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INCONGRUITY AND THE EVOCATION OF GREAT KNOWLEDGE IN THE CHUANG-TZU

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Men all pay homage to what understanding understands, but no one understands enough to rely upon what understanding does not understand. Can we call this anything but great perplexity? Let it be, let it be! There is no place you can escape it.

--The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 288)

The ancient Chinese Taoist wisdom text known as the Chuang-tzu is an ingenious and audacious evocative work which artfully marries literary skill and device in the service of precipitating liberation. A superficial reading of the Chuang-tzu may bring forth the conclusion that it is nothing more than an entertaining, poetic play on words, amusingly sketching a relativistic epistemological perspective. A more reflective reading, however, reveals a rich and insightful text capable of acting as a powerful springboard for emancipating in the mind.

The Chuang-tzu declares that liberation can be effected by unveiling a frame of mind called great knowledge. According to the Chuang-tzu, great knowledge is ordinarily obscured by a frame of mind called petty knowledge, or the discriminatory mind, but the hegemony of petty knowledge can be overcome. One method is exposure to incongruities which shake up the previously unquestioned belief that petty knowledge is a reliable, necessary, or exclusive guide to the art of living. Such provocation can open the mind to great knowledge and enable one to act in accord with the tao.

To become liberated, the Chuang-tzu advocates that we "shuck off all dualistic modes of thinking and learn to achieve a kind of mystical identification with existence as a whole" (Watson, 1987, p. 467). The evocative literary tools found in the Chuang-tzu to "shuck off all dualistic modes of thinking" often involve incongruities such as self-contradiction, paradoxes, monsters, unexpected figures, humour and wit, and myths and metaphors.

In contrast to the widespread prevalence of meditative practices to achieve liberation common to many other Asian wisdom traditions, the use of incongruity in the Chuang-tzu for evoking liberation is a relatively unusual emancipatory method and contributes much of the distinctive flavor of the Chuang-tzu.
Petty Knowledge and Great Knowledge

The Chuang-tzu depicts the unliberated life as frantic, distraught, and mechanical:

> Once there was a man who was afraid of his shadow and who hated his footprints, and so he tried to get way from them by running. But the more he lifted his feet and put them down again, the more footprints he made. And no matter how fast he ran, his shadow never left him, and so, thinking that he was still going too slowly, he ran faster and faster without a stop until his strength gave out and he fell down dead. He didn’t understand that by lolling in the shade he could have gotten rid of his shadow and by resting in quietude he could have put and end to his footprints. How could he have been so stupid? (Watson, 1968, p. 348).

This passage also suggests that freedom from the unliberated life is readily at hand, if only it could be recognized.

The Chuang-tzu differentiates two distinctive kinds of knowledge:

> Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy.
> (Watson, 1968, p. 37)

Another translation expresses the distinction this way:

> Great knowledge is free and easy. Petty knowledge picks holes
> (Graham, 1969, p. 151)

According to the Chuang-tzu, the root of the unliberated life is petty knowledge, that is, the discriminatory mind—a frame of mind that creates endless discriminations where none existed before. Discriminations separate and break asunder the fundamental unity of nature. The discriminatory frame of mind, therefore, is one from which the essential dynamic unity of the universe—the tao—cannot be apprehended. Most importantly, the discriminatory mind obscures great knowledge:

> Disregard little wisdom and great wisdom will become clear. (Watson, 1968, p. 299)

Great knowledge, therefore, is not acquired, but unveiled: It simply reveals itself when one is free from subservience to petty knowledge.

From the perspective of the Chuang-tzu, however, one should also be cautious not to become entangled in the discrimination of siding with great knowledge and casting away petty knowledge. Even this distinction can forestall liberation, for petty knowledge and great knowledge are not mutually exclusive: "The Sage remains fundamentally one with things whether he is being united with them by heaven or is dividing himself off as a thinking man" (Graham, 1989, p. 86). Since discrimination, as ordinarily conceived, does not occur in a great knowledge
frame of mind, the Sage does not discriminate even against discrimination, for the root of the unliberated life is not simply discrimination, but subservience to the discriminatory Mind. Being unattached to discrimination, the Sage is fully capable of making practical discriminations and decisions without being ensnared by them.

On Method in the Chuang-tzu

Only scattered allusions to meditative practices can be found in the *Chuang-tzu*. The implication is that meditative methods are not crucial and may even be detrimental (Liu, 1979; Merton, 1965). We do not know whether the lack of more explicit meditative instructions in the *Chuang-tzu* was a deliberate strategic omission, but the paucity of information on the subject is certainly consistent with the work's emphasis on promoting liberation through the forgetting of petty knowledge rather than mechanically following any techniques—meditative or otherwise. Although the *Chuang-tzu* advocates no single, definitive method to follow, reading this evocative work with an open mind can itself serve as a catalyst to precipitate great knowledge (Allinson, 1989; Watson, 1968; Wu, 1990).

How can reading this evocative work effect such a transformation? We suggest the following more detailed description of how the shift from petty knowledge to great knowledge can occur:

1. Great knowledge is naturally present when an individual is not being ruled by the discriminatory mind.
2. Therefore, the way to great knowledge is to free oneself from being subservient to the discriminatory mind.
3. An individual becomes subservient to the discriminatory mind by coming to believe that it is a reliable, necessary, or exclusive guide to the art of living.
4. One method to evoke great knowledge, therefore, is to shake up the belief that the discriminatory mind is a reliable, necessary, or exclusive guide to the art of living.
5. A conspicuous method found in the *Chuang-tzu* to shake up this belief about petty knowledge is the exploitation of incongruity.

The remainder of this study, therefore, focuses on a path to liberation set forth in the *Chuang-tzu* we might call the "Way of Incongruity"—an approach which confers upon the work a unique literary and methodological stamp. Although we focus on the significance of incongruity as a means toward liberation, it is only one means to an end. As Livia Kohan (1991) suggests in her recent study of Taoist mystical philosophy, any path or technique that can lead an individual toward liberation is worth pursuing.

Varieties of Incongruity in the Chuang-tzu

There are a variety of recognizable forms of incongruity found in the *Chuang-tzu*...
that can contribute to shaking up the reader's faith in the reliability of petty knowledge and thereby precipitate great knowledge. The primary forms of incongruity found in the work are: (a) monsters; (b) unexpected figures; (c) self-contradiction; (d) paradoxes; (e) puns and jokes; and (f) myths and metaphors.

Monsters

The *Chuang-tzu* contains a variety of characterizations of monsters as sages. In the fourth chapter of the work, for example, Crippled Shu is presented as a model of harmonious living (Watson, 1968, p. 66). In the fifth chapter, Wang T'ai, who had his foot cut off, is described as a Sage; Ai T'ai-t'-o is extremely ugly, yet has perfect virtue; and Mr Lame-Hunchback-No-Lips, whose name illustrates his deformity, is also described as a sage (Watson, 1968, pp. 68-76). The incongruity of monsters is twofold. First, monsters qualify as incongruous beings because they are physically different—deviants from socially recognized norms of beauty. Secondly, the monsters in the *Chuang-tzu* are incongruous because of their wisdom—monsters are not usually thought of as embodiments of great knowledge.

More generally, as Watson (1968) proposes, to free people from conventional concepts of goodness and beauty, the *Chuang-tzu* deliberately glorifies everything that we would usually perceive as sordid, base, or bizarre (p. 18). Watson illustrates this pedagogical deployment of ugliness by referring to the following passage in which the *Chuang-tzu* describes the Way (tao):

> Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, "This thing called the Way—where does it exist?"

> Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it does not exist."

> "Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"

> "It is in the ant."

> "As low a thing as that?"

> "It is in the panic grass."

> "But that's lower still!"

> "It is in the tiles and shards."

> "How can it be so low?"

> "It is in the piss and shit!"

> Master Tung-kuo made no reply.

(Watson, 1968, pp. 240-241)
The incongruity of Chuang Tzu's last comment, and the recognition that there is nothing other than the tao, apparently succeed in freeing Master Tung-kuo from being subservient to his discriminatory mind.

Unexpected figures

Another manifestation of incongruity that takes place in the Chuang-tzu is the use of unexpected figures, such as a talking tree or a crafts person, to embody spiritual authority. An alliance of this kind is incongruous because, like monsters, the subjects used defy our ordinary expectations of what a spiritual authority should "look like." People generally seek guidance in the art of living from more conventional authorities than cooks, carpenters, or trees.

In chapter 3 of the Chuang-tzu, for example, Cook Ting uses the metaphor of cutting up an ox to teach Lord Wen-hui "the secret of caring for life" (Watson, 1968, p. 51). In chapter 4 Carpenter Shih learns, in a dream, the value of the apparently useless from a talking tree (Watson, 1968, pp. 63-67). In chapter 13, Wheelwright P'ien uses his work as a metaphor to teach Duke Huan not to overly value words (Watson, 1968, pp. 152-153). And in chapter 19 words of wisdom on the art of living fall from the mouths of unexpected figures such as a gamecocks trainer, a swimmer, a carpenter, and an artisan (Watson, 1968, pp. 197-208).

By illustrating that great knowledge can manifest itself in craftspeople, talking trees, and monsters, the Chuang-tzu challenges the belief that great knowledge resides only in more conventional authorities. At the same time, the Chuang-tzu challenges the reader to reexamine his or her general proclivity for making subjective discriminations.

Self-contradiction

Another form of incongruity found in the Chuang-tzu is that of self-contradiction. As Watson (1968) points out, except for Hui Tzu, the other figures in the Chuang-tzu do not expound consistent viewpoints. For example, Watson explains, Confucius sometimes speaks in the words of a true taoist sage, while at other times he preaches conventional Confucian morality (p. 24). More generally, Watson (1968) concludes: "The reader must learn to expect any opinion whatsoever from any source, to savor the outrageous incongruities, and to judge for himself which of the opinions offered represents the highest level of enlightenment" (p. 24).

Self-contradiction keeps the reader on guard against the habit of settling on believing in one authority and rejecting others. By realizing that even authority figures can be self-contradictory, that is, nonauthoritative, the reader can no longer feel secure about any conventional authorities or "received teachings." All belief becomes questionable. Great knowledge, on the other hand, is a frame of mind that is empty of preconceived ideas, authorities, and received teachings.

Paradoxes

The meaning of a paradox is "a seemingly contrary statement that may nonetheless
be true"; "a statement contrary to received opinions"; or "an assertion that is essentially self-contradictory, although based on a valid deduction from acceptable premises" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1981, p. 950).

The Chuang-tzu contains a number of paradoxical statements such as the following:

*The sage says nothing yet says something, says something yet says nothing.*

(Watson, 1968 p. 46)

*All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless!*

(Watson, 1968, p. 67)

How can a paradox help in unveiling great knowledge? A paradox can be disturbing, yet fruitful, because it can shake up our opinions and invite us to reconsider our fundamental belief system and conception of reality. The psychologically transformative potential of a paradox, therefore, lies in its ability to provoke us to change our perspectives radically in order to resolve the paradox. In the Chuang-tzu paradoxes can serve to awaken the reader to a recognition of the fundamental frailty of petty knowledge.

**Puns and jokes**

As Watson (1968) suggests, humor is "the deadliest of weapons against all that is pompous, staid, and holy" (p. 5), and John Morreall (1987) asserts that most forms of humor share at least one fundamental characteristic: incongruity. One type of incongruity found in the Chuang-tzu is the use of puns. For example, the Chuang-tzu delights in using the different senses of "know" in a single sentence (Graham, 1989, p. 26).

Other puns found in the Chuang-tzu involve such terms as "say" and "useful," as referred to in the preceding section on paradoxes. Also, Watson (1968) points out that the Chuang-tzu uses homophones as a form of play on words: "The reader should keep in mind incidentally, that the words 'virtue' (te) and 'gain' or 'to get' (te) are homophones, and this fact is the basis of frequent puns and word plays--that is the man of true Taoist virtue is one who, as we would say in English, has 'got it'" (p. 25).

Jokes and humorous stories ridiculing the absurd behavior of individuals subservient to petty knowledge punctuate the Chuang-tzu. Puns and jokes are similar to paradoxes in that they cannot be reduced to logical analysis without losing some level of meaning.

Logically explaining a joke or a pun is rarely funny: Petty knowledge is inadequate to deal with them. More subtle humor also abounds in the Chuang-tzu. For example, the parable of the man who was afraid of his own shadow, for all
the terror-stricken anxiety it portrays, also has a witty undertone.

Myths and Metaphors

Myths, as Allinson (1989) points out, are generally understood as untrue stories; therefore they fit with the definition of incongruity as being "not consistent with what is correct." A metaphor, Allinson (1989) argues, is a "reduced myth" (p. 34) because, like myths, metaphors "do not say exactly what is to be said" (p. 33). From this perspective, therefore, myths and metaphors can perhaps also be regarded as forms of incongruity.

The first paragraph of the Chuang-tzu opens with the following myth:

In the Northern Darkness there is a fish and his name is K'un. The K'un is so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is P'eng. The back of the P'eng measures I don't know how many li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven. (Watson, 1968, p. 29).

Allinson (1989) proposes two reasons why the Chuang-tzu begins strategically with a myth. The first is that what is to be said cannot be said directly; the second reason is that what is to be said is not to be understood as literally true (p. 27). Furthermore, Allinson suggests that once we know a myth or a metaphor is to be presented, we relax our analytical faculty because we do not feel bound to conventional criteria of truth to evaluate a myth or a metaphor. At the same time because myths and metaphors are often believed to carry hidden truths, we listen carefully in order to discover that hidden truth (pp. 27-28, 33-34). In short, because myths and metaphors demand a mental framework of openness and receptivity rather than straightforward analytical thinking, they can help to precipitate great knowledge.

The Way of Incongruity

We have suggested that the device of incongruity found repeatedly in various forms in the Chuang-tzu can help to free an individual from subservience to petty knowledge and thereby evoke great knowledge.

Something "incongruous" is defined as "made up of disparate, inconsistent, or discordant parts" or "not consistent with what is correct, proper, or logical" or "inharmonious or incompatible" (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1981, p. 666). Incongruity, however, exists only in a petty knowledge frame of mind. Since great knowledge is beyond dichotomies, incongruity is never perceived as such in a great knowledge frame of mind: The tao is a single, undifferentiated, everchanging process. In a petty knowledge frame of mind, on the other hand, beliefs can conflict with each other, thereby generating the experience of incongruity.

When confronted with incongruity, an individual may: (a) avoid the incongruity
completely; (b) try to reduce the psychological impact of the incongruity; or, (c) seek an entirely new approach which transcends the incongruity. Festinger's (1959) psychological theory of cognitive dissonance is concerned with only the first two choices and is confined to the conventional framework of petty knowledge. Strategies of one kind or another used to avoid or reduce incongruities can, however, obscure a profound insight about the inadequacies of conventional thinking. By avoiding a direct engagement with incongruities at a deeper level, an opportunity for liberation through the unveiling of great knowledge may be forfeited, consigning one to a never-ending series of escapes from disquieting situations.

The frantic never-ending escape from the vicissitudes of life is vividly captured by the story in the Chuang-tzu quoted earlier about the man who is terrified of his own shadow. This striking parable clearly does not support an escapist strategy. Instead, the passage intimates that liberation from the shadow is possible by surrendering a fixed belief about how to achieve reprieve, or, more generally, forsaking subservience to petty knowledge. The Sage accepts incongruities as an unavoidable manifestation of petty knowledge and is not threatened by them. Living in unity with the tao, the Sage has no need to avoid or reduce incongruities—they do not exist.

We have proposed that liberation can be achieved by shaking up the belief that the discriminatory mind is a reliable, necessary, or exclusive guide to the art of living. Facing up to incongruity may do just that, that is, the confrontation can shake up one's faith in the reliability of petty knowledge such that the frame of mind of great knowledge is unveiled. However, when facing an incongruity, an individual clinging to the belief that conventional thinking is reliable, may choose to become defensive and respond more in accord with Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory—that is, try to avoid incongruity or reduce it. One way to defeat the persistent avoidance or rationalization of incongruities might be to overwhelm an individual through immersion in a world swarming with various kinds of incongruity. Such a world—teeming with incongruities—is exactly what a reader finds in the Chuang-tzu. The author of the work "seems to delight in keeping the reader constantly surprised and off balance, wooing him away from conventional ways of thought by the very strangeness and unpredictability of his discourse" (Watson, 1987, pp. 468-469).

By submerging the reader in a world swarming with a variety of incongruities, the Chuang-tzu can prompt a reader to realize that life’s incongruities can be understood from a very different, transcendent perspective. Although a reader may initially struggle to reject or reduce each incongruity by means of some appropriate cognitive strategy, cumulatively the series of mental struggles the reader must go through may prove inadequate, allowing the Chuang-tzu’s perspective to prevail by overwhelming the reader's conventional attempts to counteract incongruity. At some point, the realization may dawn on the reader that his or her conventional way of thinking is fundamentally limited and is inadequate to leading a more fulfilling life.

Because the style and content of the Chuang-tzu are so unconventional, a reader may simply reject the work itself rather than his or her conventional ways of thinking. To appreciate fully the wealth of insights that enrich this evocative
work, and to allow its transformative potential to take hold, the reader needs to approach the Chuang-tzu with an open mind. Perseverance, reflection, and intuitive relaxation into the work are also invaluable dispositions with which to approach the wisdom of the Chuang-tzu.

Although the Chuang-tzu was composed over two millennia ago, its bold style and content continue to offer an inspiring vision of liberation. Whatever the means by which its transformative power engages us, the Chuang-tzu remains an invaluable guide to great knowledge, wisdom, and the art of living.

REFERENCES


Requests for reprints may be sent to either author, Department of Psychology, 2430 Campus Road, University of Hawai‘i, Manoā, Honolulu, HI 96822, U.S.A.

The complete Chuang-tzu, consisting of 33 sections, was written during the fourth through the second centuries B.C.E. Only the first seven sections, the inner chapters (nei-p’ien), can be confidently ascribed to a single author (e.g., Graham, 1989); because of various uncertainties about ascribing authorship, the work is often referred to as the Chuang-tzu. The present study draws upon material from the larger works, as translated by Burton Watson (1968) and A.C. Graham (1989), two modern English translations generally considered to be the most authoritative (Mair, 1983). Our quotations from the Chuang-tzu are drawn primarily from Watson’s translation, and all quotations from the Chuang-tzu are italicized, and set off from the text. For an overview of the major themes of the Chuang-tzu, see our earlier study (Gross and Shapiro, 1933).

Our use of the term "monster" is borrowed from Robert Allinson (1989), who uses it as a general heading for a host of unusual characters appearing in the Chuang-tzu such as cripples and hunchbacks. Allinson also points out that the characters he classifies under this heading are "monsters in the sense of falling outside of the social norm" (p. 51).

"K’un means fish roe. So Chuang Tzu begins with a paradox—the tiniest fish imaginable is also the largest fish imaginable" (Watson, footnote 1, 1968, p. 29).