

The Phatic And The Anti-Inductive

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I

Ozy recently taught me the word “phatic”. It means talking for the sake of talking.

The classic example is small talk. “Hey.” “Hey.” “How are you?” “Fine, and you?” “Fine.” No information has been exchanged. Even if the person involved wasn’t fine, they’d still say *fine*. Indeed, at least in this country giving an information-bearing response to “how are you?” is a mild social faux pas.

Some people call this “social grooming behavior” and it makes sense. It’s just a way of saying “Hello, I acknowledge you and still consider you an acquaintance. There’s nothing wrong between us. Carry on.” That you are willing to spend ten seconds holding a useless conversation with them signals this just fine.

We can go a little more complex. Imagine I’m calling a friend from college after five years out of contact; I’ve heard he’s got a company now and I want to ask him for a job. It starts off “Hey, how are you?”, segues into “And how are the wife and kids?”, then maybe

into “What are you doing with yourself these days?” and finally “Hey, I have a big favor to ask you.” If you pick up the phone and say “Hello, it’s Scott from college, can you help me get a job?” this is rude. It probably sounds like you’re *using* him.

And I mean, you are. If I cared about him deeply as a person I probably would have called him at some point in the last five years, before I needed something. But by mutual consent we both sweep that under the rug by having a few minutes of meaningless personal conversation beforehand. The information exchanged doesn’t matter – “how’s your business going?” is just as good as “how’s your wife and kids?” is just as good as “how are your parents doing?”. The point is to clock a certain number of minutes about something vaguely personal, so that the request seems less abrupt.

We can go even more complex. By the broadest definition, phatic communication is equivalent to signaling.

Consider a very formulaic conservative radio show. Every week, the host talks about some scandal that liberals have been involved in. Then she explains why it means the country is going to hell. I don’t think the listeners really care that a school in Vermont has banned Christmas decorations or whatever. The point is to convey this vague undercurrent of “Hey, there are other people out there who think like you, we all agree with you, you’re a good person, you can just sit here and listen and feel reassured that you’re right.” Anything vaguely conservative in content will be equally effective, regardless of whether the listener cares about the particular issue.

II

Douglas Adams once said there was a theory that if anyone ever understood the Universe, it would disappear and be replaced by something even more incomprehensible. He added that there was another theory that this had already happened.

These sorts of things – things such that if you understand them, they get more complicated until you don't – are called “anti-inductive”.

The classic anti-inductive institution is the stock market. Suppose you found a pattern in the stock market. For example, it always went down on Tuesdays, then up on Wednesdays. Then you could buy lots of stock Tuesday evening, when it was low, and sell it Wednesday, when it was high, and be assured of making free money.

But lots of people want free money, so lots of people will try this plan. There will be so much demand for stock on Tuesday evening that there won't be enough stocks to fill it all. Desperate buyers will bid up the prices. Meanwhile, on Wednesday, everyone will sell their stocks at once, causing a huge glut and making prices go down. This will continue until the trend of low prices Tuesday, high prices Wednesday disappears.

So in general, it should be impossible to exploit your pattern-finding ability to profit of the stock market unless you are the smartest and most resourceful person in the world. That is, maybe stocks

go up every time the Fed cuts interest rates, but Goldman Sachs knows that too, so they probably have computers programmed to buy so much stock milliseconds after the interest rate announcement is made that the prices will stabilize on that alone. That means that unless you can predict better than, or respond faster than, Goldman Sachs, you can't exploit your knowledge of this pattern and shouldn't even try.

Here's something I haven't heard described as anti-inductive before: job-seeking.

When I was applying for medical residencies, I asked some people in the field to help me out with my interviewing skills.

"Why did you want to become a doctor?" they asked.

"I want to help people," I said.

"Oh God," they answered. "No, anything but that. Nothing says 'person exactly like every other bright-eyed naive new doctor' than wanting to help people. You're trying to distinguish yourself from the pack!"

"Then... uh... I want to hurt people?"

"Okay, tell you what. You have any experience treating people in disaster-prone Third World countries?"

"I worked at a hospital in Haiti after the earthquake there."

“Perfect. That’s inspirational as hell. Talk about how you want to become a doctor because the people of Haiti taught you so much.”

Wanting to help people is a great reason to become a doctor. When Hippocrates was taking his first students, he was probably really impressed by the one guy who said he wanted to help people. But since that time it’s become cliché, overused. Now it signals people who can’t come up with an original answer. So you need something better.

During my interviews, I talked about my time working in Haiti. I got to talk to some of the other applicants, and they talked about *their* time working in Ethiopia, or Bangladesh, or Nicaragua, or wherever. Apparently the “stand out by working in a disaster-prone Third World country” plan was sufficiently successful that everyone started using, and now the people who do it don’t stand out at all. My interviewer was probably thinking “Oh God, what Third World country is *this* guy going to start blabbering about how much he learned from?” and moving my application to the REJECT pile as soon as I opened my mouth.

I am getting the same vibe from the critiques of OKCupid profiles in the last open thread. OKCupid seems very susceptible to everybody posting identical quirky pictures of themselves rock-climbing, then talking about how fun-loving and down-to-earth they are. On the other hand, every deviation from that medium has *also* been explored.

“I’m going for ‘quirky yet kind’”.

“Done.”

“Sarcastic, yet nerdy?”

“Done.”

“Outdoorsy, yet intellectual.”

“Done.”

“Introverted, yet a zombie.”

“I thought we went over this. [Zombies. Are. Super. Done.](#)”



I’ve been thinking about this lately in the context of psychotherapy.

I’m not talking about the very specific therapies, the ones where they teach special cognitive skills, or expose you to spiders to cure your arachnophobia. They don’t let me do those yet. I’m talking about what’s called “supportive therapy”, where you’re just talking to people and trying to make them feel generally better.

When I was first starting out, I tried to do therapy anti-inductively. I figured that I had to come up with something unexpected, something that the patient hadn’t thought of. Some kind of brilliant interpretation that put all of their problems in a new light. This went

poorly. It tended to be a lot of “Well, have you tried [obvious thing?]”, them saying they had, and me escalating to “Well, have you tried [long shot that probably wouldn’t work]?”

(I wonder if this was Freud’s strategy: “Okay, he says he’s depressed, I can’t just tell him to cheer up, probably everybody says that. Can’t just tell him to accept his sadness, that one’s obvious too. Got to come up with something really original... uh... ”HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT YOU WANT TO KILL YOUR FATHER AND MARRY YOUR MOTHER??!”)

Now I tend more to phatic therapy. This happened kind of by accident. Some manic people have a symptom called “pressured speech” which means they never shut up and they never let you get a word in edgewise. Eventually, more out of surrender than out of a strategic plan, I gave up and stopped trying. I just let them talk, nodded my head, said “Yeah, that sounds bad” when they said something bad-sounding, said “Oh, that’s good” when they said something good-sounding.

After a while I realized this went at least as well as any other therapy I was doing, plus the patients really liked me and thought I was great and gave me lots of compliments.

So after that, “active listening” became sort of my default position for supportive therapy. Get people talking. Let them talk. Nod my head as if I am deeply concerned about their problems. Accept their effusive praise about how well I seem to be understanding them.

This is clearly phatic. I would say the ritual is “High status person is willing to listen to my problems. That means society considers my problems important and considers me important. It means my problems are okay to have and I’m not in trouble for having them.” As long as I seem vaguely approving, the ritual reaches its predetermined conclusion.

IV

I was thinking about this recently several friends have told me how much she hated “therapist speak”. You know, things like “I feel your pain” or “And how does that make you feel?”

I interpret this as an anti-inductive perspective on therapy. The first therapist to say “I feel your pain” may have impressed her patients – a person who herself can actually feel all my hurt and anger! Amazing! But this became such a standard in the profession that it became the Default Therapist Response. Now it’s a signal of “I care so little about your pain that I can’t even bother to say anything other than the default response.” When a therapist says “I feel your pain,” it’s easy to imagine that in her head she’s actually planning what she’s going to make for dinner or something.

So just as some people find it useful to divide the world into “ask culture” and “guess culture”, I am finding it useful to divide the world into “phatic culture” and “anti-inductive culture”.

There are people for whom “I feel your pain” is exactly the right response. It shows that you are sticking to your therapist script, it urges them to stick to their patient script, and at the end of the session they feel like the ritual has been completed and they feel better.

There are other people for whom “I feel your pain” is the most engaging thing you could possibly say. It shows that you’re not taking them seriously or engaging with them, just saying exactly the same thing you do to all your other patients.

There are people for whom coming up with some sort of unique perspective or clever solution for their problems is exactly the right response. Even if it doesn’t work, it at least proves that you are thinking hard about what they are saying.

There are other people for whom coming up with some sort of unique perspective or clever solution is the most engaging thing you could possibly do. At the risk of perpetuating gender stereotypes, one of the most frequently repeated pieces of relationship advice I hear is “When a woman is telling you her problems, just listen and sympathize, don’t try to propose solutions”. It sounds like the hypothetical woman in this advice is looking for a phatic answer.

I think myself and most of my friends fall far to the anti-inductive side, with little tolerance for the phatic side. And I think we probably typical-mind other people as doing the same.

This seems related to the classic geek discomfort with small-talk, with pep rallies, and with normal object-level politics. I think it might also be part of the problem I had with social skills when I was younger – I remember talking to people, panicking because I couldn't think of any way to make the conversation unusually entertaining or enlightening, and feeling like I had been a failure for responding to the boring-weather-related question with a boring-weather-related answer. Very speculatively, I think it might have something to do with creepy romantic overtures – imagine the same mental pattern that made me jokingly consider giving “I want to hurt people” as my motivation for becoming a doctor, applied to a domain that I really don't understand on a fundamental enough level to know whether or not saying that is a good idea.

I've been trying to learn the skill of appreciating the phatic. I used to be very bad at sending out thank-you cards, because I figured if I sent a thank-you card that just said “Thank you for the gift, I really appreciate it” then they would think that the lack of personalization meant I wasn't *really* thankful. But personalizing a bunch of messages to people I often don't really know that well is hard and I ended up all miserable. Now I just send out the thank you card with the impersonal message, and most people are like “Oh, it was so nice of you to send me a card, I can tell you really appreciated it.” This seems like an improvement.

As for psychotherapy, I think I'm going to default to phatic in most cases when I don't have some incredibly enlightening insight, then let my patients tell me if that's the wrong thing to do.