

A Comparison Between Mohism and Utilitarianism

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Received 22 November 2020; accepted 20 February 2021

Published online 26 February 2021

Abstract

Mohism is not a form of utilitarianism. First of all, neither of the two is ego-oriented. Besides, utilitarianism is based on individual interest, and the interest of community is simply the sum up of every individual interest; while Mohism does not put self-interest or individual interest first, but rather treat interest of community as primary consideration, which sometimes requires individuals to satisfy their own interest to make the public interest possible. The comparison between Mohism and utilitarianism illustrates the danger of employing western philosophical ideas to interpret ancient Chinese terms.

Key words: Mohism; Utilitarianism; Reverse analogical interpretation

Ma, X. F. (2021). A Comparison Between Mohism and Utilitarianism. *Canadian Social Science*, 17(1), 54-57. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12006> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12006>

INTRODUCTION

Many modern philosophers, including Feng Youlan, Benjamin I. Schwartz and Leelo Liu, believe Mohist central concept of “all-embracing love” (兼爱) shows that Mohism is an early form of utilitarianism. Liu (2006, p.113) says that to get people to accept all-embracing love, Mozi makes them “see how beneficial it would be if everyone were able to love one another universally”, and Mozi also points out “one who loves will be loved by others and one who hates will be hated by others”. Schwartz (1985: 146) describes the principle of all-

embracing love as “the utilitarian ethics” which brings people to the conviction that their own self-interest is entirely dependent on the general interest of all of mankind. I will analyze utilitarianism first then make some comparisons between Mohism and utilitarianism, to see whether the statement of “Mohism is a form of utilitarianism” makes sense.

1. MAIN THEORIES OF UTILITARIANISM

There are several theories in utilitarianism. One is the pleasure-pain principle. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, says, “nature has placed mankind under the government of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think.” (Bentham, 2005, p.11) That is to say, the motive and intention for any action is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Accordingly, whether it brings pleasure or pain determines whether an action is right or wrong. In this way, pleasure becomes a moral good while pain moral bad.

Then there is the principle of utility. “By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantages, pleasure, good or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness”. (Bentham, 2005, p.12) The principle of utility is a “principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness.” (Bentham, 2005, p.12) This principle has two applicable targets: one is the happiness or interest of individual which can be measured through the values of his pleasures and pains brought by an act, and the other is the happiness or

interest of the community. From Bentham's point of view, the interest of community is the simple sum up of the interests of the several members who compose it, so "it is in vain to talk of the interest of the community without understanding what the interest of individual is". (Bentham, 2005, p.12) Only when every member of the community maximizes his interest can the community achieve the maximization of its interest. In this way, individual interest acts as the foundation and has the foremost position.

All in all, utilitarianism holds that the best moral action is the one that maximizes utility, and that the utility of every individual is more important than that of a community. Now I will look at the reasons why Leeloo Liu and Schwartz consider Mohism to be utilitarian.

2. SELF, OTHERS AND INDIVIDUALS

From Leeloo Liu's point of view, Mozi urges people to love one another universally, because for Mozi, people's own self-interest was best secured when they could love universally. Though one must pay something for loving others, what he would get in return is much more than what he would get if he did not love others. We can see that there are two hypotheses in Liu's opinion: first, all-embracing love is essentially ego-oriented. Second, all-embracing love is utilitarian because of this orientation. I will analyze these hypotheses to see if they are convincing.

First, is all-embracing love ego-oriented?

As we know, there is a famous statement by Mencius which goes: "Yang believes in 'each one for himself', if taking one of his hair could benefit everything under heaven, he would not do so. Mozi believes in 'all-embracing love', if suffering his body from the top to the bottom could benefit everything under heaven, he would do so." (杨子取为我，拔一毛而利天下，不为也。墨子兼爱，摩顶放踵利天下，为之。) From what Mencius said, it is clear that the ideas of Yangzhu and Mozi were contrary to one another: Yangzhu only cares about himself while Mozi only cares about others. Furthermore, Mozi would even suffer himself to help others. If Mozi's aim is to get others help him or love him back, as utilitarianism advocates, I doubt what he receives can hardly make up for what he pays or suffers. If we read the three chapters in *Mozi* all titled "All-embracing love", where the idea of all-embracing love is best expressed, we can also see that Mozi has made a clear distinction between loving others (others-oriented) and loving oneself (ego-oriented). In the first chapter of the three¹, Mozi argues that the father and

the son, the elder brother and younger brother, the minister and the ruler all love themselves and do not love their pairing, hence they impair others to benefit themselves which causes the disorder of society. If everyone loves others as they love themselves, then all the wars and crimes will come to an end. In this chapter, Mozi simply encourages one to love others, but there is no expectation on "others will love him in return".

Besides, all-embracing love reflects the spirit of *hsieh* (侠), which is totally others-oriented. As we all know, social background can profoundly influence the thought of people. Considering the strictly disciplined organization constituted by the Mohists, as well as the great concerns for military technique shown in *Mozi*, most scholars such as Feng Youlan (1976, p.50) believe that Mozi and his followers came from the *hsieh* (侠), who used to be the hereditary warriors during the feudal age of Chou Dynasty. They also agree that all-embracing love simply "represents a logical extension of the professional ethics of the class of *hsieh*". (Feng, 1976, p.53) What are the professional ethics of *hsieh*? In *Shiji*, it is said: "Their words were always sincere and trustworthy, and their actions always quick and decisive. They were always true to what they promised, and without regard to their own persons, they would rush into dangers threatening others." (言必信，其行必果，已诺必诚，不爱其躯，赴士之阨困) These ethics can also be called as "ren (任)", which is well explained in *Mozi*: "Shi (士) suffers himself to benefit what he would like to fight for." (士损己而益所为也) "Do what his body dislikes to help others in trouble." (为身之所恶，以成人之所急) If we also take the stories of Mohists and *hsieh* in history into consideration, it is clear that what Mohists and *hsieh* did was purely for the benefit of other people, even though such actions might do harm to their own bodies. Thus, if we admit that the all-embracing love is driven by this kind of ethics, we should also admit that all-embracing love is totally "other people" oriented.

Therefore, I think Mohism considers others to be the aim of one's action, not just a guarantee for one's own happiness or interest. It is others-oriented instead of ego-oriented

Then the second hypothesis: is utilitarianism ego-oriented?

As is mentioned before, utilitarianism attaches great importance to individual interest. However, individual interest does not equal to self-interest. For utilitarianism, the measurement of happiness is to sum up all the values of all the pleasures and those of all the pains, then see the balance. All the pleasures and pains only differ in quantity but not in quality, which means the same kind of action will bring the same value of pleasure or pain to everyone. And the measurement of happiness works for both the individual and the community, while the happiness of the latter requires the sum up of happiness of everyone in that

¹ There are several chapters whose titles are the same and the contents are slightly different in *Mozi*. Many scholars believe that those different versions were written by disciples belonging to three different sects after the death of Mozi, to retail Mozi's ideas respectively. As for the three chapters named "All-embracing Love", there are phrases like "Master Mozi said" only appearing in the second and third chapters but not in the first one, so it is likely that the first chapter was written by Mozi himself, and the other two by disciples of him. In this way, the first chapter is of more value for us to know the true meaning of all-embracing love.

community. Thus all individual interests are considered equally, and every moral agent treats oneself with no higher regard than one has for others, which is distinctly different from egoism.

So Leeloo Liu was wrong from the beginning to regard Mohism as utilitarian due to the “egoism” which Mohism does not contain, and which is also not a feature of utilitarianism.

3. INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

From Schwartz’s point of view, Mohists advocate all-embracing love because they believe that “his own interests and the interests of all can be served only when ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number is achieved’”. “Only when the ‘general interest’ of the world has been served can the genuine interests of individuals be met.” (Schwartz 1985: 146) Here he regards all-embracing as utilitarian because of its individual consideration. But he also notices that in Mohism, with respect to individual interests and the interests of the community, the latter is of high importance and acts as the foundation. In fact, that is what makes Mohism different from utilitarianism.

We have discussed before that Mohism is others-oriented, and the “others” in Mozi usually mean “all under heaven”, which refers to the community, state, or world. In the chapter of all-embracing love, it is said “the business of the benevolent man is to seek to promote what is beneficial to the world and to eliminate what is harmful.” (仁人之事者，必务求兴天下利，除天下之害) In the chapter of Shangtong (尚同), it is also said the duty of ministers “is promoting the benefit of all under heaven and eliminating harm to all under heaven, making the poor and indigent rich, the endangered and disordered peaceful and prosperous.” (将以为万民兴利除害，富贵贫寡，安危治乱也) The “benefit” here means public benefit rather than individual benefit. Therefore, in Mohism, “the goods that serve as criteria of morality are collective or public”, including political stability, population growth and material wealth, instead of individual happiness or well-being. (Garfield and Edelglass, 2011, p.62) Mohists believe that “when the state is wealthy, the national treasury is abundant, then everyone can wear warmly and eat fully without any worries and sorrows.” (国家富，财用足，百姓皆得暖衣饱食，便宁无忧) In this way, the importance of outcomes that are good for the community outweigh the importance of individual pleasure and pain, which means that the interest of community is dominant.

However, the hierarchy of importance for interests of the individual and the community is reversed in utilitarianism. As is mentioned before, utilitarian advocators believe that only when every member of the community maximizes his interest can the community achieve the maximization of its interest. So individual

interest acts as the foundation of interests for the whole community, and maximizing individual happiness or pleasure is the foremost moral good. Thus, we can say that Mohism is state or community-oriented while utilitarianism is individual-oriented. Schwartz noticed this feature of Mohism, but he still regarded it as a form of utilitarianism, which is also not accurate.

CONCLUSION

From what we have discussed so far, I think it is improper for both Leeloo Liu and Benjamin I. Schwartz to call Mohism “a form of utilitarianism”. Utilitarianism is based on individual interest, and the interest of community is simply the sum up of every individual interest; while Mohism does not put self-interest or individual interest first, but rather treat interest of community as primary consideration, which sometimes requires individuals to satisfy their own interest to make the public interest possible.

Recently, many western scholars, such as Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (2005, p.60), would rather consider Mohism as “state consequentialism”. However, “state consequentialism” also belongs to the terms and concepts of western philosophy as utilitarianism does. It may be more suitable, but it may also lead to other problems.

That reminds me of the dilemma of “reverse analogical interpretation” which is raised by Professor Liu Xiaogan. In one of his articles (Liu, 2006), Liu explained that the traditional “analogical interpretation” (格义) aims to help the Chinese understand Hindu Buddhism through employing Taoist terms to interpret Buddhist terminology. However, In modern time, people do the opposite by employing western philosophical ideas to interpret ancient Chinese terms, which then is named “reverse analogical interpretation” (反向格义). In his opinion, this practice gives rise to difficulties that put scholars in a dilemma, as few western philosophical concepts can match their Chinese “counterparts” properly, due to the divergence of Chinese and western terminological systems, as well as of general cultural background. Given this difficulty of finding a simple correspondence between Western concepts and Chinese terms, Liu argued that we should try to avoid using a ready western term to define a Chinese expression, but rather adopt the method of describing it. This may be the most favorable attitude of studying Chinese philosophy in the context of globalization, which can also be supported by the case of Mohism and utilitarianism.

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