Bullshit for you; transcendence for me. A commentary on "On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit"

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Abstract

I raise a methodological concern regarding the study performed by Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler & Fugelsang (2015), in which they used randomly generated, but syntactically correct, statements that were rated for profundity by subjects unaware of the source of the statements. The assessment of each statement's profundity was not based on its impact on the subject but was already predetermined to be "bullshit" based on its random generation by a computer. The statements could nonetheless have been subjectively profound and could have provided glimpses of insight and wisdom to the subjects.

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I raise a methodological concern regarding the study performed by Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler & Fugelsang (2015), in which they used randomly generated, but syntactically correct, statements that were rated for profundity by subjects unaware of the source of the statements. The assessment of each statement's profundity was not based on its impact on the subject but was already predetermined to be "bullshit" based on its random generation by a computer. The random statements may have been meaningless to the authors of the paper. They may have been randomly generated (albeit with the requirement of syntactic correctness necessary for linguistic cognition), but the impact of the statements could nonetheless have been subjectively profound and provided glimpses of insight and wisdom to the subjects.

I read the authors exemplar "pseudo-profound bullshit" statement "wholeness quiets infinite phenomena" to a friend who had studied Tibetan Buddhism for well over a decade – "Wow – that's interesting, who said that?" was her response. I advised her a computer had. She nonetheless continued to turn it over in her mind – enjoying its transcendent qualities. In Buddhism, "phenomena" refers to all of the transitory appearances of thoughts and emotions that arise in the mind. The infinite phenomena are distractions to which the mind "attaches" leading us into confusion. Contemplating "wholeness" can remove or "quiet" all these infinite distracting phenomena. Contemplating the statement had this effect on me. To engage with a passage like this we need to contemplate it for more than a few seconds, perhaps a few minutes (or hours, days, or months) and watch what happens to our minds. This is the appropriate first person subjective experience and more appropriate outcome of interest.

If wisdom comes from transcending our psycho-social constructs to allow us to see the wholeness and the interdependence in the world, then it does not matter if a great sage or a computer inspires this transcendence. Seeing "nonsense" and paradox has been at the heart of many wisdom traditions - the famous Zen koan – "what is the sound of one hand clapping" may seem nonsense but it and other koans have inspired great insight not through "making sense" but through creating a cognitive gap that allows opportunity for transcendence and reflection and potentially new learning. The babbling "nonsense" of "crazy wisdom" Zen masters that are beyond convention and the Blank Scroll of Han-Shan "speak" that which cannot be expressed (Hyers, 2004). The "nonsense" of The paradoxes of Zeno of Elea from the 5th Century BCE have inspired much philosophical contemplation on the nature of infinity and thereby reality itself.[1]

A paradox or seeming nonsensical statement can act as a "cognitive shock" that, at the polarities, leads to rejection without further consideration of the "nonsense", or alternatively, to a transcendence of our previous ways of seeing the world - to make "sense" of "nonsense". Lewis's (2000) paradox framework suggests that, rather than suppressing or turning away from paradox, we respond more effectively to paradox in one of three interrelated ways: acceptance, confrontation or transcendence. In accepting paradox we learn to live with it. In confronting paradox we directly face it and find ways to accommodate it, in transcending paradox we rise above the level at which the paradox is perceived — seeing apparent paradox as complementary and interwoven.

In the West, there is a tendency to rapidly reject paradoxes whereas it has been argued that Eastern cultures may more readily access wisdom and insight from the ability to endure

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[1] Zeno's Paradoxes. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://www.iep.utm.edu/zeno-par

the cognitive discomfort of a seeming paradox until "paradoxical integration" can occur (Chen, 2002). It may be that those who experienced profundity from the statements were more Eastern in their cognitive disposition.

The use of the accessory scales that predicted (positive or negative) correlation with bullshit receptivity are not value- or culture-neutral. "Ontological confusion" while undesirable in many contexts may support a less restrained openness to experience but lead to "failure" from a Western analytical perspective.

What might contemplation find in the other randomly generated statements? Take the statement scoring highest on the bullshit receptivity scale (BRS): "Hidden meaning transforms unparalleled abstract beauty." Here is the challenge – trying to find both a literal and profound meaning in this statement may be counterproductive. I cannot propose a literal interpretation of this randomly generated statement – just as I cannot propose one for Kahlil Gibran's: "Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror." But words have meanings and these words from a source inspired by the East do have a transformative effect — at least on me. Perhaps the "hidden meaning" evokes the Universal forms of Plato or the holistic experience of "The One" of Plotinus, which hides behind and emanates true beauty, a beauty that is "unparalleled" (not the best descriptor — but it was computer generated) and "abstract" in its ineffability.

The next highest ranking random statement on the BRS scale is: "Consciousness is the growth of coherence, and of us." Again, contemplating this could open one up to a new perspective. At the risk of becoming literal let me offer an interpretation. "Consciousness" can be understood as greater awareness. "Coherence" is the view that is coherent with the nature of reality. This may seem too simple – but how many of us really live in coherence with the nature of reality, the awareness of our inevitable death and interdependence with one another? The phrase "and of us" is a pithy finish that reminds us the ultimate growth for us is striving to achieve a greater coherence with the nature of reality. It is not surprising to me that these statements were rated as more profound by the participants and I suspect that those who contemplated them may have benefited from the experience.

Pennycook may be correct; the statements may be bullshit. Contemplating "We are in the midst of a high-frequency blossoming of interconnectedness that will give us access to the quantum soup itself" was not revelatory for me. My motivation in writing this reply is not to defend the statements but rather to question the dangerously pervasive belief in the West that if one cannot immediately discern meaning in something it is automatically bullshit. Beauty, like bullshit, may be in the eye of the beholder. The work of Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists have been described as "nonsense" when a sense of transcendence has not arisen in the beholder. There are parallels between the production and reception of the statements and that of aleatoric music — John Cage being perhaps the best known exponent for his seemingly random "Music of Changes" (Cage, 1956). Aleatoric music has been defined as: "a process is said to be aleatoric ... if its course is determined in general but depends on chance in detail".[2] The random statements meet this definition in being "determined in general" – words from the tweets by an author influenced by Eastern philosophies and from a random "new age" statement generator (methods and source of words not declared). They are further determined in that they are syntactically correct but depend on "chance in detail" due to their random selection and arrangement. Interestingly, Cage later developed an interest in Eastern philosophies and came to believe that all kinds of sounds should be regarded as potentially musical, and he encouraged audiences to take note of all sonic phenomena, rather than only those elements selected by a composer.[3]

A flower, the random sounds of a waterfall, a willow tree playing in the breeze, or the random scattering of autumn leaves, may lack the intention of profundity but they can all lead to transcendence and open us to beauty – as can a random statement generated by a computer.

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