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3.10 Mozi's concept of 法 fǎ (measurement)

法 **fǎ** is often translated as "law", but Mozi's 法 **fǎ** is ***not*** about law in the sense that we've discussed in the context of the Western philosophical tradition. 法 **fǎ** is not a rule or in universal statement form. Rather, it's an operational standard of **the correct use of language**, which guides how to follow a social 道 **dào** (path) correctly.

Mozi talks about there being three 法 **fǎ** of language (e.g,. in Book 9: III: 1).

言	有	三	法
yán	**yǒu**	**sān**	**fǎ**

Sometimes he uses the word 表 **biǎo** rather than 法 **fǎ**, providing us with a rather handy metaphor to understand what he's talking about. A 表 **biǎo** is basically a sundial, which you set up on your balcony and which allows you to check when you get to the spring and the autumn equinox, to predict what time the sun will rise each day, and so on. So Mozi's idea is this: just as we use sundials to make **precise measurements** of the seasons and time, so we can use precise measurements and standards to **fix the way we use words** in order to produce the **most beneficial outcome for all concerned.**

So what are Mozi's **three standards** of language and word use?

1. **Use words the way they were used in the past.** Why? It's a matter of not wasting good daos (guidance). Information is contained in past conventions and if you want to make use of that, you must use language the same way it was used in the past.

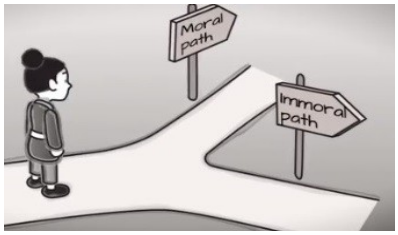
2. The norms for word use **must be accessible to the eyes and ears of ordinary people**. Everyone should be able to apply these norms, just as anyone can use a sundial to tell the time. One shouldn't have to have four years of university and a graduate degree to be able to apply these terms. The standard of 義 **yì** (morality) must be accessible to all.

3. **Test them in practice as part of the social governing *dào* to see if the produce benefit.** Put the way of using language into social practice and check the result is. If you get more material benefit (bushels of grain) then let's speak that way and vice versa.

Two of Mozi's examples.

Our norms of language should disallow using the word pair 有 **yǒu (exists)** and 命 **mìng** (fate) together. We should precede 命 **mìng** (fate) with the 無 **wú** (lack). Why? Because if the social world treats lives as fated we will all give up and nothing will get done (e.g., Confucius waiting for 天 **tiān** to choose a ruler). Instead, we should talk of there being **no fate** (無命 **wú mìng**), and the social world will engage in taking control of their social structure and leadership.

Our norms of language should conversely encourage our using 有 **yǒu (exists)** and 神 **shén** (spirits) together. Why? Because if we speak of spirits as watching us or as surviving to exact revenge if we kill someone, we will be not engage in disorderly and violent behavior. So it is beneficial for society if people talk of spirits as existing.



Both Mozi and Confucius agree that language must be used correctly if we are to be guided to the right path. But Mozi wants to avoid the Confucian appeal to **tradition** and **intuition**. Both lead to reliance on **authority**—scholars on tradition and **higher-ups** when intuitions differ. Instead, Mozi suggests that when we disagree, we should have an objective, measure-like 法 **fǎ** (standard) which ordinary people can access using their senses to decide how to signpost the 義 **yì** (moral) and 不義 **bù yì** (immoral) paths.