**These are the 2 Best Essays on Taoism from Fall 2021**

**They both would receive perfect IB scores of 7/7**

Taoism Essay #1

Taoism is a religion and philosophy from 5th century BCE China, believed to be founded by the philosopher Laozi. This time in ancient China during the Zhou dynasty was a time of war, with a period of warring states resulting in constant conflict. At this time, several philosophies were established, including Confucianism and Taoism. While Confucianism had a focus on rigid rules and principles, Taoism opposed this with a focus on creativity and freedom. Its main ideas are that life should be lived in balance with the Tao and that the objective of life is to live without regret and experience life to the fullest, Laozi stating “a man with outward courage dares to die; a man with inner courage dares to live” in the Tao te Ching. The Tao te Ching is a collection of poetry verses communicating the idea of balanced complementary energy (yin and yang), the idea of ‘Qi’ meaning pure energy, as well as other Taoist concepts. Tao means ‘the way’, or the natural order of the universe in harmony with nature. Unlike other religions which place importance on living in order to achieve a utopic afterlife, Taoism values life in the present moment and the constant energy which creates balance in nature. Therefore, Taoist philosophy argues that the meaning of life is to live in the present and create, manifesting in different ways: living in accordance with the natural order of the Tao, embracing the creative path destined for each individual, and living with the balanced complementary energy in the universe. These ideas surface through sacred texts, Taoist practices, and can also manifest through religious traditions.

Taoist ideologies are explained in the most sacred text of Taoism, the Tao te Ching, but also the ideologies of Zhuangzi which developed the ideas in the Tao te Ching. Several ideas are present in the Tao te Ching, such as the ever-present energy of nature, individual fulfillment, the destiny of each person to create, and the concept of wu wei. The Tao te Ching states that the individual’s actions are those of nature, stating that one should “live in accordance with the nature of things” and be in harmony with nature in the present moment, relating to the ideology of living with the natural order of the Tao as a way of life. The concept of yin and yang is in line with this, because the idea of good and evil both being present in all things creates a complementary opposite force in nature, always present in the Tao. The Tao te Ching states that “all things carry Yin, yet embrace Yang. They blend their life breaths in order to produce harmony”, communicating that both forces are needed for a balanced life. The sacred text also explains how to live a fulfilled life, with a focus on action for others instead of for the self. It is said that “through selfless action, fulfillment is attained”, meaning that the only way to truly live is through service for others. The concept of Wu Wei is highlighted as an important concept to finding peace and meaning in life in Taoism, meaning “without doing, causing, or making”. The concept relates to being in focus on the present moment, and also the idea that all things happen in the right way at the right time. This concept of destiny adds to the meaning of life outlined by Taoism that each individual has a creative path to follow. The ideas that philosopher Zhuangzi outlined when he developed ideas in the Tao te Ching were explained in stories, using characters performing actions in order to teach his lessons. The story of the butterfly expressed that true reality can never be fully known, and instead of fixating on knowing all life should just be lived without worry about the unknown. This relates to the concept of living life to the fullest. The story of the frog in the well communicated the need for imagination in each individual to create what they are destined to, this story teaching the Taoist concept of creating and individuality. The concepts in these sacred texts highlight the main ideas of the Taoist meaning of life, to live and create without focus on what cannot be changed or known.

The Taoist meaning of life manifests through several practices, including Tai Chi, Qi Gong, and also traditional Chinese art. Many of these practices relate to the idea of the universal energy or ‘Qi’ creating physical reality, relating to finding the true nature of life: to live and create. The martial art practices of Tai Chi involves moving the energy field around the body and being in tune with the energy of the universe, the name ‘Tai Ji Chuan’ meaning supreme principle or ‘the way’. This supreme principal is a way for the energy of nature to be in line with the nature of the individual, so they are able to live and create to their fullest potential. Qi Gong means ‘energy work’ and is meant to focus and channel the energy of the body in order to find peace and purpose. This is in line with the concept of everyone having individual creative purpose and living in accordance with universal energy, similar to Tai Chi as it allows the person to live to their fullest creative potential. The practice of traditional Chinese art also reflects Taoist principles, as it shows a pure and natural worldview and communicates living in accordance with the Tao. Traditional paintings show a simplistic worldview, relating to the Tao te Ching when it says “see simplicity, to realise one’s true nature”. The paintings are done this way to show the natural state of the universe. The concept of living in balance with the Tao is also shown through the combination of strength and fluidity in brush strokes in painting and calligraphy. This demonstrates the concept of universal balance or ‘yin and yang’ that relates to living in accordance with the balance of the Tao. The portrayal of nature present in paintings, calligraphy, and described in poetry conveys Taoist principles of nature holding the answer to the meaning of life and natural order of the Tao. The poem ‘Drinking Wine’ by Tao Qian describes the “beautiful mountain air and sunset”, and “finding true meaning” within nature, showing that the meaning of life can be found in nature and the natural Tao. Therefore, the meaning of life to live in accordance with the Tao and individual creation manifest in Taoist practices.

Though not as explicit, Taoist principles also manifest in religious Taoism. While Taoist philosophies and practices are intended for the individual to find their own creative destiny and live in accordance with the Tao, religious Taoism is intended for the community and the benefit of all. Religious practices like temple and deity worship, as well as holy days and festivals are intended to gather chi from the divine realm, and transport it to daily life in the earthly realm. There is a belief that temples are portals to the heavenly realm, and that the deities can bring positive and powerful energy. The deities are manifestations of Taoist principles of the energy present in the universe and the power of nature, shown through the male energy deity TianGong and the female energy deity Mazu. These representations of natural energy as deities display religious Taoism communicating Taoist principles of energy. The complementary forces of ‘Yang Qi’ and ‘Yin Qi’ are opposing but complementary masculine and feminine energies, shown through those deities, which further show the balance of the Tao as outlined by Taoist principles. Religious Taoism also shows the desire for immortality, achieved by the soul combining with vital energy from the heavenly realm. This can be achieved by living in the way of the Tao and connecting the individual’s chi to that of the heavenly realm, relating to the concept of living in accordance with the natural Tao. It is believed that human Taoist masters exist in this Qi realm, some examples including Laozi and Lord Wenchang. Lord Wenchang is believed to have become the God of literature and academic study for the benefit of the people, with many praying to the God before examinations. Since he is placed there to help all people, it can be argued that his existence conveys the Taoist philosophy of inspiration creating reality, since people are inspired by his divine presence which allows them to achieve their creative destiny. The holy Yuan Xiao festival on the first full moon of the year is a festival honouring deceased ancestors and celebrating the new year, and it is believed that energy from the heavenly realm is present in the earthly realm. The intermingling of energies is representative of life consisting of complementary energy, with both heavenly and earthly Qi always present.

Taoist philosophy makes the argument that instead of living for an ideal afterlife, life should be lived to its fullest with each person fulfilling their full creative potential. These ideas are further explored through living in accordance with the natural order of the Tao, embracing individual creative destiny, and embracing the complementary energy of Yin and Yang present in the universe. Sacred texts like the Tao te Ching and Zhuangzi’s interpretations of Taoist principles demonstrate these ideas, with the ideas manifested through the text and stories told. Taoist practices such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong and traditional Chinese art reflect Taoist philosophies of living with the pure Qi energy of the universe, the natural order of the Tao and finding the balance of Yin and Yang in the universe. Finally, religious Taoism also displays Taoist philosophy through the deities representing opposing but complementary energy, and also allowing people to achieve their creative destiny. All of these aspects demonstrate the meaning of life outlined by the Taoist philosophy: to live life to its fullest and to achieve individual creative destiny.

Taoism Essay #2

Taoism is a religion that originated in China around 500 BC that believes in the true nature of the world where simplicity and selflessness are emphasized. Beautifully put, the nature and essence of Taoism can be summed up in this single line from the *Tao Te Ching*, “Within Tao, the sharp edges become smooth; the twisted knots loosen; the sun is softened by a cloud; the dust settles into place.” The word ‘Tao’ 道 translates into a “way” or “principle” of life. It embodies the idea of following the natural order of the world to live a fulfilling life. An ideal Taoist life leads a life of *Wu Wei*, non-purposive action, which is a life expressing the essence of spontaneity. In Taoism, the meaning of life is to simply follow and experience the spontaneity of life, enjoying the company of nature while spreading compassion and selflessness to the world. Moreover, another way to understand the meaning of life in Taoism is through the concept of opposites, emphasized by the famous symbol of ying-yang. Taoism values the idea of reaching a balance between what seems as polar opposites in life, including life and death, spreading the concept that one can only truly understand the complexity of life through grasping its opposite. Taoism conveys all these beliefs through three types of Taoism: philosophical, practical, and religious.

In philosophical Taoism, the *Tao* is divided into two. This division of energy is illustrated by the symbol of ying and yang. The symbol is characterized by its black and white circular appearance, suggesting the idea that opposites are needed in order for harmony to exist. For example, in the second verse of the *Tao Te Ching* shares, “all can know good as good only because there is evil.” This quote captures the concept of paradoxical unity in Taoism, highlighting that the idea of good produces the idea of evil, that our idea of life could not exist without that of death. By pointing out the fault in this duality belief system, Taoism encourages its followers to perceive all as a piece of the perfection of oneness just as the sage who “lives openly with apparent duality and paradoxical unity.” By living through this way of *Tao* of combining perceived opposites as one, one can live a life without judgment; one can realize that life and death are identical, living a unified life. Another key concept tied with this idea of living as one is following the order of nature in order to experience life fully. In the 8th verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, it states that “one that lives in accordance with nature does not go against the way of things,” showing that life is about living in the flow. The *Tao* compares the meaning of life to water, “the supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to.” The *Tao* and water are synonymous. Ultimately, you are water; water is you. This idea encourages followers to live life in accordance with nature, trusting the eternal flow while staying true to their morals. All of these lessons can be taught by observing the flow of water, how it simply moves in harmony, knowing precisely how to behave. Beyond the emphasis on duality and nature, Taoism also advocates for unconditional love and compassion in its followers. As the *Tao Te Ching* shares, “serve the needs of others, and all your own needs with be fulfilled.” This quote captures the essence of *Tao,* urging followers to live for the benefit of others instead of themselves, overcoming one’s own ego. Taoism rejects the idea of ego as it realizes that ego is a demanding force that can never be satisfied. By living a *Tao*-centered life rather than an ego-centered life, it offers the followers greater inner peace and contentment, showing that the meaning of life can be reached by devoting yourself to the service of others. Another important concept mentioned in the *Tao Te Ching* was “Wu Wei”. Wu Wei is a concept of non-action. It ties into the idea of following the flow in life as it believes that everything will happen the way it should when you “do without doing,” emphasizing the act of trusting that nature will take care of everything. In addition, besides *Tao Te Ching*, Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher who believed in Taoism, also contributed to philosophical Taoism. One of the most famous Taoist ideals he spread was through his famous story of the “Butterfly Dream.” In the story, Zhuangzi went to sleep and dreamed that he was a butterfly. However, he was not sure whether in the dream, it was him dreaming to be a butterfly or butterfly dreaming to be him. Through this story, he highlighted the idea that sometimes a definitive answer cannot be found in life. He applied this same concept to life as he emphasized that since there is no definitive answer to the meaning of life, one must fully simply experience and enjoy life. With that, Zhuangzi showed that in Taoism, experiencing life is ultimately the meaning of life.

For practical Taoism, it emphasizes the fulfillment of individuals. This type of Taoism also applies the belief that the *Tao* is divided into two, the pure energy and the physical realm. For example, Qigong, a traditional Chinese system of physical exercises, utilizes the pure energy of “Qi” to create physical reality. The literal meaning of the words “Qi Gong” refers to working with energy, showing that Taoism navigates through the way of life by understanding how to properly control and use the energies. By engaging in Qigong, it is believed followers can reach a peaceful state of mind and harmony, showing that everything in life falls together when you simply follow nature, emphasizing Taoism’s idea of listening to the heart. Qigong is also used as part of the traditional Chinese medication. Medical Qigong involves the blocking and unblocking of energies through techniques such as acupuncture. The purpose of acupuncture is to restore the balance for the normal flow of Qi within the body as an imbalance of qi means an imbalance between ying and yang. Taoism believes that Qi is a single driving life force. Therefore, when there is a deficiency of qi in any organ or body part, it means that the organ is out of balance, showing that Taoism deeply values the idea of maintaining balance in life, that life can be understood through maintaining balance. Besides Qigong and Taichi, practical Taoism also includes elements of Chinese art such as painting, calligraphy, and poetry. Specifically, in ancient Chinese poetry, the main ideas of Taoism are greatly emphasized. For example, in *Drinking Wine* by Tao Qian, the connection between humans and nature is highlighted. The poem mentions multiple elements of nature such as “chrysanthemums under the eastern fence” and “the southern mountains,” highlighting the importance of nature in Taoism. By highlighting the important role nature plays in Taoism, it reveals that for one to truly understand the meaning of life, they must remain close to nature and follow nature’s order, showing that life is about experiencing and living in the moment.

Lastly, religious Taoism, in contrast with practical Taoism, values the benefit of the collective instead of an individual. For example, Taoist temples exist to help the collective group to achieve and experience the *Tao*. These temples are believed to act as a portal between the two realms: the “qi” and the earthly world, connecting the fundamental values of Taoism. This idea of helping the collective group is further emphasized through one of the most popular Taoist communal ceremonies, *Jiao. Jiao*, a rite of cosmic renewal, is made up of several rituals. A shortened version of the *Jiao* is a ritual in which each household brings an offering for the local deities, performing a ritual to restore order to the universe. This ritual is believed to regulate “qi” and balance the flow of ying and yang for the community, showing that Taoism understands the meaning of life through achieving balance. Although gods do not exist in Taoism, one of the most important deities in Taoism is lord Wenchang, the master of learning and wisdom. It is believed that by worshipping lord Wenchang, he will grant you good luck on examinations. Ultimately, religious Taoism embodies the idea that the meaning of life is reached by maintaining a balance between the two Taoist energies, showing that one can only truly understand the complexity of life through seeing its opposite.

In conclusion, the three types of Taoism: philosophical, practical, and religious, reveal the meaning of life is reached through expressing the essence of spontaneity. Taoism hugely values the role of nature in life as it believes that the purpose of life is to experience and live by following nature’s order. Or to behave as water to follow the flow of life while also bringing selflessness and compassion to the world. Furthermore, Taoism uses the concept of opposites, ying and yang, to reveal that the meaning of life is achieved through finding a balance between opposites, where the two ultimately come together and merge into one. Ultimately, the beauty of Taoism lies in the IB Ways of Knowing. Taoism mostly emphasizes Experience as the way of knowing because Taoists believe that the purpose of life is to simply enjoy the journey. Another way of knowing Taoism values is Intuition. In the *Tao Te Ching*, Taoism encourages its followers to follow their hearts, urging them to trust their intuition when living life.