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3.2 The clash between Mozi's utilitarianism and Confucian convention

So Mozi wants to replace Confucian **conventionalism** with the standard given to us by 天 **tiān** (nature), which tells us to judge moral right and wrong in terms of 利 **lì** (benefit). Mozi wants to reform how we use the word 義 **yì** (morality), so that 義 **yì** refers not to following traditional mores but instead constructing mores following a 天 **tiān** (natural) standard, i.e., that of **increasing human benefit**.

Mozi's position sounds a lot like Western **utilitarianism**. Both focus on human benefit for all concerned. There are, however, some important differences of emphasis:

	Mozi	Western utilitarianism
what constitutes benefit	crops (for food, clothing, shelter, and so on)	subjective states of pleasure or happiness
whose benefit to measure	society's "all under heaven"	individuals'
means of measurement	count the number of bushels of grain (and so on)	notoriously difficult: need to add up states of pleasure in any way...
focus of moral assessment	the social dào (the whole network of conventional social practices, including the use of language)	• acts (act utilitarianism) • rules (rule utilitarianism)

(Note that this is only rough schematic contrast; there are many varieties of Western utilitarianism.)

The important thing for Mozi is that the distinction between benefit (利 **lì**) and harm (害 **hài**) is not something you learn from conventions transmitted through generations. Instead, that distinction comes from **nature**: you are *born* knowing to prefer benefit and to avoid harm. To call a tradition **moral** is to say more than than that it's an **inherited tradition**. It's to say that that tradition meets the standard set by **benefit and harm**. When you change the tradition you are 是 **shì** (this-ing) and 非 **fēi** (not that-ing).*This-ing is choosing;* not *that-ing is rejecting*. The utilitarian standard guides **reform** of traditional mores, and so there will always be a clash between them.

Hence Mozi is not in favour of activities that hinder benefit. He is **anti-war** and **anti-music**, and **disapproves of traditional Confucian ancestor veneration: the burial ceremony**. "What a waste of time", he says. "That's what we have to change." Here's a representative passage (see grey highlights in particular).

故子墨子言曰：「然則姑嘗稽之，今雖毋法執厚葬久喪者言，以為事乎國家。此存乎王公大人有喪者，曰棺槨必重，葬埋必厚，衣衾必多，文繡必繁，丘隴必巨；存乎匹 夫賤人死者，殆竭家室；乎諸侯死者，虛車府，然後金玉珠璣比乎身，綸組節約，車馬藏乎壙，又必多為屋幕。[...]

以此共三年。若法若言，行若道使王公大人行此，則必不能蚤朝，五官六府，辟草木，實倉廩。使農夫行此。則必不能蚤出夜入，耕稼樹藝。使百工行此，則必不能修舟車為器皿矣。使婦人行此，則必不能夙興夜寐，紡績織紝。細計厚葬。為多埋賦之財者也。計久喪，為久禁從事者也。財以成者，扶而埋之；後得生者，而久禁之，以此求富，此譬猶禁耕而求穫也，富之說無可得焉。

Mozi said: I have examined the sayings of those who uphold elaborate funeral and extended mourning. If they should be taken seriously in the country, it would mean: when a lord dies, there would be several inner and outer coffins. He would be buried deep. There would be many shrouds. Embroidery would be elaborate. The grave mound would be massive. So, then, the death of a common man would exhaust the wealth of a family. And the death of a feudal lord would empty the state treasury before his body would be surrounded with gold, jade, and pearls, and the grave filled with carts and horses and bundles of silk. [...]

And [the mourning] is to last three years. Adopting such a doctrine and practising such a principle rulers cannot come to court early (and retire late); the officials cannot attend to the five offices and six posts and encourage farming and forestry and fill the granaries; the farmers cannot start out early and come in late to cultivate the land and plant trees; the artisans cannot build boats and vehicles and make vessels and utensils; and the women cannot rise early and retire late to weave and spin. So, then, in elaborate funerals much wealth is buried, and in extended mourning abstention from work is prolonged. Wealth already produced is carried away into the grave. Child-bearing is postponed. To seek wealth in this way is like seeking a harvest by prohibiting farming. The way to wealth then is not here found.
(Mozi: Book 6: Simplicity in Funerals III: 13, trans. W. P. Mei)