

Mohism, Ruism, and Effective Altruism

Some preliminary notes by Daniel Kokotajlo

1. Overview & Disclaimer

- I am not an expert on ancient Chinese philosophy or on China. I don't even speak the language. The interpretations and connections I'm about to draw are my best attempt made on the basis of reading (translations of) some primary texts, as well as a secondary text or two, and talking about it with philosophers more knowledgeable than myself. As a result there is a significant chance that I've made some interpretive errors.
- What I am presenting here is *not* an overview of the views of Mozi or Mengzi. Rather, I'm cataloguing all the pieces of their writings that seem similar to the current debates about effective altruism. I highly recommend reading overviews of their views before talking about them.
- Relevant quotes will be in footnotes.
- The texts I'm using are:
 - *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Ivanhoe and van Norden translators. (Referred to as *Readings*)
 - *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings*, by Knoblock & Riegel. (Everything not labelled *Readings* is from this)

2. Similarities between EA and Mozi

- Mozi's doctrine of *jian-ai*, translated as "impartial care," or "inclusive care," is basically the same doctrine that EAs appeal to when they say that everyone is equal, or when they say that saving a life in a poor country is just as good as saving a life in your own country, or when they say that it's better to help hundreds of pigs in faraway cages than to help your local cute homeless puppy.¹

¹ From the summary: "As an alternative to Confucian familial love, he argued for *jian'ai*, which is often translated as "universal love" but is better understood as "impartial care." In Mozi's view, the central ethical problem was excessive partiality, not a lack of compassion." From Mozi himself: "If people regarded other people's states in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own state to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people's cities in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own city to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people's families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself." (*Readings* 64)

- Strikingly, Mozi does what I call a "Census of Harms" where he lays out all the major problems in the world and then tries to take stock of the big picture.² He then searches for the underlying causes of these problems and concludes that they are generally the result of partiality. Next, he sets himself the task of reducing partiality and promoting impartiality. This seems to me to be very much in keeping with EA methodology: Maximize, don't [satisfice](#)!
- Mozi explicitly endorses an additive stance on proportionality: he says ten murders are ten times as bad as one, that a hundred murders are a hundred times as bad, etc.³ For small numbers at least, this is pretty much official EA doctrine.⁴
- Mozi takes care to convince the reader that his plan is feasible, that partiality is not something immutable or inescapable.⁵ This parallels the EA emphasis on tractability. The text is full of devil's-advocate style questions through which Mozi holds himself to a relatively high standard of rigor while simultaneously modelling good epistemology.⁶
- In particular, Mozi thinks that a comprehensive system of incentives for impartiality could work, because he thinks that human behavior depends greatly on incentives.⁷ (He

² Our teacher Mozi says, "The business of a benevolent person is to promote what is beneficial to the world and eliminate what is harmful." *Granted that this is true, what are the greatest harms that are being done in the world today?* Our teacher Mozi says, "It is things such as great states attacking small states, ... [proceeds to give long list of different harms] ..." If we try to discover the origin of these different harms, where do we find they come from? Do they come from caring for and benefiting people? This clearly must be rejected as the origin of these harms. We must recognize that they come from hating and stealing from people. If we wish to distinguish those in the world who hate and steal from people, do we refer to them as impartial or partial? We clearly must call them partial. And so it is those who are partial in their dealings with others who are the real cause of all the great harms in the world. This is why our teacher Mozi says, "I condemn partiality." Now those who condemn another's view must offer something in its place. If one condemns another's view without offering something in its place this is like adding water to a flood or flame to a fire. Such appeals prove to have no merit. This is why our teacher Mozi says, "Replace partiality with impartiality." (Readings 64, emphasis mine.)

³ "Killing someone is wrong and must be punished with execution. But if we extrapolate out from this view, then killing ten people is ten times as bad and must be punished with ten executions, and killing one hundred people is one hundred times as bad and must be punished with one hundred executions." (Readings 73)

⁴ Once we get to numbers in the trillions and above, concerns about Pascal's Mugging appear, causing some EAs to adopt a bounded utility function.

⁵ "...there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality, saying, 'It is surely a fine thing. Nevertheless, how can it possibly be applied?' Our teacher Mozi says, *'If it could not be applied even I would condemn it! But...'*"

(Readings 65) Later: "Though this is so, there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality saying, 'Impartiality is benevolent and right but how can one practice it? The impossibility of practicing impartiality is like the impossibility of picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He.'" Our teacher Mozi says, "As for picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He, this is something that no human being has ever done. But as for impartially caring for and benefitting one another, this is something that we know the four former sage-kings themselves practiced." (Readings 67)

⁶ "How do we know that the four former sage-kings themselves followed these practices? Our teacher Mozi says, "I am not of their age or time and so have not personally heard their voices or seen their faces, but I know this by what is written on bamboo and silk, etched on metal and stone, and inscribed on basins and bowls that have passed down to us through succeeding generations. For example, the Great Oath says..." (Readings 68, emphases mine) Of course, valuing good epistemology isn't unique to EA, but it is something we emphasize unusually strongly.

⁷ "Curtailling 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. Within a single

gives numerous historical examples to prove this.) Effective altruism isn't committed to any view about the importance of incentives, but modern social science tends to think that incentives are very important.

- Mozi founded and ran a social movement with the goal of solving the world's problems by implementing the incentive scheme previously discussed.⁸ He was a philosopher, but also a leader and organizer.
- **Mozi's moral system seems to be about as demanding as Peter Singer's.⁹ Apparently some Mohists would live simply and cheaply and push themselves to devote all their energy to the cause, just like some of the most committed EAs.¹⁰**
- Mozi spends pages and pages railing against musical ceremonies, elaborate funerals, and so forth. His critique is that they cost a lot of money which could be better spent solving

generation the people changed. Why? Because they wanted to accord with the wishes of their superiors. "Now as for impartially caring for and benefitting one another, such things are incalculably beneficial and easy to practice. The only problem is that there are no superiors who take delight in them. If only there were superiors who delighted in them, who encouraged their practice through rewards and praise, and threatened those who violate them with penalties and punishments, I believe that the people would take to impartially caring for and benefitting one another just as naturally as fire rises up and water flows down." (*Readings* 72) A general theme of the Mozi vs. Mengzi debate is that Mozi seems to think human nature is way more malleable than Mengzi does.

⁸ For more on this, read the encyclopedia articles or historical notes on Mozi. For an example of Mozi promoting this scheme in the text: "Since this is the case, what is the best way to go about increasing the number of worthy men? Our teacher Mozi says, "It is analogous to the case of wanting to increase the number of good archers or charioteers in one's state. One must reward and esteem them, revere and praise them; then one can succeed in increasing the number of good archers or charioteers in one's state. How much more should this be done in the case of worthy men—those who are well versed in virtuous conduct, discriminating in discussion, and broadly knowledgeable! Such men are state treasures, guardians of the altars to the soil and grain. They too must be rewarded and esteemed, revered and praised; then one can succeed in increasing the number of worthy men in one's state." (*Readings* 58) Later: "And so, at that time, rank was awarded on the basis of virtue, work was assigned according to office, reward was distributed according to the amount of labor done, and salary allotted in proportion to the effort expended. And so officials were not guaranteed constant nobility and people did not have to perpetually remain in a humble state. Those with ability were promoted, those without ability were demoted. This is what it means to 'Promote public righteousness and prevent private resentment.'" (*Readings* 59)

⁹ "If the world is poor, benevolent people do what they can to enrich it. If the people are few, benevolent people do what they can to increase their numbers. If the world is in chaos, benevolent people do what they can to make it well ordered. In pursuing these ends benevolent people may find that their strength is insufficient, their resources inadequate, or their knowledge too limited, and that they fall short. *But they would never hold back any of their strength or any scheme or advantage and not apply these in their efforts to realize the world's well-being.*" (*Readings* 76, emphasis mine.) And again: "The benevolent surely are those who devote themselves to finding ways to promote what is beneficial to the world while eliminating what is harmful; this is why they are proper models for human conduct throughout the world. If something benefits the world then they will do it. If it does not benefit the world then they will stop doing it. Moreover, when the benevolent think about the people of the world, if there is something that attracts their eyes, delights their ears, pleases their palates, and gives comfort to their bodies but this thing can only be gotten by sacrificing the people's stock of food and clothing, they will not engage in it." (*Readings* 100)

¹⁰ "Many of the Mohists of later ages wear furs and rough clothing, clogs and grass slippers, never resting day or night, taking self-sacrifice as the highest. They say, "One who cannot do this is not following the way of Yu and doesn't deserve to be called a Mohist." ... They press each other forward in self-sacrifice until there's no flesh left on their calves or hair on their shins." (Zhuangzi, Book 33, "Under Heaven") (Caution:

problems like poverty and famine.¹¹ This seems to me to be very similar to how EAs critique e.g. the Make A Wish foundation, donations to universities or art galleries or theatres, and so forth.

- Mozi talks about the importance of cause prioritization in a way that seems sensitive to importance and neglectedness.¹²
- Mozi thinks that increasing the population would be a good thing.¹³
- Mozi emphasizes the importance of an external, objective standard to judge which actions and policies are right and wrong.¹⁴ (He thinks this is where consequences and impartiality come in.) He pretty much was writing before the [invention of mathematics](#), so we can fantasize that if he had heard of the concept of expected-value calculations he would have approved.
- Mozi's Three Gauges for evaluating propositions does include an appeal to tradition/precedent, but notably, it has a focus on empirical data and experimentation.¹⁵

¹¹ "These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people." This is why our teacher Mozi says, "Musical performances are wrong!" (Readings 102, and again and again over the next few pages.) Mozi makes it very clear (100) that the sound of music is very beautiful and pleasurable; he emphasises that he condemns it because of opportunity cost rather than for any other reason.

¹² "When our Master Mozi was planning to travel abroad, Wei Yue inquired of him: "When you have obtained audience with the superior men of the four quarters, what will you discuss first?" Master Mozi replied: "Whenever you enter a country, you must select what most needs attention and devote your efforts to that. If the country is in confusion and chaos threatens, then expound the principles of Exalt the Worthy and Exalt Conformity. If it is impoverished, then expound the principles of Moderate Expenditures and Moderate Burials. If the nation is infatuated with music and besotted with wine, then expound the principles of Condemn Music and Condemn Fatalism. If the nation is wanton, perverse, and lacking in ritual principles, then expound the principles of Honor Heaven and Serve the Ghosts. If the nation cheats, plunders, extorts, and terrorizes others, then expound the principles of Impartial Love and Condemn Aggression. This is why I said to select what most needs attention and devote your efforts to that."" (The Mozi 49.10)

¹³ See e.g. *Readings* 75. To clarify, EA isn't committed to the idea that increasing the population would always be a good thing, nor the idea that it is good in the current situation. Rather, many EA's hold the view that in the long run we should try to spread life and civilization to other star systems, to support a greater population at equal or greater standards of living than could be achieved on earth. Moreover, many EA's are hedonistic utilitarians, and thus think that adding more happy lives to the world is good. By contrast, it's not clear whether Mozi advocates increasing the population for deep-seated philosophical reasons or merely for instrumental reasons, e.g. because it helps the state defend itself. So the similarity may be only surface-deep.

¹⁴ "Our teacher Mozi says, "I hold to the will of Heaven as a wheelwright holds to his compass and a carpenter his square. Wheelwrights and carpenters hold fast to their compasses and squares in order to gauge what is round and square throughout the world saying, 'What is plumb with this is true, what is not is false!' The books of all the gentlemen in the world today are so numerous that they cannot be exhaustively catalogued and their teachings and maxims are more than can be counted. Above they offer their opinions to the feudal lords and below they expound them to various men of worth. But they are far from what is benevolent and right! How do I know this? I say, 'I measure them with the clearest standard in all the world.'" (*Readings* 89)[Note: Elsewhere Mozi argues that the will of Heaven is for everyone to care for everyone else impartially.] And of course, remember that Mozi's state-of-nature theory has differences of opinion about norms as the source of conflict.

¹⁵ "When one advances claims, one must first establish a standard of assessment. To make claims in the absence of such a standard is like trying to establish on the surface of a spinning potter's wheel where the sun will rise and set. Without a fixed standard, one can-not clearly ascertain what is right and wrong or what is beneficial and harmful. And so, in assessing claims, one must use the three gauges." What are the "three gauges?" Our teacher Mozi says,

Besides, the fact that he chose to spend time talking about how to effectively seek the truth is itself a similarity to EA thought.

- Mozi has a state of nature theory, which explains the purpose and importance of government, that is very similar to Hobbes' state of nature theory. However, Mozi's is more general: Instead of talking specifically about competing for resources, status, etc. or even about having different goals, Mozi characterizes the problem as arising from a diversity of norms: Everyone has their own idea about what should be done, and this puts people into conflict with one another.¹⁶ This is remarkably insightful, in my opinion, and prefigures a lot of the ideas developed on SlateStarCodex and the rationality community more generally. Those communities aren't EA but they overlap with EA.¹⁷
- In response to the above, EAs have [explored](#) the game theory and decision theory of cooperation, applied to cases in which the parties have different norms/morals. [Some](#) have even concluded that *even if we only care about people like us* the rational thing to do is to work for the good of all, *because otherwise how could we expect others to work for our good?* Mozi gives a simple, nonmathematical version of this argument.¹⁸

"The gauges of precedent, evidence, and application." How does one assess a claim's precedents? Our teacher Mozi says, "One looks up for precedents among the affairs and actions of the ancient sage-kings." How does one assess a claim's evidence? Our teacher Mozi says, "One looks down to examine evidence of what the people have heard and seen." How does one assess a claim's application? Our teacher Mozi says, "One implements it as state policy and sees whether or not it produces benefit for the state, families, and people. These are what are called the three gauges for assessing claims." (*Readings* 106)

¹⁶ "In ancient times, when people first came into being and before there were governments or laws, each person followed their own norm for deciding what was right and wrong. And so where there was one person there was one norm, where there were two people there were two norms, where there were ten people there were ten different norms. As many people as there were, that was how many norms were recognized. In this way people came to approve their own norms for what is right and wrong and thereby condemn the norms of others. And so they mutually condemned each other's norms. For this reason, within families, there was resentment and hatred between fathers and sons and elder and younger brothers that caused them to separate and disperse and made it impossible for them to cooperate harmoniously with one another. ... The chaos that ruled in the world was like what one finds among the birds and beasts." (*Readings* 60) Like Hobbes, Mozi uses his state of nature theory to explain why government is necessary. I should clarify here that Hobbes does also consider conflicting norms to be a source of conflict; he just doesn't give it center stage.

¹⁷ Elsewhere he says the troubles of the world stem from partiality. A charitable interpretation is that he is saying that most of the problems in the world arise from a combination of people being partial and people subscribing to different norms. This is eminently reasonable, no?)

¹⁸ Well, either we interpret it as a simple and nonmathematical version of the sophisticated decision theory stuff EAs are doing, or we interpret it as a shoddy argument like most philosophers have so far. Here's the argument: "...there are still people in the world who condemn impartiality, saying, 'It does not seek what is beneficial for one's parents, so does it not harm filial piety?'" Our teacher Mozi says, "Let us consider the case of a filial son who seeks what is beneficial for his parents. Does a filial son who seeks what is beneficial for his parents want other people to care for and benefit his par-ents or does he want other people to dislike and steal from his parents? According to the very meaning of filial piety, he 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 another, expecting that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting 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 benefitting one's own parents? Clearly one must first care for and benefit the parents of others in order to expect that they in turn will respond by

3. Differences between EA and Mozi

- Mozi's movement sought to overthrow existing systems of power, whereas his Ruist (Confucian) critics sought to align themselves with it, gain an audience, and thereby reform it from within. EA these days seems to be more akin to the Ruists in this regard.
- Mozi's movement was militant whereas EA is peaceful. This is another way in which EA is closer to the Ruists.
- I don't think EAs per se have an opinion on the malleability of human nature. EAs are open to being convinced that e.g. humans are naturally and stubbornly selfish to the point where it really would be better for us all to focus on helping our own communities, or to care less about impact and more about personal engagement and fulfillment. Mozi, by mild contrast, is explicitly committed to the malleability of human behavior.
- It is speculated that Mozi came from a lower class background than Mengzi, Kongzi, etc. Perhaps he was a carpenter, since he talks about woodworking so often. EA, by contrast, has historically drawn from students at prestigious universities. It's unclear how to map the current class system on to the ancient Chinese one (who would be today's equivalent of a carpenter? An engineer maybe?) so it's not clear whether this is a difference or a similarity.
- EAs tend to respond to the problem of conflicting norms by advocating toleration and cooperation. Mozi, by contrast, thought the best solution was to have only one norm, and for that reason he advocated hierarchical authority structures: Pick one person to set the norms, and then everyone else align their norms with those of that person.¹⁹ (His advocacy of objective, consequence-based standards can also be seen as an attempt to solve this problem—a solution EAs would love.)

caring for and benefitting one's own parents. And so for such mutually filial sons to realize unlimited good results, must they not first care for and benefit other people's parents? Or should they let it be the case that filial sons are the exception and not the rule among the people of the world?" (*Readings* 70) The most sympathetic interpretation of this argument that I've heard so far is that Mozi was arguing about what the Dao should be, i.e. about what standards of behavior should apply to everyone--and so if you want to promote a Dao that permits you to not care for others, you are thereby promoting a Dao that permits others to not care for you. I think the decision-theory angle is another promising way to interpret it, though.

¹⁹ "If we look into how good order was maintained in the district, what do we find? Was it not simply because the leader of the district was able to unify the norms followed within the district that he was able to maintain good order in it? "The leader of each district would be the most benevolent person in the district. When he announced his rule to the people of the district he would say, 'Whenever you hear of anything either good or bad, you must report it to the ruler of the state. Whenever the ruler of the state approves of something all of you must also approve of it. Whenever the ruler of the state condemns something all of you must also condemn it. Eliminate any bad teachings that you may have and study the good teachings of the ruler of the state. Eliminate any bad practices that you may have and study the good practices of the ruler of the state. If you do this then how could the state ever become disordered?' (*Readings* 62)

- Mozi believed in ghosts and spirits, and in Heaven, whereas a majority of EAs are atheists or agnostics.

4. Similarities between the debate at that time and the debate today

- Mengzi positions his view between Mozi's and Yangzi's, where Mozi's is perfect impartiality and Yangzi is perfect partiality.²⁰ Similarly, most critics of EA will say things like "Obviously we should help others in need, even if they are of a different nationality—I'm not a Randian!—but nevertheless..."
- Mengzi thinks that Mohism will result in people being animals and even will result in treating people like animals. (See previous footnote) This is similar to the common critique that utilitarianism and similar doctrines pave over human relationships and connections in the service of the Greater Good, and also to the standard critique of "Ends justify the means" consequentialism (that it historically has led to cannibalism, genocide, etc.)
- Mengzi focuses on developing proper discretion, developing a virtuous inner sense of right and wrong, by explicit contrast with Mozi's call for an external standard.²¹ Mengzi thinks there is no set of rules that we can follow that will accurately capture what the right thing to do is every time. This argument should be very familiar to EAs, since it is made all the time today.
- One of Mengzi's biggest criticisms of Mozi is that it is too demanding—it will 'kill your sprouts.' For Mengzi, our moral behavior stems from our emotions (like empathy and shame) which can be thought of as sprouts, that start from seeds and grow larger and stronger if properly nurtured, but which will die or be stunted otherwise. For Mengzi, and the Ruists more generally, the most effective way to reform the world is to start with yourself, and then your personal relationships to people you know, and then work outward from there, building on each success to extend your empathy and experience further. This doctrine seems very similar to some of the common critiques of EA, and moreover it has the same consequences—people feeling less guilty, people focusing on

²⁰ "Yangzi chose egoism. If plucking out one hair from his body would have benefitted 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. ... Once again, a sage-king has not arisen; the various lords are dissipated; pundits engage in contrary wrangling; the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mo Di fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang, then it leans toward Mo. Yang is 'egoism.' This is to not have a ruler. Mo is 'universal love.' This is to not have a father. To not have a father and to not have a ruler is to be an animal. ... If the Ways of Yang and Mo do not cease, and the Way of Kongzi is not made evident, then evil doctrines will dupe the people, and obstruct benevolence and righteousness. If benevolence and righteousness are obstructed, that leads animals to devour people. I am afraid that people will begin to devour one another!" (Readings 149, 131, 132)

²¹ 7B5 Mengzi said, "A carpenter or a wheelwright can give another his compass or T-square, but he cannot make another skillful." (Readings 150) This seems to be a response to Mozi's metaphor of Heaven's Will as the standard to guide behavior.

problems in their community rather than on more dire problems abroad, or on projects they are passionate about rather than projects unfamiliar to them, etc.

5. References and further reading

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mohism/>

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