

Pseudo-profundity

by Stephen Law

Some marketing, religious, and lifestyle gurus have genuinely profound insights to offer. Others spout little more than pseudoprofundity. Pseudoprofundity is the art of sounding profound while talking nonsense. Unlike the art of actually being profound, the art of sounding profound is not particularly difficult to master. As we'll see, there are certain basic recipes that can produce fairly convincing results—good enough to convince others, and perhaps even yourself, that you have gained some sort of profound insight into the human condition. If you want to achieve the status of a guru, it helps to have some natural charisma and presentational skills. Sincerity and empathy, or at least the ability to fake them, can be useful. Props also help. Try wearing a loincloth, a fez, or, in a business setting, a particularly brash waistcoat. But even without the aid of such natural talents or paraphernalia, anyone can produce deep- and meaningful-sounding pronouncements if they are prepared to follow a few simple recipes.

STATE THE OBVIOUS

To begin with, try pointing out the blindingly obvious. Only do it i-n-c-r-e-d-i-b-l-y s-l-o-w-l-y and with an air of superior wisdom. The technique works best if your pronouncements focus on one of life's big themes, such as love, money, and death. So, for example:

- We were all children once.
- Money can't buy you love.
- Death is unavoidable.

State the obvious in a sufficiently earnest way, perhaps following up with a pregnant pause, and you may find others begin to nod in agreement, perhaps murmuring, “Yes, how very true that is.”

CONTRADICT YOURSELF

A second technique is to select words with opposite or incompatible meanings and cryptically combine them in what appears to be a straightforward contradiction. Here are a few examples:

- Sanity is just another kind of madness.
- Life is often a form of death.
- The ordinary is extraordinary.

Such sentences are interpretable in all sorts of ways and can easily appear profound. In George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, two of the three slogans of the Party have this character:

- War is peace.
- Freedom is slavery.
- Ignorance is strength.

If you're an aspiring guru, why not produce your own contradictory remarks? The great beauty of such comments is that they make your audience do the work for you. Their meaning is not for you, the guru, to say – it's for your followers to figure out. Just sit back, adopt a sage-like expression, and let them do the intellectual labor.

The thought that contradiction is a mark of profundity sometimes crops up in a religious context. Nonbelievers will suppose contradictions within a religious doctrine reveal that it contains falsehoods. The faithful are likely to take the same contradictions as a mark of profundity. Contradictions have other advantages too. A series of simple, unambiguous claims is easy to refute; not so a series of such cryptic remarks. So, if you're planning to start your own religion and want to say things that will appear profound and also be invulnerable to criticism, try making a series of contradictory pronouncements. Assert, but then deny. For example, say that your particular god is – and yet, he is not. Your god is everything, and yet nothing. He is one, and yet he is many. He is good. But then again he isn't.

None of this is to say that such seemingly contradictory remarks can't convey something genuinely profound. They can certainly be thought provoking (I bet you can find even some sort of truth in all of Orwell's poisonous examples). But, given the formulaic way contradictions can be used to generate Pseudoprofundity, it's wise not to be too easily impressed.

DEEPITIES

Another recipe for generating Pseudoprofundity, identified by philosopher Daniel Dennett,^[1] is the deepity.

Xingming's Note: Here is excerpt from Dennett's new book *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*

My late friend, the computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum had a yearning to be a philosopher and tried late in his career to gravitate from technicalities to profundities. He once told me that one evening, after holding forth with high purpose and

furrowed brow at the dinner table, his young daughter Miriam said, “Wow! Dad just said a deepity!” What a wonderful impromptu coinage! I decided to adopt it and put it to somewhat more analytic use.

A deepity is a proposition that seems both important and true – and profound – but that achieves this effect by being ambiguous. On one reading it is manifestly false, but it would be earth-shaking if it were true; on the other reading it is true but trivial. The unwary listener picks up the glimmer of truth from the second reading, and the devastating importance from the first reading, and thinks, Wow! That’s a deepity.

Here is an example. (Better sit down: this is heavy stuff.)

Love is just a word.

Oh wow! Cosmic. Mind-blowing, right? Wrong. On one reading, it is manifestly false. I’m not sure what love is – maybe an emotion or emotional attachment, maybe an interpersonal relationship, maybe the highest state a human mind can achieve – but we all know it isn’t a word. You can’t find love in the dictionary!

We can bring out the other reading by availing ourselves of a convention philosophers care mightily about: when we talk about a word, we put it in quotation marks, thus:

“Love” is just a word.

This is true; “love” is an English word, but just a word, not a sentence, for example. It begins with “L” and has four letters and appears in the dictionary between “lousy” and “low-browed,” which are also just words. “Cheeseburger” is just a word. “Word” is just a word.

But this isn’t fair, you say. Whoever said that love is just a word meant something else, surely. No doubt, but they didn’t say it. Maybe they meant that “love” is a word that misleads people into thinking that it is the term for something wonderful that doesn’t really exist at all, like “unicorn,” or maybe they meant that the word was so vague that nobody could ever know whether it referred to any particular thing or relation or event. But neither of these claims is actually very plausible. “Love” may be a troublesome, hard-to-define word, and love may be a hard-to-be-sure-about state, but those claims are obvious, not particularly informative or profound.

Not all deepities are quite so easily analyzed. Richard Dawkins recently alerted me to a fine deepity by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who described his faith as a

silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark.

I leave the analysis of this as an exercise for you.

TRITE-NALOGIES

Here's a particularly effective way of generating Pseudoprofundity. First, take some fairly trite observation about the human condition, such as:

- life is often surprising
- people often feel there's something missing from their lives
- we should appreciate things while we can
- we should make the most of the opportunities we get.

Then, wrap your chosen trite observation in an analogy. I call the result a trite-nalogy. “Life is like a ...” provides one popular template. Here are a few examples I quickly found on the Internet:

- My momma always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get. (Forrest Gump)
- Life is like a taxi. The meter just keeps a-ticking whether you are getting somewhere or just standing still. (Lou Erickson)
- Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds us down or polishes us up depends on us. (Thomas L. Holdcroft)
- Life is like a coin. You can spend it any way you wish, but you only spend it once. (Lillian Dickson)

The result can often be terribly deep sounding.

Sermons and homilies sometimes involve trite-nalogies. Alan Bennett produced a hilarious spoof in his sketch “The Sermon” (which Bennett delivered while wearing a dog collar):

Life, you know, is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. And I wonder how many of you here tonight have wasted years of your lives looking behind the kitchen dressers of this life for that key. I know I have. Others think they've found the key, don't they? They roll back the lid of the sardine tin of life. They reveal the sardines, the riches of life, therein, and they get them out, and they enjoy them. But, you know, there's always a little bit in the corner you can't get out. I wonder is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine!

Author Douglas Adams, no doubt irritated by such “Life is like a ...” pseudoprofundities, produced his own surreal version:

Life ... is like a grapefruit. It's orange and squishy, and has a few pips in it, and some folks have half a one for breakfast.

Parables, too, are sometimes trite-nalogies. Take this example:

The young man was at the end of his rope. Seeing no way out, he dropped to his knees in prayer. “Lord, I can't go on,” he said. “I have too heavy a cross to bear.” The Lord replied, “My son, if you can't bear its weight, just place your cross inside this room. Then open another door and pick any cross you wish.” The man was filled with relief. “Thank you, Lord,” he sighed, and did as he was told. As he looked around the room he saw many different crosses; some so large the tops were not visible. Then he spotted a tiny cross leaning against a far wall. “I'd like that one, Lord,” he whispered. And the Lord replied, “My son, that's the cross you brought in.” [2]

Take the important but obvious truth that we often overestimate our own woes and fail to realize how serious are the problems of others, draw an analogy with carrying heavy crosses, and voilà—you're profound! In this example, the Pseudoprofundity also serves to distract the listener's attention from more troubling questions, such as: Why does God insist on loading people with such horrendous burdens in the first place?

USE JARGON

Whether you're a business guru, lifestyle consultant, or mystic, introducing some jargon can further enhance the illusion of profundity. Here is a common trick. Make up some words that appear to have meanings similar to those of certain well-known terms but that differ in some never fully explained way. For example, don't talk about people being sad or happy; talk about them having “negative or positive attitudinal orientations.”

Next, translate some truisms into your new vocabulary. Take the trite observation that happy people tend to make other people feel happier. That can be recast as “positive attitudinal orientations have high transferability.”

It also helps to adopt the vocabulary of “forces,” “energies,” and “balances.” The use of these words will suggest that you have discovered some deep power that can be harnessed and utilized by others. That will make it much easier to persuade them that they may seriously miss out if they don't sign up for one of your seminars.

So, if you're a marketing guru, try running seminars on “Harnessing Positive Attitudinal Energies within the Retail Environment.” If some smart aleck is brave enough to put up his hand at one of your seminars and ask exactly what a “positive attitudinal energy” is, just define it using other bits of your jargon. That way, you'll never have to explain what any of your gibberish means. Yet the several truisms around which all your jargon has been wrapped will generate the illusion that you must really be on to something, even if your listeners cannot fully grasp what it is. So you'll leave them anxious to hear more.

Adding some scientific jargon or references can be particularly useful in lending your ramblings further fake authority and gravitas. Many purveyors of Pseudoprofundity have learned the insight expressed by the great nineteenth-century scientist James Clerk Maxwell that such “is the respect paid to science that the most absurd opinions may become current, provided they are expressed in language, the sound of which recalls some well-known scientific phrase.” ³

References to quantum mechanics are particularly popular among peddlers of pseudoscientific claptrap. Quantum mechanics is widely supposed to make weird claims, and hardly anyone understands it, so if you start spouting references to it in support of your own bizarre teachings, people will assume you must be very clever and probably won't realize that you are, in fact, just bullshitting. So perhaps, if you're feeling ambitious, put on another seminar titled "Positive Attitudinal Energies and Quantum Mechanics."

POSTMODERN PSEUDOPROFUNDITY

Sadly, some corners of academia are dominated by intellectuals whose writing amounts to little more than Pseudoprofundity. Strip away the academic jargon and pseudoscientific references from their impressive-sounding pronouncements, and you'll find there's precious little left.

Those thinkers often referred to as "postmodern" include more than their fair share of such jargon-fueled wafflers. So easy is it, in fact, to produce convincing-looking postmodern gobbledygook that a wag called Andrew Bulhak constructed a computer program that will write your own "postmodern" essay, complete with references. For the Postmodern Essay Generator, go to <http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/>.

I just did and received an essay that begins:

The primary theme of Cameron's model of neostructural Marxism is the common ground between society and culture. Sontag's analysis of Debordist situation states that society has objective value. However, Marx promotes the use of Marxist socialism to analyse class. Debordist situation holds that the goal of the observer is deconstruction. Therefore, the subject is interpolated into a neostructural Marxism that includes art as a paradox. Several materialisms concerning semanticist subdialectic theory may be found.

This may be nonsense, but it makes scarcely less sense than the real thing. Possibly more. Consider this example from the French intellectual Félix Guattari:

We can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author, and this multireferential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathic non-discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middle and reinforce us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticised previously. A machinic assemblage, through its diverse components, extracts its consistency by crossing ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility, ontological and phylogenetic thresholds, creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoiesis. ⁴

In 1997, Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University (eminently qualified to comment on the use of scientific terminology), annoyed with the way in which some postmodern writers were borrowing terms and theories from physics

and applying them in a nonsensical way, published, along with his colleague Jean Bricmont, the book *Intellectual Impostures*. *Impostures* carefully and often hilariously exposes the scientific jargon-fueled nonsense of various intellectuals writing in this vein. About the longer passage from which the Guattari quotation is taken, Sokal and Bricmont say that it is the “most brilliant mélange of scientific, pseudo-scientific and philosophical jargon that we have ever encountered; only a genius could have written it.”⁵

Intellectual Impostures followed the “Sokal Hoax” in 1996. Sokal submitted to the fashionable US postmodern journal *Social Text* an essay packed full of pretentious-sounding, pseudoscientific claptrap. The editors of *Social Text*, unable to distinguish claptrap from profundity, published it. After all, Sokal's “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” seemed to make as much sense as other papers they published. The publication of “Transgressing the Boundaries” became an “Emperor's New Clothes” moment for the style of philosophy published by the journal. *Social Text* became a laughingstock.

About Jean Baudrillard's work, which is full of references to chaos theory, quantum mechanics, non-Euclidean geometries, and so on, Sokal and Bricmont write:

In summary, one finds in Baudrillard's works a profusion of scientific terms, used with total disregard for their meaning and, above all, in a context where they are manifestly irrelevant. Whether or not one interprets them as metaphors, it is hard to see what role they could play, except to give an appearance of profundity to trite observations about sociology or history. Moreover, the scientific terminology is mixed up with a nonscientific vocabulary that is employed with equal sloppiness. When all is said and done, one wonders what would be left of Baudrillard's thought if the verbal veneer covering it were stripped away.⁶

I include this quotation from Sokal and Bricmont because it nicely summarizes what might be said about Pseudoprofundity more generally — Pseudoprofundity consists of a thin mixture of the trite, the nonsensical, and/or the obviously false, whipped up into an impressive-looking linguistic soufflé. Prick it with a fork, let out the hot air, and you'll find there's little left. Certainly nothing worth eating.

In defense of Guattari, Baudrillard, and others, some might say that Sokal and Bricmont have misunderstood what these writers are trying to do. Such postmodern thinkers are themselves engaging in game playing and spoofery. So the joke is really on Sokal and Bricmont. This won't wash. As Richard Dawkins points out in his review of *Intellectual Impostures*, if Sokal and Bricmont's targets

are only joking around, why do they react with such shrieks of dismay when somebody plays a joke at their expense. The genesis of *Intellectual Impostures* was a brilliant hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal, and the stunning success of his coup was not greeted with the chuckles of delight that one might have hoped for after such a feat of

deconstructive game playing. Apparently, when you've become the establishment, it ceases to be funny when somebody punctures the established bag of wind.⁷

DEALING WITH PSEUDOPROFUNDITY

Hopefully, this brief sketch of some of the ways Pseudoprofundity can be generated will help you spot it more effectively. If you find yourself on the receiving end of such blather, how should you respond? How can we best reveal Pseudoprofundity for what it is?

Pseudoprofundity's greatest enemy is clarity. One of the most effective methods of disarming it is to translate what is said into plain English. Say, "Right, so you are saying ..." and proceed to jot down in clear, unambiguous prose on back of an envelope precisely what they do mean. Such a translation will typically reveal that what was said is one of three things: (1) an obvious falsehood, (2) nonsense, or (3) a truism.

However, combating Pseudoprofundity is rarely quite as easy as that. Those who spout it are often aware, at some level, that clarity is likely to unmask them, and they will probably resist your attempts to rephrase what they mean in clear and unambiguous terms. They will almost certainly accuse you of a crude misunderstanding (see chapter on "Moving the Semantic Goalposts"). Of course, they still won't explain clearly what they do mean. They'll just keep giving you the runaround by changing the subject, erecting smokescreens, accusing you of further misunderstandings, and so on. For this reason, the unmasking of Pseudoprofundity typically requires both time and patience.

Mockery and satire can have a role to play, as Allan Bennett's "The Sermon" and the Postmodern Essay Generator illustrate. The Hans Christian Andersen story "The Emperor's New Clothes" ends with much hilarity when the small boy points out that the emperor is wearing no clothes at all. The public's laughter at the emperor parading around naked finally breaks the spell that the charlatan weavers had, in effect, cast over them all. Laughter can similarly help break the spell that Pseudoprofundity casts over us. A little satire may help us recognize that we have been taken in by someone spouting little more than truisms, falsehoods, or nonsense dressed up as profundity. That is why those who spout pseudoprofundity often strongly discourage satire and mockery – taking enormous, exaggerated offense at it.

There is an important caveat when it comes to the use of humor, however. Obviously, any belief – even a genuinely profound belief – can be mocked. I'm not suggesting mockery should replace clear, rigorous criticism of the sort I have attempted to provide here. No one should be encouraged to abandon a belief just because people laugh at it. But, because of its ability to help break the spell that pseudoprofundity casts over its victims, allowing us to entertain for a moment or two the thought that perhaps we have been somewhat gullible or foolish, a little mockery can form an appropriate part of a response. Mockery may be both useful and legitimate if we can show that it is deserved.

Footnotes

1. In a speech to the American Atheists Institution conference in 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_9w8JougLQ (accessed October 2, 2010).
2. Borrowed from the website <http://www.parables.com> (accessed October 2, 2010).
3. Maxwell's inaugural lecture at Cambridge University, 1871.
4. Quoted in Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London: Profile Books, 1998), pp. 156-57.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
7. Richard Dawkins, "Postmodernism Disrobed," <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/824-postmodernism-disrobed> (accessed October 2, 2010). Published as "Postmodernism Disrobed" in *Nature* 394 (1998): 141-43.