are indeed talking past one another due to each other's definition and usage of filial piety.

In chapter sixteen of the *Mozi*, the collection of writings showcasing Mohist thought, Mozi presents impartial care as a social attitude and behavior that if generally adopted and employed throughout society, could create a peaceful and unified civilization. He defines it as universal compassion towards all people, caring for everyone equally as opposed to caring only for oneself (partiality). In order to help society adopt this behavior, Mozi suggests that people should treat others as they would treat themselves. The author also proposes that everyone treat all aspects of life (e.g. states and cities) in a similar manner, without subjectivity (*Mozi* pg. 68-9). In this section of *Mozi*, the author addresses the reader directly, simply asking, "If people regarded other people's families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself" (*Mozi* pg. 69). Although simple, Mozi asks an important and revealing question about humanity. The assumed answer to his inquiry is that nobody would intentionally assign harm to their own family, thus they should never injure another. If one lived in this way, no family or person would be harmed by another, leading to a generally harmonious civilization. Although a convincing argument, many philosophers of Mozi's time disagreed with the prospect of universal care, including Mengzi.

Because a majority of Mohist thought and theories argue against Confucian philosophy, Mengzi, although not always directly, frequently disagrees against Mohism in his writings (*Mozi*

chapters 16, 25, 32). A Confucian philosopher himself, Mengzi actively advocated filial piety as one solution to restore Chinese society to peace and harmony (*Mengzi* 3A5, 3B9, 7A26, 7A45). When considering the debates between Mozi and Mengzi, it is important to discuss filial piety because it is Mengzi's main criticism of Mozi's normative theory of impartial care. Filial piety is the general favoring of one's older siblings and parents. In order to be filial (a good trait in Confucianism), a younger sibling's behavior and actions must be devoted to their family (*The Analects* 1.2, 1.6, 2.8). In turn, the older people in the family (older brother, mother, father) must set a good example for the younger siblings, in order for them to become productive and active members of society. According to Confucius and his disciples, if families display a good example of filial piety, other families will be prompted to follow their behavior, leading communities to adopt those families' actions, then kingdoms, states, etc. to eventually establish harmony throughout Chinese civilization.

A deep supporter of filial piety, Mengzi targets Mozi's lack of filial piety throughout *Mengzi*- the collected passages outlines Mengzi's theories and thoughts- as improper and unethical. Mengzi states one should have bias towards one's own family and that impartial care is indeed an incorrect method to lead to the establishment of peace in China (*Mengzi* 3B9, 7A45). In one section of the *Mengzi*, the author states, "[Mozi] is 'impartial caring.' This is to not have a father. To not have a father and to not have a ruler is to be an animal" (*Mengzi* pg. 136). Comparing Mozi's doctrine of impartial care to a wild animal, Mengzi undoubtedly shows his hostility towards impartial caring. Mengzi is against impartial caring because it does not feature the necessary subjectivity that is within filial piety. Mengzi does not literally mean Mozi no longer has a father, he is stating that because the meaning of Mozi's impartial care is love for

everyone, Mozi might as well not have a father because his father is indistinguishable from all other people (*Mengzi* 3B9, 7A26). To not particularly care for one's father is a complete violation of Confucian theory, therefore Mengzi deeply disagrees with Mozi's theory of impartial caring. Although acknowledging each philosopher's dislike for the other's theories regarding normative ethics (Mengzi's filial piety, Mozi's partiality and impartial caring), I believe their arguments are somewhat more complicated and in fact both philosophers are using vocabulary in very different ways.

In order to prove the debate between Mengzi and Mozi is more complex, I turn to how each philosopher uses the term, filial piety. Mengzi clearly shows his devotion to filial piety in his writing, displaying this social behavior as a solution to the chaos of Chinese civilization at the time (*Mengzi* 3A5, 3B9, 7A15, 7A45). In addition, Mengzi shows that filial piety cannot coexist with impartial caring and therefore has no place in society (*Mengzi* 3B9, 7A26). In one section in the *Mengzi*, the author describes impartial caring as something separate from the Way (i.e. the "right way of life") and therefore cannot be used in ethical behavior. He states, "If scraping himself [(Mozi)] bare from head to heels would benefit the whole world he would do it... What I dislike about those who hold to one extreme [(Mozi)] is that they detract from the Way. They elevate one thing and leave aside a hundred others" (*Mengzi* pg. 153). In this quotation, Mengzi undoubtedly demonstrates that impartial caring does not belong in ethical behavior. Therefore, this makes filial piety inherently opposed to impartial care, and certainly cannot coexist with it. However, compared to Mengzi, Mozi has a different interpretation of filial piety.

Despite intensely advocating for impartial care and urging its methodology to be adopted in Chinese society, Mozi also supports the practice of filial piety. Throughout chapter sixteen of the *Mozi*, the author himself recognizes the importance of filial piety (*Mozi* pg. 68, 76), saying that one of the great harms in China are "... children who are not filial" (*Mozi* pg. 68). Towards the end of the chapter, Mozi specifically addresses filial piety in relation to impartial care. Speaking to the reader, he states, "According to the very meaning of filial piety, [one] must want other people to care for and benefit his parents... Clearly one must first care for and benefit the parents of others in order to expect that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting one's own parents" (*Mozi* pg. 74-75). In this excerpt, Mozi presents a view of filial piety inconsistent with Mengzi's. Mozi disregards the initial prioritization of one's own family and instead characterizes filial piety as first helping another family before caring for their own. Mozi even states filial piety's meaning as the desire for others to support one's own parents. Although Mengzi's definition of filial piety presents a subjective behavior towards one's family, prioritizing them and disregarding impartial care, Mozi regards filial piety as one aspect of impartial care, one that is still necessary to perform. Therefore, acknowledging that both philosophers use filial piety in different ways, they are in fact talking past one another, proving that this is a more complicated debate.

Both ancient Chinese philosophers Mozi and Mengzi wanted to use their theories of normative ethical behavior to solve the widespread turmoil ensuing in their homeland. Mozi's theory of impartial care articulated that all people should treat others in an equal manner. In turn, Mengzi's responded to the chaos in China by supporting filial piety, specifying that subjectivity towards one's family would create harmony in China. Throughout his writings, Mengzi criticized

impartial care, describing it as an improper form of behavior that could never coexist with the superior theory of filial piety. Acknowledging this criticism, Mozi actually showed the importance of filial piety within impartial care. However, unlike Mengzi's interpretations, Mozi ultimately describes filial piety as an action where one should prioritize another's family before their own. Because Mozi and Mengzi have inconsistent definitions of filial piety, both philosophers are therefore talking past each other, showing a very complex debate, one that needs to be clarified in order to fully interpret each philosophers' theories and criticisms.

Works Cited

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