

George (Xian Zhi) Liu

UNI: xl2399

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Conrad Schirokauer

Mozi and Socrates

The development of early philosophical thought in China can largely be attributed to Mozi, the founder of the Mohist school of philosophy and one of the first true philosophers of China. Interestingly, Mozi advocated principles strikingly similar to those of another philosopher, one who is considered to be a founder of early philosophical thought in the West: Socrates. Both lived around the same time (Mozi lived circa 480 - 390 BC, whereas Socrates lived circa 470 - 399 BC), albeit more than 7,000 km away in civilizations with completely different cultures and norms. The development of both the Mohist and Socratic schools of thought in tandem with each other revolved around similar ideas that both schools had about the characteristics of the ideal society. Both schools emphasized the prioritization of the collective over the individual, showed disdain for the family unit, and supported highly centralized governments based on meritocratic systems.

One of the central tenets of the Mohist school of thought was the need for the citizenry to conduct themselves in a manner known as “impartial caring.” This concept advocated rejecting partiality in one’s treatment of others in favor of treating everyone equally well with the caring and compassion that oneself would want to be treated with. To Mozi, impartial caring was the lifeblood of an ideal society, since “it is those who are impartial in their dealings with others who are the real cause of all great benefits in the world” (Ivanhoe and Norden 69). He reached this conclusion through deduction (a logical process Socrates is also known for), positing that “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?" (Ivanhoe and Norden 68). To Mozi, partiality, or the preference of some people over others, inevitably led to sectarian conflicts such as "great states attacking small states, great families wreaking havoc with lesser families... and the noble acting arrogantly toward the humble" (Ivanhoe and Norden 68).

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates, in a discussion with his friend Glaucon, rhetorically constructed a kallipolis, or his version of an ideal society, that contain similar aspects to Mozi's concept of impartial care in his perfect society. For one, Socrates believed that the greatest evil for a city was "that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one," and that "when some suffer greatly, while others rejoice greatly, at the same things happening to the city or its people, ... this privatization of pleasures and pains dissolves the city" (Plato 136). For Socrates and Glaucon, the kallipolis must be "most like a single person," one in which "whenever anything good or bad happens to a single one of its citizens, such a city above all others will say that the affected part is its own and will share in the pleasure or pain as a whole" (Plato 137). Socrates' emphasis on the importance of the coalescence of the kallipolis into an individual unit echoed Mozi's concept of impartial caring, which aimed to unite everyone in the state through equal treatment. In both the Socratic and Mohist schools of thought, individuals and small groups were completely deemphasized and discouraged in favor of measures that would benefit the collective society. To both Mozi and Socrates, unity of the entire society is the key to an ideal society.

The similarities increase when Mozi and Socrates detail societal norms that need to be changed to achieve an ideal society, namely the family unit. To Mozi, strong familial ties posed a threat to an ideal society because it led to unequal treatment of some (relatives) over others (the

general population). Mozi repeatedly emphasized that the family units needed to be changed so that partiality won't be shown to brothers or relatives since "partiality gives rise to all the great harms in the world" (Ivanhoe and Norden 69). This was a radical concept back then and allowed the Mohist school to differentiate itself from one of its major rivals, Confucianism, which emphasized the importance of filial piety and strong family units to society. It is important to note that although Mozi believed families should operate on the concept of impartial care, he also believed that impartiality would be actually more beneficial for the family than filial piety, noting that impartial care simply means that "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" (Ivanhoe and Norden 75).

Socrates, much like Mozi, took issue with the concept of family and actually went beyond Mozi in attacking the role of familial ties in his kallipolis. Whereas Mozi simply advocated a shift in attitude from familial partiality, Socrates supported the complete destruction of the family unit. He declared that in a kallipolis "all these women are to belong in common to all the men, that none are to live privately with any man, and that the children, too, are to be possessed in common, so that no parent will know his own offspring or any child his parent" (Plato 131-132). To Socrates, this in turn allowed for the disintegration of kinship names and relationships in the kallipolis, resulting in "the having of pleasures and pains in common" on a society-wide level (Plato 138). Summing up his recommendation, Socrates echoed Mozi in stating that "If different people apply the term ["mine"] to different things, one would drag into his own house whatever he could separate from the others, and another would drag things into a different house to a different wife and children...but our people, on the other hand, will think of the same things as their own, aim at the same goal, and as

far as possible, feel pleasure and pain in unison” (Plato 139). For both Mozi and Socrates, a reevaluation of the family unit was a crucial step forward in achieving the ideal society.

Mozi and Socrates also both supported highly centralized governments to reinforce the unity in their ideal societies. Mozi noted that 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 what was wrong” (Ivanhoe and Norden 65). This in turn led to horrible chaos due to a lack of rulers so the people finally “chose the best person among the most worthy and capable in the world and established him as the Son of Heaven” (Ivanhoe and Norden 65). Mozi explained that this Son of Heaven commanded absolute power over his subjects and decreed such authoritarian measures as “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 approve of it.” (Ivanhoe and Norden 66). To Mozi, the concentration of power in the government was absolutely fine and even ideal because it allowed for the establishment of order. In defending the power of the Son of Heaven, Mozi posed a rhetorical question to his follower, asking “If we look into how good order was maintained in the world, what do we find? Was it not simply because the Son of Heaven was able to unify the norms followed within the world that he was able to maintain good order in it?” (Ivanhoe and Norden 67).

In the Mohist world, the central ruler set the example of impartial care throughout the kingdom. To Mozi, truly enlightened rulers “want their states to be wealthy, their populations great, and their administrations orderly” (Ivanhoe and Norden 61). A ruler with a mindset of impartial care fulfills all three of these parameters because such a mindset required that one “must first worry

about the well-being of one's people and then worry about oneself' (Ivanhoe and Norden 71). This attitude gave the ruler legitimacy in the face of the population, for "even though one may not advocate impartiality, one would certainly want to follow the ruler who is impartial," in turn allowing the ruler the support necessary to achieve his three objectives (Ivanhoe and Norden 71). Mozi also repeatedly pointed out that "impartiality is the way of the sage-kings" and that the ancient sage-kings such as King Wen and King Wu, the embodiment of exemplary rulers, "allocated everything equitably, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked without showing any partiality to their relatives or brothers" (Ivanhoe and Norden 76, 74). To reiterate the importance of a central ruler's impartiality, Mozi drew on a variety of sources, quoting texts such as the *Odes of Zhou*, which stated that: "The King's Way is broad so broad; without partiality or party. The King's Way is even so even; without party or partiality" (Ivanhoe and Norden 74). Mozi declared that through practicing and encouraging impartial care "when a sage rules a state that state will be twice as well off. When a sage rules the empire the empire will be twice as well off." (Ivanhoe and Norden 78).

Socrates also emphasized the importance of a central ruler. In fact, he noted that the kallipolis won't be possible without a central ruler in the form of a philosopher-king, stating that "until philosophers rule as kings in cities...the constitution we've been describing in theory [the kallipolis] we've been describing in theory will never be born to the fullest extent possible or see the light of sun" (Plato 148). To Socrates, this central ruler would be the one administering the mate selection and procreation process and "this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers, so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissension as possible" (Plato 134). Moreover, Socrates regarded the importance of secrecy in this process as paramount to

the extent that he encouraged the “considerable use of falsehood and deception” by the rulers “for the benefit of those they rule” (Plato 133).

Another common aspect of both Mozi’s and Socrates’ ideal society was the importance of its development through a meritocratic framework. Although Mozi believed in equal treatment among citizens, he emphasized that rulers should “honor the worthy and employ the capable in carrying out their rule” (Ivanhoe and Norden 62). This sentiment in part stemmed from Mozi’s humble origins as a member of the craft/artisan class and Mozi’s belief in the practical benefits of a society with a meritocratic mindset (Ivanhoe and Norden 59). Mozi told his disciples that “it is the proper work of kings, dukes and great officers to increase the number of worthy men in their states” and that the best way to do so was to “reward and esteem them, revere and praise them [worthy men]” (Ivanhoe and Norden 62). To Mozi, the honoring of the worthy, who he defined as those “well versed in virtuous conduct, discrimination in discussion, and broadly knowledgeable” would establish a positive chain effect that would result in everyone striving to become worthy instead of relying on wealth, relations, and eminence (or lack thereof) (Ivanhoe and Norden 62). Mozi was adamant that this meritocratic treatment apply to every level of society, pointing out that when the sage-kings ruled, “even someone who worked as a farmer, artisan, or merchant, if they had talent they were promoted, given high rank and a handsome salary, entrusted with responsibility, and empowered to have their orders obeyed” (Ivanhoe and Norden 63).

Similarly, Socrates advocated for the creation of a meritocracy, one which would reward those who “seem most of all to believe throughout their lives that they must eagerly pursue what is advantageous to the city” (Plato 89). Interestingly, both Socrates and Mozi justified the creation of a meritocracy not on the grounds that it would morally right but on the grounds that it would benefit

the society the most, a further reinforcement of their results-oriented concern for the collective, not the individual. Socrates envisioned meritocracy in the kallipolis as being comprised of competitions to filter out those with inadequate dedication to the city. Socrates asserted that “we must subject them [the citizens] to labors, pains, and contests in which we can watch for these traits” (Plato 90). Much like Mozi, he emphasized that although the citizenry should be united, citizens should be assigned different ranks in the kallipolis. Socrates explained this using a precious metals analogy, noting that “all of you in the city are brothers but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule...silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen” (Plato 91). Just like Mozi, Socrates also explicitly dismissed societal status based on wealth/connections, declaring that “if an offspring of theirs [golden parents] should be found to have a mixture of iron or bronze, they must not pity him in any way, but to give him the rank appropriate to his nature” (Plato 91).

As established earlier, both Socrates and Mozi advocated centralized governments, so it's no surprise that they both believe the rulers should be the ones taking initiative in setting up and overseeing the meritocratic system. Mozi emphasized that “it is the proper work of kings, dukes, and great officers to increase the number of worthy men in their states” whereas Socrates emphasized that “the firsthand most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation” (Ivanhoe and Norden 62, Plato 91).

Mozi and Socrates come from two extremely different civilizations thousands of kilometers apart with different cultures, societal norms, values, and governments. Yet not only were they able to come up with distinct philosophies that contain very similar characteristics, but they ultimately

became the most prominent philosophers of their time in their respective civilizations, preaching these similar schools of thought. Both articulated visions of an ideal society with a centralized government, a meritocratic system, a code of conduct based on collective unity and experience over individual actions, and radical change in familial units.

Works Cited

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