The most significant contemporary controversy surrounding the interpretation of the moral thought of Mozi is the debate over his ultimate criterion for right action. The problem is that there are two significant candidates found in the text of the Mozi. One is a kind of utilitarian principle: whatever benefits the world is right and whatever harms the world is wrong. The other is a divine will principle: whatever Heaven desires is right and whatever Heaven disapproves of is wrong. Both principles play an undeniably important role in Mozi’s system, but their precise relationship is surprisingly difficult to determine. Is one more fundamental than the other? If so, which? And what purpose does the less basic of the two criteria serve?

The contemporary discussion began with a 1976 article by Dennis Ahern, in which he challenged the standard understanding of Mozi as a utilitarian. Ahern argued that there is no textual basis for concluding that either criterion is the more basic, and so the precise relationship between them is something of a mystery. In the three decades since, some scholars have interpreted Mozi as a consistent utilitarian, while others have interpreted him as a consistent divine will theorist. The current state of the debate, as I will argue in the first section below, is that both sides can advance prima facie plausible interpretations: it is possible, at least on the surface, to harmonize the divine will passages in Mozi with the utilitarian interpretation and to harmonize the utilitarian passages with the divine will interpretation.

This creates a hermeneutical stalemate. Since making the utilitarian and divine will criteria equally ultimate is theoretically redundant and opens the door for possible irresolvable moral conflicts, charity suggests that we interpret Mozi either as a consistent utilitarian or as a consistent divine will theorist. But which? In the second and third sections below, I will consider arguments designed to break the stalemate. I will argue that, after the arguments on both sides are considered, the divine will interpretation comes out ahead. Many of the arguments urged against the divine will interpretation reveal a lack of understanding of what is involved in a divine command theory of moral obligation. In the fourth and final section, I will respond to Xiufen Lu’s charge that the whole debate between the utilitarian and divine will interpretations is misguided.

The key to any interpretation that seeks to elevate one of the two competing criteria to the status of ultimate moral criterion is to explain the role that the other criterion, the non-ultimate criterion, plays in Mozi’s thought. The challenge is to find a role for
the non-ultimate criterion that is neither redundant nor pointless and is compatible with the text. I think it at least initially plausible that such a role can be found by both interpretations. I will treat the utilitarian interpretation first and the divine will interpretation second.

The Utilitarian Interpretation

Scholars who favor the utilitarian interpretation take passages like the following to express Mozi’s ultimate moral criterion:

Mo Tzu said: It is the business of the benevolent man to try to promote what is beneficial to the world and to eliminate what is harmful. And when we set out to classify and describe those men who hate and injure others, shall we say that their actions are motivated by universality or partiality? Surely we must answer, by partiality, and it is this partiality in their dealings with one another that gives rise to all the great harms in the world. Therefore, we know that partiality is wrong.5

Partiality is wrong because it results in harm to the world. What makes an action right is that it benefits the world; what makes an action wrong is that it harms the world.6 The passages that need to be harmonized with this interpretation are those that apparently advance the divine will criterion for right action:

The Son of Heaven cannot decide for himself what is right. There is Heaven to decide that for him.7

Now the stupid and humble cannot decide what is right for the eminent and wise. There must first be the eminent and wise, who can then decide what is right for the stupid and humble. Therefore, we know that righteousness does not originate with the stupid and humble, but with the eminent and wise. Then who is eminent and wise? Heaven is pure eminence and wisdom. Therefore righteousness in fact originates with Heaven.8

Mo Tzu said: the will of Heaven is to me like a compass to a wheelwright or a square to a carpenter. The wheelwright uses his compass to check to the roundness of every object in the world, saying, “What matches the line of my compass I say is round. What does not match my compass I say is not round.” Therefore he can tell in every case whether a thing is round or not, because he has a standard for roundness. . . . In the same way Mo Tzu uses the will of Heaven to measure the government of the rulers and ministers above, and the writings and words of the multitudes below. He observes their actions, and if they obey the will of Heaven, he calls them good actions, but if they disobey the will of Heaven, he calls them bad actions.9

How can these be harmonized with an interpretation that makes utilitarian considerations the ultimate right-making feature of an action? It is obvious that the will of Heaven plays some important role in determining right action, but what is it? Dirck Vorenkamp’s answer is that Mozi is a rule-utilitarian and that the will of Heaven constitutes a rule the following of which tends to benefit the world, since (as a matter of fact) we know that Heaven wills the benefit of the world.10 Kristopher Duda’s answer is similar, but simpler: since Heaven knows what benefits the world better than I do, the will of Heaven is a guide to what is right. The role of the will of Heaven is therefore epistemic. The fact that an act is willed by Heaven is not the right-making
feature of the act (utilitarian considerations are), but it is a reliable guide that I can and should use to come to know that the act is right. As far as I can tell, Duda’s answer has all the benefits of Vorenkamp’s, with the additional benefit of not committing Mozi to rule-utilitarianism as opposed to act-utilitarianism, so I will assume Duda’s account in what follows.  

Duda points out (rightly, I believe) that all of the preceding passages are compatible with assigning the will of Heaven this secondary, epistemic role, rather than the role of the ultimate right-making feature of an action. Heaven can “decide” what is right for the Son of Heaven and “originate righteousness” for the “stupid and humble” by being an authority in the epistemic sense of authority, in the same way that scientists or historians are authorities in their respective fields. Similarly, I can use Heaven’s will as a standard of measurement for right and wrong without asserting that it is Heaven’s decree that makes right and wrong, by saying that Heaven’s will is a better guide than my own reasoning processes and limited knowledge of the world for figuring out right and wrong. It is like the difference between the meter stick that actually defines the length of a meter and the meter stick that I own and use for measuring. The defining meter stick actually determines the length of a meter, while my meter stick is only a guide to the length of a meter; in each case, the illustration of a meter stick (in Mozi’s case, of a wheelwright’s compass or a carpenter’s square) is appropriate, which means that it is compatible with the Divine will having either a right-making role or a subsidiary epistemic role.

So there is a plausible interpretation in which Mozi is a consistent utilitarian and ascribes a subsidiary epistemic role to the divine will criterion of moral rightness.

The Divine Will Interpretation

Scholars who favor the divine will interpretation have to do the reverse of their utilitarian counterparts: they take the divine will passages to express the ultimate criterion of moral rightness, the fundamental right-making features of an act, and they have to find some subsidiary role for the utilitarian criterion.

Such a role is fairly easy to come by for the divine will interpreter. As David Soles points out, the utilitarian criterion will have to provide some sort of “test of right.”  

The only plausible way I can think of for the utilitarian criterion to serve as such a test is for it to be the content of the divine will: Heaven wills that all people be benefited. Because what Heaven wills is right, what benefits the world is right. I know that Heaven wills this general principle, which I can then apply in the many specific situations where I don’t know Heaven’s particular will.

It seems, at least initially, that all of the utilitarian passages are consistent with this interpretation, since it ascribes to the utility criterion a significant epistemic role in determining right action in particular circumstances.

II

So we have two incompatible interpretations, each of which provides a prima facie plausible way to harmonize the text into a consistent whole. At this point, we are at a hermeneutical stalemate. In this section, I will examine arguments intended to
break the stalemate in favor of the utilitarian interpretation. In the next section, I will look at arguments intended to break the stalemate in the other direction. I should emphasize that this is in fact a hermeneutical stalemate, absent any further argumentation. Chris Fraser seems to think that the utilitarian interpretation is somehow the default interpretation, since he cites the mere absence of decisive reasons to accept the divine will interpretation as evidence for the utilitarian interpretation. I don’t see any reason to regard the utilitarian interpretation as the default, apart from the arguments favoring that interpretation that I will be examining in this section.

(1) The first argument for favoring the utilitarian interpretation, due to Duda, has to do with the analogies Mozi employs to describe how the righteous person uses Heaven’s will, the wheelwright’s compass, and the carpenter’s square. Duda thinks that these analogies fit better with assigning Heaven’s will an epistemic rather than a right-making function. The compass and the square do not define what counts as round or square; they merely test for the antecedent presence of roundness or squareness. Therefore, as analogies to Heaven’s will, they suggest that Heaven’s will likewise plays only an epistemic role in morality, not a creative right-making role.

This argument is unconvincing. The presence of these analogies is evidence for the utilitarian interpretation over against the divine will interpretation only if we can expect that Mozi would have used a different set of analogies were he advancing a divine will theory. I don’t think we can, though. These sorts of “standard of measurement” analogies are standard in historical divine command theories, and although they are not perfect analogies (Duda is right about that), it is hard to come up with better ones. Try to think of everyday sorts of experiences that would serve as better analogies. I can’t think of any. My example of the meter stick that actually defines the length of a meter might be a better analogy, but it is far from an everyday sort of thing that would really affect the reader, and I doubt that Mozi was aware of anything similar in ancient China. Since we can’t expect Mozi to have used different analogies were he advancing a divine will theory, the fact that these examples aren’t perfect analogies does not weigh against the divine will interpretation.

(2) The rest of the arguments favoring the utilitarian interpretation are all really species of the same argument, and they represent the most serious challenge to the divine will interpretation. The basic form that the arguments all share goes as follows. Mozi gives reasons to obey Heaven’s will. But the giving of reasons to obey Heaven is incompatible with the divine will theory of morality, since Heaven’s will is the most basic moral principle and doesn’t admit of moral grounding from beyond itself. So Mozi does not espouse a divine will theory of morality. In effect, this form of argument tries to show that Mozi takes the non–divine will horn of the Euthyphro dilemma: Heaven wills what is right because it is right. It is not right because Heaven wills it. As Duda puts it, “A divine command theorist could never consistently say that Heaven decides for people what is right because of some other consideration, for in that case the other consideration would be the real source of authority for Heaven’s commands, not the mere fact that Heaven commands them.”

I will divide up this argument into four sub-arguments, because there are actually four distinct types of reasons that Mozi seems to give for obeying Heaven, and
the type of reason is relevant for evaluating the argument above. The first set of reasons that Mozi offers for obeying Heaven has to do with Heaven’s character and position:

Now the stupid and humble cannot decide what is right for the eminent and wise. There must first be the eminent and wise, who can then decide what is right for the stupid and humble. Therefore, we know that righteousness does not originate with the stupid and humble, but with the eminent and wise. Then who is eminent and wise? Heaven is pure eminence and wisdom. Therefore righteousness in fact originates with Heaven.16

Heaven’s will is normative for us because Heaven is eminent and wise. Presumably, if it so happened that Heaven were not eminent and wise, Heaven’s decrees would not be normative for us. Therefore, the objection goes, there must be some moral standard independent of Heaven’s will that grounds Heaven’s authority, and this is incompatible with divine command theory.

But is it true that divine command theory is incompatible with Heaven’s authority having any kind of value-laden ground? Contemporary divine command theories have generally answered no. Divine command theory is the view that divine commands are both necessary and sufficient for the creation of a moral obligation (for making an action the morally right thing to do). Robert Adams has pointed out, though, that this view does not rule out the view that for a command to really count as a divine command—that is, the sort of command that can create a moral obligation—it has to come from a being with a certain set of characteristics, including perhaps goodness, love, and wisdom.17 Adams is in effect distinguishing between the good and the right and nesting a divine command theory of the right inside a non–divine command theory of the good. This makes divine command theory compatible with the relevance of value-laden evaluations of the divinity (God or Heaven) as to whether that divinity’s commands should be obeyed.

All well and good: divine command theory as such is not incompatible with the giving of reasons for obeying divine commands, at least the sort of reasons that are statements about the nature and character of the divinity. But is it reasonable to think that Mozi himself makes the distinction between the good and the right that this move requires? I think it is. Although Mozi does not make the distinction explicitly, it is a natural sort of pre-theoretical distinction to make. Consider the following illustration. I live in a country where the legislature makes laws. The legislature therefore has the power to create legal obligations for me. If the legislature made no laws, I wouldn’t have any legal obligations; whenever it does make a law, I am legally obligated to obey it. So the legislature’s action is both necessary and sufficient for the creation of a legal obligation. Nevertheless, I can still make value judgments about the legislature that are relevant for whether their laws create binding legal obligations for me. For example, if the legislature wasn’t properly elected or is totally corrupt, their laws may be illegitimate and therefore not binding. This illustration shows that intuitions about authority—the kind of authority that actually creates obligations—are consistent with and even demand value-laden judgments about the character and position of the authority. And since divine command theory is usually motivated by
intuitions about the need for authority in the creation of obligation, it makes sense that there would be operative in most divine command theories at least some implicit distinction between the basis for evaluating the authority (the good) and the obligations imposed by the authority (the right).

This is borne out in two ways in Mozi’s text. First, Mozi seems primarily concerned throughout his system with right action, marginalizing the multitude of other value concepts that can be brought to bear in evaluating situations, including the general notion of goodness. This suggests that when he talks about Heaven’s will it is precisely the right rather than the good that is his primary concern. Second, one of the ways he motivates his position that Heaven’s will determines the right is by appeal to the more general intuition that what is right is always determined by authority: “Subordinates do not decide what is right for their superiors; it is the superiors that decide what is right for their subordinates.” This also suggests that it is precisely an intuition about the general need for authority to create obligation that is motivating Mozi’s view of Heaven. It is therefore likely that some sort of distinction between good and right will be implicit in Mozi’s thought, since, as we saw from my illustration, such a distinction does intuitively accompany normal cases of authority. I conclude that the fact that Mozi says we should obey Heaven because Heaven is eminent and wise is fully compatible with the divine will interpretation.

(3) A similar treatment can be applied to another kind of reason that Mozi seems to give for obeying Heaven:

Suppose there is a man who delights in and loves his son, and does everything within his power to benefit him. If the son, when he grows up, does nothing to obey his father, then all the gentlemen of the world will call him unbenevolent and ill-fated. Now Heaven loves the world universally and seeks to bring benefit to all creatures. There is not so much as the tip of a hair which is not the work of Heaven. And since the people enjoy all these benefits, may we not say that its love for them is generous indeed? Yet in the case of Heaven alone, they do nothing to repay this love, but even fail to perceive that they are unbenevolent and ill-fated. Therefore I say that gentlemen understand trifling matters but fail to understand important ones.

This suggests a way of evaluating Heaven’s character, love, in addition to wisdom and eminence, but it also suggests another kind of reason altogether. The passage points to some sort of principle of gratitude: we should obey Heaven out of gratitude for all the blessings we have received from it. The distinction between the good and the right may not be able to handle this sort of reason, because it may seem inadequate to say merely that it is good to obey Heaven because of Heaven’s blessings. It may seem more adequate to say that it is right or obligatory that we obey Heaven because of the gratitude we owe it.

There are at least four ways to deal with this passage. The first is to note that although Mozi hints at the principle of gratitude in this passage, he never actually says that gratitude is why we are obligated to obey Heaven. This passage provides weak evidence, therefore, against the divine will interpretation, even if no other way can be found to deal with it. Second, we could insist that the distinction between the
good and the right is sufficient to deal with this passage, because it could just be saying
that it is good for people to obey out of gratitude, not that they somehow owe
obedience or have an obligation to obey out of gratitude.

Third, even dismissing these first two responses, there is a response available that
is again illuminated by contemporary forms of divine command theory. C. Stephen
Evans thinks that it is possible to distinguish not only between the right and the good
but also between different sorts of right. His motivation for doing so is to make
room for this same principle of gratitude. He distinguishes moral obligations (which
divine commands are necessary and sufficient to establish) from non-moral or natu-
ral obligations, and argues that the principle of gratitude constitutes a non-moral
obligation. Evans thinks he can legitimately answer the question “Why obey God?”
with “Because you owe him gratitude” without compromising divine command the-
ory, since divine command theory only applies to moral obligations. Now, this dis-
tinction is probably less intuitive than Adams’ distinction between the good and the
right, but I don’t think it is wholly unintuitive. Consider again the legislature illus-
tration. It seems plausible that, even though the legislature’s making of a law is both
necessary and sufficient for the creation of a legal obligation, there may be other
kinds of obligations that are relevant for determining whether the legislature can cre-
ate legal obligations for me. For instance, if I agree to be ruled by the legislature, or
if this government has the endorsement of the vast majority of the people in my coun-
try, I may be obligated to obey them (and not obligated otherwise). Nevertheless, I
still would have no legal obligations if the legislature for whatever reason never made
any laws, so the legislature’s authority still creates my legal obligations. Divine au-
thority could be based in a similar sort of obligation, an obligation that is different in
kind from the obligations created by the divine will. And the divine will could still be
necessary for the creation of most of what we consider moral obligations.

Fourth, assume that all three of the preceding responses fail. Assume that the
principle of gratitude constitutes an independent moral principle, capable of creating
moral obligations, and this independent moral principle is necessary to ground di-
vine authority. This still doesn’t support the utilitarian interpretation over against the
divine command interpretation. It could be that Heaven’s will isn’t necessary for the
creation of moral rightness, but it could be that Heaven’s will is still sufficient for
the creation of moral obligations and necessary for the creation of all moral obliga-
tions except the principle of gratitude—including the utilitarian principle itself. This
is still very close to a divine command theory of morality, and may even count as one
on a loose enough definition. It certainly is not a utilitarian theory of morality, but it
is consistent with this passage. I conclude that this passage does not support the
utilitarian interpretation.

It is illuminating that these first two sorts of reasons for obeying Heaven that Mozi
gives—regarding the character of the divinity and human gratitude for the divinity’s
blessings—are the same sorts of reasons that contemporary divine command theorists
give for obeying God. As long as a rationale similar to the one that these contempo-
rary philosophers give for allowing these reasons into their divine command theory
can plausibly be ascribed in some implicit or inchoate form to Mozi—and I have
given reasons for thinking that it can—then the fact that Mozi gives these as reasons for obeying God does not count against the divine will interpretation. A big problem in Mozi interpretation, the reason that these last two objections seem to carry so much weight, is the apparent implicit assumption among interpreters that divine command theory is an all-or-nothing proposition—either every single truth about value reduces to truths about divine commands or divine command theory is false. There are more subtle versions of divine command theory than this, though, and it could very well be that Mozi espouses one of these.

(4) The third class of reasons that Mozi gives for obeying Heaven are prudential reasons:

But although all the people in the world may identify themselves with the Son of Heaven, if they do not also identify themselves with Heaven itself, then calamities will never cease. The violent winds and bitter rains which sweep the world in such profusion these days—these are simply the punishments of Heaven sent down upon the people because they fail to identify themselves with Heaven.

Now what do I desire and what do I hate? I desire good fortune and prosperity and hate misfortune and calamity. If I do not do what Heaven desires and instead do what Heaven does not desire, then I will be leading the people of the world to devote themselves to what will bring misfortune and calamity.

The same sort of reasoning is operative when Mozi says we should obey Heaven out of fear of punishment or desire for reward from the ever-present ghosts and spirits. Duda reads these passages as cases of Mozi giving a utilitarian justification for obeying Heaven, which would mean that the utilitarian criterion is more fundamental than Heaven’s will. I think these passages are more naturally read, though, as cases of Mozi giving another kind of reason altogether, a kind of prudential reason: “If you don’t obey Heaven, you’ll suffer! But if you do obey Heaven, you’ll be happy!” This is why the ghosts and spirits are so important: they see everything, so none of my actions will escape their notice and I will face punishment for evil actions. Their presence doesn’t add any utilitarian motivations, though. The ghosts and spirits, then, do not provide a utilitarian motive for obeying Heaven but a more self-centered, prudential one, and the passages above can easily be read in the same way.

This kind of prudential reasoning could fit with a divine command theory in two ways. It could be a kind of *ad hominem* argument, adopting the selfish standards of the reader for the sake of argument and saying, “Look! Even according to your own standards of action, you should obey Heaven.” Or it could be presenting a reason for action that is not morally significant but still constitutes a good reason. When my son tells me he doesn’t want to go to bed, I can tell him that if he doesn’t I will ground him from video games. This gives him a good reason to go to bed, even though it isn’t the moral reason that he should go to bed (what makes his going to bed the right thing to do); the moral reason is his obligation to obey my rightful authority. The two sorts of reasons—prudential and moral—are not incompatible in many cases. I assume that the moral reasons would be overriding in cases where they are incompatible, but in the case of obeying Heaven’s will they are not. So Mozi’s giving of prudential reasons for obeying Heaven is compatible with the divine will interpretation.
(5) The final set of passages I want to look at constitutes the most serious challenge to the divine will interpretation. I have argued that each of the previous three sorts of reasons that Mozi offers for obeying Heaven’s will—reasons pertaining to the character of Heaven, the gratitude owed Heaven by humans, and prudential reasons—are compatible with the divine will interpretation. Some read Mozi as giving another sort of reason for obeying Heaven, though, a sort of reason that I admit is incompatible with the divine will interpretation: we should obey Heaven because it is right to do so, and it is right to do so because of utilitarian considerations. If Mozi gives this sort of reason for obeying Heaven, then he should be read as making the utilitarian criterion more fundamental than the divine will criterion.

I’ve already mentioned that at least some of the passages that apparently advance a utilitarian justification for obeying Heaven can just as plausibly (perhaps more plausibly) be read as advancing a prudential rather than a utilitarian justification. There are three passages, though, that cannot as easily be dealt with. I will treat each in turn.

In the same way Mo Tzu uses the will of Heaven to measure the government of the rulers and ministers above, and the writings and words of the multitudes below. . . . Therefore Mo Tzu said: If the rulers, ministers, and gentlemen of the world truly desire to honor the Way, benefit the people, and search out the basis of benevolence and righteousness, then they must not fail to obey the will of Heaven, for obedience to the will of Heaven is the standard of righteousness.26

Here Mozi cites honoring the Way, benefiting the people, and searching out the basis of benevolence and righteousness as reasons to obey Heaven’s will. The first thing to note is that “honoring the Way” and “searching out the basis of benevolence and righteousness” do not obviously express utilitarian motivations. They could just as easily express a more general desire to “do the right thing,” a desire that is genuine, but which has no idea whether it is utility or divine will or some other standard that determines what the right thing to do is. “Benefiting the people” may seem more utilitarian, but in reality it is just as vague a notion as the other two, and could easily express a general desire to “do the right thing for the people,” where this desire is compatible with the right thing turning out to be something other than what the utilitarian criterion would say. The desire would then need further direction to determine what exactly the right thing is, and Mozi could be providing that direction by saying that the will of Heaven determines what is right. All this is compatible with the divine will interpretation.

I will summarize the second passage, since it is a bit lengthy.27 The reason that Son of Heaven is set up as an authority, along with the whole chain of authority extending from him all the way down, is that the presence of authority prevents chaos and all the bad effects of chaos. So Mozi gives an explicitly utilitarian justification for the chain of human authorities. This could lead us to think that there is also a utilitarian justification for Heaven’s authority.

Assume for the sake of argument that the divine will interpretation is true. We would expect there to be a utilitarian justification for human authority, since Heaven’s will is the foundation for human authority, and Heaven wills what is best for every-
Therefore, if it is right for there to be human authority, it must be because it is best for everybody. It simply doesn't follow from there being a utilitarian justification for human authority that there is a utilitarian justification for Heaven's authority, since we would expect there to be a utilitarian justification for human authority even if there were no such justification for Heaven's authority.

This leads us to the third and final passage:

How do I know that Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness? In the world, where there is righteousness there is life; where there is unrighteousness there is death. Where there is righteousness there is wealth; where there is no righteousness there is poverty. Where there is righteousness there is order; where there is no righteousness there is disorder. Now Heaven desires life and hates death, desires wealth and hates poverty, desires order and hates disorder. So I know that Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness.28

This passage is a bit opaque, but a straightforward reading of it suggests that Mozi has some antecedent conception of righteousness, knows that it results in such things as life and order, and infers from the fact that Heaven approves of life and order that Heaven desires righteousness. This suggests further that Mozi has some antecedent criterion for determining what “righteousness” consists of, and although the passage doesn’t explicitly mention the utilitarian criterion, it is the natural candidate.

There are a couple of different ways Mozi could be using the term “righteousness,” though, and not all of them are incompatible with the divine will interpretation. If by righteousness Mozi means “those actions which are actually right,” then this passage does support the utilitarian interpretation, since it suggests that righteousness is determined independently of Heaven’s will. He could be using it another way, though. Consider the following cases. I’m a patriotic soldier whose conscience has come to trouble me, and I ask myself, “Is my duty really my duty? Am I acting wrongly by doing my duty?” Or, to use an example inspired by the New Testament, “Is the righteousness of the Pharisees true righteousness?” In both of these cases, terms like “duty” and “righteousness” are being used as shorthand, for something like “perceived duty” or “righteousness by common standards” or some such thing. Otherwise, these example questions would be silly because they would express doubt about analytically true statements. I want to suggest that Mozi could be using “righteousness” in a similar way in this passage—he could be using it to pick out some conception of righteousness such as common beliefs or (most likely) his own pre-theoretical beliefs about it, and then proceeding to argue the substantive claim that this sense of righteousness is actually right because desired by Heaven.

This hermeneutical move is plausible independently of any other textual evidence, because of the undeniable fact that we use all sorts of words in this elliptical way. There is some textual evidence, however, that Mozi does sometimes use righteousness (yì) in this elliptical way.29 In chapter 11, Mozi writes: “In ancient times, when mankind was first born and before there were any laws or government, it may be said that every man’s view of things was different. One man had one view, two men had two views, ten men had ten views—the more men, the more views.”30 In
this passage, “views” and “view of things” translate yi: “it may be said that people differ in yi. And so if there is one man there is one yi, if there are two men there are two yi, if there are ten men there are ten yi. . . .”31 Here, yi (righteousness) is elliptical for a particular conception of righteousness, not righteousness itself. If Mozi is using righteousness in such an elliptical sense, then the passage under discussion is compatible with the divine will interpretation. The support that this passage gives to the utilitarian interpretation is not, therefore, very strong, since it is plausible to suppose that he is using the term in the elliptical sense, which is compatible with the divine will interpretation.

I conclude that the five arguments urged in favor of the utilitarian interpretation do little to support it. In particular, the divine will interpretation is compatible with giving reasons to obey Heaven of the sort that Mozi speaks clearly of, and there is very little non-question-begging reason to think that he gives reasons to obey Heaven that are incompatible with divine command theory.

III

Now we come to arguments in favor of the divine will interpretation of Mozi. All the arguments advanced in the literature on the debate to date have simply come from the passages that set out the divine will criterion. As I said before, though, I think Duda is right to argue that all of these passages are compatible with assigning Heaven’s will an epistemic rather than a right-making role. I will advance a new argument in favor of the divine will interpretation, which I believe gives us better reason to accept that interpretation than the utilitarian interpretation.

As we saw earlier, the key to the utilitarian interpretation is to be able to find a subsidiary but significant role for Heaven’s will. Assigning an epistemic role to Heaven’s will seems to deal nicely with the most obvious divine command passages. If we dig a bit deeper, though, I think it turns out to be unlikely that Mozi is in fact assigning Heaven this epistemic role.32

The question of how we come to know Heaven’s will is very important for the utilitarian account. We have to be able to know two things. First, we have to be able to know that Heaven does in fact, always and only, will what is best for the world. Otherwise we would have no basis for thinking that Heaven’s will is in fact a good guide to right and wrong, since we wouldn’t know whether Heaven’s will abides by the utilitarian criterion of right and wrong. Second, we have to be able to know more than simply that Heaven wills what is good for the world generally; we have to be able to learn what specific actions Heaven wills, and we have to be able to learn this independently of the knowledge we already have of what is best for the world. Otherwise, Heaven’s will won’t add anything to our moral knowledge, over and above the knowledge we have from our knowledge of the utilitarian criterion, and it won’t be able to play the epistemic role that this interpretation needs it to. In other words, according to the utilitarian interpretation, Heaven’s will can’t simply give us knowledge that the utilitarian criterion is right, since we already need to know that the utilitarian criterion is right in order to know that Heaven’s will is a good guide to
right and wrong (this is the utilitarian interpretation of the passages giving reasons to obey Heaven’s will). So using Heaven’s will to infer the utility criterion would involve a vicious circle. Heaven’s will must, therefore, give us knowledge that certain particular actions are right and wrong, or else it won’t add anything to our moral knowledge.

Mozi’s discussion of how we know what Heaven wills unambiguously allows for the first sort of knowledge that the utilitarian interpretation needs. There are two basic ways we come to know what Heaven wills. The first way is through reasoning about what Heaven would want given its situation and relation to the world. (There is no hint of revelation in Mozi’s system.) We know that Heaven desires what benefits the whole world because we can rule out any partisanship, any reason to favor one group of people over another, on Heaven’s part. We can rule this out on a number of grounds: the fact that all people are Heaven’s possession because all people sacrifice to Heaven, so there is no reason for Heaven to love one group over another; the fact that Heaven causes beneficial natural processes such as the sun and moon, the seasons, and so on, to benefit all peoples equally; and the fact that Heaven sets up rulers to establish the needed order in all societies without exception.33 This way of knowing what Heaven desires only gets one of the two sorts of knowledge that the utilitarian interpretation needs: it allows us to know the general truth that Heaven wills the benefit of the whole world, but it does not allow us to know any of Heaven’s more specific desires.

So if we are to come to know Heaven’s specific desires—which we must be able to if Heaven is to play the epistemic role the utilitarian interpretation needs it to—we must be able to gain it from the second way of knowing Heaven’s will. The way is this: we can know what Heaven desires on the basis of its action in rewards and punishments. Heaven always punishes killers of innocent people and rewards those who help others, and specific examples of such rewards and punishments can be seen in the cases of the sage-kings and of evil despots.34

This means of knowledge could, theoretically, grant us knowledge of Heaven’s more specific desires. We could look around and see what sorts of actions are punished and rewarded, and infer from that which actions are willed by Heaven and therefore beneficial to the world. There are two reasons to think, though, that Mozi does not intend to use Heaven’s will in this way. First, whenever Mozi identifies a particular action that Heaven punishes or rewards, he uses this knowledge of Heaven’s specific will to argue for the conclusion that Heaven’s general will is that all the people be benefited. In making this inference, he clearly knows independently of Heaven’s will that the actions that Heaven wills satisfy the utility criterion. For example:

Yet this is not the only reason that I know that Heaven loves the people generously. If someone kills an innocent person, then Heaven will send down misfortune upon him. Who is it that kills the innocent person? A man. And who is it that sends down the misfortune? Heaven. If Heaven did not love the people generously, then what reason would it have to send down misfortune upon the murderer of an innocent person? Thus I know that Heaven loves the people generously,35
All the cases of Mozi identifying a particular action that is willed by Heaven are used, like this one, to argue for the conclusion that Heaven wills the good of all. This shows that Mozi views knowledge of Heaven’s specific will not as an epistemic guide for knowing what actions are in accord with the utility criterion (as he should were he a utilitarian) but as further evidence that Heaven wills the utility criterion itself. This harmonizes better with the divine command interpretation of Mozi, since it does not give Heaven the epistemic role that the utilitarian interpretation does.

The second reason to think that Mozi does not use Heaven in the epistemic role demanded by the utilitarian interpretation is the fact that Mozi never himself uses Heaven’s will that way in any of his own moral reasoning. All of his arguments for particular moral requirements—honoring the worthy, universal love, no offensive warfare, moderation in funerals and expenditures, and opposing music—appeal to the utility criterion, not to Heaven’s will. All he does is argue that certain actions are required by the utility criterion; he never appeals to Heaven’s will to explain how he knows that these actions are required by the utility criterion. It would be curious, to say the least, for Mozi to make such a big deal about Heaven’s will and then never use it himself in the role he assigned it.

The divine will interpretation faces no such difficulties. According to the divine command view, since Heaven’s will actually determines right action, we only need to know enough about Heaven’s desires to figure out whether our specific actions are in accord with these desires. So all we would need to know would be the general principles that Heaven wills, which we can then apply to particular situations. Were Mozi a divine command theorist, then, we would expect him to care much more about these general principles (which would explain his use of specific desires of Heaven to infer Heaven’s more general desires) and then use these general principles to reason about more specific situations (which would explain his use of the utility criterion in all of his moral reasoning about particular cases). I conclude that the utilitarian interpretation’s assigning of an epistemic role to Heaven’s will is less plausible than it may have first appeared, and this supports the divine will interpretation. Notice that this is not a simple, proof-text argument. It is an argument that the whole pattern of Mozi’s practice of moral reasoning makes sense only if Mozi is a divine command theorist, not a utilitarian. As such, I think this argument is a very strong one.

This argument, although not decisive, does, I think, weight the scales in favor of the divine will interpretation of Mozi’s moral theory. Mozi probably does espouse a form of divine command theory, a form that is compatible with the giving of various sorts of reasons (pointing out characteristics of Heaven, debts of gratitude owed it, and considerations of prudence) for obeying divine commands.

IV

Recently, Xiufen Lu has advanced an argument for the conclusion that the whole debate between the utilitarian and divine will interpretations is misguided and reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of Heaven in Mozi’s thought. The term trans-
lated “Heaven” (Tian), Lu argues, should not be regarded as a personal being, for two reasons. First, the concept of Tian in ancient China is almost always, despite some personification, regarded not as a personal being but as “the whole world from which everything including humans evolve[s] in accordance with the ultimate force in nature that works toward the universal harmony.”36 Second, “it is inconceivable that in the absence of the creation myth, any Chinese notion of deity can be comparable to the Western notion of God.”37 Since Heaven is simply the directional processes of nature, of which humans are a part, and according to which humans need to act in order to live up to their ends and benefit themselves, “Heaven’s will” and “what is best for the world” actually denote the same thing—the actions for which humans are naturally intended. Both sides of the utilitarianism / divine will debate, therefore, are misguided because, as a result of a personalistic conception of Heaven, both artificially separate Heaven’s will from what is best for the world and ask which is more fundamental.

Even if Lu is right about the nature of Heaven in Mozi, though, it does not follow that the debate between the utilitarian and divine will interpretations is misguided. There are still two criteria of moral action—what is best for the world (the utility criterion) and Heaven’s will, even if that simply denotes the natural tendencies and ends of nature—and it is still a substantive question of whether they are identical. After all, as Lu herself notes, it is not a logical truth that nature tends to benefit the things that make it up. This means we can still ask which of the two is metaphysically more fundamental—which of the two criteria reflects fundamentally what makes an action right, and which serves a dependent, epistemic role. Lu notes this objection and responds by saying,

The appropriate response to such a challenge is that even posing the question betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of classical Chinese philosophy. In the intellectual milieu in which Mozi was working such a question simply could not arise. For classical Chinese philosophers, things (including human beings) flourish, thrive, or do well only if they develop in keeping with their inherent nature. Because a thing’s inherent nature is given by its place and role in the overall system, its flourishing or being benefited simply cannot be separated from its playing its role in the overall system.38

But it simply isn’t true that in Mozi’s intellectual milieu “such a question simply could not arise,” because Mozi himself quite obviously asks and spends a great deal of time answering this question. It is definitely a substantive question for Mozi whether Heaven wills the benefit of the world, and he gives a series of arguments that it does (from general facts about Heaven’s relation to the world and specific acts that Heaven rewards or punishes)—some of which have played an important role in my arguments for the divine will interpretation.39 Now, it may turn out in Lu’s interpretation of Mozi’s view of Heaven that it is metaphysically necessary that Heaven wills the benefit of the world, and this would constitute an interesting difference between Mozi’s divine will theory and Western divine command theories, many of which have held that at least some of God’s commands are contingent.40 There must be some sense in which it is not necessary that Heaven wills the benefit of the world,
However, and the absence of this sort of necessity (perhaps epistemic necessity) must be enough to allow us to ask which criterion better reflects the metaphysical right-making property of an action and which functions more as a guide to right action. In any case, if it turns out that in Lu’s interpretation it doesn’t make sense to ask the question whether Heaven’s will and the benefit of the world are identical, then so much the worse for Lu’s interpretation, since Mozi clearly does ask that question.

So even if Lu is right about Heaven not being a personal being, the debate still makes sense; all that needs to be done is replace the “divine will” interpretation with some analogue that cuts out the implication of a personal deity. However, I am also not convinced by Lu’s arguments that Mozi can’t be thinking of Heaven as a personal deity. Even if it is true that there is no creation myth available to Mozi, I cannot make sense of the assertion that you need a creation myth to have a conception of a personal deity. Many philosophers who do have a personal conception of God deny creation and affirm the eternity of the world.\footnote{41} Also, the mere fact that the culture surrounding Mozi does not generally regard Heaven as a personal deity, even if true, gives only \textit{prima facie} reason to think that Mozi doesn’t either, and Mozi’s striking and widespread personification of Heaven (far more widespread and vivid than in any other ancient Chinese philosopher) gives, to my mind, a much stronger \textit{prima facie} reason in the other direction.\footnote{42}

However this debate is resolved, it remains true that Mozi probably champions some version of a divine will theory of right action (or an analogue of divine will theory that replaces a personal deity with an impersonal conception of nature), and that he regards the utility criterion as making up the content of this divine will. The secondary theological question—the precise nature of the Heaven whose will we are obligated to obey—is precisely that, a secondary question, and remains open for debate. I myself am inclined to follow the majority of philosophers and take Mozi’s personified references to Heaven more at face value than Lu does.

Notes

1 – I will refer to “Mozi” throughout, but I intend to remain neutral as to whether the thought of the \textit{Mozi} is the product of one mind or the collective endeavors of the Mohist school.

2 – Kristopher Duda (2001) makes a slight error in his statement of Ahern’s position. Duda asserts that Ahern believes that Mozi \textit{inconsistently} subscribes to both moral criteria (the utilitarian and divine will criteria). In fact, Ahern just asserts that there is no textual basis for deciding one way or the other whether Mozi is a consistent utilitarian, a consistent divine will theorist, or inconsistent. See Ahern 1976.

4 – I will use “divine will” and “divine command” interchangeably throughout, since the differences between the two are not relevant for the present discussion.


6 – This is ambiguous between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. It is not significant for my purposes to resolve this ambiguity.


8 – Ibid., p. 84.

9 – Ibid., p. 92.


11 – I don’t think that assuming Vorenkamp’s account instead would significantly affect the rest of the arguments.

12 – Soles 1999, p. 43.

13 – Fraser 2007, sec. 7.

14 – Versions of this argument are found in Vorenkamp 1992, Duda 2001, and Fraser 2007.


16 – Mozi, in Watson 1963, p. 84.

17 – Adams 1999.


19 – Another passage giving reasons to obey Heaven, which is not translated in Watson’s translation—chapter 4, section 3 of the Mozi—admits of a similar treatment as the passage in this section. It identifies a series of good-making properties of Heaven (being impartial and all-inclusive, being abundant and unceasing in blessing, and being lasting and untiring in guidance). These also are compatible with the divine command interpretation, since they are plausibly thought of as criteria a being would have to meet to be able to issue genuinely divine commands.

20 – Mozi, in Watson 1963, pp. 88–89.


22 – Evans also notes that God can make a non-moral obligation into a moral obligation by commanding it.


24 – Ibid., p. 79.
26 – Ibid., pp. 92–93.
28 – Mozi, in Watson 1963, p. 79. Fraser (2007, sec. 7) uses this passage to argue against the divine will interpretation.
29 – I owe the following point entirely to an anonymous referee for this journal.
30 – Mozi, in Watson 1963, p. 34.
31 – Again, thanks to an anonymous referee for this translation point.
32 – Concerning the various words that Hui-Chieh Loy uses to describe possible roles for Heaven’s will—evaluating, guiding, checking, validating, justifying, modeling—although there are some minor differences between them (particularly between evaluating and guiding), all amount to assigning to Heaven the epistemic role that I am here arguing Mozi does not assign to Heaven. See Loy 2008, esp. secs. 4, 5, and 6.
34 – Ibid. I am including under this heading what Soles (1999, pp. 43–44) divides into the “divine justice” and “ancient texts” means of knowing Heaven’s will, since I take the ancient texts simply to be providing further testimonial support for the argument from divine justice. It is undeniable that Mozi is being rather naive with these empirical claims, but the issue at hand is not whether Mozi is right but what he thinks, and he certainly thinks that these empirical claims about who suffers misfortune and who is rewarded are true.
35 – Ibid., p. 89.
36 – Lu 2006, p. 127. Lu does admit, though, that there are some more personal conceptions of a high being that pop up here and there in ancient China.
37 – Ibid., p. 127.
38 – Ibid., p. 132.
39 – Most of “The Will of Heaven” is concerned with this question and these arguments (Mozi, in Watson 1963, pp. 78–93).
40 – Notice, though, that some divine command theorists have embraced Leibniz’ modal fatalism, according to which God necessarily wills the best, and so may accept that all of God’s commands are metaphysically necessary.
41 – Consider the whole host of Neoplatonically influenced Muslim, Jewish, and Christian philosophers—al-Farabi jumps particularly to mind.
42 – And see Clark 2005 for a challenge to Lu’s view that theism is nearly nonexistent in ancient China.
References


