

A Response to the Mohist Arguments in “Impartial Caring”

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One of the doctrines that has been characteristic of Confucianism throughout its history is “graded love.” The doctrine of graded love states that one should have greater concern for, and has greater ethical obligations toward, those who are bound to one by special relationships, such as those between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends.¹ Kongzi expressed his commitment to the doctrine of graded love in the following famous passage from the *Analects*:

The Lord of She said to Kongzi, “Among my people there is one we call ‘Upright Gong.’ When his father stole a sheep, he reported him to the authorities.”

Kongzi replied, “Among my people, those we consider ‘upright’ are different from this: fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. This is what it means to be ‘upright.’” (13:18)²

The Confucian doctrine of graded love seems to capture the common-sense intuitions that many of us have, both in China and in the West. Imagine how you would react if someone told you, in an indignant tone, “People are going hungry tonight in New York, and Bryan isn’t doing anything about it!” I think most people would *not* take this to be a particularly serious ethical failing, and would perhaps respond to the statement with the tepid agreement that, Yes, we should *all* do more about the problem of hunger in the U.S. But suppose someone told you, “Bryan’s *mother* is going hungry tonight in New York, and he isn’t doing anything about it!” If this were true, and if there were no extraordinary explanation for Bryan’s behavior, I think most of us would regard it as reflecting a particularly severe ethical flaw in Bryan’s character.

Nonetheless, not everyone agrees with the doctrine of graded love. The first philosophical opponent of Confucianism was Mozi, a charismatic and enigmatic figure of the fifth century B.C.E. In opposition to the Confucians, Mozi advocated *jiān ài* 兼愛, a phrase often translated, “universal love,” but which I shall render as “impartial caring.”³ The doctrine of impartial caring states that one should have equal concern for, and has equal ethical obligations toward,

promoting the well-being of every person, regardless of any special relation a person might have with oneself.

The essay, "Impartial Caring," in which the later followers of Mozi present and defend their master's doctrine, seems to polarize the opinions of interpreters. On the one hand, David Wong, in a thoughtful and insightful essay, dismisses most of the arguments in this essay as "genuinely shallow and unimportant. They are wishes masquerading as arguments. . . ."⁴ At the other extreme, Chad Hansen states that the Mohists offer "a nonquestion begging [sic] argument for universal concern," and demonstrate that the Confucian view of partial or graded love is "self-defeating."⁵ I agree with parts of both Wong's and Hansen's assessments. Ultimately, I agree with Wong in favoring some version of Confucian graded love over Mohist impartiality. However, like Hansen, I find the Mohist arguments stronger and more intriguing than Wong's quick dismissal suggests. For example, in "Impartial Caring," the Mohists give what is probably the first use of "thought experiments" in Chinese philosophy, and perhaps their first use in the world. Given the intrinsic interest of the Mohist thesis and their arguments for it, it is surprising that, although many works present a quick overview of the arguments in the essay, there are few detailed analyses of it.⁶ I hope to partially remedy that lack in this paper.

The Caretaker Argument

One of the key arguments in "Impartial Caring" is the following *gedanken* experiment:

Suppose one must put on one's armor and helmet and go to war in a vast and open wilderness where life and death are uncertain; or suppose one was sent by one's ruler or high minister to the distant states of Ba, Yue, Qi or Jing and could not be sure of either reaching them or ever returning from one's mission. Under such conditions of uncertainty, to whom would one entrust the well-being of one's parents, wife and children? Would one prefer that they be in the care of an impartial person or would one prefer that they be in the care of a partial person? I believe that under such circumstances, there are no fools in all the world. Even though one may not advocate impartiality, one would certainly want to entrust one's family to the person who is impartial. But this is to condemn impartiality in word but prefer it in deed, with the result that one's actions do not accord with what one says. And so I don't see what reason any person in the world who has heard about impartiality can give for condemning it.⁷

The key question in this passage is "Would one prefer that [one's family] be in the care of an impartial person or would one prefer that they be in the care of a partial person?" The Mohists apparently regard it as blindingly obvious that one would entrust one's family to an *impartial* person, for they do not

even bother to explain why this is the best choice. But, in fact, it is far from obvious that the impartial person is the right choice. Suppose that you have gone on a dangerous mission, and have entrusted the care of your family to someone else. Let us call this man "the caretaker." Now consider the following elaboration of the Mohist example. Suppose that, in the community in which you left your family, a famine occurred, leading to widespread starvation. If the caretaker is an impartialist, he will have no reason to promote the health and survival of your family over the health and survival of anyone else. Indeed, if the members of your family are unlikely to survive, the impartialist caretaker may intentionally divert resources *away* from your family to families whose members have a greater chance of survival. I doubt that, if I had entrusted them to an impartialist caretaker in such a situation, the members of my family would say, "Gee, *thanks*, Dad!"

In contrast, if the partialist caretaker is bound to you by a special relationship such as kinship, friendship, et cetera, then he will promote the well-being of your family *over* the well-being of strangers. Thus, in many situations, the Confucian caretaker is a better choice than the impartial caretaker. Even Hansen seems to admit as much: "The Confucian soldier may protect his family *better* by putting them with a relative. Even though they *come after* the original family, they still *come before* starving strangers."⁸

However, if the caretaker acts according to Confucian graded love, he will prefer the well-being of his own closest family members to the well-being of the members of your family. Consequently, if it is a choice between letting your family starve and letting his own family starve, a partialist caretaker will let your family starve. Consequently, one can construct convoluted stories about situations in which one's family is better off with an impartial caretaker. Suppose that the three members of your family and the three members of the caretaker's family are isolated in a cabin, with all the nearby roads snowed in, and suppose there is only enough food to keep three people alive. Since the universalist caretaker is completely impartial, he is as likely to give food to members of your family as he is to give food to members of his own family. So in this situation you are better off with the universalist. However, it is worth pointing out that this is a scenario that is seldom realized. Although I do not think this claim (or its denial) can be proven with mathematical certainty, I would hazard to guess that one's family is better off in most situations with a Confucian caretaker.

So why do the Mohists regard the thought experiment as so obviously favoring the universalist caretaker? The answer can be found in some curious comments that occur in the text immediately prior to the thought experiment:

Suppose there were two people: one who maintains partiality and one who maintains impartiality. And so the person who maintains partiality would say, "How can I possibly regard the well-being of my friends as I do my own well-being? How can I possibly regard the parents of my friends as I do my own parents?" And so when

his friends are hungry, the partial person does not feed them. When his friends are cold, he does not clothe them. When his friends are ill, he does not nurture them. And when his friends die, he does not bury them. This is what the partial person says and what he does. But this is not what the impartial person says nor is this how he acts. The impartial person says, "I have heard that in order to be a superior person in the world, one must regard the well-being of one's friends as one regards one's own well-being; one must regard the parents of one's friends as one regards one's own parents. Only in this way can one be a superior person." And so when the impartial person's friends are hungry, he feeds them. When his friends are cold, he clothes them. When his friends are ill, he nurtures them. And when his friends die, he buries them. This is what the impartial person says and what he does. (p. 65)

An aspect of the characterization of the impartialist here is surprising: he is described as regarding the well-being of his *friends* as he regards his own well-being. And the Chinese *yǒu* 友, like the English term "friend," suggests someone with whom one has a special relationship, not shared with people in general. If the Mohist impartialist is someone who is impartial only among the members of the group consisting of his own family and friends, but promotes the well-being of his family and friends over that of strangers, then of course one would choose an impartialist caretaker over a partialist one. But the Mohists are clearly arguing in the essay for impartiality toward humans in general, not toward the members of one's family, or clique, or city, or kingdom. So it seems likely that the Mohists are using the term "friend" in some extended, nonstandard sense. (But they should have alerted us to this fact.) Let us assume, then, that the impartialist is someone who is "friends" with everyone, and cares for everyone else as he cares for himself.

More problematic for the Mohist argument is their characterization of the partialist. It is clear that, characterized in the way that they are, and if *these* are one's only choices, one should choose an impartialist caretaker over a partialist caretaker—because the partialist "caretaker" won't do any caretaking at all! As described in the preceding passage, the partialist will do nothing at all to benefit or assist his friend (and, presumably, nothing for his friend's family). So the addition of this characterization of the partialist saves the Mohist argument from being a simple non sequitur. However, there are now at least two different problems for the Mohist argument.

First, suppose for the moment that the Mohist thought experiment is rationally persuasive. What has it persuaded us of? What the Mohist argument shows is that we have reason to prefer impartialist caretakers for our family. Perhaps we might even be able to generalize the Mohist argument to demonstrate that we should prefer that everyone else in our community be an impartialist. But notice that this does *not* demonstrate to the partialist that he should be an impartialist. The fact (if it is a fact) that the partialist has reason to want *other*

individuals or families to be impartial does not show that the partialist has any reason to want *himself* or *his family* to be impartial.

However, Hansen offers a response to this sort of objection, suggesting that a *dào* 道 is intrinsically social rather than individual, so that the question the Mohists (and all other early Chinese thinkers) are concerned with is, "What *dao*-type should society teach to all people?" I am not certain that Hansen is right. However, let us assume (for the sake of the argument) that it is impossible for Chinese thinkers (or at least for Mohists) to entertain the possibility of a *dao* that would instruct me to do one thing myself but to encourage others to do something else. In that case, the only available options are the way of partiality for society as a whole (everyone acting partially) or the way of impartiality for society as a whole (everyone acting impartially). The Mohist argument is still problematic, though. It is true that people who have to entrust their families to the care of others would be much worse off in a society composed entirely of partialists. But it is also true that those who are less crafty, weaker, less aggressive, and generally more in need of the assistance of others would fare worse in a partialist society. Neither of these facts, by itself, demonstrates the conclusion that the Mohists want to demonstrate: that one would be a "fool" to choose to live in a partialist society. All the argument shows is that I should not prefer a partialist society unless I am crafty, strong, aggressive, and unlikely to need the assistance of others.¹⁰

The second problem with the Mohist argument becomes clear when we ask whom the argument is directed against. We have been assuming so far in our discussion (as Wong, Hansen, and all other interpreters I know of assume) that the critical arguments in "Impartial Caring" are directed against the Confucian position. The difficulty is that partialism, as the Mohists characterize it here, is nothing at all like the Confucian position. Nowhere do any Confucians advocate complete indifference to the well-being of other human beings, and they certainly do not advocate indifference to the suffering of their friends. As Wong observes, "Confucianism has some universalistic tendencies. . . . It holds to a thesis of 'differential [ethical] pull' in such a way that everyone has at least some substantial pull as reflected in the idea that certain things are owed to all."¹¹ This makes it seem like the Mohists are simply attacking a straw man.

Now the interpretive principle of charity encourages us to look for a different interpretation, if the interpretation we currently have attributes foolishness to the object of our interpretation. The only way to avoid attributing to the Mohists a straw-man argument is to identify someone or some group who (unlike the Confucians) seriously advocated the position the Mohists are attacking. It is possible that the partialists under attack are members of a loose group sometimes described as "self-preservationists." The paradigmatic self-preservationist was Yang Zhu. In characterizing the differences between Yang Zhu and Mozi, Mengzi said, "Yangzi chose egoism. If plucking out one

hair from his body would have benefited the whole world, he would not do it. Mozi loved universally. If scraping himself bare from head to heels would benefit the whole world, he would do it" (7A26).¹² Mengzi also claims that, in his era at least, "the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mo Di fill the world" (3B9). Consequently, Yang Zhu was thought by some people to advocate a view similar to that of the extreme partialist described by the Mohists, and there was a time when the thought of Yang Zhu was a major (perhaps *the* major) intellectual rival to Mohism. In addition, in the next argument of the Mohist essay ("the ruler argument," discussed below), there is a significant phrase attributed to a partialist ruler: "How brief is the span of a person's life upon this earth! It rushes by like a galloping team of horses glimpsed through a crack!" (p. 66). A very close simile is used in the "Robber Zhi" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, which Angus Graham has argued is Yangist in origin: it says that the passing of a man's life "is as sudden as a thoroughbred steed galloping past a chink in the wall."¹³ Furthermore, in the *Liezi* (circa c.e. 300), there is a philosophical dialogue between Yang Zhu, one of Yang Zhu's disciples, and a disciple of Mozi's. Although the *Liezi* as a whole dates from long after the supposed time of this dialogue, Graham thinks the dialogue comes from an earlier Mohist source. This suggests that the Mohists felt a need to respond to Yangist arguments.¹⁴

There are several problems with an interpretation that identifies the target of the first (and second) Mohist arguments with a Yangist partialist. (1) Yang Zhu lived after the time of Mozi. (2) Although Mengzi accuses him of extreme egoism, more recent scholars read Yang Zhu as having a much more moderate position toward helping others, which might allow for some concern for others. For example, Graham writes that "one has the impression that Chinese thinkers perceive persons as inherently social beings who are more or less selfish rather than as isolated individuals who will be pure egoists unless taught morality."¹⁵ (3) Within "the caretaker argument" itself, the partialist is described as having some concern for his own family.¹⁶ (4) As we shall see, there is an argument later in the essay that assumes the opponents of impartial caring do have a commitment to "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝). This seems to rule out their being narrow egoists.

However, all of these objections can be answered. (1) We do not know when the third version of "Impartial Caring" was composed; it may be a version of that essay, written much later than the time of Mozi himself, as a response to Yang Zhu's ideas specifically. (2) Even if Mengzi misunderstood Yang Zhu's teachings, the fact that he did so shows that this was a misunderstanding they were open to. Perhaps the Mohists made the same interpretive error. (To attribute to them a misunderstanding apparently common in their culture is not a violation of the principle of charity.) (3) A hypothesis that helps to respond to both the second and the third objections is to accept that the Yangists were not pure egoists and did have some concern for those closest to them. If this is true (and if the Mohists knew this) it would explain why the partialists are

described as having some concern for close family members. Finally, (4) note that the people concerned with filial piety later in the essay are never explicitly identified as "partialists." It may be that the arguments in the first part of the essay are directed against Yangist partialists, while "the filial piety argument" later in the essay is directed against Confucians.

I am still not certain that the Mohists were thinking of Yangists or quasi-Yangists (rather than Confucians) in their characterization of the partialists. But I do want to suggest it as an intriguing possibility.

Let me review where we have been so far. Our initial examination of the Mohist thought experiment suggested that it was a simple non sequitur. At first glance, a Confucian who is bound to you by friendship seems to generally be a better choice for a caretaker than someone who is completely impartial. But then we noticed that the Mohists provide a description of the partialist in the immediately preceding paragraph of the text. Assuming the Mohist characterizations of the partialist and the impartialists, and assuming that these two are our only choices, the Mohist argument becomes logically valid. However, the partialism thus described seems completely inconsistent with any plausible understanding of Confucianism. That makes it seem like the Mohist argument, although technically valid, is a straw man argument. The only alternative to attributing a straw man argument to the Mohists seems to be identifying the partialist with a Yangist.

However, now we can see two other problems with the Mohist argument. First, if the partialist is a self-preservationist, a Hobbesian might argue that, under certain conditions, a partialist caretaker might be a better choice.¹⁷ Suppose, for example, that you are potentially more dangerous to the caretaker than she is to you, and you have a known willingness to act on your threats. You can then put your family in the care of a partialist, and tell her that, if you return and find that she has not taken good care of your family, you will kill her. As long as the partialist does not know for certain that you are dead, she will have an incentive to take care of your family. Furthermore, she will have a commitment to taking care of your family *over* the families of others, so she is arguably a better choice than an impartialist caretaker. Even if you do die, a Hobbesian will argue that it may be in the interest of a partialist caretaker to go through with her commitment to caring for your family, since she may benefit from acquiring the reputation of one who is reliable in carrying out her agreements. Overall, I am not convinced by the Hobbesian arguments myself. But the Hobbesian alternative does show that there is much more complexity to the choice situation than the Mohists suggest. And this shows that, even if one accepts the premises of the Mohist argument, their conclusion will not follow without additional arguments (which have not been supplied by the Mohists).

The second problem with the Mohist argument is more serious, and has to do with a crucial implicit premise: the Mohists assume that impartiality and partiality (as defined) are the only two alternatives. But this is a false dichotomy.

There are an almost infinite number of theoretical alternatives to impartiality and partiality as defined by the Mohists, and (more importantly) there is at least one *prima facie* plausible alternative that the Mohists would have been aware of, and should have taken into account: Confucian graded love. A Confucian is almost certainly a better caretaker than an extreme egoist. Furthermore, as we saw above, a strong case can be made that a Confucian is generally preferable to a Mohist impartialist as a caretaker. In other words, the number of “live options” for our choice of a type of caretaker is larger than the Mohists suggest. Our practical choice is actually among an impartial caretaker, a caretaker who is a Yangist, and a Confucian caretaker. And it is not obvious that the impartial caretaker is the best choice. In fact, a plausible case can be made that the Confucian caretaker is the best choice.

I can think of only one way to save the Mohists from this objection. It is possible that the Mohists thought it was only necessary in this section of the essay to show the superiority of Mohist impartialism to Yangist partialism, because they provide an argument later in the essay (the “filial piety argument”) that attempts to show that Confucians should become Mohist impartialists. If this is what the Mohists have in mind, the success of the caretaker argument ultimately depends on the success of the filial piety argument (discussed below).

In short, if the partialist in the argument is supposed to be a Confucian, the caretaker argument is attacking a straw man; if the partialist in the caretaker argument is supposed to be a Yangist, then the argument seems to offer a false dichotomy. However, it may be that the caretaker argument is intended only as a response to the Yangists, and that the later filial piety argument is a necessary supplement to it.

The Ruler Argument

In response to the objection that impartiality cannot be used as a standard in selecting a ruler, the Mohists ask us to imagine a partialist and an impartialist ruler: “When his subjects are hungry, the partial ruler does not feed them. When his subjects are cold, he does not clothe them. When his subjects are ill, he does not nurture them. And when his subjects die, he does not bury them” (p. 66). In contrast, the impartial ruler does for his subjects all the things the partial ruler fails to do. The Mohists then ask us to consider the following: “Suppose there were a terrible epidemic in which most of the people suffered bitterly from hunger and cold and many lay dead and unburied in the ditches and gullies. . . . I believe that under such circumstances, there are no fools in all the world. Even though one may not advocate impartiality, one would certainly want to follow the ruler who is impartial” (p. 67).

Once again, we are faced with either a straw man argument or a false dichotomy. Confucians certainly do not hold up as an ideal a ruler who ignores the needs of his subjects. So a Confucian ruler is not like the partialist described

in this passage. If, in contrast, the partialist ruler is supposed to be a Yangist, then the Mohists are failing to examine the possible benefits of a Confucian ruler. In fact, the actions the Mohists attribute to the impartialist ruler in this passage are indistinguishable from the actions of a Confucian ruler in the same circumstances, so it is not at all clear why the subjects are better off with an impartialist ruler.

There are some circumstances (not discussed by the Mohists) in which the actions of a Confucian ruler *would* differ from those of a Mohist impartialist ruler, because of the special obligations the Confucian has to his own kin. These special obligations can, in principle, lead to ethical dilemmas. In the early Confucian tradition, these dilemmas are discussed at length by Mengzi. In one case, he is asked,

“When Sage King Shun was Son of Heaven, and Gao Yao was his Minister of Crime, if ‘the Blind Man’ [i.e., Shun’s father] had murdered someone, what would they have done?”

Mengzi said, “Gao Yao would simply have arrested him!”

“So Shun would not have forbidden it?”

Mengzi said, “How could Shun have forbidden it? Gao Yao had a sanction for his actions.”

“So what would Shun have done?”

Mengzi said, “Shun looked at casting aside the whole world like casting aside a worn sandal. He would have secretly carried him on his back and fled, to live along the coast, happy to the end of his days, joyfully forgetting the world.” (7A35)

In Mengzi’s solution to the ethical dilemma, Shun manages to avoid violating either his obligations as king or his obligations as a son. This is ingenious, but, arguably, Shun’s subjects would be better off if Shun were to remain as ruler and simply allow his father to be arrested (and executed).

To my knowledge, the Confucians never directly respond to this objection. (But then again, the Mohists never directly raise it.) I think there is a Confucian response, though. They might acknowledge that, in theory, a purely impartial ruler would be better for his subjects than a Confucian ruler in certain rare cases. However, they might argue that the caring yet impartial Mohist ruler is, at best, extremely rare, because a human who is sufficiently indifferent to the suffering of his own father to allow him to be executed is, as a matter of psychological fact, unlikely to be sufficiently compassionate to be a good ruler. (And if the ideal Mohist ruler is extremely rare, then the Mohist political system is intrinsically unstable in real-world conditions.) As an armchair psychologist, I find this Confucian argument plausible (but it is based on an empirical psychological claim, which should be supported by further evidence).

A Confucian could also point out that there are some circumstances in which subjects would be better off with a partialist king. Suppose there is an interna-

tional situation in which a particular policy would benefit a larger number of subjects of other states, but at a great cost to the smaller number of subjects in the ruler's own state. Depending on the relative benefits and costs, an impartial ruler would sacrifice the well-being of his own subjects for the greater good, whereas a partialist ruler would protect the interests of his own subjects.

The Historical Precedent Argument

The Mohists next address the concern that practicing impartiality is impossible, like "picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the" Yangtze or Yellow River (p. 67). The Mohist response is to provide textual evidence from historical sources that impartiality was practiced by the sage kings of former times. If impartiality was in fact successfully practiced by earlier rulers, this is decisive evidence that practicing impartiality is possible. Once again, though, there is a problem with the Mohist argument. The Mohists cite four texts as evidence for their claim. Although the Mohists interpret each of these texts as providing evidence for their brand of impartiality, what is actually written in the first three texts is completely consistent with a Confucian conception of kingship. For example, in the third text, Sage King Tang is quoted as addressing Heaven during a drought, saying, "If those within my domain have committed any offense [which led Heaven to cause this drought], let the responsibility rest with me" (p. 69). The trope of a ruler offering himself as a sacrifice to save others is ancient in China, and is as much a part of the Confucian tradition as the Mohist.¹⁸

The last text the Mohists cite does provide some evidence that something like Mohist impartiality was regarded as an ideal by earlier rulers. It is an ode, attributed to the time of the Zhou Dynasty, which says (in part), "The King's Way is broad so broad; / without partiality or party" (p. 69). However, I think a Confucian would interpret this as applying only to the king's relationship with his subjects at large. Of course, the Confucian interpretation of this poem may be mistaken, but the ambiguity in the one piece of textual evidence that directly supports the Mohist claim shows that the Mohists have not given us much evidence for the claim that impartiality was practiced historically.

The Filial Piety Argument

This argument is especially intriguing because it seems to take as at least one of its premises the sort of commitment that is definitive of Confucian graded love, but to attempt to argue from this premise to Mohist universalism:

A filial son who seeks what is beneficial for his parents . . . must want other people to care for and benefit his parents. Given this, how should one act in order to bring about such a state of affairs? Should one first care for and benefit the parents of others, expecting that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefiting one's

own parents? Or should one first dislike and steal from other people's parents, expecting that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefiting one's own parents? (p. 70)

The Mohists appeal to the principle that "anyone who cares for others will receive care from them while anyone who dislikes others will in turn be disliked" (p. 71). On this basis, they conclude, "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 benefiting one's own parents" (p. 70). Thus, the argument is that, if one is committed (as are Confucians) to filial piety (*xiao* 孝), then one should not "dislike and steal from other people's parents," but rather ought to "care for and benefit the parents of others." Notice that, although the argument is phrased in terms of filial piety, which involves a special commitment to the well-being of one's own parents, it could be generalized to apply to any special commitment: husband to wife, sibling to sibling, parent to child, et cetera. I shall, therefore, treat the argument in its generalized form.

The key premises of this argument strike me as quite plausible. It is not invariably true that either kindness or callousness toward others is reciprocated. However, we do seem to find that, across a broad range of cultures and circumstances, kindness is often repaid by kindness, and callousness by callousness. Furthermore, most of us are concerned about the well being of our parents (or about other members of our family). Consequently, it seems that we do have good reason, all else being equal, to make friends, and not enemies, of others.

The problem with the argument is that it does not seem to lead to the conclusion the Mohists are using it to establish. Recall that the Mohists are arguing against Confucians and in favor of impartiality. But their argument here, even if successful, does not provide any reason to reject Confucianism, for Confucians certainly do not advocate harming the parents of others. Indeed, Confucians like Mengzi advocate "extending" compassion outward from one's own family to others: "Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones as young ones, and extend it to the young ones of others" (1A7).¹⁹ Furthermore, the Mohist argument does not provide any reason for impartiality: all it shows is that, if one *is* partial to one's family, one should not harm the families of others.

Perhaps the Mohists assume that a policy of Confucian graded love, while not directly commanding us to harm the families of others, will lead to harming others. As a general claim, this is patently false. Most of us do things to benefit our families all the time without needing to harm the families of others. It is true that there are some circumstances in which adherence to graded love will require acting against the interests of other families. Suppose we are on a sinking ship, with one other family and one lifeboat left on board, and there is only room for one family in that lifeboat. In such exigent circumstances, Confucian graded love requires that I attempt to secure the lifeboat for my own family.

However, this example does not show that the Mohist “filial piety argument” provides a reason to be an impartialist. First, the Mohist argument begins from the assumption that we are committed to the well-being of our own parents (or our own family members generally). As long as we are so committed, if we find that we are in a situation like the “life boat scenario” above, we should drop our normal policy of not acting against the interests of others. Second, situations like the “life boat scenario” are likely to be quite rare. It is not clear what practical relevance the small possibility of such situations being realized has.

The Practicability Argument

One common objection that has been raised against certain forms of impartial consequentialism in the West is that complete impartiality is psychologically unobtainable (for most people, at least). Consequently, it does not surprise us that the final Mohist argument in this essay is a counterargument to the objection that “impartial care is too difficult to carry out” (p. 71). This might seem to merely be a repetition of the earlier objection dealt with in the “historical precedent argument.” However, the “historical precedent argument” focused on the practicability of impartiality *as a policy for kings to follow* in ruling their subjects. The “practicability argument” here responds to the objection that *most people in society* cannot be made to act in accordance with impartial caring.

The Mohist counterargument is to provide counterexamples to the objection, in the form of successful policies that seem to have required behavioral changes in people at least as drastic as the change to universal love. The examples are a ruler who “was fond of slender waists,” and whose subjects, in consequence, “ate no more than one meal a day and became so weak that they could not raise themselves up without the support of a cane nor could they walk without leaning against a wall”; a ruler who “was fond of bravery,” and whose soldiers, when so ordered, charged onto burning ships; and a ruler who “was fond of rough and simple attire,” so that his subjects “wrapped themselves in sheets of cloth, wore sheepskin jackets, hats of raw silk, and hempen shoes” (p. 71). The Mohists conclude, “Curtailing one’s food, charging into flames, and wearing rough and simple attire are among the most difficult things in the world to get people to do, but masses of people did it in order to please their superiors” (p. 72). By comparison, impartial caring is easy to put into effect.²⁰ The Mohists give a more extensive list later in this section of practices that can modify behavior: superiors delighting in them, encouraging them with rewards and praise, and discouraging alternative practices with penalties and punishments.

We have insufficient historical knowledge to evaluate the Mohist accounts of these rulers and the effectiveness of their programs of behavior modification. However, our own knowledge of human practices suggests that these accounts are plausible, up to a point. For example, the widespread occurrence of eating

disorders among women in our own society makes painfully vivid the possibility of a society in which many humans are motivated to become unhealthfully thin. However, what the Mohists intend to show with their examples is something much more extreme. Specifically, the Mohists assume that the structure of human motivations and dispositions is almost infinitely malleable.²¹ In other words, humans are like clay that can be radically remolded “within a single generation” (p. 71), so long as rulers provide the appropriate leadership and behavioral incentives. It is tempting to describe this by saying that the Mohists think that human nature is infinitely malleable, but this is somewhat misleading. It is more accurate to say that the Mohists think that there is no human nature.²²

Not only do the Mohists seem to be suggesting something like this, but they *need* to hold something like this view. For, as I suggested earlier, graded love seems to be the “common sense” view of many of us, not just in the contemporary U.S., but in most societies around the world. Consequently, if there is such a thing as human nature, it seems to be strongly opposed to Mohist impartiality. Now, the Mohists’ examples of behavior modification are plausible as examples of practices that were instituted among small portions of the population, or among large segments of the population for short periods of time. However, what the Mohists need to show is that impartial care can be permanently instituted as a practice among a segment of the general population large enough for it to be practically effective. Their examples are insufficiently detailed and (without further documentation) insufficiently convincing to show this. Indeed, the prevalence of graded love in the world and the disastrous failures of social philosophies such as Stalinism and Maoism that have regarded humans as infinitely malleable suggest that there *is* such a thing as human nature, and that we flout it at our peril.²³

Conclusion

The Mohist essay on “Impartial Caring” is an impressive example of early philosophical argumentation. The essay shows great systematicity in its efforts to argue in favor of impartial caring, to argue against the major alternatives to impartial caring (including, if I am right, both Yangism and Confucianism), and to address every one of the major objections to impartial caring (including the objection that impartial caring cannot be inculcated among the general population). Furthermore, the essay makes use of the classic technique of the thought experiment.

Nonetheless, I believe that the essay ultimately fails to be persuasive. The caretaker thought-experiment offers a false dichotomy unless it relies upon the later *filial piety argument to rule out* Confucian graded love as a choice for a *dao*. And the filial piety argument is a simple non sequitur.

Appendix: Hansen's Interpretation

Hansen regards the Mohist "caretaker argument" as sound, in part because he believes that it is structurally similar to one that Derek Parfit would offer two and a half millennia later, which Hansen takes to demonstrate that Confucian graded love is "directly collectively self-defeating." Parfit says, suppose we have a particular theory of how one should act, call that theory "T," and call the aims that T says one should promote the "T-aims" of that theory. Then, T is *directly collectively self-defeating* when it is certain that, if we all successfully follow T, we will thereby cause the T-given aims of *each* to be worse achieved than they would have been if none of us had successfully followed T.²⁴

Theories are self-defeating in situations that are formally like what are called "Prisoner's Dilemmas" in game theory. The classic Prisoner's Dilemma involves only two, purely self-interested agents. However, the choice situation can be generalized to apply to arbitrarily large numbers of either individuals or groups who are concerned only with the well being of themselves or the members of their own group.

Consider the following example. Suppose we have a community of families in which the following conditions hold: the members of each family act according to some T that has as its sole T-aim maximizing their own family's wealth; there are community services (police, public transportation, et cetera) which, if properly funded, would contribute to maintaining and increasing the wealth of each family; it is possible for each family to effectively evade paying its share of the funding for the community services. In this situation, T is directly, collectively self-defeating, because each family in the community knows that, whether the community services end up receiving sufficient funds or not, the family will maximize its own wealth by evading providing its share of the funding for the community services. Parfit takes it to be a serious objection to a theory that it is self-defeating in this sense. For brevity's sake, I shall refer to an argument of this form as "Parfit's argument."

Hansen's analysis of the Mohist arguments raises three distinct questions:

1. Is Parfit's argument directed against T's such as the Confucian doctrine of graded love?
2. Do the Mohists provide a version of Parfit's argument against the Confucian doctrine of graded love (or against any other position)?
3. Does Parfit's argument provide a serious challenge to the Confucian doctrine of graded love?

Hansen's answers to these questions are Yes, Yes, and Yes. However, my own answers are Yes, No, and No.

It seems clear that, although he never mentions Confucianism, Parfit's argument is directed against positions like Confucian graded love. (This is perhaps

not surprising, since Parfit is attracted to Buddhist philosophy, and Buddhist and Confucian philosophy are typically seen as conflicting on the issue of universal vs. graded love.) Specifically, Parfit states that what he describes as "Common-Sense Morality" is characterized in large part by "special obligations" to "our children, parents, friends, benefactors, pupils, patients, clients, colleagues," et cetera, and that this morality is directly, collectively self-defeating.²⁵

But do the *Mohists* actually use such an argument? Hansen claims to find this argument in the caretaker argument in "Impartial Caring." At first glance, this thought experiment seems to have no similarity at all with Parfit's argument. Parfit's argument applies to situations that are formally similar to Prisoner's Dilemmas. The situation the Mohists describe does not seem to be like a Prisoner's Dilemma at all. More precisely, a theory is self-defeating in Parfit's sense if, were we all to act in accordance with it, it is *certain* that we *each* would do a worse job of achieving what the theory tells us to aim at than if we did not act in accordance with the theory. In contrast, the Mohist caretaker argument shows, at most, that we should prefer a society composed solely of Mohist impartialists to a society composed solely of Yangist partialists *if* we will need to entrust the care of our family to someone. But this does not show that each of us will do a worse job of achieving our goals if we all follow the Yangist *dao*. (I imagine a Yangist would reply to the Mohist argument, "So don't take an official position that will require you to go on dangerous missions of state.")

In order to get closer to Parfit's argument, we need to make two more assumptions. First, assume the Mohists intend the scenario of entrusting one's family to someone else as only an *example* of a large range of cases in which we require the assistance of others. Second, assume it is certain that all of us, regardless of how strong, assertive, et cetera, we are, will have a crucial need to rely upon the assistance of others at some point in our lives. This final assumption implies that it will be impossible for a partialist to attain his T-aims in a society composed of partialists. So if we make all of these assumptions, then the argument seems formally similar to an argument of Parfit's type. Now, I am all in favor of reading arguments charitably, but these are a large number of textually unsupported assumptions to attribute to the Mohists, just to get them to have an argument like Parfit's. Consequently, I find it implausible to attribute to the Mohists a version of Parfit's argument.

As a philosophical historian, I am interested in what the Mohists said. But as a philosopher, I am interested in what the truth is. Consequently, even if the Mohists did not use Parfit's argument, we should examine whether Parfit's argument is a successful refutation of positions like the graded love of Confucianism. I think that it is not successful, for at least two reasons. First, as I have repeatedly stressed, Confucian graded love is not egoism, nor does it advocate concern for one's own family to the exclusion of concern for others. As Parfit himself admits, such concern greatly mitigates the effects of partialism, and makes Prisoner's-Dilemma situations less frequent. However, Parfit also stresses

that any version of partialism will occasionally produce Prisoner's-Dilemma situations. This brings me to my second objection. I find quite hokey Parfit's examples of situations that are collectively self-defeating for people who live according to something like Confucian graded love. Consider this example from Parfit:

Suppose that you and I each have four children, all of whom are in mortal danger. We are strangers, and we cannot communicate. Each could either (1) save one of his own children or (2) save three of the other's children. If I love my children, I may find it impossible to save the lives of three of your children at the cost of letting one of my children die. And the same may be true of you. We will then both do (1) rather than (2). Because we love our children, we save only two of them when we could have saved six.²⁶

How often in the history of our species has a situation like this actually occurred? This is not to say that such a situation is impossible. However, I do believe that such situations are extremely rare. And it is not clear to me that it is a serious practical objection to a theory that in certain extremely unusual circumstances it would be self-defeating if everyone adhered to it.

Notes

1. These are sometimes called the "five relations," and are mentioned in *Zhongyong* 20 and in *Mengzi* 3A4 (with "elder and younger" replacing "elder and younger brother" in the latter text).
2. Edward Slingerland, trans., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).
3. I here follow Philip J. Ivanhoe's translation of the phrase in Ivanhoe and Van Norden.
4. David Wong, "Universalism versus Love with Distinctions: An Ancient Debate Revived," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 16 (1989): 263.
5. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 112.
6. E.g., Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 145–51, *passim*; Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), 41–43. I deal here only with the third version of the "Impartial Caring" essay. For a general discussion of the textual issues raised by the Mohist synoptic chapters, and a brief summary of the contents of the various versions of each essay, see Scott Lowe, *Mo Tzu's Religious Blueprint for a Chinese Utopia* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).
7. All translations from the Mohist writings are from the translation by Philip J. Ivanhoe in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*. This quotation is from p. 66.

8. Hansen, *A Daoist Theory*, p. 112. Emphasis in original.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
10. Hansen nonetheless finds the Mohist argument persuasive, for reasons that I discuss in the Appendix to this paper.
11. Wong, "Universalism," p. 253.
12. Translations from the *Mengzi* are by Bryan W. Van Norden in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*. References are to the standard sectioning.
13. Graham, *Disputers*, p. 64.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
16. In the initial description of the partialist, he asks the rhetorical question, "How can I possibly regard the parents of my friends as I do my own parents?" In addition, in the "caretaker thought experiment," the person leaving on the mission is concerned with the well-being of his wife, parents, and children (however, the person leaving on the mission is not explicitly said to be a partialist as the passage defines that term).
17. Although, historically, the Mohists were not aware of Hobbes's philosophy, we can ask, philosophically, whether they would have a response to this objection.
18. For a discussion, see David S. Nivison, "'Virtue' in Bone and Bronze," in *The Ways of Confucianism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 17–30.
19. That is, treat the elders and young ones of your family as they should be treated, and then extend that treatment to the young ones and elders of other families.
20. My experience in teaching "Impartial Caring" has been that students frequently object that the examples the Mohists give are examples of rulers being cruel to their subjects, rather than examples of impartial caring. This is true, but it is not an objection to the Mohist argument. The Mohists are not endorsing the actions of these rulers. They are only using these examples to demonstrate the possibility of radically altering the behavior of a population.
21. To my knowledge, the only commentator to have identified this aspect of their thought is David S. Nivison. See his "Weakness of Will in Ancient Chinese Philosophy," p. 83, and "Philosophical Voluntarism in Fourth-Century China," p. 130, both in *The Ways of Confucianism*.
22. Ning Chen suggests that the Mohists believed human nature was evil. (Ning Chen, "The Ideological Background of the Mencian Discussion of Human Nature," in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. Alan K. L. Chan [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002], 17–41.) His challenging argument deserves serious consideration, but it is based largely on a passage in the Mohist dialectical chapters that is extremely difficult to interpret and that may be textually corrupt. The advantage of Nivison's interpretation is that it is based, as we have just seen, on unambiguous statements in a central Mohist text.
23. The received view among anthropologists and Skinnerian behaviorists had long favored something like the Mohist view. However, the empirical evidence for the claim that there is no human nature has recently received extensive criticism. Typical is the view of anthropologist Donald E. Brown who, in a survey of this topic, concluded,

“Whatever the motive may be for resisting the idea that there is a human nature whose features shape culture and society, its intellectual foundations have all but collapsed” (*Human Universals* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991], 144).

24. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984),

55.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 95 and p. 98ff.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

PART II

FRIENDS, AUTHORITY, FAMILY, AND MORAL CULTIVATION