

Rationally Speaking #223: Chris Fraser on “The Mohists, ancient China’s philosopher warriors”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest today is Professor Chris Fraser.

Chris is a professor of philosophy at the University of Hong Kong. And I reached out to him because I've recently become fascinated with this group — I guess you could call them an intellectual movement, in ancient China, called ... I'm sure Chris will correct my pronunciation of all these words shortly, but called Mozi? I'm sure that's wrong. Chris, you'll have to help me.

Chris: The Mohists. Yeah.

Julia: Mohists. Okay, let's go with that. That sounds easier to pronounce. Anyway, there's not as much written about them. Not as much coverage of them as I think they deserve. They're a strikingly fascinating group of people that were sort of an anomaly in their time. They had a lot of modern views and a pretty cool effect on Chinese society.

As I said, they haven't gotten as much coverage as I think they deserve, but Chris is one of the top experts on Mohism, and has written a book on The Philosophy of the Mozi — you can correct me — The first consequentialists.

Chris: Mozi.

Julia: Mozi.

Chris: Yeah.

Julia: Okay. Mozi. Is it like the first two syllables of Mozart? Mozi?

Chris: Yes, it's something like that. Yeah.

Julia: That's very generous of you. So Chris, maybe let's start by talking about the origin story of Mohism. Who was the founder? What was his station in life and how did he become an intellectual cult leader?

Chris: Okay, well what we're talking about is basically an intellectual, social, political and religious movement in early China, and as you said the Mohists haven't really attracted the amount of attention that they deserve, given the importance of their writings and their importance as a social movement. And the reason for that is that the movement died out in the Han dynasty. They were very influential in the period before the unification of China under the Qin dynasty, and then going forward from that-

Julia: What year was that?

Chris: The Qin dynasty would be 221 B.C.

Julia: Okay.

Chris: And then the Qin dynasty didn't last very long, and in Han dynasty the Mohist movement gradually died out for various reasons. So it's an interesting historical example of how a certain movement can be influential in many, many respects during a certain period of time and then almost be forgotten, or be deeply neglected later in history. It's as if having had their effect, and had many of their key ideas be absorbed and applied in a wide variety of schools of thought, they die out, and people forget who they ever were.

Now the Mohists, they were never wholly forgotten, but they tended to be denigrated, and they didn't really receive the level of attention that they deserve.

Julia: Was it like a "history written by the victors" type thing?

Chris: It is to some extent a history written by the victors. Yes, that's part of what's going on. Another part of what's going on is that some of their key interests didn't really get picked up by later thinkers. And a further important factor is that their text was almost lost to us through Chinese history, and only really in the Qin dynasty did scholars develop interest again in recovering these texts and understanding the details of Mohist doctrines.

But you asked about the founder. So, Mohism emerges as I would say as mainly a social and political movement, somewhere in the middle of the 5th century B.C. and their charismatic teacher, who they're organized around is a person named Mo Di. His given name is Di. We refer to him as Mozi because Mozi is an honorific referring to an honored teacher. And Mo Di is a somewhat mysterious figure. It's not really clear what his background is, but he seems to have been from the artisan class, and most of the texts that you would read from early China and much of the thought, was produced by higher social classes.

In particular, the texts and thought that we associate with Confucianism tended to be produced by people who, in terms of their occupation, were ritual specialists. You can think of them, in some cases, as something like a priest. In some cases it would be like the people who officiated over a wedding ritual, or a funeral ritual; something like that.

And the Mohists seem to have been, as best we can tell, largely artisans, soldiers, engineers, merchants. And perhaps some of them were farmers or landowners. So the Mohist movement tends to present the views of this segment of society.

Julia: So the subtitle of your book was, The First Consequentialists. Can you explain what that means?

Chris: Right, well to my knowledge, looking at Chinese, Indian and European philosophy, this seems to have been first school of thought who wholly embraced a consequentialist's ethics. That is, for them, what's right and wrong, or what we should or should not do, is determined by what has the best consequences.

And anytime we introduce a consequentialist's ethics in Philosophy 101, we explain that, that's the basic idea. Right and wrong are determined by what has the best consequences, and then any particular version of consequentialism will have to spell out what consequences are we concerned with. In this particular case, are we talking about right or wrong, are we talking about actions, are we talking about policies; those various sorts of things that we might evaluate as right or wrong to flesh out the particular brand of consequentialism we're dealing with here.

And what's especially interesting about Mohists is that their brand of consequentialism picks as its basic goods the consequences that we're supposed to try to promote ... it picks as its basic goods a series of social goods.

Julia: Like what?

Chris: Well, the canonical list which they repeat again and again in Chinese is zheng zhi, which would be material wealth; in their time a large population; and zhi, social order. And that's a very complex concept for them. Social order refers to the absence of crime and war, but it also refers to harmonious social relations. So for instance, to actually achieve social order, all of us have to fill our social roles as political subjects or political leaders, as parents or children, as brothers or sisters or what have you, in a socially appropriate way.

Julia: So speaking of causing good consequences, one thing that really impressed me reading about the Mohists was just how proactive they were. Like, they have this belief system in which fatalism is bad and war is bad, and they didn't just write and talk about it. They were like, "Okay, war is bad so how do we stop war from happening?" And they went and they strategized and they put their plans into action.

Can you talk a little bit about how they tried to reduce war in ancient China?

Chris: Right. So that is really intriguing. So they think that given the ethical theories that they adopt, it's ethically right for us to actually go out and attempt to improve society; change the world. Stop bad policies, promote good ones.

And war is regarded as the most harmful sort of action. So at least certain bands of Mohists dedicated themselves to preventing war or stopping war, or at least enhancing the defense of states that were being attacked.

So one of their anti-war moves is simply to march around the known world and give talks and urge leaders not to undertake war.

There's a long anecdote preserved in the Mozi, in which Mozi himself hears that the southern state of Chu is planning to attack and conquer the smaller central state of Song. And supposedly when he hears about this he's in the northeastern state of Qi, and on hearing about this plan he walks ten days and nights to reach the court of Chu to try to persuade the ruler of Chu to cancel his plan to attack Song.

The reason I'm telling you this story is that this story illustrates another aspect of their anti-war activities. Mozi tries to persuade the ruler of Chu not to attack, and he says, "Well I've already prepared everything and we're about to set out, so I can't cancel the plans now."

And Mozi explains to him that, well, he's already posted hundreds of his followers on the city walls of Song to defend the state of Song from the Chu attack. So certain bands of Mohists, besides rhetorically arguing against war, actually organized themselves into paramilitary groups that were devoted to defense warfare. So this is very interesting.

Julia: There was one blog post that referred to the Mohists as the ancient China's Jedi knights. Like philosopher warriors, basically.

Chris: Philosopher warriors. So they're anti-aggression and they're anti-war, but they're not pacifists. Some of them at least become legendary experts in purely defensive warfare. So they've got all these techniques for defending cities under siege that they develop, and the idea is that if you don't attack us we won't attack you. We're against aggression, but we're not against fighting. And not only are we not against fighting, they became legendary for the effectiveness of their defense of cities.

Julia: Is it true that they would ... part of the way they spread the ... or like gained influenced and spread their ideas, was that when the ruler of one area was under attack, or about to be under attack, they would go to him and offer to train them in defensive warfare?

Chris: Yes, I think so. And if your city was under threat you could contract with the Mohists to defend you.

Julia: Man. Did they-

Chris: And the terms of the contract were very rigorous.

Julia: Did they extract any kind of promise, like we offer our services now and in exchange you have to promise not to attack other areas? Or what was their like long-term plan there?

Chris: Yeah, I don't recall hearing about that. Yeah.

Julia: Or was it just like as a deterrent. Like, if everyone is fortified to the gills and not vulnerable to attack, then no one will bother attacking.

Chris: Right. So that story that I mentioned illustrates that perfectly. What happens is Mozi ... the military engineer for Chu who is planning to attack Song has developed various sort of siege machines that he's going to use to attack Song.

And Mozi demonstrates that he has a set of different counter-attacks or different sorts of machines that can defend against these. He does this using his belt and a stick. So he builds like little toy models showing how he's going to defend against these things. And so part of what's going on, obviously, is to show that we've got these countermeasures prepared, and since the city is so well fortified, this should be a deterrent measure. You should just give up because you can't possibly win.

Julia: Did it work?

Chris: In that story, in that anecdote, it does. The point of the anecdote is it does work. He successfully defended Song.

And then on his way home, in a rainstorm, he passes by the gates of Song, and they don't recognize him, and they won't let him in out of the rain.

Julia: Wow. Wait, so this founder, Mozi ... How was that?

Chris: Mm-hmm. That's good.

Julia: The way I first came to become interested in the Mohists was that they were described to me by a friend as history's first rationalists, and Mozi himself apparently was known for being an amazing debater, who was so good at logic that people just started refusing to debate him, because they knew he would lose. Is that true?

Chris: I think it's an exaggeration, yeah.

Julia: Well. That happens I suppose. Would you agree with the characterization of them as rationalists? I know that word has different meanings in different contexts, but is there a version of the word that you think applies to them?

Chris: Okay, we need to be very careful. So in philosophy, rationalism refers to the doctrine that the basic source of knowledge is reason, right? And in the history-

Julia: As opposed to empiricism. Yeah.

Chris: As opposed to empiricism. And so if you take the-

Julia: Right. So, yeah. Clearly not that.

Chris: Right. If you take the pair of terms, rationalism versus empiricism ... but the Mohists are empiricist at least as much as they are rationalist. And they have no explicit conception of reason, and they don't seem to appeal to reason as a source of knowledge. So I'd be very uncomfortable labeling them rationalists.

I think if someone labels them rationalists, what they're thinking is that these people have a deep commitment to thinking things through very carefully, and ...

Julia: Yeah I think that's what my friend meant, probably.

Chris: And a deep commitment to following arguments where they lead, basically. And so they've got this commitment to a consequentialist ethics. And if the consequentialist ethics shows that some custom doesn't have the best sorts of consequences, even if it's a beloved traditional custom, they would say, "Well, we better give that up, because it doesn't produce the sorts of consequences that we have in mind."

And they're well known for a very important argument along those lines. You might say that one of the epic-making moves in Mohist argumentation is to explicitly draw a distinction between customs, people's habits or traditions, and what's morally right or wrong according to some sort of objective standard, right?

So the Mohists were against elaborate prolonged funeral and mourning procedures. And one of the arguments that critics made to them in response was to say, "But these elaborate mourning rituals ... this is what is followed by the gentleman of the central states. If you're right that this is an unjustified pattern of conduct, then why is it that all of these people who we admire, people with high social status, are so dedicated to it?" And the Mohist response is that that question is confusing custom with morality. "We're saying it's immoral, and you're saying, but nevertheless it is a custom," and the Mohist response is, "Yes, customs can be immoral, and therefore they should be changed."

Julia: That feels like such an obvious argument now, but I can imagine that at the time before anyone made an explicit distinction between those two things it was pretty new.

Chris: Yes, right. Because beforehand you had people saying, "Well so-and-so is a gentleman. That's the proper way of conduct." And Mohists are saying-

Julia: Right. "Proper" covers a lot of ground.

Chris: Right. Yeah. That notion of proper, ranging from etiquette through to what we would think of as ethically proper.

The Mohists are saying, "Hang on, hang on. People who have a certain social status and are admired in the society are not necessarily people whose actions are ethically justified. And we need some sort of higher criteria for that."

So another aspect of this commitment to following arguments where they go is that they were very, very interested in the problem of finding explicit objective criteria to determine the answers to ethical questions, and these criteria had to be criteria that anyone could apply. That they don't require a lot of expertise.

So we need to be able to have ... If we're saying, "Well, is this really the right thing to do?" We need some sort of objective criteria that anyone can use. So that the common people of the state can point to that criterion and say "Our ruler is failing to live up to these ethical criteria, therefore our ruler is losing legitimacy and perhaps should be replaced."

And their understanding of these criteria is modeled on artisan's tools. The typical example of what the criteria should be is the criteria should be like the wheelwright's compass, and the carpenter's square.

So when a carpenter makes a table and wants to check whether or not he sawed the corner properly, he takes a T-square and holds it up to the table to check whether or not the corner is actually 90 degrees. And that conception of a model or a standard is crucial to them. They think that in every area of life, you should be able to find explicit models by which to evaluate whether or not you're doing things properly.

Now an interesting thing about that is that the Mohists themselves actually advocate social inequality.

Julia: Really?

Chris: Yes. So they don't advocate equality. They advocate promoting what they regard as the benefit of all the world. And they think that for society to

operate properly, you need to have a hierarchical social organization, and those on higher rungs of the hierarchy have to be perceived to have power and to have wealth, and have a certain sort of social status. Otherwise people won't follow their orders, for example.

They also think that to bring order to society, you have to hire talented people, and to attract talented people you have to pay them well.

So you have to recruit what they think of as worthy personnel, and to do so you have to make it clear that in recruiting them they're going to get genuine authority. They don't simply get a government position with a empty title; they actually have some power to exercise, and they have a high social rank, high social status, and they have an income that goes along with that.

Now interestingly, they're against spending on luxuries — so if you have a relatively high social position, you have of course [high] income, but you're not supposed to waste it on buying jewelry and pretty trinkets. You're supposed to use some of that income to help the poor.

There's a moral issue, but not because there's something actually wrong with inequality, as they understand it.

Julia: So it sounds like they were pro-meritocracy, is that right?

Chris: You might say that the Mohists invent the idea of meritocracy in China's political history, and certainly you would say that they were among the inventors of that idea.

So much later in Chinese history we see the development of a meritocratic civil service examination system for selecting qualified people to fill government administrative posts. And the roots of that system probably lie in the Mohist philosophy of promoting the worthy.

Julia: What was the procedure before that for assigning government positions to people? Was it basically nepotism?

Chris: Yes. If we look at what the Mohists themselves say, it was nepotism. And probably some of what's going on there is that they're testifying to a social transition from smaller states with a lower population, where it would have seemed only natural to the boss who was in authority to appoint his relatives to all the important positions in authority.

And as society grows and these positions of authority require expertise, require a higher degree of professionalism, we see the emergence of ideas like the Mohists', who are claiming that these positions should be claimed by people who are genuinely qualified for them because they had proven themselves in other positions.

Julia: Would you say that the Mohists were not just consequentialists, but utilitarians? Like it sounds from the way you've described them that they had this kind of ... not just focus on consequences, but focus on impartiality. That like you should be good to like all people irrespective of who they are, because people having good things and order is good inherently and that sounds like utilitarianism to me.

Chris: Right. I wouldn't necessarily associate that with utilitarianism. But there are ways of looking them in which the word utility is a convenient way of identifying some of their prominent concerns. I mean typically, if we're teaching introduction to ethics and we introduce utilitarianism we're typically talking about the classical utilitarianism of Bentham of and Mill, right?

Julia: Yeah.

Chris: And so in that context, I would say utilitarianism refers to a position in which the basic good that we seek to promote, or the basic good that determines what is right and wrong, permissible or impermissible, is individual happiness. So typically when we talk about utilitarianism we're talking about that kind of position. So it's a consequentialist theory on which the basic good that counts as the consequence that we're trying to promote or maximize is individual happiness.

Julia: You could also define the good as just people fulfilling their preferences, which will often line up with happiness but isn't exactly the same thing. Which is sort of what I thought the Mohists were arguing for. That material worth, and order, and so on; those are the things that people want. So there could be-

Chris: Preference satisfaction.

Julia: Yeah, exactly. Preference utilitarianism.

Chris: Okay, so the Mohists in terms of selecting their basic goods ... they're not concerned whatsoever with individual happiness. They hardly ever talk about it.

Julia: So how did they decide what the goods were?

Chris: Okay. One way of answering that question would be to say they think it's obvious. Another way of answering that question would be to say that their god has told them. Because they're —

Julia: Oh, they're religious.

Chris: They're very deeply religious.

Julia: That's so interesting, because all the other aspects of their philosophy, they are associated in my mind with sort of secular, humanist movements. Like the meritocracy and the rationalism and the progress and all that stuff is usually, at least in western history, is in opposition to conservative religious forces.

Chris: The Mohists are very, very deeply religious. And in fact if I were to change something about the book I wrote about them, it would be to emphasize the religious side of their thought more strongly.

Now, their religion is what you might think of as a this worldly religion. So they don't believe in an afterlife that takes place in a sort of a different sphere of existence. They do believe in something like an afterlife, but that afterlife is your life as a ghost here in this world. So when you die, you don't go somewhere else. You're still here, it's just that your physical body has dissipated, as it were, and instead you were constituted by chi, a kind of dynamic energy-breath.

And that's why your ancestors are still around and you have to perform regular sacrifices to your ancestors, because in effect their ghosts are still with us.

So the Mohists believe that the god that they worship is called Tian, which is a word that refers to nature and also refers to the sky. So in effect they're worshipping a sky god or a nature god, and they think that the nature god is devoted to the very ethical tao that they follow.

So one of their criteria for identifying the ethical tao is to look at what they think this deified conception of nature, what tao, that follows. And they claim that nature itself follows the kind of consequentialist tao that they follow, and that's one of reasons why we know that that was the right one.

But so to go back to the utilitarian idea, when they're articulating what that path is, what that way or tao is, they'll often describe it by saying that the tao lies in promoting the benefit of all the world and eliminating harm to all the world. So there's an explicit ... it's not exactly egalitarianism, but there's a kind of comprehensive ethical concern for everyone built into their conception of what the way is. We're supposed to promote benefit for all the world.

And the word benefit that they're using, li, can be interpreted as a way of referring to utility. In more like the sense where we talk about utility in economics.

And they'll often refer also, in connection with li, they'll also often use the Chinese word that means "use," or quite literally utility. And when they're talking about utility, their conception of it is not preference satisfaction and

it's not individual happiness, so then in this regard it's different. I just said that li is something like in economics, but in this regard it's different from that. Their conception of li, or what's useful, is what promotes their basic goods. So material welfare, an increasing population, and social order.

So they're very, very focused on this conception of what's useful or beneficial, in that regard using layman's terminology, we might call them deeply utilitarian.

Julia: Yeah. Even one of the chapters of their text is called, I think, "Against Fatalism," and it just felt so modern to me. They basically complained about this fatalistic attitude where people are like, "Well you know if we're poor it's because we're destined to be poor, and you can't actually change anything so you shouldn't try."

And they were like, "This attitude is like holding back progress, and we can actually change our fates." Just felt very ... yeah, very modern to me, and very pragmatic.

Chris: Yeah. That doctrine is interesting. As modern readers who might flip open their texts and find that ... I mean, I know as a student I found that a relatively uninteresting doctrine, but it's actually really fundamental in two ways.

One is they're arguing against the view that we don't ultimately have control over what happens to us, right? And it's very important to them to reject that view, because they're claiming that what's right and wrong is determined by what has the best consequences, right? If you can't control the consequences of your actions, if you can't control the outcomes of what you do, then you're not in control over whether what you do is right or wrong, as they see it.

So it's absolutely fundamental to their worldview to say the consequences of our actions are up to us. I mean of course there are factors that we can't control, but on the whole it's up to us what happens. Therefore we have to be devoted to this tao that brings about the best sorts of consequences.

So in that regard the fatalism doctrine is very, very important to them. I'm not sure if you picked up on this, but there's another really interesting aspect of that doctrine for them, and that's that they use it to introduce an explicit epistemological doctrine.

And the epistemological doctrine is that we can determine what is correct or what is beneficial, as opposed to what's incorrect or not beneficial, by holding doctrines up to a set of standards. Set of several criteria.

And the criteria introduced are the deeds of the sage kings, these semi-legendary ancient rulers who are regarded having governed the world very, very well and therefore having set a very effective precedent that we can

model ourselves on... So there are the deeds of the sage kings; what people can hear and see, the evidence of our senses; and what's useful in practice.

So if you take some policy or some proposal and put it into practice as a government administrative policy, they want to see whether or not it has good consequences. And if it does, that counts in favor of determining that as the correct thing to do.

Now what's intriguing is they take those three criteria as a basis for determining whether or not, for example, fatalism is correct. And you'll notice one of those is a consequentialist criteria. They apply that consequentialist criteria to determine whether or not we should accept the doctrine that fate exists.

Julia: Fatalism can't be correct, because if it were —

Chris: Because there would be bad consequences.

Julia: Right. That's a very pragmatic, in the philosophical sense, way of speaking about truth. Like, whatever's useful is true.

Chris: Exactly. If something's not useful it can't be ... we would say true, and this is one reason for thinking that they're actually not talking about truth. They're talking about tao, the way.

... So you shouldn't say they have no concept of truth, but when it comes down to getting an explicit account of how to go about arguing for the path that you propose for people to follow, the criteria they use aren't ... at least some of them aren't obviously criteria of truth. So that's not their main concern.

Julia: Nice. Can you talk a little bit about why their influence died out? I heard one story, which I tried to re-find and now I can't find it again, so I don't know if this came from you or someone else, but: One of the theories for why their influence died out was that as their movement grew, there were parts of the movement that started focusing more and more on the sort of radical lifestyle changes. A sort of asceticism.

And the theory, at least that this person was suggesting, for why that happened was that it was kind of a ... it was sort of an in-group bonding, virtue signaling thing? Like-

Chris: I've heard of that.

Julia: In the sense that a lot of subcultures emphasize lifestyle practices that kind of isolate them from the broader world, and signal that they're serious, and sort of ethically rigorous, and things like that.

And the sort of core leadership of the Mohists didn't ... their views were more nuanced and less focused on signaling that they were radically spartan.

But it was sort of the fringe areas, the more radical areas of the Mohist group that had the most control over PR and that got the most attention. And therefore the broader society rejected them, because they were like, "Well, your philosophy means we have to give up all these comforts of life and we don't really feel like doing that."

So I'm curious to what extent that story seems plausible to you, but I'll just tell you the reason that that hit me so hard: I'm involved with this movement called Effective Altruism, which is about sort of reasoning through how to do the most good possible in an impartial way across all sentient beings. Not just in the present but in the future. And then using reason and evidence to try to effect change, along those lines.

And one thing that I see happening with Effective Altruism is that as the movement grows, there's kind of a gap between the central sort of leadership or like the sort of thought leaders of effective altruism, and then people who just like heard about it or like read a book about effective altruism and are less sort of involved in the central discussions about it.

And this sort of radical asceticism, that in order to be a good Effective Altruist you have to donate as much of your money as possible ... and you have to, like, not buy any luxuries for yourself because that money could be used to save starving children in Africa, or you know, people at risk for malaria in Africa ... None of the central leadership believe that. But it's like a popular way that the public views Effective Altruists because it's more radical.

So I read the story of the decline of the Mohists and was like, "Oh God. Is that what's going to happen to us?"

Chris: There's definitely an object lesson there. Yeah, no, I think the decline of the Mohists probably rested on a number of different factors. So I think it's probably a very complicated story.

But the factors you're picking out I think were certainly among them. That was certainly part of the story.

In terms of virtue signaling, we actually have textual evidence for some of this. So in the last book of the Zhuangzi, a Taoist classic, we have an overview of different schools of thought of that time. And in the section of that that

talks about the Mohists, talks about groups of Mohists who were active many hundreds of years after the lifetime of Mo Di himself.

And it reports that they would criticize each other for not being radical enough, or for not being sufficiently dedicated to the model of the ancient sage King Yu, who pretty much completely gave up his personal and family life to promote the benefit of all. Specifically by carrying out flood control projects.

So there are lots of different issues at stake here. One of them is this: the Mohists do admire figures such as this semi-legendary, possible fully-legendary, King Yu. But those were people at the top of the social hierarchy. They're political leaders and they're responding to emergencies.

And the Mohists tend to exaggerate the extent to which any of us is ever in that position. Do you understand what I mean? I mean if I'm a leader and I have power and people are following me and there's an emergency to deal with, then it makes perfect sense that I might not see my family for a few days because I'm so busy dealing with this emergency. But we would never advocate that as a model for a typical ethical lifestyle. It wouldn't be sustainable, right?

And it's not... for the typical person.

Julia: It's not sustainable, yeah. Right.

Chris: So it seems to me that ... I mean the two key points that I think that help to explain why the Mohists died out, one is this: I think that the attractive aspects of their ethics were widely absorbed into the culture at large.

Julia: Like meritocracy?

Chris: Meritocracy, and the idea that ... For example, one of their key doctrines was all-inclusive moral care for everyone. And that terminology was picked up by a lot of different writers later on. The idea that those with power and wealth do have to exhibit some sort of concern for the rest of society was picked up by a lot of different schools of thought.

So many of their key and most persuasive moral ideas, I think to some extent, were adopted by a lot of other different thinkers.

Julia: Not a bad way to die out, to be assimilated.

Chris: Right. Exactly. So in the end because these ideas have been assimilated, they're no longer your distinctive ideas, right. So a commitment to that position is no longer a reason to commit to your philosophical and social movement because other people are committed to that as well. Okay.

Julia: Let's hope that Effective Altruism dies out in that way.

Chris: Right. When that happens what are you left with? Well, another aspect of their consequentialism is that they claimed that ... and these claims might have made sense in their original context ... they advocated that people should spend very, very little on non-essential items in life.

So in effect, you should have somewhere between two and four sets of clothing. Maybe two for the summer and two for the winter. One that you wear and one that you launder. And that would be it. And the clothing should be very simple and not have any decorations on it.

They specifically say when you make a car or a boat or a weapon, you shouldn't have any decoration on it. Why is that? Well, because that's all wasteful. All we care about is the function, the utility. All right, so if you fulfill the function, if your swords are sharp and very tough and very hard, that's all that's required to make a good sword. Doesn't have to have any carvings on it or any sort of decoration.

So I think if we want to find out why they died out, we need to look at Han dynasty sources. Sources from around the time that their movement did seem to be petering out, and see what their criticisms are.

And their chief criticisms are not criticisms of their ethical doctrines.

Their criticisms are criticisms of this radical commitment to parsimony, and hand in hand with the parsimony ... The parsimony was understood by critics as entailing erasing or downgrading social rank. So some of the privileges of social rank are, you have nice things. You have a fancy insignia that signaled your social rank, and their critics perceived them as advocating that those of higher social status give up these sorts of things that would signal their social rank.

Now if we look at what the Mohists actually say about this, they don't seem to say that. But they definitely do advocate a very spartan, very simple lifestyle.

And you mentioned virtue signaling and in-group competition. I think that some of those ... you can kind of draw a distinction between what the Mohists are claiming everyone should do, and what they seem to be saying to their groups. Their in-groups. And in the in-groups I think their position gets quite radical at times, and they are to some extent competing to be who can be a saint.

And so the resulting lifestyle to the typical person in society is not going to seem very attractive, and in particular to those with wealth and social status it's not going to seem attractive at all.

Julia: That makes sense. Chris, we're almost out of time here, but I have one last quick question and then we'll wrap up. Another theory that I heard about why they died out was just that their source of influence in society had been defensive warfare and helping leaders defend themselves, and then when China unified there wasn't war. At least for a while. And so the leaders didn't really need them and their influence petered out.

Chris: I think it's certainly part of the story as well, yes.

Julia: It's also kind of a nice reason to be made obsolete, as reasons go.

Chris: Because when you had a world of these various small states who are all potentially under threat of attack, it was a very good thing to have the Mohists be your friends, right? And then once China was unified and that threat was removed, they weren't so influential I think.

Julia: Yeah. All right and I lied; I actually have one more question for you, which is my ... the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode. Can you recommend a work, like a book or article even that you think is like a good representation of your field? Like a good work on philosophy or a good introduction to some area?

Chris: The book that pops into mind in terms of a very recent overview ... it has an interesting take on Chinese philosophy ... would be my colleague Franklin Perkins' recent book that's called "Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane." Frank is a professor of philosophy at the University of Hawaii. And I think that that's a sort of ... I'm trying to think in particular of books in the last five years, and that's sort of a nice, fresh interesting route into the field that looks at a different sorts of doctrines. He's especially concerned with how something corresponding to the problem of evil is manifested and dealt with in early Chinese philosophy.

Julia: Oh cool. Sounds really interesting. Well we will link to that, as well as to your website and the philosophy of the Mozi.

Chris: Mozi.

Julia: That's as good as it's going to get.

Chris: Yeah and that's part of the problem with even talking about this stuff is we can't say the words, right?

Julia: I mean, I'd been saying it wrong in my head, all this time, as I read this stuff. That's partly why it's so hard for me get it right now.

Anyway, we'll link to your work on the subject, as well as to your great Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy description, which is where I first read about it. And yeah, thank you so much for being on the show.

Chris: Thank you.

Julia: I'm delighted to give more exposure to this fascinating group of thinkers.

Chris: Thank you. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Julia: Likewise. Well, this concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.