

9 Laozi

Tao Te Ching – Exam Notes

(Freedom, Rules, Pushing, Influence, Motivation, Contrarian Impulse, Understanding Before Action)

1. Freedom vs. Precise Rules

Core idea:

The Taoist ideal is *freedom* and *flexible responsiveness*, not living by rigid, precise rules.

- **Tao is ineffable and shifting**
 - The Tao (the Way things naturally go) is subtle, hard to see or describe, and always changing.
 - Because reality is complex and fluid, **no fixed rulebook** can cover every situation well.
- **Why precise rules are problematic**
 - They assume we can predict and control complex situations.
 - They encourage **mechanical obedience** instead of understanding.
 - They make people **focus on the rule**, not on what is truly needed here and now.
- **Taoist alternative**
 - Develop **inner qualities**: calmness, humility, sensitivity, flexibility.
 - Act like water: beneficial, adaptive, not rigidly “contending.”
 - Use **simple guiding attitudes** rather than detailed prescriptions (e.g., “don’t contend,” “know when enough is enough,” “work with natural tendencies”).

Exam angle:

Be able to explain why, for Taoists, living well **requires freedom and responsiveness**, and why **overly precise rules are mistrusted**.

2. How “Pushing” and Precise Rules Can Backfire

“**Pushing**” = trying to force outcomes through direct pressure, confrontation, or crude, oversimplified strategies.

A. Backfiring in personal projects

- “**Act and you ruin it; grasp and you lose it**”

- When a project is delicate or almost finished, **extra pressure and interference** often break what is working.
- Example: over-editing a nearly complete paper until it becomes worse; over-training just before a performance and getting injured.
- **“People commonly ruin their work when they are near success”**
 - Anxiety near the finish line leads to overcorrection and micromanagement.
 - Taoist advice: keep the same calm, careful attitude **at the end as at the beginning**.

B. Backfiring in controlling others / the world

- **The world as a “spiritual vessel”**
 - The world is too complex and alive to be controlled like a machine.
 - Those who try to **control and grasp** often **fail and lose** what they cling to.
- **Rules and pressure trigger resistance**
 - Harsh, obvious attempts at control provoke:
 - * Rebellion, passive resistance, or superficial compliance.
 - * Loss of trust; people do the minimum to satisfy the rule, not what’s genuinely good.

C. Crude “pushing” vs. skillful influence

- Taoism doesn’t say *all* rules and effort are bad, but:
 - We **overuse** direct pushing.
 - We **underuse** more skillful, subtle, and context-sensitive methods.

Exam angle:

Be ready to explain **mechanisms by which pushing backfires** (anxiety, resistance, fragility of complex systems) and how Taoist texts warn against “acting” and “grasping.”

3. How, If At All, Should We Try to Influence Events?

Taoism doesn’t urge total passivity. It urges a **different style of influence**: *wu wei* (effortless, non-coercive action).

A. Wu wei: working with, not against, natural tendencies

- **Wu wei** is not doing absolutely nothing; it is:
 - Acting without strain, ego, or force.
 - **Aligning with** how things naturally tend to go, instead of fighting them.
- Analogies:
 - **Steering a boat** using the current and wind, instead of rowing furiously against them.
 - **Gardening**: you don’t force plants to grow; you create the right conditions.

B. Steering, not pushing

- **Early, light guidance**
 - “At rest is easy to hold; not yet impossible is easy to plan.”
 - It is easier to shape something **before** it gets rigid or out of control.

- Tiny early corrections (steering) are better than big late pushes (panicked control).
- **Proceed consistently**
 - “Proceed at the end as at the beginning” – avoid last-minute forceful interventions.
 - Consistent calm attention is more effective than occasional frantic pushing.

C. Passivity and responsiveness

- Taoist “passivity” = **openness and responsiveness**, not laziness.
 - Cautious like crossing an icy stream; humble like a guest.
 - Calm muddy water and it becomes clear: instead of thrashing around, **wait for clarity**.
- Don’t cling rigidly to preconceived notions of how things operate.
 - Your model might be wrong; **watch and learn first**, then act.

D. “Hidden” influence and the manipulation objection

- **Influence without being seen to influence**
 - The sage helps beings find their own nature “but does not presume to act.”
 - They avoid drawing attention to themselves: no self-display, no insistence on credit.
 - This reduces ego clashes and resistance.
- **Objection: Is this manipulative?**
 - It *could* be manipulative if:
 - * You secretly control others for your own benefit; you deny their autonomy.
 - Taoist reply (as interpreted for this course):
 - * The sage minimizes ego, prizes no prizes, desires no selfish desires.
 - * Their “hidden” influence is more like **setting up conditions** for others to flourish and to act freely, not puppeteering them.
 - * They “do not contend” – they avoid conflict rather than winning power struggles.

Exam angle:

Be able to contrast **pushing vs. steering**, explain **wu wei**, and discuss whether **inconspicuous influence** is problematic or can be ethically acceptable on a Taoist view.

4. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation (Taoist Perspective)

A. Definitions

- **Intrinsic motivation**: Doing something for its own sake (because it is meaningful, interesting, or satisfying in itself).
- **Extrinsic motivation**: Doing something mainly for external rewards (money, praise, status) or to avoid punishment.

B. Taoist preference for intrinsic motivation

- The sage “desires no desires” and “prizes no prizes”:
 - Not **addicted** to wealth, status, or external recognition.
 - This loosens the grip of extrinsic rewards.
- Taoism does **not denigrate bodily pleasure**:

- Enjoyments are fine, but:
 - * Avoid **attachment** – don't let pleasure-seeking control you.
 - * Avoid **desensitization** – constant chasing makes pleasures dull.
- “Knowing when enough is enough is enough”: stop before craving takes over.

C. How extrinsic motivation and pushing can undermine things

- Using **rewards and punishments** as main tools:
 - Encourages people to act **for the reward**, not from understanding or care.
 - Can **crowd out intrinsic motives** (e.g., loving learning vs. studying only for grades).
 - Fits with the “pushing” mentality: treat people like objects to be controlled.
- Taoist alternative:
 - Create environments where people can **discover and follow their own nature**.
 - Influence gently; rely on example, simplicity, and good conditions rather than bribes or threats.

D. Happiness and effortless action

- Wu wei is **effortless and enjoyable**:
 - When you act in harmony with the Tao, you avoid constant struggle and conflict.
 - Happiness is not a product of maximizing external goods through willpower.
 - Be skeptical of **simple formulas** (“do X steps, follow Y rules, and you'll be happy”).

Exam angle:

Explain how Taoist ideas support **intrinsic motivation** and why overemphasis on **extrinsic rewards** and crude “pushing” is criticized.

5. The Contrarian Impulse in the Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching often asserts **paradoxical, counterintuitive** claims. This is a deliberate **contrarian strategy**.

A. Key paradoxes

- “The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong” (water vs. rock).
- “Crippled becomes whole; crooked becomes straight; hollow becomes full.”
- “The bright road seems dark; the road forward seems to retreat.”
- The sage does not promote themselves, and thus **truly stands out**; does not contend, and thus “no one can contend with them.”

B. Purpose of the contrarian stance

- **Challenge default assumptions**:
 - Society admires hardness, force, dominance, loudness, speed, visible success.
 - Taoism points out the **hidden strengths of softness, yielding, quietness, and patience**.
- **Reframe success and power**:

- True strength is being flexible and adaptive (like water or young plants), not rigid.
- True influence often comes from **humility and non-competition**.
- Taking the “low place” (accepting blame, not seeking prestige) can bring deeper authority and trust.

C. Contrarianism vs. mere rebellion

- This is not being contrarian for its own sake.
- The point is: **common sense is systematically biased** toward pushing, force, and control.
- The text uses paradox to **jolt us** into reconsidering those biases and noticing how often **softness, patience, and non-contending actually work better**.

Exam angle:

Be able to give examples of Taoist paradoxes and explain how they serve a **philosophical purpose**: criticizing our overvaluation of force and simple rules.

6. Understanding Before Action

A. Why understanding must come first

- The ancients following the Way are described as:
 - Cautious, hesitant, polite, yielding, blank like uncarved wood, open like a valley.
- These images suggest:
 - **Observation, humility, and receptivity** before decisive action.
 - Recognizing that **our initial theories may be wrong**.
- “Calm the muddy water, and it becomes clear”:
 - If we are emotionally agitated or in a rush, our perceptions are “muddy.”
 - First step: **settle down**, watch, and let things reveal their patterns.

B. Concrete contrast: understanding vs. pushing

- **Pushing-first approach**:
 - Immediately impose plans, rules, and controls based on preconceived ideas.
 - Tends to ignore the actual situation and people involved.
 - Leads to misfits between policy and reality; more pushing is then needed to fix the damage.
- **Understanding-first (Taoist) approach**:
 - Study natural tendencies: what do people already care about? What are the underlying flows?
 - Then **steer gently**, aligning with these tendencies rather than fighting them.
 - Example: a teacher observes how students learn best, then subtly adjusts; doesn’t just add stricter rules and more homework.

C. “The way is gained by daily loss”

- “Daily loss” = **shedding**:
 - Unhelpful intense emotions like fear, anger, greed.

- Rigid opinions, ego-centered desires, and unnecessary complexity.
- This loss **clarifies understanding**:
 - With less ego and noise, you can see what is actually happening and what is truly needed.
 - Action then becomes simpler and more appropriate—closer to wu wei.

Exam angle:

Explain why Taoists insist on **understanding before acting**, how this connects to **passivity, responsiveness, and daily loss**, and how it differs from the typical modern strategy of acting first and reflecting later.

Very Brief Summary for Last-Minute Review

- **Freedom vs rules**: Taoism prefers flexible responsiveness over rigid rule-following, because reality is complex and changing.
- **Pushing backfires**: Over-control and last-minute pressure often ruin projects and provoke resistance.
- **Influencing events**: Use wu wei – steer gently, early, and in line with natural tendencies; be responsive, not forceful; hidden influence can be acceptable if ego-free and non-manipulative.
- **Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation**: Value inner motivation and simple, sufficient pleasures; excessive pursuit of prizes and rewards distorts behavior and undermines happiness.
- **Contrarian impulse**: Paradoxes (soft > hard, low > high) challenge our bias toward force, control, and visible power.
- **Understanding before action**: Calm, observe, and shed ego and rigid views before acting; then act lightly and effectively, like steering rather than pushing.