

On Reading Mozi
Han Yu
(translation by B.W. Van Norden; January 13, 2006)

[Translator's Introduction: Mozi was a Chinese philosopher who lived soon after the death of Kongzi. In ancient times, he was regarded as an opponent of Confucianism, and among later Confucians his doctrine of universal love was seen as anticipating the Buddhist teaching on this topic. Confucians rejected Buddhist universal love on the grounds that to love universally was to ignore our stronger love and obligations for our parents, friends and other loved ones. Consequently, it is surprising to find Han Yu arguing here that Mohism, the philosophy of Mozi, is fundamentally consistent with Confucianism.]

Confucians criticize Mohists for "Obeying One's Superior," "Universal Love," "Honoring the Worthy" and "Understanding Ghosts."ⁱ

Yet Kongzi was "in awe of great people."ⁱⁱⁱ When he resided in a state he did not condemn its Chief Counselors. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* criticized ministers who usurped power. Is this not "Agreeing with One's Superior"?

Kongzi "cared broadly" and "was close to the benevolent." He regarded "benefiting broadly" and "saving the masses" as being a sage. Is this not "Impartial Caring"?

Kongzi "treated worthies as worthy." He praised his disciples according to four qualities, and "lamented an age too decadent for words." Is this not "Honoring the Worthy"?

Kongzi "performed sacrifices as if present," criticizing performing sacrifices as if one were not there, saying, "If I perform sacrifices, then I shall receive good fortune." Is this not "Understanding Ghosts"?

Confucians and Mohists are the same in approving of Yao and Shun, and are the same in disapproving of Jie and Tyrant Zhou. They are the same in cultivating oneself and rectifying one's heart in order to bring order to the world and the state.

How is it, then, that they are not pleased with one another? I believe that the dispute basically began when later students each advanced the theories of their teacher, and condemned the Way of the other teacher.

Kongzi would definitely have employed Mozi; Mozi would definitely have employed Kongzi. If they had not employed each other they would have been unworthy to be Confucians or Mohists.

[Translator's Comment: If Han Yu had read the Mohist essays carefully, he would have seen that they explicitly condemn Confucian doctrines and even impugn the character of Kongzi himself. (It is possible, as A.C. Graham has suggested, that the Mohist writings were actually not available for Han Yu to consult, and that he only knew the titles of some of the essays.) What is most interesting about "On Reading Mozi" is not that Han Yu is mistaken, though. What is interesting is that even a harsh critic of Buddhism like Han Yu had been so influenced by Buddhist ideas that he did not see a fundamental tension between universal love and Confucian filial piety. Confucians have always thought we should have some concern for everyone ("Within the Four Seas, all are brothers," says Analects 12.5). But they have also stressed our special obligations to our loved ones ("Does [the Mohist] truly hold that one's affection for one's elder brother's son is like one's affection for one's neighbor's baby?" Mengzi asks rhetorically in passage 3A5). The influence of Buddhist ideals pushes Confucianism more toward universal love, and School of the Way ("Neo-Confucian") philosophers wrestle with how to reconcile universal love with filial piety. See, for example, Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription" and Cheng Yi's "Letter in Response to Yang Shi's Letter on the 'Western Inscription.'"]

ⁱ The quoted phrases are the names of Mohist essays. For translations see Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, second edition, Chapter 2. (My translations of phrases and passages above reflect how I think Han Yu understood them, so they sometimes differ slightly from those in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*.)

ⁱⁱ The quoted phrases in the remainder of the essay are from the *Analects* of Kongzi.