

A Philosopher Gets Fed Up With Profundity

There are better ways to communicate.

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Here is a story I have heard from more than one professional philosopher, though it has never, at least not yet, happened to me: You are sitting on a plane, the person next to you asks what you do, you tell them you are a philosopher, and they ask, “So, what are your sayings?” When a philosopher opens their mouth, people expect deep things to come out of it. Philosophers don’t always enjoy this; to avoid it, they might even say instead, “I am a professor” or “I teach Plato” or “I am in academia.”

When I was an undergraduate pondering what to do next, a professor of mine—not a philosopher—advised me, “Even if you get a Ph.D. in philosophy, don’t ever call yourself a philosopher. Kant, Socrates—those people were philosophers; you’re someone who reads or thinks about philosophy.” He felt that by calling myself a philosopher, I would be putting on airs, claiming to be deeper than I was. I did get a Ph.D. in philosophy, and I do call myself a philosopher, and that does, just as the professor feared, sometimes lead to disappointed expectations.

Recently, a *New Yorker* profile of me by Rachel Aviv drew more on her conversations with me than on my written work. While many readers said they loved the profile’s intimacy and directness, those same features seemed to outrage others—although the critics were split on the question of what exactly was wrong with the profile, and with me. Some were struck by how ordinary and boring I sounded—Steven Pinker reported finding it “disappointing” to learn how “shallow” I was, and Joyce Carol Oates called my concerns “banal-stereotypical”—whereas others found me strange: a “weirdo,” a “freak,” a “monster.” The two sides of the opposition couldn’t come together on whether I was “embarrassingly familiar” or bizarrely unrelatable, but one thing they did agree on, and complain about, was that I had failed to come across as someone possessed of great profundity. And they’re right: Deep down, I am not deep.

What is profundity? The first thing to note is that it belongs more to writing than to speech. Imagine that you and I are talking, engaged in a rapid and animated back-and-forth, and all of a sudden, I say something incredibly, unbelievably profound. What do you do? No response can possibly count as an adequate rejoinder to the bottomless well of insight I’ve just placed between us. Maybe you catch your breath in awe. Maybe you just say, “Wow, that was so profound.” Eventually, after a long pause, we move on, and maybe change the topic.

In a conversation, when we’re talking with and not at each other, profundity is an impediment to the flow of thought. It’s more fitting in a context such as writing, where the roles of giver and receiver are fixed and do not shift back and forth.

In writing, profundity solves a communication problem. The background to the problem is that one person—right now, for example, it’s me—is doing all the talking. You haven’t had a turn, and you’re not going to get one, and you know that, and you accept that arrangement—but only because you think we have a deal. The deal is that you are patiently listening to me because you think I have something special to offer you. By the time you get through reading this essay, you hope to have extracted a cognitive treasure from me. But what can I give you? How can I implant thoughts in your mind?

Bottom of Form

The problem is that if you do not think some claim is true, then it is not clear why me writing it down should make you change your mind. Perhaps I am *persuading* you, giving you reasons to abandon your beliefs in favor of mine. But in order to do this effectively—to know what reasons I should give you—I’d have to allow you to respond to me, to offer counterarguments, to show me the places where you remain unconvinced. Suppose you wanted to persuade your spouse to do something important—to move, to have a kid, or even just to take an unusual vacation. You wouldn’t make a long speech, forbid them from interrupting, and then expect them to be persuaded by the time you got to the end of it.

Right now I’m not doing any listening. I don’t have much of an idea of what it would take to persuade you. Under these circumstances, it is not impossible for me to radically shift your mindset, but that’s not the most likely outcome. That’s why a lot of writers don’t even try, devoting their verbal gifts instead to dressing up their readers’ old ideas in new clothing; this is often what people are responding to when they describe a piece of writing as “insightful” or “compelling.” It is easier to make someone see their own thoughts in a different light than to introduce them to a genuinely foreign idea.

To appreciate how hard the latter is, consider someone who is in the business of it, such as a mathematician. A philosopher I know once complained to me that when he tries to explain his ideas to mathematicians, they claim that they don’t understand him, that he’s being unclear, that maybe he’s not saying anything at all ... right up until the moment when they finally grasp his point and say, “Oh, that’s obvious!”

Mathematicians are used to having all the steps spelled out to a degree that almost no form of writing permits. If there were something like a mathematical proof of the idea I am trying to give you, then I could lead you through it, step by step, without waiting to hear your objections. A proof of the Pythagorean theorem doesn’t need to be a conversation.

But even if I had such a proof, which I don’t, and even if a publication gave me the 100,000 words I’d need to lay it out, which they wouldn’t, you wouldn’t read it. You’d get bored. So the mathematical solution is off the table.

Unlike mathematicians, you and I are not able to proceed straight from “confused gibberish” to “obvious truth.” Unlike persuasive conversationalists, we are not going to talk through our differences. So what is the alternative? The answer is profundity.

The crucial feature of profundity is that when you experience what someone says as profound, you generally don’t know exactly why. Profundity is an obscure little chunk of wisdom—you feel that you’ve learned something, but you don’t need to specify precisely what it is or evaluate its truth. It can take the form of a bon mot, a poetical turn of phrase, or someone gesturing at an argumentative terrain too complicated to walk you through. It can also take the form of someone with credentials you’re not inclined to challenge, in possession of data you don’t need to see, giving you a tidy

package that may not be completely right—but you don’t need to know the details. You don’t mind a little mystery.

Clarissa, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, “felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it.” Virginia Woolf “often conceives of life this way,” Joshua Rothman wrote in a *New Yorker* essay, “as a gift that you’ve been given, which you must hold onto and treasure but never open. Opening it would dispel the atmosphere, ruin the radiance—and the radiance of life is what makes it worth living.”

Woolf’s line epitomizes the experience of profundity: One has been given something; one is not sure what it is; it is wonderful; one should not inspect it too carefully. She helps us see the recipient’s role in preserving the profundity. I don’t have to create something truly bottomless and infinite so long as you, out of delicacy, agree not to do too much unwrapping.

The first work of philosophy I fell in love with was Immanuel Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, now often translated as *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. I still have the version of it I read at 15—an outdated translation, cheaply bound with a maroon-and-white cover, full of multicolor underlinings and marked in many places with “beautiful” and “QQ” in the margins. “QQ” stood for “quotable quote”—lines that could be sprinkled into my high-school-debate speeches.

I was such a devotee that quotes from the volume appeared in most of my speeches, on panhandling, on gun control, on the relative values of competition and cooperation. For each proposition, we had to prepare one speech in favor and one against; it didn’t give me pause how often Kant showed up on both sides. That’s just how profound he was. When I hold the book today, I channel my teenage self and remember how heavy it felt, how weighted down with wisdom.

Not until years later, when I studied Kant in college, did I realize that what I’d taken for mysterious wisdom nuggets were actually parts of arguments: In every sentence, Kant is doing nothing other than trying (and often failing) to be as clear as possible. In *Groundwork*, he argues that being a good person amounts to being motivated by the question of whether every rational being would and could act the way you’re acting. But is that something that can actually motivate a person? Kant thinks we have to behave as if it were, so we can safely assume that it is.

In one very literal sense of the word *profound*, where a claim is deep because it serves as the basis for other claims—the sense in which axioms are more profound than the theorems we prove using those axioms—Kant’s claims are indeed profound. They lie at the foundation of ethics. But in the more colloquial sense of *profound*, where it refers to an aura of wisdom and mystery that envelops like Woolfian wrapping paper, Kant’s profundity was an artifact of my ignorance.

Profundity mediates communication by decoupling what I give from what you take. Perhaps if you knew exactly what you were getting, you wouldn’t want to receive it, and if I knew exactly what you were taking, I wouldn’t want to give it. Profundity greases the gears of an interaction, and the kind of interaction that needs that grease is the one between writers and readers. Socrates explains why:

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever.

Socrates hates the fact that writing is not conversational, that it tells you the same thing every time. Writing is flat; it doesn't offer answers to your follow-up questions or replies to your objections. But that's true only if you take the text literally, at face value. When a text is profound, it seems to have a lot to say that it isn't exactly, precisely, currently saying. Reading such a text is like looking at the paintings Socrates describes and imagining that the figures could unfreeze at any moment, that they are *choosing* silence and stillness. Profundity allows readers to feel that a wealth of possible claims are being made, and it lets them make different things out of the text at different times (which is precisely what they are wont to do with Plato's Socratic dialogues).

There is a joke about pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Thales: "They wrote in fragments." They didn't, of course, but many of their thoughts were preserved only in fragmentary form, because they were quoted by others. This worked out surprisingly well for them; it turns out that there is an avid audience for sayings, such as these by Heraclitus: "The path up and down is one and the same"; "You would not find the boundaries of the soul, even by traveling along every path: so deep a measure does it have"; "The sun is new each day."

Nietzsche, surveying the expanse of ancient texts—over which he, as a classicist, had unparalleled mastery—reported disappointment over the absence of the kind of tragic, passionate thought that he considered essential to philosophy. He dismissed Aristotle's *Poetics*—an entire treatise, most of which is about tragedy—in a parenthetical but gushed over Heraclitus, "in whose proximity I feel altogether warmer and better than anywhere else." Nietzsche was, of course, himself a master of the aphoristic style; it is no accident that his "sayings" so often serve as a gateway to philosophy.

Profundity warms you; it makes you feel that you are in the presence of something significant that you don't, and perhaps don't need to, understand. Profundity is also totalizing: Profound questions are questions that contain everything, and profound answers are answers to every question.

Suppose, for a moment, that Socrates is right. Suppose we grant to him that ideal philosophical communication would allow for the switching of roles, for you to give and for me to take—to listen carefully enough to your specific objections that I can spell out what I mean in ways that precisely address your individual concerns. Would it follow that communication that fails to fit within those parameters is bad, and to be avoided? I don't think so. Our minds are lonely and underused, and there is no reason to deny ourselves a little warmth. If a doomed recluse like Nietzsche could find a friend in Heraclitus, and if the loners and outcasts of the world continue, especially

in their formative years, to find a friend in Nietzsche, then we have to count that as a win.

Profundity is the crutch that makes such one-sided friendships possible. There is no shame in using that crutch, as a writer or as a reader, to connect across time and space. It's wonderful that we can communicate, however imperfectly, with people who are long dead or not yet alive; I love that that's part of my job as a philosopher. But another, equally important part of my job is reminding people that, when they are lucky enough to be confronted with a living, breathing thinker—the kind who needn't remain “most solemnly silent”—they don't have to ask for profundity. They can ask for something better.

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The Atlantic. <www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/03/philosophy-profundity-purpose-limits/673471>

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