INTRODUCTION

Some marketing, religious, and lifestyle gurus have genuinely profound insights to offer. Others spout little more than pseudo-profundity. Pseudo-profundity is the art of sounding profound while talking tosh. 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. Here are two examples.

Deepities

A classic recipe for generating pseudo-profundity, identified by the philosopher Daniel Dennett,[1] is the *deepity*. A deepity involves saying something with two meanings – one trivially true, the other profound-sounding but false or nonsensical. Dennett illustrates with:

Love is just a word

On one reading, this sentence is about *the word* 'love' (though notice that, if the sentence is about the word, then it really ought to appear quotation marks). The word 'love' is indeed just a word, as are the words 'steel' and 'concrete'. So, on this reading, the sentence is trivially true. On the other reading, the sentence is about not the word 'love', but *love itself* – that which the word 'love' refers to. Love is often defined as a feeling or emotion. Love may even, arguably, be an illusion. But the one thing it definitely isn't is a word. So on this second reading, 'Love is just a word' is obviously false.

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Deepities trade on the ambiguities between such readings. It's the ambiguity that generates the 'Oh wow!' response, that makes people gasp, 'Golly, yes, actually love *is* just a word, isn't it?!', as if they have suddenly been struck by something terribly profound.

Trite-nalogies

Here's a particularly effective way of generating pseudo-profundity. First, take some 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. (Forest 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.

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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!

The author Douglas Adams, no doubt irritated by such 'Life is like a . . .' pseudo-profundities, 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

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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 *voila* – you're profound! In this example, the pseudo-profundity also serves to distract the listener's attention way from more troubling questions, such as: Why does God insist on loading people with such horrendous burdens in the first place?

(Adapted from *Believing Bullshit* by Stephen Law, published by Prometheus in April 2011)

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Editor

Notes

[1] In a speech to the American Atheists Institution conference in 2009, available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_9w8JougLQ

[2] Borrowed form the website www.parables.com

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