When the Noble and the Wise Govern the Foolish and the Base: Power and Knowledge in Mozi's Political Philosophy

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Skills and Politics

Somewhere during the early years of the Chinese Warring States period (453-221 BC), Gongshu Ban (ca. 507-444 BC), the legendary carpenter and engineer from the state of Lu, presented his just completed magpie-kite to the philosopher Mozi (ca. 480-390 BC). Carved from bamboo and wood, the kite could stay up in the air for three days in a row. Gongshu was confident that he would meet with nothing but praise, since his invention required an unprecedented mastery of both aerodynamics and craftsmanship. How surprised he must have been to be confronted with Mozi's strong disapproval: even a tiny stick of wood, three inches long and swiftly chopped by a regular carpenter, was judged by Mozi to be worthier than Gongshu's kite. The first could serve as a cartwheel's lynchpin, withstanding the weight of 5000 liters of cargo, whereas the latter was probably nothing more than an amusing children's toy. "Therefore," Mozi concludes, "of all things regarded as achievements, that which benefits people I call skillful; that which does not benefit people I call clumsy."[1] Gongshu's achievement did not deserve the predicate "skillful" (*qiao* 巧), since he had overlooked a crucial factor: benefit (*li* 利). As Mozi states elsewhere: "Even though you might possess skillful craftsmanship, you are not necessarily able to get things right."[2] How to "get things right" (*de zheng* 得正) is one of the central questions of Mozi's epistemology, and it has important political implications.[3]

Right after Mozi's evaluation of Gongshu's magpie-kite, a politically charged discussion follows, in which Gongshu recalls how he had once designed a "cloud-ladder" for the king of Chu, who wished to use it to attack the state of Song, until Mozi dissuaded him from doing so.[4] According to Mozi, righteousness (*yi* 義), a term closely related to benefit,[5] and not technological skill alone, should be the primary factor in considering one's political ambitions:

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[1] *Mozi* 49.21, 724. In this paper, all translations from the *Mozi* are my own, based on Wu Yujiang's edition (2006). I am indebted to Ian Johnston's translation (2010 and 2014), but I do not always follow his interpretations and terminology. When citing the *Mozi*, I refer to the paragraph numbers as given in Johnston's translation, as well as the corresponding page numbers of Wu's edition.

[2] *Mozi* 36.1, 406.

[3] The word *zheng* 正, "right", means "to rectify" as a verb, and is closely related to the Classical Chinese term for politics or government (*zheng* 政).

[4] See *Mozi* 50.1-7, 747-8. Folklore has it that the magpie-kite also served a military function, as Joseph Needham (1994, p. 278) writes: "One tradition even goes so far as to say that Gongshu [Ban] flew wooden man-lifting kites over the city of Song during a siege, either for observation or as vantage-points for archers." The *Mozi* says nothing of this use of the kite.

[5] *Mozi*, A8.C, 461: "righteous is that which benefits".

> Master Gongshu said to Master Mozi: "When I had not yet had the chance to meet you, I wished to take Song, but now that I have met you, I would not do it if it was not righteous, even if Song was given to me.
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> "When I had not yet met you," Master Mozi replied, "you wished to take Song, but now that I have met you, you would not do it if it was not righteous, even if Song was given to you. This is me giving Song to you. If you take righteousness as your duty, I can even give the world to you."[6]

At this point, Mozi has apparently taught Gongshu to regard righteousness as the fundamental principle of his work: although Gongshu might have nothing to learn from Mozi when it comes to practical craftmanship, Mozi provides him with the skills needed in applying his knowledge in the sphere of politics, where righteousness is the basic principle of government policy.[7] He may thereby come to possess the entire world, and this concluding statement should probably be understood symbolically: Mozi's teachings are universal, not attached to any individual ruler or state. As a skillful and righteous engineer, Gongshu no longer needs to serve the particular interests of the king of Chu, but may aspire to a political career spanning the entire Chinese world, devoting himself to the universal values Mozi has taught him.[8]

Gongshu Ban was only one of Mozi's political protégés: in the *Mozi*, the text attributed to Mozi, we encounter many more instances of the master recommending his disciples for offices in various states, always under the condition that they never lose righteousness out of sight.[9] In this paper, I will interpret Mozi's philosophy from the perspective of his role as a teacher and advisor for potential government officials. As Yi-pao Mei has also observed, one of the key aims of Mozi's philosophy "is to supply governments with political experts."[10] The

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[6] *Mozi* 49.21, 724.

[7] *Mozi* 26.3, 288: "Righteousness is what it means to govern [or: to rectify]". There is no agreement on the translation of the term *yi*, as its semantic field is too broad to be captured in any English phrase. In this paper, I will stick to "righteousness", keeping in mind that it is the fundamental principle of Mozi's philosophy.

[8] The accounts of Mozi and Gongshu Ban are almost certainly fictitious. While Mozi is commonly said to have lived between ca. 480 and 390 BC (see Tan 1995, pp. 4-5 for an overview of the differing opinions. I will comment upon the complexities of the historical Mozi and the *Mozi* in the next chapter), less agreement exists on the historical Gongshu Ban. Only Ren Jiyu (1998, pp. 11-12) holds that he was of the same age and from the same town as Mozi. Despite their lack of historical substance, however, I would argue that the stories convey an important philosophical meaning, bringing together the practically-minded craftsman and the teacher of ethical values. See Sun 2009 for a similar approach.

[9] In *Mozi*, 46.13, 644, Mozi praises one of his disciples to have refused office in a state fundamentally opposed to *yi*, even though he was granted an enormous salary. For other instances of Mozi paving ways for his disciples' careers: 46.5, 642; 47.15, 673; 48.16, 693; 48.24, 697; 49.13, 721 (the entire chapter 49 is devoted to Mozi persuading rulers, specifically Lord Wen of Luyang).

[10] Mei 1934, p. 45.

notion of a political expert presupposes an idea of meritocracy, which indeed lies at the heart of Mozi's political philosophy. It also hints at the strong practical import of Mozi's epistemology, in which the term "usefulness" (*yong* 用) plays a key role in evaluating an idea's accuracy. Mozi's philosophy could thus be characterized as an attempt to connect power to knowledge, and to ensure that the knowledgeable ones fill the ranks of government. Many academic studies discuss Mozi's epistemology in relation to his ethical statements, while paying less attention to the political institutions envisioned by Mozi.[11] In understanding Mozi as a teacher and recruiter of government officials, my aim is to lay bear the strong political dimension of Mozi's philosophy: Mozi seeks to challenge the dominant aristocratic institutions of his time and to replace them with a meritocratic bureaucracy. Although Mozi does not explicitly formulate this political program, it can be reconstructed through a comprehensive reading of his political philosophy and epistemology, which is the aim of this paper.

The basic question of this paper concerns the relation between Mozi's political philosophy and his epistemology: what kind of political system does Mozi envision in order to implement his meritocratic ideas, and by what standards must knowledge be judged to be politically useful? Moreover, what is Mozi's conception of political order and how does it relate to his conception of valid knowledge?

The main body of this paper is divided into two parts: the first part argues how Mozi's meritocratic ideas are embedded within his narrative of the origins of politics from the state of nature. The second part discusses Mozi's epistemology, and aims to disclose how his doctrine of the three standards for knowledge is designed to ensure the sustainment of Mozi's ideal bureaucracy, while his theory of proper distinctions is meant to demarcate social and hierarchical boundaries. Before that, however, I will make a few remarks concerning the text of the *Mozi*, as well as the historical framework within which I propose to understand the figure Mozi.

[11] See for instance Loy 2008, who speaks of Mozi's "moral epistemology", identifying Mozi's conception of a "sound doctrine" with "right conduct". If I were to borrow his framework, I would use the phrase "political epistemology" and replace "right conduct" with "legitimate institution". Another important example of Mozi's epistemology tied to ethics is the lively debate on the question whether Mozi's ethical theory is based on a form of utilitarianism or a divine command theory. See Johnson 2011 for an overview of this debate, as well as an attempt to resolve it. I should emphasize that by shifting the focus from ethics to politics, I do not intend to disregard these debates, but rather to add a different dimension to them.

2. Mozi and the *Mozi*

2.1 Mozi as a Political Teacher and Persuader

When reading the ancient Chinese philosophers, one has to take heed of the uncertainties surrounding the texts that tradition has attributed to the "masters and schools" of the Warring States period. The mainstream narrative of philosophical activity as organized in different "schools", founded by the identifiable authors of their main texts, has been exposed to be probably a construct from Han dynasty times (206 BC-220 AD).[12] Before that, unfixed texts circulated among groups of "master persuaders" and their disciples, who were not primarily associated with a text, but rather with a certain approach to politics, "expressed by a motto or a form of special practice."[13] From a philosophical point of view, one can of course choose to circumvent these issues by taking the texts as ahistorical, meaningful entities in themselves, discussing them from the perspective of a symbolically implied author. However, since I set forth to treat Mozi as a political figure, and thereby as the product of the political circumstances of his time, I should briefly address the historical context which renders such an understanding plausible.[14]

Towards the Warring States period, the slow disruption of the old hereditary institutions of the Zhou dynasty (1045-221 BC) gave rise to the increasing power of individual rulers in the various states. The extension of their governments opened up new career-possibilities for the class of intellectuals (*shi* 士), who found themselves out of office despite their ambitions and social status.[15] The historian Cho-yun Hsu lays much emphasis on this development, as he describes the idea of a meritocratic bureaucracy, with a hereditary ruler who relegates all tasks of

[12]Csikszentmihalyi & Nylan 2003; Smith 2003.

[13] Csikszentmihalyi & Nylan 2003, p. 63. William Boltz (2005) argues that the finally transmitted texts are the result of later editors compiling earlier fragments and mottos, which served as "building blocks". Erik Maeder (1992, pp. 81-2) argues that the *Mozi* too is a product of such "*bricoleurs*", while Carine Defoort (2014 and 2016) attempts to understand Mozi's philosophy through such mottos and "fixed formulations", constituting different historical layers in the *Mozi* (see footnote 25).

[14] Here I should emphasize that in understanding Mozi in a historical context, I do not seek to speculate about the actual, historical Mozi. Mozi as the presumed author of the *Mozi* remains at all times a symbolic construct, which, I maintain, could nonetheless be understood within a historical framework.

[15] Lewis 1999, p. 604. The *shi* originally consisted "of the educated sons of the nobility and the most able and talented of the commoners" (Hsu 1965, p. 89). Mark Lewis translates the word as "man of service", echoing Charles Hucker's "serviceman" (1985, p. 421). In this discussion, I borrow the translation "intellectual" from Yuri Pines (2009, p. 117), who uses it to refer to "the intellectually active *shi*", which does not necessarily capture the entire social stratum, but is accurate within a political context. According to Pines (2013, p. 166), the philosophical "masters" (*zi* 子), to whom Mozi belonged, were those *shi* who established themselves as "intellectual and moral leaders of the society."

policy-making to capable officials, as one of the primary engines for social mobility in this period.[16] Being recognized as capable officials thus became an important motive for intellectuals to study the principles of governing, leading them to form self-conscious peer-groups and affiliate themselves with independent teachers like Mozi.[17] We could thus describe Mozi's philosophical attempt to connect knowledge to power as a way of persuading rulers to employ capable intellectuals.

In emphasizing Mozi's role as a political teacher and persuader, my approach slightly differs from Chris Fraser's recent introductory account, in which he presents Mozi as a public activist, personally concerned with the social chaos of his time, whose philosophy "was above all a social and political program aimed at overcoming war, strife, crime, and poverty."[18] Although certainly not untrue, the focus on Mozi's philosophy as motivated from sincere concerns with suffering does not immediately explain the practical ramifications of Mozi's role as a persuader for rulers and recruiter of officials.[19] Therefore, I hope to show in this paper that Mozi's philosophy is not only a coherent body of thought, but also a political program in service of the recruitment of talented government personnel.

This program demanded a radical promotion of meritocracy, directed at those rulers who tended to hold on to the old system of hereditary offices. As Yuri Pines points out, the Springs and Autumns period (770-453 BC) "was the golden age of hereditary aristocracy", when a system of hereditary offices "effectively precluded outsiders from entering the top echelon of powerholders."[20] The breakdown of the Zhou-institutions, culminating in the Warring States period,

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[16] Hsu 1965, pp. 86-92.

[17] Ibid., p. 150. See also Pines 2013, p. 170: "Many – probably most – *shi* were primarily interested in a government career as a means of improving their economic status, and Mozi was a keen speaker on their behalf." Furthermore, Mozi explicitly confirms his independent status as a teacher: "Above, I have no ruler to serve; below, I do not have the burdens of farming, so how could I dare to discard [studying and teaching]?" (*Mozi*, 47.13, 673).

[18] Fraser 2016, p. 5. An extremer view of this approach is the study by Scott Lowe (1992), who terms Mozi's project a primarily religious one, defining "religious concern" as "that which the text, person, or group in question feels is of ultimate importance and worthy of ultimate allegiance" (p. 3). According to Lowe, Mozi was exclusively concerned with the promotion of the highest benefit for the largest possible amount of people (the utilitarian point of view). While this could be true, I do not deem it fruitful to use the term 'religion' in this sense, as it may distract from Mozi's functionalist political perspective. The term religion could better be reserved for some of the practices promoted as parts of his political project (such as venerating the gods and observing sacrifices), rather than identifying it as Mozi's primary concern.

[19] Dan Robins (2008) has convincingly argued for an understanding of Mozi as a political persuader, rather than a theoretical philosopher. My approach elaborates on his views, as I propose to combine a coherent reading of Mozi's philosophy with an understanding of his political role. However, I will try to avoid a too cynical - even Machiavellistic - view of Mozi, like the one suggested by Wong & Loy (2013). Their reading of Mozi's arguments - specifically his anti-rational adherence to ghosts and spirits - as a possible handbook for manipulative rulers tends to put too much emphasis on Mozi as a ruthless persuader.

[20] Pines 2013, p. 162.

made it possible for meritocratic ideas to take root, and Mozi was one of their first explicit supporters.[21] Before Mozi's lifetime, it was perceived as natural that the noble (*gui* 貴), those belonging to the aristocratic families, were governing the base (*jian* 賤), the poor commoners. Mozi formulated two additional conditions for political order: the noble should be those who are wise (*zhi* 智), whereas the base should be those who are foolish (*yu* 愚). Only when the noble and the wise are made to govern the foolish and the base, an orderly government can be established.[22] This implied that in theory, even common fishermen or farmers could now enter the stratum of nobility, should they prove to be wise enough, while the foolish of noble descent could always lose their social prominence.[23] This synthesis of wisdom and meritocracy, of knowledge and power, functions as the theoretical foundation of Mozi's political program.

2.2 The Text of the *Mozi*

This paper focuses on the so-called "core chapters" and the dialogues of the *Mozi*.[24] The core chapters formulate ten main doctrines of Mozi's philosophy, each divided into three separate essays, albeit some of them are lost.[25] The basic principles of Mozi's political philosophy are developed in the first two triplets, while his epistemology is found in the last. In between, specific policy issues are discussed, such as the rejection of aggressive warfare and elaborate funerals, as well as the affirmation of the "will of Heaven" and the existence of gods and ghosts.

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[21] Pines 2013, pp. 169-71. Elsewhere (2009, p. 122), Pines observes that Mozi's promotion of meritocracy went with remarkably little opposition, which indicates that rulers already considered the empowerment of intellectuals as inevitable.

[22] *Mozi*, 9.1, 73.

[23] See *Mozi*, 8.6, 66-7; 9.8, 77.

[24] The other sections of the *Mozi* are less relevant for my subject: two of them are devoted to technical discussions of logics, and one of them deals with strategies for defensive warfare. The first section of the *Mozi* is philosophically more interesting: it is formed by seven short essays, most probably from a later date than the core chapters (Durrant 1975, p. 15), and introduces seven main themes of Mohist philosophy in a concise style. However, its authenticity is uncertain, and it does not shed much further light on Mozi's philosophy. For some clear overviews of the textual history of the *Mozi*, see Durrant 1975, pp. 45-90 and Lowe 1992, pp. 50-73.

[25] Recent scholarship by Carine Defoort (2015 and 2016) has revealed that the portrayal of Mozi's philosophy as consisting of "ten core doctrines" is largely the product of nineteenth century philology, most notably by Sun Yirang (1978/1895). She argues that the text of the *Mozi* reflects a gradual evolution of the thinking of the historical Mozi, his followers and later (Han dynasty) editors, rather than a consciously developed set of ten core ideas. See also Defoort & Standaert 2013, introduction.

Regarding the threefold composition, A.C. Graham (1985) identifies three separate layers within the core chapters, which, however, do not exactly overlap with the current arrangement of the text. Graham (p. 20) attributes the threefold structure to three sects of "Mohism", addressing three different audiences (government officials, fellow philosophers and rulers of the more conservative southern states). Karen Desmet (2006) argues that the threefold structure is the result of a historical evolution, rather than sectarian division.

Although I will mainly discuss the first and the last triplet, I will refer to the other chapters whenever relevant.

Apart from the core chapters, I will cite from the dialogue-section, which offers some interesting concretizations of the rather abstract doctrines of the core chapters.[26] The dialogues are my main source in presenting Mozi as a political persuader, as we witness Mozi advising rulers on policy issues, recommending disciples for offices and giving explicit motivations for his work as an intellectual. In invoking the dialogues, I elaborate on Fraser's insight that the dialogues can be read as clarifying Mozi's primary philosophical principle, righteousness, while at the same time showing how Mozi's words (*yan* 言) can be put into practice (*xing* 行), by placing Mozi's teachings into real-life situations, including considerations of intentions, motivations and conflicts with practical reality.[27] Such considerations are generally lacking in the core chapters.

[26] Based on grammatical analysis, Stephan Durrant concludes that the dialogue-section is mostly from a later date than the core chapters, but is possibly written at the same time as the latest stratum of the core chapters: "It is the writer's feeling that the Dialogue Chapters reflect the eclectic language of the later Zhou period, while the Essay Chapters are written in a highly colloquial language of a slightly earlier period." (Durrant 1975, p. 306).
[27] Fraser 2013.

3. The Foundations of Power: Political Philosophy

Mozi's political philosophy is developed in the first two triplets of the core chapters: the three chapters entitled *Esteeming Worthiness* (*Shang xian* 尚賢) discuss a set of principles which could be characterized as meritocratic, according to which only capable officials should be employed, dismissing all other possible criteria. The next three chapters, entitled *Esteeming Unity* (*Shang tong* 尚同) describe Mozi's ideal bureaucracy in its hypothetical historical development, a narrative of early humans escaping the chaotic state of nature by forming a network of hierarchic positions with corresponding responsibilities, all based on a universal agreement upon the principle of righteousness. Taken together, these chapters present us with a political system that Mozi deemed perfectly fit for relegating all positions of power to those possessing the right knowledge and skills to attain the three basic aims of all governments: material wealth, population growth and social order. In general, Mozi's political thinking is marked by its detachment from historical time: there is no ideal past to be restored, but only ideal principles to constantly strive towards.

3.1 The Sage Kings and the Three Aims of Government

Mozi envisions mankind's transition from the state of nature into a political system through the guidance of the ancient sage kings (*sheng wang* 聖王), who by means of their technological skills freed their people from the merciless forces of nature. His primary example is Yu, the legendary tamer of the floods and founder of the equally legendary Xia dynasty (ca. 2070-1600 BC). Mozi thereby explicitly takes his loyalty away from the Zhou dynasty, whose cultural institutions were deeply admired by Confucius (551-478 BC) and his followers. Mozi prefers practical skill over cultural refinement, as Benjamin Schwartz notes: "The fact that he obviously genuinely prefers civilization in its simple unadorned state suggests that there was nothing wildly implausible from his point of view in believing that the Xia had been closer to his ideal than the Zhou."[28]

[28] Schwartz 1985, p. 156 (transcription adjusted). Another important reference in this regard is a biographical note in the *Huainanzi*, a Han Dynasty anthology: "Mozi studied the works of the Confucian scholars, and received instructions regarding the methods of Confucius. Considering their ritual codes loathsome and worrisome, he did not delight in them. The extravagant burials were a waste of resources and impoverished the people, harming their lives and making matters worse. He thereupon turned his back on the way of the Zhou and followed the governance of the Xia (*Huainanzi* 11.25, in He 1998).

The heroic deeds of Yu are recounted in the context of an argument for the practicability of Mozi's universal ethical ideals, summing up the sage kings' contributions to the people's well-being:

> In ancient times, Yu brought order to the world. In the west, he created the Western River and the Fisherman's Stream in order to divert the waters of Ju, Sun and Huang. In the north, he created the Fang, Quan and Gu, leading the floods into the streams of Houzhidi and Huchi. He made the Dizhu spring forth, tunneled through the Dragon's Gate, in order to benefit the people around Yandai, Hutuo and the Western River. In the east, he lifted a hill in defense against the Mengzhu-marshes, and divided the Nine Channels to block the waters of the Eastern Plains, thereby benefiting the people of Jizhou. In the south, he created the Yellow River, the Han, Huai and Ru, making them stream eastwards, flooding into the region of the Five Lakes, benefiting the people of Jing, Chu, Gan, Yue and the Southern Barbarians. This is told about Yu's deeds, and this is how we can practice universality today.[29]

The last line is especially informing, as it underlines Mozi's interest in undertaking such ambitious engineering projects in his own time. In general, then, insofar as Mozi refers to ancient times, he emphasizes the practical accomplishments of the sage kings, rather than appealing to a utopian vision of the past.

This distrust of utopianism is concisely summed up in a debate with Gongmeng Zi, a supposed follower of Confucius, who argues for the uncritical adherence to "ancient speech and attire". Mozi provides him with firm reply, stating that the ideal principle of humaneness (*ren* 仁) does not depend on a particular institution, but only on its realization in actual achievements, as was the case with the Xia dynasty:

> In ancient times, King Zhòu of Shang[30] and his prime minister Fei Zhong were tyrants in the world, while Viscount Ji and Viscount Wei were sages. Their speech was the same but the latter two were humane, while the first were not. Duke Dan of Zhou[31] was the most sagely man in the world, while [his adversary] Guan Shu was the most tyrannical man. Their attire was the same,

[29] *Mozi*, 15.8, 157.

[30] The Shang dynasty (ca. 1600-1045 BC) was the successor of the Xia and preceded the Zhou. King Zhòu (not to be confused with the dynasty-name Zhou) was the Shang's "evil last ruler". It is the earliest dynasty to be historically attested by archeological evidence (see Keightley 1999).

[31] The Duke of Zhou (11th century BC) is the cultural hero of Confucius, responsible for the ceremonial institutions of the Zhou dynasty. By praising him nonetheless, Mozi shows that he does not entirely reject the Zhou dynasty, but rather the Confucians' elevation of it as a utopian standard.

> but the one was humane while the other was not. Therefore: [to be humane] does not depend on ancient speech or attire. Moreover, you take Zhou as your model, instead of Xia, so what you call "ancient" is not even really ancient![32]

Mozi's message is that while the Zhou dynasty may have brought forth some virtuous people, this does not mean that the dynasty as such may serve as the only true model of virtuous behavior. Whereas, should Gongmeng Zi really insist on referring to an ancient model, he had better resort to a truly ancient dynasty, which could at least be remembered for its beneficial achievements, rather than wasteful ceremonial extravagance. This then is the starting point of Mozi's narrative of the origins of politics: the aims of government should be measured against the perceptible achievements of skillful politicians, rather than the idealized patterns of ancient ceremony.

These aims of government are threefold, and according to Mozi, any inquiry of the principles of politics ultimately boils down to asking how and why governments, now and in the past, have failed to realize these three aims:

> In ancient times, when kings, dukes and high officers developed policies for their states, they all wished their states to be wealthy, their populations to be numerous, and their governments to be orderly. However, instead of wealth, they obtained poverty; instead of population growth, they obtained shrinkage; and instead of order they obtained disorder. Therefore, they basically lost what they wished for, and obtained what they despised. What is the reason of it? Master Mozi says: It is because when kings, dukes and high officers develop policies for their states, they do not know how to base their government on esteeming the worthy and employing the capable.[33]

The three aims of government – wealth, population growth and order - are frequently formulated by Mozi, and it is no coincidence that they also form the first line of the chapters on

[32] *Mozi*, 48.4, 689.

[33] *Mozi*, 8.1-2, 65. This quotation's first character, "ancient times" (*gu* 古) has puzzled many scholars, as they tended to read the *Mozi* within the more Confucian framework of an ideal past and a degenerated present, so how could ancient kings have failed to live up to their standards? This puzzlement led Sun Yirang to a philologically unjustified replacement of *gu* with *jin* 今, "present times" (Sun 1978/1895, p. 42), which is followed by Johnston in his translation. However, I take Mozi's reference to "ancient times" as highly significant here, as it shows how Mozi was not thinking along the lines of an ideal past, but argues that bad governments, just like good ones, have always existed – with the rare exceptions of the virtuous deeds of the sage kings – and are thus independent of time.

epistemology, as the three aims are the basic motivation for studying any philosophical problem.[34] Moreover, the chapters on economic frugality (*jie yong* 節用) and moderation in funerals (*jie zang* 節葬) are devoted to a discussion of how wasteful extravagance and elaborate funerals frustrate the fulfillment of precisely these three aims. With elaborate funerals, workmen are distracted from their duties, which disturbs the economy and brings about poverty. The harsh regulations for mourning are unhealthy and discourage men and women from procreating, which brings about population shrinkage. Finally, government officials and family members neglect their proper roles, breeding social disorder.[35]

When a Confucian opponent defends that the ancient sage kings nevertheless prescribed elaborate funerals, Mozi replies that this could not have been the case, as, just like Yu taming the floods, the sage kings' achievements lie in their focus on practical benefit, which must be measured independently of their historical context. So, even though the sage kings accomplished an enormous amount of wealth in their states, their burials and mourning regulations must have been a paragon of frugality:

> If we look at it from the perspective of the three sage kings, it cannot be the case that elaborate funerals and prolonged mourning-rites were the way of the sage kings. Still, they were granted the title Son of Heaven and their wealth spanned the entire world, so how could they have worried that their material expenses were insufficient? They simply considered [frugality] the best method for funerals.[36]

In short, Mozi only refers to the rulers of the past where they can be shown to have governed in line with the three aims of government. As exemplary politicians, the sage kings fit into Mozi's philosophical narrative of how the political world came into being, as a way to free human beings from their lives in the state of nature, the story to which I will now turn.

3.2 From the State of Nature to the Political World

In the early days of mankind, Mozi argues, people were fundamentally equal, and there were no political leaders to guide them. The lack of a political power-structure signifies two things:

[34] *Mozi*, 35.1, 393.
[35] *Mozi*, 25.5-7, 259-60.
[36] *Mozi*, 25.11, 262. The "three sage kings" are the beforementioned Yu, along with his predecessors Yao and Shun. "Son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子) is the common title for the supreme ruler of the Chinese world, representing Heaven on earth.

disunity and beastliness. Without any moral authority around, the equality of people leads to the equality of moral principles. This conceptual equality implies social disharmony, with people living the lives of wild beasts, each following their natural inclinations:

> In ancient times, when people first arose, there were not yet any regulations or governments. They must have said: "people differ in their [conception of] righteousness. Therefore: where there is one person, there is one [conception of] righteousness. Where there are two persons, there are two [conceptions of] righteousness. Where there are ten persons, there are ten [conceptions of] righteousness." The more people, the more [conceptions of] righteousness there must have been. That is the reason why people approved their own [conception of] righteousness, but rejected that of others. They thus mutually rejected each other.[37]

This lack of agreement on the meaning of righteousness has the practical implication of disrespecting family values on the one hand, and the unwillingness to economically cooperate on the other hand:

> Inside their houses, fathers and sons, and older and younger brothers, created distrust and enmity, which separated them, unable to live in harmony. The many clans of the world all harmed each other with water, fire and poisonous herbs, resulting in their inability to help each other with their surplus strengths. They hid and obscured the good way without teaching it to each other, left their surplus riches to rot and decay without sharing them with each other, and the chaos throughout the world reached the level of that among the wild beasts and the birds.[38]

Therefore, salvation lies in reaching conceptual agreement, which coincides with the establishment of hierarchical difference. In other words: the fundamental equality of people must be sacrificed in order to attain a unified conception of righteousness.

At one point, people gained insight (*ming* 明) into the cause of the world's disorder: the lack of political leadership. Therefore, "they selected the world's most worthy, capable, wise, and knowledgeable man and established him as Son of Heaven, so that he may act and unify the world's [conception of] righteousness."[39] We already see a meritocratic principle at work here: it is not a regular man who raises to power, but the wisest of all human beings. He himself does not lack modesty, as he "immediately realized that the senses of his eyes and ears were

[37] *Mozi*, 11.1, 107.
[38] *Mozi*, 11.1, 107.
[39] *Mozi*, 12.2, 114.

insufficient to unify the world's principles alone. He therefore selected the world's most sophisticated and worthy men and established them as the Three Dukes, to follow his lead in unifying the world's [conception of] righteousness."[40] This process repeats itself a number of times, all the way down to the level of the village chief, until the world is fully divided into different bureaucratic levels. Each layer is obliged to abide by the unified conception of righteousness, through a network of mutual responsibility in complying to the levels above, and controlling those below.[41] In this way, Mozi unfolds the universal range of his political system: at its final accomplishment, the entire world is put under the authority of one hierarchically ordered government, until an empire is established which "fulfills all its plans, completes all its tasks, is strong in interior defense, and victorious in outer punitive wars."[42] The military phraseology here underlines the physical power underpinning this power-structure: inner rebellion is being guarded against, while those who fail to comply outside, be it peripheral barbarians or subversive elements, are punished.

Regarding this transition from natural disorder to political order, three questions remain unanswered: Mozi does not tell us how this moment of understanding could emerge, it simply happens. Nor does he explain how people finally managed to agree upon whom to elevate to power. Finally, by what standard is the Son of Heaven able to form a legitimate definition of righteousness? Here, a supernatural intervention turns out to be the decisive factor, as becomes clear by relating two other triplets to Mozi's state of nature-argument: the triplets entitled *Heaven's Will* (*Tian zhi* 天志), and *Rejecting Aggressive Warfare* (*Fei gong* 非攻). In order to see their relevance, it is necessary to appreciate the metaphysical and mythological foundations of Mozi's philosophical narrative.

The notion of Heaven (*tian* 天) functions as the metaphysical foundation of Mozi's political philosophy. Being the supreme cosmic power, there is no way to escape its authority: the son who commits a crime, may flee to another family; the official who offends his ruler, may flee to another state; but he who sins in the eyes of Heaven has nowhere to escape to, since "there is no forest, valley, or desolate place, which Heaven's clear vision does not see."[43] Heaven embodies the three aims of government as one objective standard, coinciding with a definition of righteousness:

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[40] *Mozi*, 12.2, 114. The "Three Dukes" (*san gong* 三公) are the three most eminent assistants to the Son of Heaven. The term is used throughout all Chinese political history (see Hucker 1985, p. 399).
[41] *Mozi*, 12.3-6, 115-6.
[42] *Mozi*, 12.7, 117.
[43] *Mozi*, 26.1, 287.

> Heaven desires righteousness, and despises unrighteousness. […] When righteousness prevails in the world, there is life [that is: population growth], otherwise there is death. When righteousness prevails in the world, there is wealth, otherwise there is poverty. When righteousness prevails in the world, there is order, otherwise there is disorder. Moreover, Heaven desires life and despises death, desires wealth and despises poverty, desires order and despises disorder.[44]

Being the embodiment of Heaven on earth, the Son of Heaven's authority is only superseded by that of Heaven itself: only if his government meets Heaven's standard of righteousness, his rule is legitimate.[45] A righteous government (*yi zheng* 義政) is based on the universal (*jian* 兼) and objective standards set by Heaven. Should his government instead rely on mere physical force (*li zheng* 力政), the Son of Heaven would not be worthy of the title "sage king", but would be cast aside by Heaven as a "tyrant" (*bao wang* 暴王).[46]

As Jon Carlson notes, Mozi's state of nature-argument should best be appreciated in its rhetorical function, rather than in a historiographical sense.[47] The sage kings are the narrational embodiment of how a Heavenly legitimized political order was established in the world, instead of a power-structure based on force.[48] While focusing on the accounts of the sage kings in the *Heaven's Will*-chapters, Carlson does not connect them to state of nature-argument in the *Esteeming Unity*-chapters. Although justly dismissing an objective historical reading, Carlson thus risks overlooking the causal chain underlying Mozi's narrative: where did the sage kings come from, and how was their power accepted by the people, as well as consolidated? Moreover, how did they manage to adjust their conception of righteousness to Heaven's standard? In asking these questions, my intention is not to historicize Mozi's narrative once again, but rather to lay bare its conceptual foundations, relating to a surprisingly significant role for violence, sanctioned by Heaven, in establishing and consolidating the sage kings' political authority.

Mozi rejects the use of physical force in politics, as the condemnation of aggressive warfare is one of the basic features of Heaven's will.[49] However, the establishment of the sage

[44] *Mozi*, 26.3, 288.
[45] *Mozi*, 27.2, 297.
[46] *Mozi*, 26.6-7, 289-90. For an excellent account for Heaven's function as objective standard, as well as its possible historical development in Mozi's philosophy, see Standaert 2013.
[47] Carlson 2014, p. 131.
[48] Ibid., p. 134. Based on an extensive study of ancient texts, Miranda Brown (2013) argues that the *Mozi* was probably the earliest text in Chinese intellectual history to employ the notion of the sage king in this way, that is: to make a philosophical statement rather than writing objective history.
[49] *Mozi*, 27.4, 298.

kings' power is nonetheless the result of a violent intervention, a fact often overlooked in discussions of Mozi's account of the origins of political power.[50] In this respect, Mozi does not form an exception to Mark Lewis' identification of sanctioned violence as one of the foundational elements of ancient Chinese political theory.[51] In his discussion of warfare, Mozi draws an important distinction between "aggressive warfare" (*gong* 攻), denoting larger states seeking to conquer smaller ones, and "punitive warfare" (*zhu* 誅), according to which a violent intervention is justified by Heaven as a means to dethrone tyrants. The latter type of warfare enabled the sage kings to establish their power and put an end to the vicious rule of their predecessors.[52] If we understand the utter cosmological chaos under the tyrants' rule as the world's relapse into the state of nature, we can read Mozi's defense of punitive warfare in connection with his state of nature-argument, providing a mythological justification for the sage kings' political authority.[53]

Thus emerged, out of the state of nature, and through an intervening act of Heavenly justified violence, the political world under the Son of Heaven's rule. Hereafter, a righteous government could be installed, in accordance with the three aims of governing as formulated by Heaven's will, to be implemented by a bureaucracy staffed by qualified officials.

3.3 The Free Market of *Yi*

The political system now established put an end to the contention about the meaning of righteousness, but gave in turn rise to a new form of competition: as officials shall be recruited on the basis of their skills, ambitious intellectuals will seek to act as righteous as possible, so that a rigid "market of talent" emerges, functioning on all levels of the bureaucracy:[54]

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[50] For example, Pines (2009, p. 32), remarks that "Mozi's monarch was established not by means of the violent overthrow of his predecessors, but through an ambiguous procedure that looks like a kind of popular election." Fraser (2016, p. 85) emphasizes the possible conventional way in which people came to agree upon their ruler, simply appointing the most charismatic leader among them and obeying his orders willingly.

[51] Lewis 1990. In chapter 5, Lewis discusses the legend of the Yellow Emperor slaying the evil genius Chiyou as the "charter myth" of political legitimacy in ancient China. Although this myth is from a later date than the *Mozi*, Mozi's account of the sage kings defeating their opponents may be understood as an older variant of the same theme.

[52] *Mozi*, 19.5-7, 216-7.

[53] Robin Yates (1980, p. 560) interestingly identifies the concerning passage from the *Mozi* as a political creation myth: "The demarcation of boundaries and relationships, geographical, political, religious and social, by naming, described as though it was an historical event, *was* the creation of the Chinese world" (emphasis in the original).

[54] I borrow the phrase "market of talent" form Pines (2013, p. 170), who observes that Mozi's promotion of potential officials among the society's intellectuals (*shi*) is remarkably focused on economic factors, especially when compared to Confucius' emphasis on moral self-cultivation.

> Therefore, when in ancient times the sage kings were in charge of government, they proclaimed: "He who is not righteous shall not be wealthy; he who is not righteousness shall not be noble; he who is not righteousness shall not be our kin; he who is not righteousness shall not be near us." Thus, when the wealthiest and noblest people of the state heard this, they all withdrew and deliberated: "I used to rely on my wealth and nobility, but now the superiors elevate the righteous and no longer exclude the humble and poor, therefore I have to be righteous too."[55]

The same deliberation is then made by those who used to rely on kinship or proximity to their superiors, until even those who are far removed from the rulers realize that they too have a chance of an official career, if only they be righteous enough.

With everyone forced to compete on a level playing field, leaving all other criteria for success worthless, Mozi's ideal society forms a paragon of social mobility, a free market centered on the accomplishment of righteousness, where only the most skillful and righteous would rise to the top of the bureaucracy. The final arbitrators in this market are again identified as the sage kings, who ultimately decide who is to be elevated as "worthy" (*xian* 賢) or to be downgraded as "unworthy" (*bu xiao* 不肖):

> Therefore, the ancient sage kings highly valued esteeming the worthy and employing the capable. They did not take sides with their fathers and brothers, did not favor the noble [of birth] and rich, or give preference to the good-looking. They promoted and elevated the worthy, enriched and ennobled them, and put them in charge of official positions. They downgraded and discarded the unworthy, impoverished and debased them, and forced them to do hard labour.[56]

Additionally, a system of rewards and punishments (*shang fa* 賞罰) is installed, so that "all people are motivated by rewards, and deterred by punishments, persuading each other to be the worthiest".[57] Furthermore, Mozi outlines a system of rewarding capable officials, consisting of three methods: granting high titles, substantial salaries and effective power in decision-making.[58] Apart from rewarding those already in position, however, Mozi emphasizes the need for rulers to ensure that throughout the entire realm, people will remain ambitious and combative

[55] *Mozi*, 8.4, 66.
[56] *Mozi*, 9.1, 73.
[57] Ibid.
[58] *Mozi*, 9.3, 74.

to be recognized as qualified officials. For a righteous government to be sustained, competition among an increasing number of potential officials must be enhanced, in order to prevent them from turning their back on politics altogether:

> Suppose, for instance, that one wishes to increase the number of officials (*shi*) who are capable of archery and charioteering. Then one must enrich and ennoble them, respect and praise them, after which one will succeed in increasing the number of officials who are capable of archery and charioteering. The more so with regard to worthy and qualified officials, strong in virtuous behavior, distinctive in their speech and discussions, broadly minded in their ways and methods! They are certainly the treasures of the state, the cornerstones of the world. Therefore, one must necessarily enrich and ennoble them, respect and praise them, after which one succeeds in increasing the number of worthy and qualified officials.[59]

In this way, people from all social positions compete with each other to be as righteous as possible, with the prospect of being rewarded with an official career, while those already in power remain motivated to work as hard as they can, making sure that they are worth their title and salary, and take full responsibility for the decisions they make on behalf of their ruler. This is how Mozi seeks to establish a new form of aristocracy: an aristocracy of skill, which is meant to replace the aristocracy of blood.

3.4 Meritocracy: The Aristocracy of Skill

The concept of "esteeming the worthy" (*shang xian*) could be characterized as Mozi's definition of meritocracy.[60] It is the foundation of government, as the proper estimation of those who are worthy of an official career ensures that "the noble and the wise" come to govern the "foolish and the base", where the aristocratic notion of "nobility" is no longer associated with mere pedigree, but rather with the exemplary and skillful qualities needed to bring about political order:

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[59] *Mozi*, 8.2, 65.

[60] Somewhat tentatively, "meritocracy" could even be invoked as a translation of *shang xian*. Mozi himself does not systematically develop the idea of meritocracy, so when I speak of "meritocracy", I implicitly refer to the term *shang xian*. Pines (2013) also conflates the two terms, but argues that throughout later Chinese history, an increasing tension evolved between the notions of *xian* ("worth") and *gong* 功 ("merits") as the proper foundation for meritocratic institutions.

> How do I know that esteeming the worthy is the foundation of government? I say: there is order when the noble and the wise govern the foolish and the base; while there is disorder when the foolish and the base govern the noble and the wise. This is how I know that esteeming the worthy is the foundation of government.[61]

Mozi's formulation of meritocracy thus amounts to a new conception of aristocracy: one of skill, rather than blood, and rulers should employ their officials on no other basis than political expertise, just like they would in the case of any other task:

> When kings, dukes, and high officers have a sheep or an ox, but do not know how to slaughter it, they will surely look for a qualified cook; or when they have a piece of cloths, but do not know how to weave, they will surely look for a qualified tailor. When it comes to these tasks, even though the kings, dukes, and high officers have blood relations, know people who just happen to be rich, or are good-looking, but of whom they actually know that they are incapable of it, they would not employ them. Why is that? Out of fear for wasting their riches. In these cases, the kings, dukes, and high officers do not fail to esteem the worthy and employ the capable.
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> When kings, dukes, and high officers have a sick horse, and do not know how to cure it, they will surely look for a qualified veterinary; or when they have a swift bow, but do not how to draw it, they will surely look for a qualified archer. When it comes to these tasks, even though the kings, dukes, and high officers have blood relations, know people who just happen to be rich, or are good-looking, but of whom they actually know that they are incapable of it, they would not employ them. Why is that? Out of fear for wasting their riches. In these cases, the kings, dukes, and high officers do not fail to esteem the worthy and employ the capable.
>
> But when it comes to the affairs of the state, kings, dukes, and high officers elevate their blood relations, those who happen to be rich, or are good-looking. The kings, dukes, and high officers thus turn their state into a family matter. Is this any different from turning a swift bow, a sick horse, a piece of cloths, or a sheep or ox into a family matter? That is how I know that the officials and gentlemen of the world understand small things but do not understand big things. It can be compared to employing the mute as a messenger, or the deaf as a musician.[62]

Mozi thus compares "esteeming the worthy" and "employing the capable" (*shi neng* 使能) to recognizing the capacities of the skilled workingman. This, however, leaves us with an apparent

[61] *Mozi*, 9.1, 73.
[62] *Mozi*, 10.2, 95.

paradox: since someone must always be already there to recognize and employ skilled politicians, he himself cannot be recruited according to these meritocratic principles. As becomes manifest from the above-cited passage, the "kings, dukes, and high officers" are already in power before they can put the meritocratic principles into practice, but who has employed them in the first place, and according to which principle?

As we have seen, the Son of Heaven, the supreme ruler on top of the political hierarchy, is himself only accountable to Heaven, whose objective standards serve as the metaphysical foundation for his government. The establishment of the Son of Heaven's power is ultimately based on an act of sanctioned violence. From then on, however, the fate of the Son of Heaven's dynasty depends on the proper adherence to meritocratic rule, while those rulers who fail to adhere to it end up without legitimate successors.[63] This means that the principle of hereditary rule, at least in theory, remains intact, and this is how Mozi reconciles his meritocratic principle with a political system that is ultimately aristocratic.

When it comes to the sage kings Yao, Shun and Yu, as well as Tang and Wen, the respective founders of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, Mozi makes it abundantly clear that they appointed their own successors on no other basis than meritocracy, as their successors all started out as humble figures from marginal places. Although they did not perpetuate their dynasties through hereditary succession, the dynastic principle is not abandoned in these cases, as their successors are considered to be the legitimate inheritors (*chengsi* 承嗣). Putting capable intellectuals in charge of government positions was their secret in perpetuating their dynasties, by providing the ruler with capable assistants, ready to inherit the throne in due course:

> Therefore, in ancient times, Yao elevated Shun from the sunlit-side of the *Fu*-marshes, offered him the government, and the world was in peace. Yu elevated Yi from the shadowy fields, offered him the government, and the Nine Regions[64] were complete. Tang elevated Yi Yin from the kitchen, offered him the government, and his plans were established. King Wen elevated Hao Yao and Tai Dian from their fishing nets, offered them the government and the western plains were subdued.
>
> Therefore, in that time, even though granted large salaries and respectable positions, no one dared to fulfill his task without reverence and fear. Even though people were farmers or common artisans, no one esteemed one's ambitions without competition and encouragement.

[63] *Mozi*, 9.8, 77.

[64] "The Nine Regions" (*jiu zhou* 九州) is an alternative name for the Chinese realm, based on a legend according to which Yu, having tamed the floods, divided the world into nine administrative regions.

> That is why intellectuals (*shi*) are the means to provide the dynastic inheritor with good assistants.[65]

Thus, Mozi reformulates the aristocratic institutions of his time into a meritocratic system based on skill and expert-knowledge. In order to understand what Mozi's conception of this knowledge is, and how it is conceived to be politically relevant, we must now turn to his epistemology, providing the philosophical content for Mozi's ideal bureaucratic institutions.

[65] *Mozi*, 8.6, 66-7. Pines observes that Mozi implicitly hints at alternatives to hereditary succession, such as voluntary abdication, only in relation to the legendary sage kings. Due to the sensitivity of this theme, Mozi does not further elaborate on this idea: "Just as in the case of abdication, a story of (s)electing the supreme leader appears in the *Mozi* in passing, without further elaboration and without an attempt to explicitly relate it to the current political situation. The anti-hereditary topoi are present in the *Mozi* only in nascent form, but these rudimentary sentiments testify that the idea of placing the best possible ruler on the throne was not alien to Mozi's followers" (Pines 2009, pp. 60-1). Recently excavated texts have brought to light that the idea of abdication was not uncommon in the Warring States period: see Pines 2005a and Allan 2015.

4. The Foundations of Knowledge: Epistemology

According to Mozi, the practical use (*yong*) of a doctrine or technique is the decisive factor in determining its validity. Knowledge, theoretical as well as practical, must be measured in terms of benefit (*li*), which in turn is based on a conception of righteousness (*yi*). Mozi's epistemology is thereby closely linked to his political program, in which he envisions a bureaucracy staffed by meritocratically recruited, qualified officials, equipped with the right knowledge and skills for policy-making. However, the criterium of practical use is only one of Mozi's three standards for knowledge, so I will first examine its place within his broader epistemological theory. After that, I will differentiate between three practical applications of Mozi's epistemology: the first two are ontological, and play an important role in establishing political authority; the third pertains to knowledge of distinctions, and is used to evaluate concepts, as well as to demarcate social boundaries.

4.1 The Three Standards for Knowledge: Evidence and Use

Mozi introduces his theory of the three standards for knowledge in the triplet committed to denying the existence of fate (*Fei ming* 非命).[66] The most elaborate formula is found in the first chapter of the triplet. Mozi first attributes the rulers' failure to achieve the three aims of government (wealth, population growth, and order) to their false belief in the existence of fate, rendering them unmotivated to take matters into their own hands. Hereafter, Mozi proposes to investigate the existence of fate, by stating that all speech (*yan* 言) must be based on proper definitions (*yi* 儀), without which it is impossible to know whether a statement relates to reality at all. Mozi uses the example of knowing the distinction between day and night. If one speaks of this distinction, while defining it by means of a potter's wheel, instead of a gnomon, one's speech may very well be coherent, but has no relation to reality, and is therefore untrue. The more so when it comes to knowing the distinctions between right and wrong, or benefit and harm:

[66] The Chinese text variously renders the term "standard" as *biao* 表, "gnomon" (chapter 35) and *fa* 法, "model" (chapters 36 and 37). The contents of the three standards also vary throughout the three chapters, so that Hui-chieh Loy (2008, p. 456) argues that we should actually distinguish between five standards. However, I hold, following Fraser (2016, p. 65), that these differences merely reflect slight shifts in the vocabulary of different authors, and do not convey a significant difference in meaning - the only possible exceptions being the inclusion of the authority of ghosts and gods and the documents written by the sage kings in chapter 36.

> Master Mozi says: "In speaking, one must necessarily establish definitions. To speak without definitions is like establishing the difference between day and night on a potter's wheel. [In this manner], it is impossible to know and understand the distinctions between right and wrong or benefit and harm. Therefore, speech must have three standards."
>
> What is meant by "three standards"? Master Mozi says: "There is its root (*ben* 本), there is its origin (*yuan* 原), and there is its use (*yong* 用). How do we determine its root? Above, we determine its root through the affairs of the ancient sage kings. How do we determine its origin? Below, we determine its origin through investigating the evidence (*shi* 實, "reality") of the eyes and ears of the masses. How do we determine its use? It comes forth from government policy and can be seen in the extent to which it brings benefit to the people of the Central States.[67] This is what I mean by saying that speech must have three standards."[68]

The authority of the eyes and ears of the common people is mostly relevant to Mozi's discussion of gods and ghosts. Moreover, the authority of the sage kings and the practical use of a doctrine serve in fact an overlapping function, as the sage kings' affairs are examples of beneficial knowledge in action: Yu's taming of the floods enhanced the well-being of his people, therefore his knowledge of hydraulic engineering must surely have been accurate. Practical use thus forms a guiding principle in evaluating knowledge, and the sage kings bear testimony to its proper use in the past.

In what follows, I will discuss three political functions of Mozi's epistemology. First, knowledge of the inexistence of fate serves to convince rulers of their own responsibility in governing. Secondly, knowledge of the existence of gods and ghosts, acting as intermediates between Heaven and earth, serves to prompt the common people to obey authority. Thirdly, knowledge of distinctions, most notably between righteous and unrighteous, or right and wrong, but also between men and women, and civilized and uncivilized, serves to establish social boundaries by means of which political order is sustained.

4.2 The Rulers Are Like Gods: Ontology and Authority

Two of the three above-described functions of Mozi's epistemology pertain to ontological knowledge: the "eyes and ears of the masses", as well as the acts of the sage kings attest the

[67] The term "Central States" (*zhong guo* 中國) refers to all states within the civilized, Chinese world.
[68] *Mozi*, 35.3, 394.

inexistence of fate. Furthermore, the perception of the common people is invoked to prove the existence of gods and ghosts. In fact, the gods, ghosts and sage kings share a similar function: by means of their charismatic authority over the people, they give testimony of their supreme knowledge of all affairs in the world. The chapter about ghosts is entitled *All-perceiving ghosts* (*ming gui* 明鬼), which can be related to one of Mozi's indications for the sage king: the "all-perceiving ruler" (*ming jun* 明君), emphasizing his omniscience.[69] At one point in Mozi's state of nature-argument, the sage kings are even mistaken by the people for godly figures, as they cannot imagine how they could otherwise be so intelligent, capable of rewarding the world's good people, as well as punishing the wicked:

> Therefore, if there was a good person as far removed as tens of million miles, and neither his family members, nor his fellow villagers knew about it, the Son of Heaven learned of it and rewarded him. If there was a wicked person as far removed as tens of million miles, and neither his family members, nor his fellow villagers knew about it, the Son of Heaven learned of it and punished him. That is why the people in the world were all fearful and awestruck, not daring to act wickedly, saying: "The sight and hearing of the Son of Heaven is godlike!" The ancient kings said: "It is not godlike, we simply know how to use the people's eyes and ears to assist us in hearing and seeing, the people's mouths to assist us in speaking, the people's minds to assist us in thinking, and the people's limbs to assist us in acting."[70]

By establishing an information network encompassing all levels of the political hierarchy, compelling all people to report their neighbor's crimes, while attaching the same punishment to the failure of reporting a crime as to the crime itself, the sage kings ensured their omniscience regarding all matters in the empire, even though they were initially as human as their inferiors.[71]

In a sense, the people were right in attaching divine attributions to the omniscience of their rulers, as this is exactly the role Mozi assigns to the gods and ghosts, after proving their existence by means of the common people's perception, as well as the sage kings' authority. Mozi cites no less than five historical anecdotes of people witnessing ghosts, in addition to four scriptural sources, bearing testimony of how the sage kings never ruled on their own, but were

[69] The term occurs twice in the *Mozi*, in 9.3, 74 and 16.7, 174. Note that the term *ming gui* can also be read with *ming* as a transitive verb: "to clarify ghosts or "to understand ghosts". I hold that the chapter's content, explaining the ghosts' function as carriers of information, justifies its translation as "all-perceiving ghosts", or as Johnston less forcefully translates: "percipient ghosts".
[70] *Mozi*, 12.11, 118-9.
[71] *Mozi*, 13.9, 139.

always sided by divine figures.[72] In the political function the gods and ghosts fulfill, informing the ruler of all affairs throughout the empire, we may discern Mozi's appeal to pragmatism in evaluating ontological knowledge:

> Therefore, the percipience (*ming* 明) of the gods and ghosts is such that there could be no remote place, vast marsh, mountain, forest, or deep valley, of which they do not know. The punishments of the ghosts and gods will necessarily strike all people, no matter how wealthy, noble, manifold, strong, brave, martial, or equipped with the deadliest of weapons.[73]

The gods and ghosts thus form a vital part of Mozi's meritocratic bureaucracy, sustaining political order by persuading all people, including government officials, of their all-perceiving force:

> That is why none of the government officials dared to be corrupt, rewarding all those they witness being good, punishing all those they witness being wicked. People who were malicious and caused disorder through banditry, using weapons, poison, water and fire in taking innocent people from the road, stealing their horses and carriages, as well as their clothes in order to benefit themselves, were thus being stopped. […] In this way, the entire world was put into order.[74]

Mozi's second ontological proof concerns the inexistence of fate (*ming* 命), thereby rejecting the claim that the world is governed by a natural force, leaving human political actors without any entitlement to freedom or responsibility. It is no coincidence that Mozi develops his epistemological theory in this context, as the false belief in fate is one of the primary causes of political failure. If we would believe their appeal to fate, the tyrants of the past cannot be held responsible for their malicious behavior. However, when it comes to virtuous statesmen, no one would attribute their accomplishments to fate:

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[72] *Mozi*, 31.4-15, 331-5. See also 31.18, 337, in relation to 19.5-7, 216-7, where the gods figure as communicators between Heaven and the sage kings, in sanctioning their punitive war-expeditions against their predecessors.

For an interesting reading of the ghosts' political function in Mozi's discussion of warfare, see Wong & Loy 2004, who conclude from Mozi's irrational defense of ghosts that his argument could, somewhat cynically, be read as an advice to manipulative rulers, who could justify their illicit behavior by appealing to supernatural interventions. Although I deem their interpretation to be slightly too Machiavellistic, the ghosts form indeed part of Mozi's functionalist strategy in justifying political authority. In this sense, it is not at all puzzling that Mozi does not provide a rational argument for the existence of ghosts, since his ontology is functionalist, not rationalist, in the first place.

[73] *Mozi*, 31.17, 336.

[74] *Mozi*, 31.16, 336.

> Now, those who hold that there is such a thing as fate proclaim: "We have not made it up in later times [as an excuse for our misbehavior], for such speech has been existing all throughout the Three Dynasties,[75] and it has been transmitted to us. What do you say to that?" I say: "Do you know whether it came from the sagacious and good people of the Three Dynasties, or from the tyrannical and unworthy ones? How can we know about that? In the beginning, high officials and prominent noblemen were careful in their speech and wise in their conduct, so that above, they could admonish and remonstrate their rulers; and below, they could teach the many clans. Therefore, from above, they received rewards from their superiors; and from below, they were praised by the many clans. The reputation of these high officials and prominent noblemen is still heard of and has not vanished, and all the world says: it was due to their own strength.[76]

If one praises celebrated government officials to have acted by their own strength (*li* 力), one cannot at the same time cover up the misdeeds of tyrants by attributing them to fate. Mozi's contemporary rulers were nevertheless doing so, thus setting the wrong example for their subordinates, causing the entire empire to tumble down into an apathetic state, with no willingness to improve the disordered situation in the world:

> Even the poor people of the Three Dynasties were like this: inside, they did not know how to serve their family well; outside, they were not able to serve their superiors well. They despised arduous work and loved leisure, were fond of eating and drinking and neglected their duties. The materials for clothes and food were insufficient, which caused the people to worry about starvation and freezing to death. They certainly would not say: "I am simply not worthy; I do not rightly fulfill my duties." So, they simply said: "I am poor, because of fate."[77]

We may notice the similarity of this state of affairs with the state of nature, where people equally neglected their social duties. Here, Mozi's denial of the existence of fate also indicates the discovery of human freedom and responsibility. With his epistemological prove for the inexistence of fate, Mozi paves the way for a meritocracy, with qualified officials taking full responsibility for their actions.

[75] The Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties.
[76] *Mozi*, 36.3, 407.
[77] *Mozi*, 36.5, 407.

4.3 Knowing Distinctions: Gender and Culture

The third political function of Mozi's epistemology regards the correct knowledge of distinctions (*bian* 辨). The relation between knowing distinctions and acting correctly in Mozi's thinking is concisely summed up by Fraser: "To know something is to be able to do something correctly – most fundamentally, to be able to draw distinctions properly."[78] In order to know how to apply a certain norm, it is necessary to know how to distinguish between a norm and its opposite. Nowhere does Mozi more urgently express this connection between knowledge of theoretical dichotomies and their practical application than in his famous denouncement of aggressive warfare:

> Suppose there is someone who sees a little bit of black and calls it black, and then sees a large amount of black and calls it white, we must conclude from this that he does not know the distinction between black and white; or someone who tastes a little bit of bitterness and calls it bitter, and then tastes a large amount of bitterness and calls it sweet, we must necessarily conclude from this that he does not know the distinction between bitter and sweet. Now, on a small scale, [the rulers] reject something, and they know how to reject it. But on a large scale, when it comes to the rejection of attacking states, they do not know how to reject it, but instead praise it and call it righteous. Can this be called knowing the distinction between righteousness and unrighteousness? Therefore, we know that the gentlemen of the world are confused in distinguishing between righteousness and unrighteousness.[79]

Paul van Els labels this passage "the moral argument" in Mozi's rejection of aggressive warfare, distinguishing it from the arguments which focus more on economic and religious factors.[80] It is indeed telling that the most obvious appeal to strictly moral obligations is formulated in such concise rationalistic language around the term "distinction". The standardized conception of righteousness is here presented as an objective and knowable entity, which compels the knower into immediate policy-making, in this case, refraining from engagement in aggressive warfare.

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[78] Fraser 2016, p. 57. Fraser (pp. 52-54) focuses his discussion on the terms *shi* 是 and *fei* 非, "right" and "wrong", or, as verbs, "approve" and "reject", which are more sophisticatedly developed in Later Mohist logic, but also play an important role in the above-discussed passages on the state of nature-argument, in which people approve of their own conception of righteousness and reject that of others.

[79] *Mozi*, 17.3, 196. Graham (1985, pp. 3-4), suggests that the relatively short chapter 17, from which this passage is taken, might have started out as a part of chapter 26, which was later singled out to replace the missing third chapter of the *Rejecting warfare*-triplet. This hypothesis is refuted by Fraser (2010). It is therefore most probably a summarizing chapter, written by a later follower of Mozi. See also Van Els 2013, pp. 71-4.

[80] Van Els 2013, pp. 74-8.

Apart from the abstract principle of righteousness, however, Mozi's emphasis on knowing and maintaining distinctions manifests itself in various concrete examples within the social realm, characteristic of the ideal political order Mozi constantly envisions. The most obvious distinction in the political sphere is that between superior and subordinate, or the ruler and his officials, but in what follows I will discuss two other social dichotomies which I deem exemplary for Mozi's idea of social order: the proper separation of the sexes, and the dichotomy between barbarians and civilized people.

Within the realm of traditional morality, the most apparent distinction Mozi emphasizes on numerous occasions is that between men and women. Mozi deems the separation of men and women so fundamentally important that he describes it as one of the basic purposes of building houses: apart from sheltering from heat and cold, their walls are meant to keep men and women apart.[81] Likewise characteristically, Mozi mentions the inseparableness of men and women as one of the indicators for the level of social chaos prevailing in the empire that marked the justification for the sage kings to intervene.[82] Moreover, the indecent intermingling of men and women is discussed as one of the gravest crimes perceived by the gods and ghosts, forcing people to strictly abide by the regulations in this regard.[83]

The separation of the sexes serves both moral propriety and economic efficiency, and these two functions probably evolved simultaneously long before Mozi formulated them as a moral prescription. Several times, Mozi assigns the tasks of weaving and spinning to women, while men carry out agricultural tasks, or seek a career as government officials.[84] The historian Yang Kuan identifies Mozi as the earliest Chinese thinker to have turned the much older gender distinctions in agricultural occupations into an ideological formula.[85] Mozi marks the proper regulations for contact between men and women by two opposing phrases: on the one hand, there is the separation between men and women (*nan nü zhi bie* 男女之别),[86] while on the other hand, the frequent intercourse of men and women (*nan nü zhi jiao* 男女之交) is equally important, in realizing population growth. For instance, Mozi argues that elaborate funerals and mourning rites prevent men and women from seeing each other, so that striving for population growth in this manner "could be compared to striving for longevity by letting someone attack

[81] *Mozi*, 21.7, 250-1; 48.13, 691.
[82] *Mozi*, 19.7, 217.
[83] *Mozi*, 31.16, 336.
[84] *Mozi*, 19.4, 216; 25.5, 259; 32.6, 375; 37.7, 418.
[85] Yang 1997/1955, p. 85. See also Hinsch, 2003, pp. 598-600.
[86] In *Mozi* 35.8, 395, the phrase *nan nü zhi bian* 男女之辨 is used instead.

you with a sword."[87] The political function of separating the sexes is thus outlined in accordance with the three aims of government: by assigning separate economic occupations to the appropriate gender roles, wealth is ensured. By enabling men and women to frequently see each other, population growth is realized. Finally, by separating them by means of walls inside their houses, social order is maintained.

The second social dichotomy I wish to point out is that between civilized and uncivilized people.[88] When Mozi criticizes rulers for sticking to elaborate funerals without paying intention to their waste of resources, he refers to barbarian cultures who equally uphold meaningless and abhorrent customs:

> In ancient times, there was a country called Kaimu at the east of Yue. When a first son was born there, they ripped him apart and ate him, claiming it to be beneficial for his younger brothers. When a grandfather died, they expelled the grandmother, saying: "We cannot live in the same place with the wife of a ghost." The superiors took this to be good government, the subordinates took this to be proper custom, so they continued this practice without stopping, and carried it out without breaking with this tradition. Could this really be called the way of humaneness and righteousness? I call it: sticking to one's habits for convenience's sake and regarding one's customs as righteous.[89]

Along the same lines, Mozi criticizes the ritual culture of the Zhou dynasty. This is in perfect agreement with Mozi's focus on an objective standard of righteousness, rather than the legacy of the early Zhou kings. Pines observes a form of cultural relativism in this respect: "[U]nlike Confucians, Mozi did not regard Zhou rites as the criterion for proper behavior. Hence, his comparison conveys a sense of relativism: Chinese and aliens' customs are equally wrong, and Chinese have no reason to emphasize their superiority."[90] Indeed, Mozi strongly rebukes a ruler who underlines his own culture's superiority, by haughtily debunking a similar custom of a barbarian state:

> Lord Yangwen of Lu spoke to Master Mozi: "On the south of Chu exists a country named Qiao where cannibals live. When a first son is born in that country, they rip him apart and eat him,

[87] *Mozi*, 25.7, 260.
[88] As Bret Hinsch (2003, p. 606) notes, the two dichotomies are related, as in Chinese intellectual history, the neglect of sexual distinctions is often marked as one of the primary characteristics of barbarian cultures
[89] *Mozi*, 25.14, 263.
[90] Pines 2005b, p. 76.

> claiming that it is beneficial for his younger brothers. If the taste is good, they offer it to their lord, and when satisfied he rewards the father. Is that not a repulsive custom?"
>
> Master Mozi replied: "It still does not differ from the customs in our Central States. To kill a father and reward his son, is that really not the same as eating a son and rewarding the father? If we do not employ humaneness and righteousness, how are we not like the barbarians eating their sons?"[91]

Judging from this passage, I would argue that Mozi's argument should not be read as a form of relativism: on the contrary, he asserts that the prevalent customs of the civilized Chinese world, just like those of their barbarous neighbor states, do not live up to the objective standard of righteousness. The absolute standard still stands, albeit not in the real world, but in the ideal political institutions he envisions. In a political environment in which regicide and patricide are all too common, it is in no way salutary, Mozi argues, to set oneself apart from the repulsive practices of others.

In separating barbarians from civilized people, Mozi emphasizes that the entire world has degenerated into barbarism, comparable to the time before the establishment of political leaders. Mozi thus formulates his ideal political world in opposition to a barbaric state of nature, with the objective standard of righteousness, instead of traditional custom, as the guiding principle in policy-making.

4.4 Knowing the Future: Technology and Planning

If we now turn back to Gongshu Ban, the engineer to whom Mozi promised to offer the world, we can connect Mozi's political philosophy and epistemology to the symbolic fulfillment of this promise. In another dialogue between the two, Mozi criticizes Gongshu's disregard for righteousness in designing naval warfare equipment for the ruler of Chu, who was preparing for a river battle between the armies of Chu and Yue. During the battle, Yue employs a defensive strategy by following the current in retreating, instead of in advancing. The natural course of the water keeps the soldiers of Yue safe, until Gongshu's invention enables Chu's army to prevent Yue from retreating by means of a set of hooks and clamps, designed according to

[91] *Mozi*, 49.7, 7.19.

standardized measurements. However, Mozi argues, instead of focusing on standardizing violent technical tools, Gongshu should focus on standardizing righteousness, which apparently is done along the same lines as technological engineering:

> My righteousness' hooks and clamps are worthier (*xian*) than those of your naval warfare equipment. As regards my hooks and clamps: I hook with care (*ai* 愛), I unite with respect (*gong* 恭). If one does not hook with care, there will be no kinship; if one does not unite with respect, one will soon become too intimate. Being intimate without kinship will quickly lead to estrangement.
>
> Therefore: care for each other, revere each other; this amounts to benefiting each other. Now your hooks may obstruct people, but people will also obstruct you. Your clamps may separate people, but people will also separate themselves from you. Hook each other, clamp each other; this amounts to harming each other. Therefore, my righteousness' hooks and clamps are worthier than those of your naval warfare equipment.[92]

Mozi thus calls for the standardization of the "hooks and clamps" of righteousness: care and reverence ensure the regulations for intimate kinship on the one hand, and proper distance on the other hand. Through this comparison with standardized weapons, standardization is presented as a technical skill (*qiao*), emancipating people from their dependency on environmental factors. Government officials, as "political engineers", must always take righteousness to be their guiding line, "just like the carpenter, himself unable to cut in a straight line, must always hold on to his cutting line."[93] Knowledge of a straight line, according to Mozi, is just as attainable as knowledge of righteous policy.

Modeled on technological skill, politics becomes an engineering project, enabling the ruler to foresee the future, just as the past can be known by examining the documents transmitted by the sage kings. As Mozi aptly explains to a certain Pengqing Shengzi:

> Pengqing Shengzi said: "The past can be known; the future cannot be known." Master Mozi said: "Imagine having a relative living a hundred miles away from you, who has suffered a calamity. Within the scope of one day, he could make it if you reach him, otherwise he would die. Now you have got at your disposal a stable carriage and a well-bred horse, as well as an inferior horse and a carriage with four square wheels. If I let you choose one of them, which one

[92] *Mozi*, 49.20, 723-4. For the translation of *ai* as "care" in Mozi's philosophy (important for its occurrence in the famous phrase *jian'ai* 兼愛, "universal care"), see Robins (2012), who argues that the common translation of "love", retained by Johnston, does not reflect Mozi's focus on concrete moral obligations, rather than romantic devotion.

[93] *Mozi*, 47.7, 672.

would you ride? “I would ride the stable carriage with the well-bred horse,” he answered. “It would allow me to arrive there faster.” “So, then you do know the future!” Master Mozi said.[94]

Pengqing is able to predict the moment he will reach his family, by relying on the skills of his cartwright and horse-breeder. It is not so far-fetched to draw a parallel with Mozi advising rulers to rely on the political skills of qualified officials, in accomplishing the three aims of government. By focusing on economic efficiency, judging traditions and institutions by their merit and sustaining the regulations for men and women, population growth is ensured. By installing a meritocratic bureaucracy, recruiting officers on the basis of their qualities, as well as establishing an information network by which all misbehaviors throughout the empire can be communicated, governmental order is ensured. Finally, by knowing and maintaining clear distinctions between right and wrong, righteous and unrighteous, thus refraining from unjustifiably engaging into resource wasting projects of warfare, while making sure that all people throughout the empire stick to their allotted tasks and are not distracted, material wealth can be achieved.

[94] *Mozi*, 49.17, 722.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to consider Mozi in his role as an advisor for rulers and recruiter of government officials. By connecting Mozi's political philosophy to his epistemology, I have argued that Mozi's envisioned meritocratic bureaucracy can be understood as a synthesis of valid knowledge and political power, according to which the notion of "nobility" is reformulated in terms of practical wisdom. The wise men, mythologically embodied by the sage kings, receive their authority from their insight into the inexistence of fate and the universal and objective standards of Heaven. This authority is then given shape by means of a tightly knit hierarchal system, with carefully allocated administrative and agricultural tasks to men and women, whose practices and customs are solely measured by their beneficial qualities. In developing this political program, Mozi seeks to convince rulers of the proper means to accomplish material wealth, population growth and social order, while at the same time promising unemployed officials to be able to aspire a political career, regardless of their social background.

It should be noted that this paper is thus primarily an exposition, rather than a critical evaluation. Mozi's philosophy has been read in many ways, from an early form of socialism[95] or liberalism[96] to a Chinese equivalent of Christianity;[97] from a religious program from a sincere concern with the benefit of all people[98] to a handbook for manipulative rulers.[99] All such interpretations could provide useful insights in understanding the *Mozi*, and it is not my intention to contribute to any of these debates with this paper, let alone to make a decisive choice between these possible readings. Rather than looking into the details of specific doctrines, or to speculate about his motivations and intentions, I have attempted to integrate Mozi's epistemology and political philosophy in explaining how Mozi promised to establish political order in the world by having wise men govern the foolish, and to pave the way for official careers for his most talented disciples, instructing them to take the fundamental notion of righteousness into earnest consideration.

[95] David-Néel 1907.
[96] Osborne 2012.
[97] See Malik 2004.
[98] Lowe 1992.
[99] Wong and Loy 2004.

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