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3.1 Mozi's argument against conventionalism

Confucius, remember, had located a problem about performance **interpretation** (the problem of rectifying names): how can we know we are *interpreting* a discourse dao correctly? Mozi raises a more basic question: "**How do we identify the correct discourse dao, in the first place?**"

Confucius's stance: "The **transmitted** social dao (禮 **lǐ**, rituals, conventions) is the correct discourse."

Mozi's reply: "You cannot simply assume that conventional *our* mores are correct. Consider the case of the tribes of Kai Shu (who live east of the state of Yue), whose mores include **eating their first-born sons** to ensure the health and strength of the younger brothers. Are their conventional mores right?"
(Mozi: Book 6: Simplicity in Funerals III: 12)

Confucian answer: "No, that's obviously wrong, that's completely wrong."

Mozi's response: "Okay, so our conventional mores imply theirs are wrong. Hence our own traditional mores accept mores might be wrong. That a practice is widely and traditionally accepted cannot make it right. It seems we need a **neutral** standard to guide our choice of cultural conventions. To do this, it should **transcend culture**. What transcends culture and is neutral? 天 **tiān** (heaven:nature:sky). If you dislike the culture of a place, you can cross the border. Nowhere can one go to avoid being subject to the 道 dào (guidance) of 天 tiān (nature). The sky makes crops grow in the north and in the south. So 天 **tiān** (constant nature) can be a neutral source of standards of choice among conventional mores."

So what standard, exactly, does 天 **tiān** (nature) provide us with? Mozi's claim is that 天 **tiān** (nature) is in favour of **human benefit**. Here is one of his arguments:

且吾所以知天之愛民之厚者有矣，曰以磨為日月星辰，以昭道之；制為四時春秋冬夏，以紀綱之；雷降雪霜雨露，以長遂五穀麻絲，使民得而財利之；列為山川谿谷，播賦百事，以臨司民之善否；為王公侯伯，使之賞賢而罰暴；賊金木鳥獸，從事乎五穀麻絲，以為民衣食之財。

Moreover I have grounds by which I know constant nature favors the people's bountiful well-being. The sun, moon, and the stars revolve as on a millstone to light our dao (path). Its system of four seasons, Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer, have a regular structure. Snow, frost, rain, and dew descend to mature the five grains,flax and silk so people can take up basic goods and benefit. Mountains and hills align rivers and valleys, and generally provides the means of human enterprises to appraise their being good at things and not. Rulers, dukes and nobles emerge to reward excellence and penalize destruction. A store of metal, wood, birds and beasts exist for use in the social matters of producing food and clothing for people to eat and wear.
(Mozi: Book 7: Will of Heaven II: 6)

lì (benefit) **plant** **knife**

Notice that the Chinese character for benefit suggests reaping [**knife**] crops [**plant**], and this is just how Mozi thinks 天 **tiān** benefits us: with crops that we can use for food and clothing, and so on.

Mozi's argument sounds like a naturalized **argument from design** "Look at how well the world is arranged for human benefit". But note that Mozi does not anthropomorphize 天 **tiān**, beyond observing how 天 **tiān** 愛 **ài** (favors, loves, cares for) human life. He doesn't postulate that a person who loves us like a father created nature. He simply observes that the natural world has a bias in favor of our survival and thriving. Mozi's account is rather more akin to the **Gaia Hypothesis.** Nature balances itself to maintain beneficial conditions for human life on earth.

For Mozi, 天 **tian** (heaven) provides an **absolutely reliable,** predictable, constant, **measurement-like standard** for choosing among social daos: Choose the one that increases benefit (利 **lì**) and reduces harm (害 **hài**). That system of mores = 義 **yì** (morality).