

---

# China's First Liberal

— ◆ —

EVAN OSBORNE

Scholars and partisans of liberty often dispute whether liberty is the natural desire of all humans or—as Orlando Patterson (1992), among many others, contends—the product of a distinctive Western history that runs through the Magna Carta, the Enlightenment, and the *Federalist Papers*. The most explicit consideration of why liberty is the just state of society is probably mostly Western, although, owing (ironically) to Western imperialism and in recent years to globalization, the appeal of limited government arguably has spread around the world.

But are the principles of classical liberalism in particular a Western creation? China, which has endured thousands of years of despotism, notwithstanding that it has produced a great deal of political philosophy arguing that the dictator should treat his subjects justly, is an unlikely candidate as a source of classical-liberal thought. However, at least one Chinese philosopher known as Mozi (c. 470–391 B.C.E.) was arguing in favor of some of the principles of classical liberalism centuries before Locke or Voltaire.

In this article, I survey the impressive extent to which modern liberal principles appear in Mozi's writings, themselves also known collectively as the *Mozi*. Such a philosophical foundation looms large with the geopolitical rise of China, whose rulers in recent years have emphasized other Chinese political-philosophy traditions that laud hierarchy over equality and prioritize obedience above all. I briefly summarize Mozi's life and describe the framework of Chinese philosophy in which he wrote. I then analyze his proto-advocacy of equality before the law and explore his recognition of the dangers of the predatory state, his antiwar liberalism, and his anticipation of the modern liberal conception of the rational self-interested social order.

---

Evan Osborne is a professor of economics at Wright State University.

*The Independent Review*, v. 16, n. 4, Spring 2012, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2012, pp. 533–551.

## Mozi in the Chinese Tradition

Chinese philosophy and ethics are the oldest continuous intellectual tradition in history. Like Greek philosophy and drama, they are concerned with social order, governance, individual ethics, and the nature of the choices humans and their societies must make. By the time the Shang dynasty ascended in roughly 1600 B.C.E., there was an awareness that governments could rise and fall. Indeed, the concept of cyclicity and order not only in politics but also in medicine, family, and human affairs generally is an important component of China's traditional way of understanding the world. Ever since China became a cohesive civilization, it has been densely populated, subject to frequent natural disasters (often seen as heaven's punishment for misrule), and struggles over power. China's political traditions for almost its entire history as a cohesive civilization have also been authoritarian, often to an extreme degree. The emperor, though not necessarily seen as literally divine in the way that Japanese emperors were, was the Son of Heaven, charged with implementing the divine will on earth and thus not to be questioned. The checks and balances from other social groups—such as the church, the nobility, and the merchant class that provided some restraint on monarchical power in post-Roman Europe—were little in evidence in China, although this tendency toward absolutist rule was offset to some degree by the vast scope of the territory over which most Chinese emperors ruled, which allowed the monarchs of distant jurisdictions considerable autonomy. The conduct of such local lords, both in terms of what should be done and what historically had been done well and poorly is often the focus of political writing, including that of Mozi.<sup>1</sup>

Because of China's dynastic history and susceptibility to social collapse, order—how to achieve it and what happens when it is absent—was long an important, if not the central, question in Chinese political thought. From order comes security and (by contemporaneous standards) prosperity, and from disorder comes the threat of internal and external violence. Pre-Confucian writings had already established that the force of heaven, although not personified as in monotheistic religions, could and did intervene in human affairs—through, for example, the weather to punish wicked rulers and reward just ones. It was already expected in this tradition that the people would rebel against a ruler who had lost heaven's mandate.

But Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) and his admirers erected a mammoth edifice of work that emphasized hierarchy and ritual as the keys to preserving order. In parallel, Confucian thought emphasized that a superior was owed obedience, provided he merited it by dint of worthy conduct. Confucius was born in the middle of the sixth century B.C., during the eastern Zhou dynasty. Like others before him and like Mozi and others after him, he viewed the present as a time of disorder and

---

1. As noted in the Chinese idiom “Heaven is high and the emperor distant,” denoting regions beyond the imperial government's control.

decline, and he argued that the conduct of the “sage kings” of the past provided a model to be emulated in the present. In an argument that was to be repeated many times in other places over the centuries, he contended that private virtue was the key to public order, but he added that private virtue involved not only ethical conduct toward others, but also the observance of ritual. He emphasized the intrinsic importance of respect for one’s natural superiors—younger brothers toward older, sons toward fathers, dukes toward kings, and all toward the emperor. The Confucian legacy dominated political thought over the centuries, not only in China but across East Asia.

It was in this environment that Mozi taught. Confucianism was already the dominant strain of thought, and some of what Mozi proclaimed, as recorded in the *Mozi*, directly opposes it. The eponymous *Mozi* is not a single book by Mozi himself, but a collection of essays of uncertain authorship, most likely containing the thoughts of the teacher Mo Di, whose life is not nearly as well documented as that of Confucius. According to the most widely held view, Mò Dí—or, as usually rendered in the Latin alphabet, Mozi (the latter syllable denoting “master”)—was one man who lived in the Chinese state of Lǚ, in what is now Shandong. As is common with many of the great Chinese philosophers, including Confucius, most if not all of the texts bearing his name were not in fact penned by him, but subsequently by his disciples. Scholars disagree about whether he had artisanal or low-noble background, whether he served time in prison, and the extent, if any, of his work as a mandarin at the provincial level. The *Mozi*, however, is at minimum a collection of his thought as understood by those who followed him. It is known to consist collectively of seventy-one treatises, but only fifty-three have survived.

Consistent with the preceding discussion and like all Chinese political philosophers until after China’s contact with the West, Mozi, when discussing political theory, was not concerned first and foremost with rights in the Enlightenment sense of the term. At the time he wrote, Chinese civilization already had perhaps a millennium of history behind it, and it was already preoccupied with questions of the ruler’s legitimacy, which hinged on whether the ruler could maintain order and prosperity. The hierarchy of rule, from the heaven-selected emperor down through kings and dukes, was taken for granted, and the idea of popular sovereignty or citizens actively defending themselves against state predation through the law or other means short of violent rebellion (which was justifiable in the case of sufficient corruption or other instability) would have been incomprehensible to most classical Chinese political thinkers. The imperial system of government was part of the natural order of things.

Order, however, depended on good governance. Within the constraint of the longstanding Chinese conception of governance, Mozi still challenged what was by then the Confucian orthodoxy. In a work known as “Against the Confucians II,” he directly criticizes the established Confucian wisdom on a variety of topics, arguing at one point that Confucian scholars, with their seeking of income and employment as

in effect the house scholars of Chinese nobles, are essentially rent seekers pursuing gains from an artificially manufactured need for their expertise:

They [Confucians] believe in Fate and accept poverty, yet they are arrogant and self-important. They turn their backs on what is fundamental and abandon their duties, finding contentment in idleness and pride. They are greedy for drink and food. They are indolent in carrying out their responsibilities and fall into hunger and cold, but, when endangered by starvation and freezing, they have no way of avoiding these things. They are like beggars. They stare like billy goats. They rise up like castrated pigs. When a gentleman laughs at them, they angrily reply, “What do you know of god[, ] Confucians[?]” In spring, they beg for wheat. In summer, they beg for rice. When the five grains have been harvested, they attach themselves to large funerals with their sons and grandsons all flowing along, and so they get their fill of drink and food. They depend on other people’s households for food and rely on other people’s fields for wine. (39.4, pp. 353–54)<sup>2</sup>

The theme that Confucians had a mistaken understanding of prosperity, where it comes from, and the nature of justice recurs throughout Mozi’s work. Because of the nature of Chinese society at the time when he lived, it is unsurprising that Mozi was not an orthodox liberal in the Western tradition. Yet even against that backdrop he still demonstrated a remarkable understanding of several notions immediately recognizable to the modern liberal and often couched in terms of opposition to conventional Chinese thought, especially that of Confucius.

## The Centrality of Equality

To think about the preservation of the well-ordered society in a sophisticated way requires thinking about why order comes about to begin with. This question, of course, has loomed large in Western political theory for centuries, and both Donald Jenner (1984) and Benjamin Schwartz (1985) have explicitly likened Mozi’s analysis of the primitive society that lacks order to Thomas Hobbes’s depiction of the state of nature. There are, however, differences in Mozi’s analysis of the society that results from escaping this state. Mozi’s conception of the social hierarchy is similar to that of the Confucians. At the apex is heaven. Just below that is the emperor, or Son of Heaven. Then come a series of progressively more local kings, lords, and officers

---

2. Throughout this article, in referencing the *Mozi*, I rely on Ian Johnston’s recent annotated translation (*The Mozi* 2010). Parenthetical citations to the *Mozi* include the title of the specific work quoted or referenced (unless it is already indicated in the text), the numerical designation of Chinese classics accepted by Western scholars of classical Chinese (similar to the universally accepted classification system for Greek and Roman literature), and the page number in Johnston’s translation. The original Chinese-character rendition of quotations from the *Mozi* is included and analyzed only when its meaning is critical.

down to the common people, who inhabit the bottom of a seven-tiered structure. Each level is obligated to obey those who occupy higher layers, but the ultimate source of authority, even over the emperor, is heaven, which possesses the capacity to intervene in human affairs via natural phenomena and outside invasion when rulers violate its dictates. Although both Hobbes and Mozi posit a violent and anarchic state of nature rooted in the nature of man, Hobbes attributes this disorder to the lack of a meaningful sovereign, whereas Mozi argues that the fault lies in a lack of uniformity of conception of righteous conduct (*yì*, 義). Mozi's diagnosis is almost an argument against what we would now call "cultural or moral relativism":

Ancient times, when people first came into being, were times when there were as yet no laws or government, so it was said that people had different principles. This meant that, if there was one person, there was one principle; if there were two people, there were two principles; and if there were 10 people, there were 10 principles. The more people there were, the more things there were that were spoken of as principles. This was a case of people affirming their own principles and condemning those of other people. The consequence of this was mutual condemnation. In this way, within a household, fathers and sons, and older and younger brothers were resentful and hostile, separated and dispersed, and unable to reach agreement in accord with each other. Throughout the world, people all used water and fire, and poisons and potions to injure and harm one another. As a result, those with strength to spare did not use it to help each other in their work, surplus goods rotted and decayed and were not used for distribution, and good doctrines were hidden and obscured and not used for mutual teaching. So the world was in a state of disorder comparable to that amongst birds and beasts. ("Exalting Unity I," 11.1, p. 91)

But is it necessary only that there be a unity of some principle or another, or is there a particular notion of righteousness, a particular will of heaven? The most common characterization of Mozi's ethics holds that he advocates universal love, and this description is indeed an accurate, if partial, translation of the Mozi ethical system. In his view, however, what heaven actually desires is mutual love and mutual benefit (*xiāng ài xiāng lì*, 相愛相利)—that is, a system in which all love one another and can and should interact for mutual gain, repaying gain with gain. The first and third characters in this phrase simply mean "mutual," the second "love." The fourth consists of a left portion denoting grain and a right denoting the knife that cuts the grain, and, as we will see in due course, in both the classical Chinese of the *Mozi* and modern Chinese it denotes benefit or profit in a very utilitarian sense.

In addition, a Mozi argument that is clearly recognizable from a liberal perspective is the importance of impartiality in good governance. Unlike previous Chinese thinkers, Mozi goes to great lengths to distinguish two concepts: *bié* (別), denoting "the other,"

as in differentiation between the own group (family, clan, state) and other groups; and *jiān* (兼), meaning universality—that is, the regarding of members of one’s own group and other groups as equal. In “Heaven’s Intention III,” one of three works on the principles mandated by heaven, he argues: “I say that to comply with Heaven’s intention is to be universal. To oppose Heaven’s intention is to be discriminating” (28.8, p. 268). Thus, one should regard another’s father exactly as one regards one’s own, and one should not view the weak as having different moral stature from the strong or the great man or state from the small. Three surviving works—“Universal Love I, II, III”—also repeatedly argue that whereas dukes must love and honor kings and sons their fathers, the reverse is also true.

As a prescription for individual ethical conduct, this admonition is not entirely novel. It is conceptually related to Confucius’s famous negative formulation in the *Analects* of what Christians would later call the “Golden Rule”: “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.”<sup>3</sup> However, unlike Confucius, Mozi follows this principle to its logical conclusion: what you would not want other people to do to your father, your country, and so forth do not do to other people’s fathers and countries. Although there is a natural social hierarchy and a need for those on its lower levels to honor and obey those above them, heaven demands that those who are higher treat those who are lower not simply with paternalistic respect, but as their equals. (That this line of reasoning does not cause him to question the social hierarchy mandated by heaven is of course an unresolved contradiction in Mozi’s thinking, albeit one that even his subsequent critics failed to emphasize.) That heaven endows all lands with the resources to allow the people prosperity (while reserving the right to punish unrighteously governed lands) means that all are equal before heaven—an idea marking a substantial progression from the one-way ascending structure of veneration in pre-Mozi thought. In vesting equality in the will of heaven, Mozi shows some similarity to natural-law conceptions of the source of liberty—seen, for example, in John Locke ([1689] 1988). Further, in making universality the central principle of good governance, the *Mozi* departs substantially from prior emphasis on the need to tend to one’s own, especially one’s own family, as the foundation of ethical behavior. In the end, universality is the heart of righteous governance: “To follow the way of universality is to govern by righteousness. To follow the way of discrimination is to govern by force” (“Heaven’s Intention III,” 28.8, p. 269).

Adherence to the principle of universality will lead to both ethical and effective governance. Compliance with heaven’s intention means that “[t]hose who live in large states do not attack small states. Those who live in large families do not take over small families.”<sup>4</sup> The strong do not plunder the weak. Those in high positions do not disdain the lowly. Those who are clever do not cheat the foolish” (“Heaven’s

3. 己所不欲，勿施於人 (“jì suǒ bù yù, wú shī yú rén”), *Analects*, 15.24 (author’s translation).

4. “Family” here is an extended entity, more akin to a clan in English usage.

Intention I,” 26.7, p. 241). There is thus order and, by standard classic Chinese reasoning, prosperity as well. This argument, however, raises the question of whether societies in reality can be built on such a principle of universality. Mozi asserts that numerous ancient societies ruled by the sage kings were in fact so run, and he gives historical examples of two kings who did in fact govern this way, citing in particular the remarks by a king Wū of Zhōu, who viewed barbarians and men of the kingdom as equally deserving of the assistance of “men of benevolence.” He notes that his own clansmen were as flawed as the men of other clans (“Universal Love II,” 15.9, p. 145). As we shall see, moreover, he also makes a positive argument in favor of the empirical vitality of the society built on universal love and mutual benefit.

With remarkable anticipation of modern Western liberal thought, Mozi argues that universality requires predictable laws. The details of legal implementation in the Mozi system would not be recognizable to the modern liberal, but the “policy” recommendation is the same. In “Exalting Unity II,” he lays out the logic of the will of heaven. At each of his seven rungs of the social order, whenever anyone hears of a good or bad deed, he must report it to his superior. At the same time, obedience to his superior is required, and collusion with others against decrees from above must be avoided. Whenever wrongdoing occurs below, it must be punished. At first, this instruction seems an unlikely recipe for consistent, nonarbitrary law, but the meaning is that wrongdoing and only wrongdoing should be punished and that virtuous conduct and only virtuous conduct should be rewarded—in other words, the law should be consistent. In addition, in a well-ordered society, someone on a lower rung must be free to admonish wrongdoing by someone on the immediately higher rung. The recipe for good governance is found in the rule of the sage kings, who “in establishing punishment, government, reward and praise, were very perspicacious and thoroughly reliable” (“Exalting Unity II,” 12.3, p. 101).

With allowance for the social and cultural constraints on Mozi, this view is remarkably close to Friedrich Hayek’s concept of the rule of law as “rules which make it possible to foresee with fair certainty how the authority will use its coercive powers in given circumstances and to plan one’s individual affairs on the basis of this knowledge” ([1944] 1976, 72). Hayek’s conception of the rule of law is multifaceted, including reliance on ideas developed by Hume and Kant—for example, in the latter case “universality” (Gray 1982)—but as we have seen, the universalist ideal is also part of the Mozi system. In Mozi as well as in Hayek, people should know what the law expects of them so that they may sensibly plan their decisions or, as Mozi would say, so that chaos can be avoided and righteousness achieved.

## The Dangers of the Predatory State

Another striking coincidence in argument between Mozi’s thought and Western liberal philosophy is in the conception of the state’s proper boundaries. Over the centuries, Western writers have differed over these boundaries; Locke, for example,

concentrates on individual rights exclusively to control the use of property, including the self, whereas some modern opinion—for example, Robert Nozick (1974)—holds that all unethical acts involve force or fraud or both and that such acts are then the only ones that the state may acceptably use coercion to prohibit. For Mozi, heaven, too, is concerned about these things. In “Heaven’s Intention,” the absence of attacks by big states on small, big clans on small, “plunder” by the strong, and “deception” by the clever constitutes the inevitable outcome of “rule by righteousness” (26.7, p. 240). In the same passage, in contrast, the converse set of circumstances is called “rule by force.”<sup>5</sup> Mozi goes on to make an absolute statement about this distinction between rule by righteousness and rule by force, which are as different as a square and a circle. A state that governs by force, in short, is the antithesis of justice.

A component of rule by force, he says in “On Eschewing Faults,” is excessive state bloat, which is the entire focus of this chapter. He begins by invoking the state of nature, in which a hypothetical wise leader had yet to build housing, let alone cities. With the rise of the sage kings, it became possible through the assessment of prudent taxation to build housing, one of the most essential ingredients of the emergence from the state of nature. This conception of the origin of wealth obviously differs from that of the modern liberal, who views wealth as being created by individuals under their own initiative, with the state providing only essential public goods, which clearly would not include personal housing. (Notice also the contrast to the Hobbesian conception of the construction of the state as more a necessary evil to escape the state of nature, with no veneration of wise rulers.) But the sage kings also taught men to farm and women to sew, which then became their responsibility. Mozi here argues that as long as state expenditures are confined to things that the state must provide for the common good, taxation will be correspondingly limited, and the people not distressed. The sage kings themselves led properly frugal lives, forgoing excess in their own dwellings and their clothing. But the current nobility, Mozi writes, feast on copious amounts of luxurious food, much of which cannot be consumed and hence rots. Their dwellings are large and lavishly adorned, and they wear the most opulent clothing. Not only does this high living penalize the people through taxation itself, but also the people, under Chinese feudalism, have to provide forced labor to manufacture these things for nobles, who produce nothing themselves, leaving the people without proper food and clothing. The corrupt current nobility “must impose heavy tax demands on the ordinary people, cruelly seizing the people’s materials for clothing and food to make elegant, embroidered, ornamented, colored and beautiful clothes,” yielding “wasteful and extravagant rulers” and a “dissolute, mean and difficult” populace, making social disorder inevitable. If in contrast the state is “restrained and moderate,” there is “prosperity” (6.1–6.8, pp. 39–47).

---

5. “Rule by force is different from this. It is the negation of this in word and the converse of this in deed, in fact, it is entirely the opposite.” The character for “force,” 力, can also be translated as “power” (“Heaven’s Intention I,” 26.7, 241).

Mozi spends a significant amount of time and effort criticizing two aspects of cultural and government bloat in particular: the wasteful expenses on funerals and public performance of music. There were originally three works titled "Moderation in Funerals" and three more on "Condemning Music," although in each case only one remains. The general argument is that such effort represents a waste of resources, particularly in the case of ornate public performance of music when a local ruler chooses to provide it at public expense. The benevolent ruler, Mozi begins "Condemning Music I" by asserting, "[does] not make what is beautiful to their eyes, or pleasing to their ears, or sweet to their mouths, or of comfort to their bodies. They take these things as depriving the people of materials for food and clothing and so the benevolent do not make them" (32.1, p. 307). Kings must tax if they wish to provide lavish displays of music. The sage kings of yore also taxed to provide "boats and carts" ("Condemning Music I," 32.3, p. 309), but the latter are practical goods for the people to use and hence proper uses of tax revenue. But the labor required to produce public music means men and women are diverted from productive tasks, and the taxes imposed bring only useless benefit to an idle ruling class, while burdening the common people ("Condemning Music I," 32.10, p. 315).

To modern ears, this discussion seems to deal with a trivial matter, but in fact the expenses for public music were often considerable in both time and physical resources, as they were for the elaborate and prolonged Confucian mourning rituals. By contemporary custom, the death of a parent or eldest son had to be marked with three years of mourning, with lesser periods required for other relatives ("Against the Confucians II," 39.1, p. 351). The opportunity cost of this time was substantial, and Mozi remarkably expresses some of his objections explicitly in these terms. Farmers who, by Confucian thinking, in proper imitation of those above them in the Chinese social hierarchy mourn for three years "will not be able to go out early and come back late, plow and plant, and cultivate trees" ("Moderation in Funerals III," 25.5, p. 217). High officials are not able to tend to affairs of state, women are unable to carry out their weaving, and there is "a prolonged prevention of further production" (25.5, p. 217).

In taking this position, Mozi put himself squarely at odds with Confucian tradition, in which honoring the dead, especially fathers and older brothers, was a key rite and hence essential to social order. But Mozi recognized the cost of this custom to the practical functioning of society. At its most dramatic, when the emperor or a king or duke died, Chinese belief required that common people, perhaps several hundred in the case of the emperor, be killed to accompany him to the afterlife. Of course, this conduct is in modern times outrageous on its face, but Mozi once again emphasizes the opportunity cost of such lives wasted, listing these deaths after the expenses of the mourning of a lesser king, duke, or other noble that render his "family's resources almost exhausted," along with the lavish expenditures on jewelry and silk buried with the body ("Moderation in Funerals III," 25.4, p. 215).

The state in Mozi's conception is thus potentially a source of oppression, precisely because it consumes too much and thus diminishes the people's ability to

provide for themselves. The sine qua non of the sage king is that he increase his people's "benefits" by eliminating useless government expenses. To be sure, the conception of what the state ought to provide was different in Mozi's time from the modern notion of public goods. Local officials and, above them, kings issue dicta about the production of grain, clothing, weaponry, and housing; but even if we take as given the traditional Chinese way of thinking in which the emperor or the king provides the essential goods after the people independently produce them, the notion of the potential burdens of oppressive taxation to fund the ruler's own love of purely ornamental "pearls and jade, birds and animals, and dogs and horses" ("Moderation in Use I," 20.2, p. 201) is certainly in harmony with later—including modern—Western liberal thought about the dangers of governments in their own interests building an endless stream of white elephants and of the self-serving, if not actually self-aggrandizing, state. Mozi emphasizes the need for efficiency in government operation precisely because of the burden government imposes on the peasantry, a notion eminently familiar to anyone acquainted with Peter Bauer's (1972) analysis of profligate waste in developing countries.

### **Mozi the Antiwar Liberal**

To Mozi, perhaps the most catastrophic big-government waste of all is that of the militaristic imperial state. He sees war, first, as a sin, then as a material waste. In "Condemning Offensive Warfare I," where he tellingly lays out the rationale for the ethical supremacy of universal love, he characterizes war as simple theft and brutality writ large. To steal someone's fruit is clearly wrong because the thief unjustly enjoys the fruits of another's labor, a form of violation of property rights (itself, of course, an important liberal concept).<sup>6</sup> If theft of fruit is a sin, he argues, surely so, too, is breaking into a warehouse and seizing merchandise, breaking into an animal pen and stealing animals, or seizing another's sons and daughters. It is then an even greater sin to kill an innocent person, and all these sins ought to be punishable under law. War results in the killing of uncountable numbers of innocents, in the stealing of property, and in the enslaving of the sons and daughters of uncountable thousands. When a king punishes individual theft or murder and then engages in warfare while calling it righteousness, says Mozi, it is like calling a small amount of black "black" and then, when seeing black in large enough quantities, suddenly calling it "white." Note that this idea of war as a point at the extreme end of the spectrum of violation of rights bears some resemblance to Stephen Carson's (2007) view that war is enabled by a prior history of property-rights violations and indeed is a form of such violation.

After presenting this argument not just in "Heaven's Intention III," but in the three essays devoted directly to antimilitarism, "Condemning Offensive Warfare I,

---

6. "Why is such theft wrong? I say it is because he did not participate in the work yet he seized the produce so what he took was not his" ("Heaven's Intention III," 28.11, 275).

II, III”—essays that are familiar to modern antiwar liberals and national-interest realists alike—Mozi goes on to claim that war, like other exercises in state excess, impose significant opportunity costs on society:

Now why not look at this from the viewpoint of a state that favors attacking and reducing? Even if it is to launch a campaign on a moderate scale, the worthy men must number several hundred, the sons of officials must number several thousand and the ordinary foot-soldiers must number several tens of thousands. Then there is enough for an army to go forth. A protracted campaign lasts several years, a swift campaign lasts several months. In either case, superiors do not have the time to attend to government, officers do not have the time for their official duties, farmers do not have the time to sow and harvest, women do not have the time to spin and weave, and so the state loses soldiers and the ordinary people lose their livelihood. Furthermore, if you think about the wearing out and destruction of horses and carts, and the materials for the Army's tents, and what the “three armies” use in terms of arms and weapons, yet one part in five remains, it is a lot. And not only this, but consider also those who are scattered or lost on the road because the road is long and supplies are not maintained. They do not even drink at the proper time, so due to this the serving men who become ill through hunger and cold and are all rolled into ditches and gullies to die cannot be counted. This is not a benefit to the people and the harm to the world is substantial. (“Condemning Offensive Warfare III,” 19.4, p. 187)

In short, war is unrighteous because “if you consider the resources wasted in military activity, this harms the foundations of life of the people, and the depletion of the resources of the world in the ordinary people is incalculable” (“Condemning Offensive Warfare III,” 19.3, p. 185). Mozi later makes a straightforward appeal to costs and benefits: “If we calculated the cost involved in raising an army to protect against the evils of the feudal lords, then [we could see that we] would certainly be able to obtain substantial benefit” (“Condemning Offensive Warfare III,” 19.11, p. 197). In “Condemning Offensive Warfare II,” he notes with a similarly practical spirit that regardless of the season in which a leader launches offensive war, he must disrupt either planting or sowing, leading in either case to starvation among the people (18.1, p. 171). Both military equipment (which presumably entails an opportunity cost because it is needed for properly defensive war) and capital stock in the form of animals are uselessly destroyed. The effects on the invaded land are similarly outlined. The invading soldiers destroy its crops, trees, and water sources and impose spiritual costs (that is, they offend the spiritual world, an important crime in traditional Chinese thought) by killing sacrificial animals. Overall, the effect, which any antiwar liberal familiar with elementary economics would readily understand, is an incalculable

“depletion of the resources of the world and [of] the ordinary people” (“Condemning Offensive Warfare III,” 19.3, p. 185).

The emotional impulse to eternal war or eternal preparation for war, another common theme among antiwar liberals, is also obvious in the *Mozi*. Why do leaders pursue their wars despite the immense costs of such wars both at home and in the desired foreign territory? They “covet the fame of conquest and wish to reap the benefits” (“Condemning Offensive Warfare II,” 18.2, p. 173), an argument not dissimilar to Robert Higgs’s (2011) analysis of the interplay between the distinct interests of the national ruler and the citizenry in the decision to go or not to go to war. Mozi also diagnoses another emotion-based peril of offensive war: the imperial temptation. In “Condemning Offensive Warfare II,” he relates two accounts of kings who invade neighboring states. One king, Hélú of the state of Wú, upon completion of a victorious series of campaigns against neighboring states, begins to build a massive monument to glorify himself, generating such rancor and fatigue among the populace that the state is laid open to conquest and defeat by one of its defeated rivals (18.5, pp. 178–79). Another general, Zhì Bó of Jin, attacks one neighbor and sets his eyes on a second, the latter act inducing several neighboring states to join together and topple him in self-defense, an exercise in “checking the hegemon,” to use modern parlance. Jin itself becomes vulnerable and is taken because a king who launches one successful war finds himself confronted with new temptations, not unlike the modern United States, as Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson (1992) argue.

It must be acknowledged that Mozi was no ardent pacifist. He clearly distinguished between offensive and defensive warfare, and he spoke extensively and in detail about the practical methods of defending a city against attack. The *Mozi*’s translator, Ian Johnston, goes so far as to describe Mozi as “a specialist in [warfare’s] techniques” (Johnston 2010, xlvi). Somewhat more problematically from the perspective of the modern antimilitarist liberal, Mozi also distinguishes between offensive warfare and the warfare of punishment. His need to make this distinction arises because numerous earlier rulers who during Mozi’s time were universally regarded as sage kings nonetheless invaded other states. But, he argues, the leaders of the invaded lands, by allowing their realm to fall into chaos and by neglecting various ritual duties, had invited the arrival of natural disasters and thus invasion from without to restore order. Moreover, Mozi’s frequent target, Confucius, in no sense can be characterized as an explicit advocate of offensive war, so the contrast between Mozi and his Confucian opponents in this regard may not be so dramatic. To the extent that Confucius discusses offensive warfare, he views war as yet another symptom of disorder caused by the lack of righteous conduct. Mencius (c. 385–303/302 B.C.E.), who succeeded both Confucius and Mozi and is regarded as the former’s most formidable defender against the latter’s attacks, distinguishes between righteous and unrighteous wars, and in one of his most famous works he mockingly uses a war analogy for the benefit of a king he is counseling who is “fond of war.” But opposition to militarist expansion is in no way a core part of Mencius’s thought as it is for Mozi.

## Imagining a Liberal Order

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the *Mozi* from the liberal point of view is its imagination and advocacy of a sort of liberal order. If a social order based on liberal principles and governance rests on anything, it is surely the premise that people have interests and are rationally capable of pursuing them, sometimes in conflict with others and sometimes for mutual gain, and that society is generally best served (subject to the appropriate market-failure cautions, however broad any particular liberal believes them to be) by establishing a legal framework that allows people to pursue their interests.

The foundational element of the *Mozi* rational system is the goal of good governance and social order, which is starkly utilitarian. The benevolent ruler must “seek assiduously to promote the world’s benefits and to eliminate the world’s harms” (“Universal Love III,” 16.1, p. 147).<sup>7</sup> Note the departure from the Confucian emphasis on the inherent value of ritual in preserving order, although in various locations *Mozi*, too, advocates ritual (albeit, as we have seen, not to excess) for the sake of appeasing the spirits. According to *Mozi*, the harms that the benevolent ruler seeks to minimize are plunder and deceit, lack of compassion by fathers, and lack of filial piety by sons. The use of “weapons, poisons, water and fire to injure and harm each other” (“Universal Love III,” 16.1, p. 147) is also a primary harm that a good ruler seeks to avoid, which calls to mind the modern-liberal emphasis on avoiding force and coercion.

What to do, then, to achieve such a maximization of benefits and a minimization of harms? Rely on rational governance. Such an order works only if people are rational, and the idea that they are rational—in particular that they respond in predictable ways to incentives—permeates the *Mozi*. This idea is most evident in *Mozi*’s discussion of how to select government officials. In “Exalting Worthiness I,” he describes the important role meritocratic criteria must play. Poverty, low population, and disorder result from rulers’ failure to “use ‘exalting worthiness’ and ‘utilizing ability’ in their governing” (8.2, p. 55). Those who are worthy must be “ennobled,” “respected,” and “praised” (8.3, p. 55). What is the alternative? The longstanding practice of negotiating among noble “factions with fathers and older brothers,” of “partiality toward the noble and rich,” and of “favoritism toward those of fine appearance,” which cultivates disorder (“Exalting Worthiness II,” 9.1, p. 63) In *Mozi*’s meritocracy, in contrast, the worthy rise to the top, and the unworthy sink into justified obscurity. By instituting such a system, he says, the sage kings gave the worthy an incentive to govern cleanly, to “rise early and retire late, attend to cases at law and administer the government,” with the result that the “punishments and laws are correct” (“Exalting Worthiness II,” 9.2, p. 65). And good governance in turn leads to ample production, exchange with neighboring provinces (trade itself, of

7. This objective is also mentioned several times in the works “Condemning Offensive Warfare I, II, III” and when *Mozi* condemns excessive public consumption—for funerals, music, and more generally.

course, being a cornerstone of the liberal order at least since *The Wealth of Nations*), security, and prosperity.

Two qualifications are in order. First, Mozi emphasizes the key role of state officials in fostering good social outcomes. In Western liberal thinking, most of this work is done not by the mandarin, but by autonomous individuals acting in their own interests and thus furthering the interests of others through mutually beneficial exchange. But, again, Mozi's view reflects the overwhelming scope of the state, whether the distant emperor or the local lord, in taking care of the people—a view promoted throughout Chinese history. Against that backdrop, the Mozi model of the social order is remarkably forward thinking. Second, to an extent, this idea is not a departure from earlier Chinese thought. The Chinese famously invented the examination system of selecting public officials in an attempt to cast the widest net possible and avoid favoritism, a legacy that remains in the modern East Asian societies that often still rely exclusively on exams in university-admission decisions. A noncorrupt, achievement- and talent-based selection system was not by itself an innovation by Mozi.

However, the emphasis on self-interest as the foundation of order is an innovation. And the reliance on mutual self-interest is not confined to the bureaucratic sphere. Later scholars criticized as naive the notion of reliance on universal love in the belief that love is reciprocated with love, but if we interpret Mozi's "love" as Smithian self-interest—I do something in your interest, and you do something in mine—then the proposition becomes not merely defensible, but obvious. Is this interpretation defensible, at least sometimes? Just prior to arguing that "[t]hose who love others must themselves be loved, and those who hate others must themselves be hated," a very representative statement of the practical use of the universal-love principle, Mozi approvingly cites an earlier Chinese classic, which argues that "[no] words are without response, no virtue is without reward. If you present me with a peach, I repay you with a plum" ("Universal Love III," 16.13, p. 161). Indeed, although Mozi regularly employs the character for love (*ai*, 愛) to describe his system, he often intertwines it with the more workaday character for benefit (*li*, 利), discussed previously, and in "Universal Love II" the reasons given for why leaders should encourage the people to trade for mutual gain almost seem as if they were taken from the Scottish Enlightenment: "If [officers and gentlemen of the world] truly wish for its wealth and abhor its poverty, if they wish the world to be well ordered and abhor its disorder, they should take as right universal love and exchange of mutual benefit" (15.9, p. 145). "Exchange of mutual benefit" is rendered in the original as "交相利" ("jiāo xiāng lì"), where the first character certainly means "exchange" of some sort.<sup>8</sup> In other words, mutually beneficial exchange, in conjunction with a willingness to regard others' social groups as morally equal to one's own,

8. The Chinese Text Project, an online dictionary of classical Chinese, defines the first character as meaning "mix; intersect; exchange, communicate; deliver"; the second as meaning "mutual, reciprocal, each other"; and the third as meaning "gains, advantage, profit, merit." See <http://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=en&char=%E5%88%A9>.

is the key to peace and prosperity. This vision of how the good society functions is remarkably close to the view outlined in the famous passage in *The Wealth of Nations*:

But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. (Smith [1776] 1976, 18)

Here the contrast with Confucianism is palpable and critical to Mozi's distinctiveness in premodern Chinese thought. Confucius himself also devoted attention to the question of national success but did not at all associate it with the pursuit of self-interest. Rather, his *Analects* make a sort of Calvinist argument for prudence, if not outright mercantilism: national success comes from producing and is damaged by consumption. In the *Great Learning*, Confucius indicates that “[t]here is a great course *also* for the production of wealth. Let the producers be many and the consumers few. Let there be activity in the production, and economy in the expenditure. Then the wealth will always be sufficient.”<sup>9</sup> (This way of thinking is arguably still visible in the economic thinking of some East Asian leaders today, including those in China, who emphasize the importance of saving and repressed consumption, and Ryōshuin Minami [1986] argues that this attitude was an important element of Japanese policy after Japan's commercial contact with the West began in 1853.)

But individual pursuit of self-interest has no place in the Confucian model of the well-functioning society, and at the individual level it is actually seen as a grave shortcoming. Confucius argues, for example, that the accomplished man should “think of righteousness when he sees benefit” (“jiàn lì sī yì,” 見利思義, *Analects*, 14.12, author's translation). The character used for “benefit” is exactly the same as in the *Mozi*, but the meaning here is best translated as “self-interest” and is starkly negative—for an individual to think of self-interest, especially commercial interest, is to behave basely. Elsewhere in the *Analects*, again employing the character 利 (*lì*) that Mozi elevates, Confucius argues that “the great man's knowledge lies in righteousness, the small man's in self-interest” (2.16, my translation).

In addition, Mozi anticipates another modern argument for a liberal social order, this time Hayek's emphasis on the role of freedom in creating social dynamism, a process whose modern analysis, according to Edmund Phelps (2007), descends through, among others, Joseph Schumpeter (1911), Frank H. Knight (1921), and

9. *Great Learning*, 15, available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/learning.html>.

Hayek (1937, 1945, 1937, [1968] 2002). In this way of thinking, progress comes from fundamental rethinking of the existing order of society (at a large level or small), and the ability to capitalize on such foresight, if not even the ability of reimagination itself, depends both on an environment in which potential entrepreneurs can be confident that their gains will not be arbitrarily confiscated if they are successful and on government neutrality with respect to all sorts of noncoercive economic activity.

The Mozi argument is certainly not so straightforward, but, unusually in the context of a philosophical heritage that venerated tradition, he respected the role of social change and experimentation. In “Exalting Worthiness II,” he argues that the wise ruler does not rely on “intimidation and force” because doing so (as he argues that his generation of rulers does) only serves to “incline the people toward death,” even though “life” is what they desire. He presumably does not mean literally that suicide is widespread when rulers rely on “intimidation.” More likely he refers to a willingness to live vibrantly and with purpose rather than with fear. The character used for “life” is the standard one, *sheng* (生), which besides denoting the state of being alive also has connotations of birth, and its ideographic meaning involves a plant sprouting. A repressed people, this statement seems to suggest, is a nonactive one, whereas a people living free of violence and oppression is an animated one that generates a vibrant culture (9.11, p. 79).

The comfort with change and indeed the belief that change is essential to the healthy society are clearly also visible in “Against the Confucians II,” which, as the title suggests, is a polemic against the Confucian philosophical structure. Much of this work, which is the sole surviving one of two written on this theme, concentrates on internal contradictions in the Confucian belief in honoring ancestors as well as on (as noted previously) charges of hypocrisy against those who uphold the Confucian system because the elaborate rituals they advocate turn out to be an opportunity for Confucian scholars to find remunerative employment. But mindless adherence to tradition is also criticized. In response to the Confucians’ advocacy of traditional ways of speaking and dressing, Mozi argues: “What is called ancient in speech and dress was all once upon a time new so, if the men of old spoke this way and dressed this way, they were not gentlemen. This being so, must we clothe ourselves in the garb of those who were not gentlemen before being benevolent?” (39.5, p. 355).

Immediately afterward, Mozi ponders the Confucian belief that, in his words, “[t]he gentleman follows but does not create.” After citing several revered ancients credited in Chinese lore with creating several critical inventions, Mozi asks whether these creators were “petty men” and notes that “someone must have created what the follower follows” (“Against the Confucians II,” 39.6, p. 355). It is not clear that he admires creativity in the way many modern liberals do, and, indeed, China’s slow rate of technological advance (which, because of its several millennia of history, nonetheless put the Chinese at that time considerably ahead of Europe in some ways) argues against it. But to be mindlessly wedded to the old ways and to fear change are clearly mistaken in his view.

In a related vein, Mozi criticizes the Confucians for their resolute belief in fate, which in his judgment denies man's agency. Once again in "Against the Confucians II," he argues that a belief in fate as determinative of why individuals and states have the outcomes they do—an important element of pre-Confucian and Confucian thought—essentially renders humans powerless and prevents them from achieving what they can. If fate determines our destiny, then officials and the people neglect their responsibilities because "[s]uccess and failure, reward and punishment, good luck and bad are established [by Fate] and cannot be affected by a person's knowledge or strength" (39.3, p. 353).

This passage is a critical because Mozi, in explicit contrast to Confucianism (as he sees it), accepts the individual's agency. Moreover, fate is not just a sometime visitor; it simply does not exist. There is no arbitrariness in the world. Both the focus on the individual as the key moral actor and key component of society and the belief that an individual's life depends on his choices and not on grand social forces are key components of modern individualism and contrast starkly with much ancient Chinese philosophy as well as with some of China's modern Communist history (especially its Maoist revolutionary zeal), which emphasized not the individual, but "the masses" and their capabilities when harnessed together. The combination of individual agency and rationality (in the sense of responding to the proper rewards and punishments) makes the system of universal nondiscrimination or love and exchange for mutual benefit—the Mozi system—work. The belief in fate keeps the poor from realizing that their poverty may result from their lack of "diligence" ("Against Fate I," 35.9, p. 327). Belief in fate leads to a lack of willingness by both rulers and ruled to tend to affairs properly, thus creating disorder and ultimately cruelty.

In three works "against fate," Mozi offers numerous historical examples of rulers who actively took their destiny in their hands and created stable, prosperous societies. The rulers who believed in fate, in contrast, were undisciplined wastrels who brought their states to ruin (see, for example, "Against Fate III," 37.4, pp. 342–43). Good rulers achieve results because for them "diligence ensures nobility and lack of diligence ensures baseness" ("Against Fate III," 37.7, p. 345), whereas for the common farmer "diligence ensures wealth and lack of diligence must result in poverty" (37.8, p. 345). Diligence is useful, of course, only if it makes a difference in outcomes, and the belief in fate is a creation of evil rulers who foist it on the poor (37.10, pp. 347–48), presumably because it will make the poor tranquil and willing to accept their negative situation.

## Conclusion

The many later references to Mozi's thought suggest that during the Warring States period (c. 475–221 B.C.E.) he remained highly influential. In the end, however, he lost the struggle for the hearts of Chinese intellectuals for the most part. Later defenders of the Confucian tradition, in particular Mencius, believed that the Mozi principle of universal love would damage the family by failing to prioritize it. Honoring

one's father was the essential moral duty and indeed was what differentiated man from the animals (see Mencius IIIB.9, in Lau 1970, 114–15). This criticism arguably reflects a misunderstanding of the Mozi system, which is about elevating others more than about deemphasizing one's own group and family. The idea that love has no difference among different groups of which any particular individual is a member struck Mencius as abhorrent. He also criticized the doctrine of universal love as unrealistic and evinced no sympathy for the idea that self-interest can cause a society based on something other than Confucian ritual to persevere.

Xunzi (ca. 312–230 B.C.E.) further criticized Mozi as excessively utilitarian, concerned only with naked self-interest, not with ritual and obligation. Mozi, he said, emphasizes practicality (*yòng*, 用) and ignores the higher things—literature and culture (*wén*, 文). This view, the *Xunzi* argues, is a mindset that arises only in times of dynastic decay. Mozi's practicality admittedly manifested itself in his own Spartan way of living, marked by a remarkable degree of Thoreauvian self-sufficiency bordering on self-abnegation. (According to legend, Mozi harvested his own food and wood and manufactured everything he used.) As a consequence, he became useful in the Mao era, when his seeming attitude of work for work's sake meshed well with the needs of Communist regimentation. This attitude also may have helped to generate squabbling over philosophical esoterica among his later followers, as reflected in their desire to prove their own authenticity through “subject[ing] themselves to hardship so that they left ‘no down on their calves and no hair on their shins’” (Johnston 2010, lxxiv, translating Guo 1961, 4:1081).

So although Mozi has enjoyed a revival among scholars in recent decades, there are no Mozi institutes to compete with the international Confucius institutes the Chinese government promotes overseas, and only a few statues are devoted to Mozi in the Chinese-speaking world, in contrast to the many statues devoted to Confucius and Mencius. Moreover, to reiterate, Mozi was not a full liberal in the modern sense: he did not think in terms of limiting the state's power, but rather in terms of how the sage king, whose rule was taken for granted, ought to rule. If a ruler “delighted” in mutual love and mutually beneficial exchange, the rational self-interested society would cohere and persist as a matter of course (“Universal Love III,” 16.14, 1pp. 64–65). Nevertheless, the coincidence of visions between the ideas of Mozi, who wrote six centuries before Christ, and modern liberal thought is extraordinary. That his thought can serve at a minimum as a reference point, perhaps in conjunction with Western thought, for building a liberal society in the new China provides grounds for optimism and reflects the broader nature of the impulse to respect human dignity and autonomy.

## References

- Bauer, Peter Thomas. 1972. *Dissent on Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Carson, Stephen W. 2007. Stealing and Killing: A Property-Rights Theory of Mass Murder. *Independent Review* 11, no. 3 (Winter): 381–95.

- Gray, John N. 1982. F. A. Hayek and the Rebirth of Classical Liberalism. *Literature of Liberty* 5, no. 4 (Winter): 19–101.
- Guo Qingfan. 1961. *Zhuangzi Jishi* (莊子集釋, Collected Works of Zhuangzi). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. 1937. Economics and Knowledge. *Economica* 4, no. 13 (February): 33–54.
- . 1945. The Uses of Knowledge in Society. *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (September): 519–30.
- . [1944] 1976. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . [1968] 2002. Competition as a Discovery Procedure. Lecture given at the Institut für Weltwirtschaft, University of Kiel, translated by Marcellus S. Snow. Reprinted in *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 5, no. 3 (Fall): 9–23.
- Higgs, Robert. 2011. To Fight or Not to Fight: War's Payoffs to U.S. Leaders and to the American People. *The Independent Review* 16, no. 1 (Summer): 141–50.
- Jenner, Donald. 1984. *Mo Tzu and Hobbes*: Preliminary Remarks on the Relation of Chinese and Western Politics. *Cogito* 2, no. 1 (March): 49–72.
- Johnston, Ian. 2010. "Introduction." In *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*, translated and annotated by Ian Johnston, xvii–lxxxii. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Knight, Frank H. 1921. *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit*. Boston: Hart, Schaffner & Marx.
- Lau, D. C. 1970. *Mencius*. Baltimore: Penguin.
- Locke, John. [1689] 1988. *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Peter Laslett. 2nd ed. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Minami, Ryōshuin. 1986. *The Economic Development of Japan: A Quantitative Study*. London: McMillan Press.
- The Mozi: A Complete Translation*. 2010. Translated and annotated by Ian Johnston. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1992. *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Phelps, Edmund S. 2007. Macroeconomics for a Modern Economy. *American Economic Review* 97, no. 3 (June): 543–61.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. 1911. *Theorie der Wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung. Eine Untersuchung ueber Unternehmergeinn, Kapital, Kredit, Zins und den Konjunkturzyklus* (The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle). Berlin: Duncker and Humbold.
- Schwartz, Benjamin I. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Adam. [1776] 1976. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tucker, Robert W., and David C. Hendrickson. 1992. *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

# SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

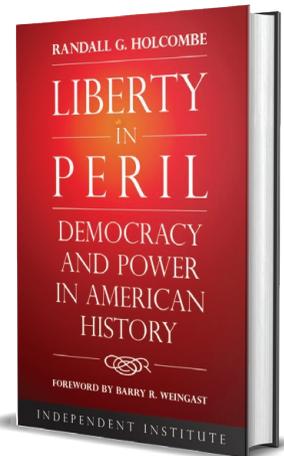
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

**SUBSCRIBE**

*The Independent Review* is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

