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3.3 The Moral Reform Impasse

Confucian traditionalist: Being moral means following traditions and conventional mores.

Mozi: No! According to the universal moral standard of 利 害 **lì hài** (benefit and harm), conventional mores can often be reformed!

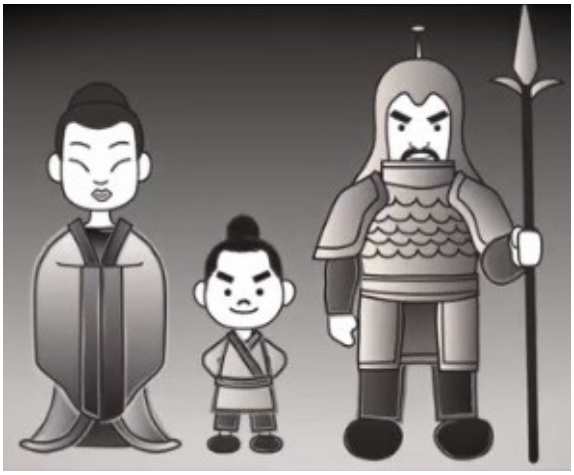
*Note that Mozi is making a distinction that the Confucians don't make: between **morality** and **mores**. But the traditionalist may not be willing to accept it.*

Traditionalist: Why should I accept the standard of 利 害 **lì hài** (benefit and harm)? Judged by the standards set by conventional mores, the standard of 利 害 **lì hài** (benefit and harm) seems to get things wrong! It rejects what we all choose and chooses what we all reject.

How to move past this? Mozi offers an argument against **partial moralities** and in favour of **universal moralities**. Universal moralities have an equal concern for **everybody**; partial moralities favour oneself or one's own group. What Mozi will argue is that partial moralities are **self-defeating**.

(In fact, it isn't entirely clear that Confucian morality is partial in the sense that Mozi is talking about. And the reason for this is Confucius himself seems to have what we call the "silver rule": Don't do to others what you don't like done to you. It looks like the Christian "golden rule" except for having the negation in it. So it's not clear that Mozi's argument against partial concern is really a refutation of the Confucian position.)

Mozi's Soldier Argument



然即敢問，今有平原廣野於此，被甲嬰胄將往戰，死生之權未可識也；又有君大夫之遠使於巴、越、齊、荊，往來及否未可識也，然即敢問，不識將惡也家室，奉承親戚，提挈妻子，而寄託之？不識於兼之有是乎？於別之有是乎？我以為當其於此也，天下無愚夫愚婦，雖非兼之人，必寄託之於兼之有是也。此言而非兼，擇即取兼，即此言行費也。不識天下之士，所以皆聞兼而非之者，其故何也？

Suppose a war is on, and one is in armour and helmet ready to join the force, life and death are not predictable. Or suppose one is commissioned a deputy by the ruler to such far countries like Ba, Yue, Qi, and Jing, and the arrival and return are quite uncertain. Now (under such circumstances) let us inquire upon whom would one lay the trust of one's family and parents. Would it be upon the universal friend or upon the partial friend? It seems to me, on occasions like these, there are no fools in the world. Even if he is a person who objects to universal love, he will lay the trust upon the universal friend all the same. This is verbal objection to the principle but actual selection by it - this is self-contradiction between one's word and deed. It is incomprehensible, then, why people should object to universal love when they hear it.
(Mozi: Book 4: Universal Love III: 4, trans. W. P. Mei)

Mozi here points out that even a man who believes in a **partial morality** will choose to leave his family in the care of a **universally-minded** friend rather than one **partially-minded**. The universally-minded friend will care for the man's family as carefully as for his own, while the partially-minded one will care only for his own.

We can make a parallel observation in the case of **ethical egoism** (the view that we morally ought to be self-interested). Such an egoist will not encourage egoism in *others*, because the egoism of others is a threat to him. Therefore, the egoist's own ethical standards tell him *not* to advocate egoism as shared or collectivesocial dao.

So Mozi points out that if what we're looking for is a **social morality**, then a partial morality will always have this self-defeating weakness. A social morality must be **universal** in order for it to be a shared, public one.

Problem: Even if Mozi's argument shows that the partial morality of Confucianism is **wrong**, Mozi still hasn't shown that *his* own particular universal morality, his utilitarian standard of material benefit, is **right**.