

THE BIG IDEAS

Wu-wei

Let's define it.

Charismatic Power

= The result of wu-wei.

Four Ways to Try

The four philosophers.

Spontaneity + Mirrors

+ When gifts become burdens.

Connect

To something bigger than ourselves.

"For a person in wu-wei, the mind is embodied and the body is mindful; the two systems—hot and cold, fast and slow—are completely integrated. The result is an intelligent spontaneity that is perfectly calibrated to the environment."

~ Edward Slingerland

Trying Not to Try

Ancient China, Modern Science, and the Power of Spontaneity

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"The goal of this book is to explore the many facets of spontaneity, as well as the conundrum it presents: why it's so crucial to our well-being and yet so elusive. In fact, the problem of how to try not to try is an ancient one, and it has engaged thinkers throughout history and across the world. Some of the most important and influential of them lived in early China. It is my belief that these thinkers, hailing from the so-called Confucian and Daoist schools, had deep insights into the human condition that can still prove very useful to us today. ...

My hope is that by exploring the distilled wisdom of ancient traditions of thought—as well as the best findings from contemporary cognitive science—you will gain new insights that you can apply to your own life."

~ Edward Slingerland from *Trying Not to Try*

Edward Slingerland is one of the world's leading experts on *both* ancient Chinese thought AND modern cognitive science.

This book is a melding of those two realms. It's a truly fascinating read. I read it in a day and felt like I was spending the day hanging out with a brilliant thinker—getting privileged access to twenty years of deep thinking.

If you're into ancient wisdom and modern science I think you'll love the book as much as I did. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

WU-WEI

"Looking at our lives through this early Chinese lens will require learning about two tightly linked concepts: the first is *wu-wei* (pronounced *ooo-way*), and the second is *de* (pronounced *duh*, as in 'no duh').

Wu-wei literally translates as 'no trying' or 'no doing,' but it's not at all about dull inaction. In fact, it refers to the dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective. People in *wu-wei* feel as if they are doing nothing, while at the same time they might be creating a brilliant work of art, smoothly negotiating a complex social situation, or even bringing the entire world into harmonious order. For a person in *wu-wei*, proper and effective conduct follows as automatically as the body gives in to the seductive rhythm of a song. This state of harmony is both complex and holistic, involving as it does the integration of the body, the emotions, and the mind. If we have to translate it, *wu-wei* is probably best rendered as something like 'effortless action' or 'spontaneous action.' Being in *wu-wei* is relaxing and enjoyable, but in a deeply rewarding way that distinguishes it from cruder or more mundane pleasures. In many respects, it resembles the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's well-known concept of 'flow,' or the idea of being in the zone, but with important—and revealing—differences that we will explore."

"The 'thinking without thinking' strategy certainly has its limits, but it is becoming increasingly clear that any behavior we want to be reliable and fast in real-life situations needs to be turned into an embodied habit or tacit skill."

~ Edward Slingerland

There are two Chinese concepts we need to understand: *wu-wei* (pronounced oooo (kinda like "ew") way and *de* (one of the coolest words ever that is, unfortunately, pronounced "duh.")

We'll get to *de* in a moment. For now, *wu-wei*.

Although *wu-wei* directly translates as "no trying" or "no doing" it doesn't mean that we don't do anything and/or that we just check out of life.

It means that we do the *right* thing without having to even TRY to do the right thing. With *wu-wei*, this right action just naturally arises from who we are.

Wu-wei is: "the dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective."

Got it. That begs the question: How do we arrive at this optimal state of effortless awesome (that doesn't require "trying") without trying? We'll get to that paradoxical question in a moment.

First, let's take a quick peek at WHY we want to cultivate our *wu-wei*. It's all about the *de*.

CHARISMATIC POWER

"People who are in *wu-wei* have *de*, typically translated as 'virtue,' 'power,' or 'charismatic power.' *De* is radiance that others can detect, and it serves as an outward signal that one is in *wu-wei*. *De* comes in handy in a variety of ways. For rulers and others involved in political life, *de* has a powerful, seemingly magical effect on those around them, allowing them to spread political order in an instantaneous fashion. They don't have to issue threats or offer rewards, because people simply want to obey them. On a smaller scale, *de* allows a person to engage in one-on-one interactions in a perfectly efficacious way. If you have *de*, people like you, trust you, and are relaxed around you. Even wild animals will leave you alone. The payoff provided by *de* is one of the reasons that *wu-wei* is so desirable, and why early Chinese thinkers spent so much time figuring out how to get it."

So, we cultivate our *wu-wei* so we can have our *de*.

Although we don't have a good equivalent to either word in English (or any other language), *de* is translated as "virtue," "power," or "charismatic power."

Think about that for a moment.

Virtue = power = charismatic power = the ability to radiate goodness that magnetizes people.

That's A.W.E.S.O.M.E.

The power of *de* is why all ancient Chinese philosophers obsessed about how to best acquire it.

Slingerland also describes *de* as "moral charisma." I love that phrase as well: "moral charisma." When we're naturally expressing the purest, best version of ourselves, people respond. They can *feel* our goodness and we're evolutionarily programmed to respond positively to this.

We talked about some basic, more mechanical ways to dial up our charisma in [The Charisma Myth](#) (recall the Big 3 of charisma: Presence + Power + Warmth).

But I just love the idea of "moral charisma"—the power that comes from the moral "rightness" of a person.

In [The Leadership Challenge](#), Kouzes and Posner tell us that the foundation of leadership (one could say the source of their *de*!) is credibility.

They tell us that the research shows: "Credibility is the foundation of leadership. Constituents must be able, above all else, to believe in their leaders. For them to willingly follow someone else, they must believe that the leader's word can be trusted, that she is personally passionate and enthusiastic about the work, and that she has the knowledge and skill to lead."

"True de, true attractiveness, comes out of sincere absorption into a larger, valued good... not calculated clothing choices or pickup lines. What you choose to embrace doesn't matter, as long as it's something that you're doing genuinely, not for strategic reasons."

~ Edward Slingerland

The four key attributes people look for in leaders they willingly follow?

They are Honest + Forward-looking + Competent + Inspiring. <— Great qualities to work on such that we radiate *de* via our *wu-wei*.

WU-WEI: FOUR WAYS TO TRY NOT TO TRY

*"Complete relaxation and freedom from external concerns perfect your *de* and make you formidable, conveying a confidence and ease that makes others think twice before messing with you."*

~ Edward Slingerland

"Fortunately for us, the early Chinese explored every conceivable strategy for moving a person from a state of alienated trying into perfected *wu-wei*. You can carve and polish: subject yourself to rigorous, long-term training designed to eventually instill the right dispositions. You can embrace simplicity: actively reject the pursuit of goals, in the hope that the goals will then be obtained by themselves. You can cultivate your sprouts: try to identify the incipient tendencies of desirable behavior within you, and then nurture and expand them until they are strong enough to take over. Or you can just go with the flow: forget about trying, forget about not trying, and just let the values that you want to embrace pick you up and carry you along."

Alright, so *wu-wei* leads to *de*.

But what do we need to *do* to get to the point where we don't need to *do* anything?

In short: How do we try not to try?

To help us answer this paradoxical question, Slingerland walks us through the four different philosophical approaches presented by four of the leading old-school philosophers of ancient China: [Confucius](#) + [Lao Tzu](#) + Mencius + Chuang Tzu.

Each of those philosophers gets his own chapter. Here's a super quick peek:

- **Confucius** tells us we need to try *really* hard, following rituals and practices rigorously until we get to a place where they're part of who we are and *wu-wei* flows. (Slingerland calls this "*Try Hard Not to Try: Carving and Polishing the Self*.")
- **Lao Tzu** thought Confucius got it wrong and tells us we need to let everything go (literally—move out of town, check out, etc.) if we want to find *wu-wei*. (Slingerland calls this "*Stop Trying: Embracing the Uncarved Block*.")
- Then there's **Mencius**, who basically extends Confucius's perspective and advocates trying but not trying *too* hard—telling us we need to basically tend the sprouts of our goodness but not yank at the roots. ("*Try, but Not Too Hard: Cultivating Moral Sprouts*.")
- And, finally, there's **Chuang Tzu** who softens Lao-tzu's approach and tells us we don't need to drop out of society and return to our primitive roots—we just need to tune into the Heavenly spiritual force and let *that* flow through us. ("*Forget About It: Going with the Flow*.")

So, which approach is the right approach?

** insert Jeopardy music **

Short answer: Slingerland tells us they all have partial truths but no *one* approach is perfect for every person in every situation.

P.S. Note: "Where does this leave us? If the paradox is a real one, arising from basic structural features of human civilized life, it is unsurprising that none of our Chinese thinkers was able to come up with a single, surefire solution to it, and that people in widely separated cultures have struggled with the same tension. Indeed, that's why we call it a 'paradox'—if there were an answer, we'd demote it to a mere 'problem' or 'puzzle.' Paradoxes are not something that you *solve*, they are something that you learn how to live with."

That reminds me of another book that features ancient Chinese wisdom: [The Seventh Sense](#). I love the way Joshua Cooper Ramo differentiates "complex" vs. "complicated" challenges.

Here's how he puts it: *"When Holland chose the word 'complex,' he was making an important distinction. Complicated mechanisms can be designed, predicted, and controlled. Jet engines, artificial hearts, and your calculator are complicated in this sense. They may contain billions of interacting parts, but they can be laid out and repeatedly, predictably made and used. They don't change. Complex systems, by contrast, can't be so precisely engineered. They are hard to fully control. Human immunology is complex in this sense. The World Wide Web is complex. A rain forest is complex: It is made up of uncountable buzzing, connecting bugs and birds and trees. Order, to the extent that it exists in the Amazon basin, emerges moment by moment from countless, constant interactions."*

Life is COMPLEX, not complicated. It's full of paradoxes that we will never completely solve. Learning to live with these paradoxes is an essential aspect of *wu-wei*.

How're *you* doing with that? :)

P.P.S. Check out the book for more, of course. And check out our Notes on Confucius's [Analects](#) and Lao Tzu's [Tao te Ching](#). Notes on Mencius + Chuang Tzu coming soon.)

SPONTANEITY + WHEN GIFTS BECOME A BURDEN

"The conscious mind has limited capacity, and often the best thing to do when you run into difficulty is shut it down for a while and let the body take over."

~ Edward Slingerland

"Zhuangtzi's sages are also distinctive by virtue of the fact that they are not attached to strict values. They live their lives and have their goals but maintain openness that allows them to change direction when circumstances demand, or to let go of something that has turned from a gift to a burden and move on to something else. Translated into modern terms, they've downregulated their cold cognition so that their hot cognition can run the show more or less directly, with minimal interference from the conscious mind. The trick, of course, is how to pull this off."

Zhuangtzi's *wu-wei* exemplars are not bound by super strict values that make them rigid. They have a flexibility that allows them to act spontaneously to what the situation demands.

One of the metaphors Slingerland shares to bring this wisdom home is that of a mirror. Picture a mirror in your mind. Note that a mirror simply reflects whatever is presented in front of it. It's not muddled by past images that once appeared on the mirror. It is always freshly responding to life. One could say that the mirror is "spontaneous."

This spontaneity is a key aspect of *wu-wei*: Like a mirror, we spontaneously respond to what life presents—optimally expressing the best we're capable of without even trying to do so!

Practically speaking, these sages have goals but they also maintain an openness that allows them to change directions when the situation demands, or to let go of something that has turned from a gift to a burden.

Let's take a moment to reflect. Is there anything in your life that was once a gift but has become a burden? Something that you continue to pursue with a little too much rigidity and not quite enough "spontaneity"? What could you do to sprinkle in a little more *wu-wei* spontaneity?

Let's be passionately committed to goals that inspire us AND stay flexible + spontaneous in our joyful, *wu-wei* pursuit.

P.S. Emerson comes to mind: *"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.—'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.'—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."*

Let's not be hobgoblins. :)

P.P.S. We haven't gotten into the cognitive science. Super short story: Our minds have a fast (or hot) and slow (/cool) way of interacting with the world. The *wu-wei* master has learned how to integrate them beautifully—effortlessly knowing when to apply the cool, rational, slow thinking system and when to let the fast, hot system take over.

Check out the book for more. For now, know that, in many ways, it's like the trusting vs. training mindset we look at in [Overachievement](#) and the overthinking we talked about in [Choke](#). We also explore the power of "letting it rip!" in [Peak Performance 101](#). And, ultimately, it's connected to the Ideas in [Habits 101](#) + [Willpower 101](#) that we want to use our willpower (cool system) wisely such that we automatically (hot system) do what is best for us.

CONNECTING TO SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES

"The idea here is that, if you are to successfully enter wu-wei, your focus should be on the world, not yourself. You have to forget everything—your ego, even your own body—so that you can be absorbed into the larger movement of Heaven's Way."

~ Edward Slingerland

"Grasping the fundamentally religious nature of *wu-wei* is vital, and not just for reasons of historical accuracy. For one thing, the example of mastering a physical skill (like ox butchery), while a helpful analogy, becomes misleading if it's disengaged from its original cultural and religious context. The problem is that we can imagine someone being a skilled butcher, pianist, or tennis player and yet still an atrocious human being. (I'm sure you know a person or two like this.) What *wu-wei* represents, on the other hand, is the state of being a perfected part of a greater whole that is also embraced by others. It is this holistic, social and religious quality of *wu-wei* that makes it unique. ...

It's now easy to see why *wu-wei* is about more than isolated individuals incrementally improving their personal bests in the Ironman Triathlon or mastering a new level of Tetris. *Wu-wei* involves giving yourself up to something that, because it is bigger than you, can be shared by others. For those of us who no longer embrace the early Chinese faith in the Way and Heaven, the precise nature of this 'larger whole'—the framework of values that gives shape and meaning to the *wu-wei* experience—is going to vary from tribe to tribe, even person to person or moment to moment. By its very nature, though, this framework needs to be something larger than the self. An essential fact about *wu-wei* is that it's not just about the experience unfolding within the mind of an isolated individual but also about social connections *between* people."

One of the important distinctions Slingerland makes in the book is that *wu-wei* is grounded in a connection to something BIGGER than the individual.

It has a spiritual and social dimension that differentiates it from something like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's [Flow](#), for example.

Whereas the science of *Flow* is grounded in a Western, individualistic worldview and therefore emphasizes things like matching your challenges with your skills, *wu-wei* is rooted in something bigger than the self.

As such, it's important to note that *wu-wei* isn't about setting your new personal best Ironman time or crushing a new level of Tetris.

It's about becoming an amazing human being, connected to something bigger than yourself who makes a beautiful contribution to the world.

To use the language of our work together, we optimize not so we can take a narcissistic, check-me-out selfie of our six-pack but so that we can be a more loving and present human being.

Here's a little more on what we're looking for: "It is this difference between skills and virtues that, at the end of the day, is driving the paradox of *wu-wei*. Although our Chinese thinkers used stories like that of Butcher Ding or Woodcarver Qing to illustrate aspects of *wu-wei*—as did Aristotle, incidentally—the kind of *wu-wei* that they are worried about is *moral* in nature. They want to foster cooperation and virtue, not efficient butchery. So the paradox exists because

"If we can manage to not push too hard when trying is bad, and not think too much when reflection is enemy, the flow of life is always there, eager to pull us along in its wake."

~ Edward Slingerland

the kinds of virtues that people care about and value in others center on *who you are*, not necessarily what you do. They are about stable, *inner* states, not just outward behavior. They are about *values*, not merely actions, because it's commitment to shared values that allows large-scale societies to function. So it's not enough to perform generous actions, you need to become a *generous person*.

This is an enormously difficulty trick to pull off, which is why true *wu-wei* is both inherently hard to reach *and* such a great signal of trustworthiness once we've managed to get there. We're attracted to genuinely *wu-wei* people—they have *de*—because evolution has shaped us to home in on signals of sincerity that are difficult to consciously simulate and even harder to experience on demand, and to do so in response to basic challenges inherent to human cooperation."

Wu-wei is all about values + virtues. It's about who we are.

If we want to shine with the radiant power of moral charisma, we need to live in integrity with our highest ideals in service to the world.

Let's do that!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.