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Different Kinds and Aspects of Bullshit

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The publication and subsequent popularity of Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* has inserted a rather conspicuous and somewhat comical point of discontinuity in the philosophy sections of many bookstores. For here we have a small, unassuming book with 'Bullshit' printed on the outside but lacking the quality of bullshit on the inside.

The exact opposite, one cannot fail to notice, is true of so many other books sold under the heading of 'philosophy' today. Books like *Chakra Balancing Kit: A Guide to Healing and Awakening Your Energy Body*, *The Hidden Messages in Water Crystals*, *Numerology Helps You to Master Your Relationship and to Find the Right Career*, or *Astrology: A Cosmic Science* appear in the same bestseller lists and sometimes even on the same bookshelf as *On Bullshit*—almost as if they are put there on purpose to illustrate the unusual topic of Frankfurt's philosophical study and his claim that bullshit is indeed “the most salient feature of our culture.”

When Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit was first published as an essay in 1986, no one could have predicted the philosophical sensation (and hilarious situation) it would cause in twenty-first-century bookstores. The original essay was received in much the same way as most academic articles are received, that is, without attention from press or public. The essay did, however, provoke discussion among fellow philosophers; one admiring but critical response is especially worth mentioning since it puts some of Frankfurt's claims in a new perspective.

an “indispensably distinctive characteristic” (p. 54) of the bullshitter, making it as central to the concept of bullshit as the tendency for indifference as to how things really are.

In order to tell a lie, says Frankfurt, one needs to know how things really are or one must at least think that one knows what’s true. It’s clear by now that this does not hold for bullshit. The bullshitter does not have to keep his eye on the facts, whereas the liar must do precisely that in order to conceal the facts. That is why, according to Frankfurt, lying does not render a person unfit for telling the truth in the same way that bullshitting does. The biggest problem with bullshit, so to speak, is not that the bullshitter hides the truth, but rather that he does not even remember where he put it. Hence, Frankfurt’s striking conclusion that “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (p. 61) and his appeal to oppose bullshit wherever it may be found, in defense of a civilization built upon a concern for truth.

In Frankfurt’s analysis, then, the bullshitter is (i) unconcerned about the truth but also (ii) concerned about hiding this fact and thus (iii) morally reprehensible. We will now challenge all three of these claims.

A Different Take on Bullshit

In the first part of his book, Frankfurt describes a rather intriguing conversation to illustrate his account of bullshit. Fania Pascal, Wittgenstein’s Russian teacher, received a call from Wittgenstein when her tonsils had just been taken out. Pascal relates: “I croaked: ‘I feel just like a dog that has been run over.’” He was disgusted: “You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like.”² Frankfurt explains Wittgenstein’s strong reaction to Pascal’s innocent remark as follows: “To the Wittgenstein in Pascal’s story, judging from his response, this is just bullshit.” (p. 29)

Given Frankfurt’s own account of bullshit, this diagnosis seems problematic. For one of the essential ingredients of bullshit is clearly missing. Fania Pascal is not hiding something or

² F. Pascal, “Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir,” in R. Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 29.

deceiving someone and there seems to be no fakery or phoniness involved. So why should her statement be interpreted as bullshit?

Frankfurt might reply that it should, in fact, *not* be interpreted as bullshit and that it is only *Wittgenstein* who thinks that Pascal is talking bullshit. Frankfurt seems to take this stance when he says: “It seems extraordinary, almost unbelievable, that anyone could object seriously to what Pascal reports herself as having said” (p. 25) and “Wittgenstein’s reaction . . . is absurdly intolerant” (p. 31). So, Frankfurt himself seems unconvinced that Pascal’s utterance is bullshit. But Wittgenstein thinks it is—that’s the point. Should we assume then that Wittgenstein thinks that Pascal is deceiving people about her enterprise or hiding something? If we hold on to Frankfurt’s analysis of bullshit, we should. But this assumption is plainly false. Wittgenstein’s objection does not amount to an accusation of either fakery or phoniness. That is not what bothers him. Another explanation is needed.

Fania Pascal is not concerned with how things really are, that much seems certain. She obviously does not know, except in the most vague sense, how a run-over dog feels. Nevertheless, she employs the image to describe her own state of mind. This mindlessness is what bothers Wittgenstein. He finds her indifference to the truth obnoxious and clearly sees this as sufficient ground for discarding her remark as plain bullshit. Wittgenstein, we know from various sources, was extremely demanding when the truth was concerned. In philosophical discussions, but also in daily life, one should never trifle with the facts, he thought. One should always try to get things right. This notorious exactingness probably explains why Wittgenstein almost never engaged in playful “bull sessions” or chitchat, not even when this was part of a language class (Fania Pascal recalls how hard it was to find a suitable subject for a conversation with Wittgenstein: “The conversation lessons were excruciating. We sat in the garden. With the utmost impatience he rejected any topic I would suggest . . . To him they were all absurd, non-topics” (p. 29). It also explains why he was so “disgusted” with Pascal’s remark. Pascal was playing fast and loose with the facts and did not even make an attempt to get things right. Wittgenstein found this intolerable.

There is something slightly absurd about this intolerance, as Frankfurt rightly points out. Most of us would not disapprove of,

let alone express disgust at a loose remark like Pascal's. It's easy to understand why. Most of us do not share Wittgenstein's exacting standards. We do not always expect people to be as accurate and precise as humanly possible. Sure, Pascal is "cutting corners" like a slovenly craftsman, but who doesn't, once in a while? Besides, the purpose of conversation is not always to give an accurate description of reality. People sometimes say things just to be funny, agreeable or sociable. In many conversations, it's not so important *what* one is saying, but rather *that* one is saying something and talking to someone. It is about making the other feel comfortable, for instance, and not about trying to get things right.

A certain amount of sloppiness in our speech may be tolerated, but this does not mean it goes undetected. Most people, when pressed, would acknowledge that Pascal's comparison of her own feelings to those of a run-over dog, is bullshit. Yet they do not seem to mind as much as Wittgenstein. They do not think this sort of bullshit is unforgivable or unreasonable. Being intolerant in this respect, *that* would be unreasonable.

If this diagnosis is correct, Frankfurt's account has to be revised in at least two ways.

First, pretence is not an essential ingredient of bullshit. Fania Pascal's utterance, for instance, qualifies as such, though there is no element of deceit or fakery involved. A mere indifference to the truth is apparently all that is needed.

Of course, a speaker will often try to conceal his own indifference when he knows that his audience is very concerned about how things really are. A politician, for example, who is primarily interested in getting re-elected instead of getting things right, has to hide this fact. The bullshit he sells will usually be accompanied by pretence and deceit. However, this combination is not inevitable. Just imagine a politician who is fed up with all the fakery and phoniness and starts talking bullshit openly, without hiding his complete indifference to the truth. The audience will probably feel shocked and the outcry, "Bullshit!" will be heard everywhere. Yet, in contrast with the Fourth of July orator mentioned by Frankfurt, this speaker is not hiding what he is up to. Thus, in Frankfurt's view, his speech cannot count as bullshit. This is a very counterintuitive conclusion.

Frankfurt's distinction between bullshit and bull sessions is just as counterintuitive. For suppose one would ask the partici-

pants in a playful bull session what they were doing. A natural response would be: “We are just talking bullshit.” Likewise, people witnessing a bull session will readily acknowledge that bull sessions consist mainly of bullshit. Frankfurt ignores this and claims there is a fundamental difference between bullshit and bull sessions. This distinction, centered around the presence or absence of pretence, is inevitably artificial. After all, as Frankfurt observes, the term ‘bull session’ is most likely an abbreviation or sanitized version of ‘bullshit session’ (p. 38).

Second, bullshit is not always a bad thing. Although the term is typically used to express indignation, irritation or disapproval, bullshit is not always offensive. Frankfurt finds this particularly hard to understand. He is genuinely puzzled by the fact that “our attitude toward bullshit is generally more benign than our attitude toward lying” and leaves it “as an exercise for the reader” to find out why this is so (p. 50). Perhaps the answer is not so difficult. Why is our attitude towards bullshit, resulting from a manifest indifference to the truth, so benign in many circumstances? Because in many circumstances the concern for truth and accuracy is not—and should not be—our primary concern. For instance, it is not our main concern, and rightly so, when someone is in terrible pain and in need of a comforting conversation. Wittgenstein’s failure to appreciate this makes him, in Frankfurt’s own words, “absurdly intolerant.”

A bit of bullshit from time to time might even be a good thing. That is what the old butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* comes to realize when he is reflecting on the practice of “bantering,” or as contemporary Americans would call it, “bullshitting”:

There is a group of six or seven people gathered just a little way behind me who have aroused my curiosity a little. I naturally assumed at first that they were a group of friends out together for the evening. But as I listened to their exchanges, it became apparent they were strangers who had just happened upon one another here on this spot behind me. . . . It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. . . . I rather fancy it has [something] to do with this skill of bantering. Listening to them now, I can hear them exchanging one bantering remark after another. It is, I would suppose, the way many people like to proceed. In fact, it is possible my bench companion expected me to banter with him—in which case, I suppose I was something of a

ferred to truthful expressions of hostility, contempt, derision, sexual desire or aversion.

What about Frankfurt's most central claim, however, that the essence of bullshit is an indifference towards truth?

A Different Kind of Bullshit

According to Frankfurt, the most distinctive feature of bullshit is one situated in the speaker's state of mind. The bullshitter is indifferent and hides this indifference. However, it would appear that an utterance often qualifies as bullshit purely as a result of certain of its objective features independent of the speaker's stance. This suggests that there is another kind of bullshit that should be explained not by reference to the state of mind of the producer but rather by pointing to certain salient features of the "product" itself.

This is the basic idea of G.A. Cohen's response to Frankfurt. In "Deeper into Bullshit," Cohen notes that Frankfurt's definition of the "essence" of bullshit does not sit well with the kind of bullshit that concerns him the most, namely the bullshit abundant in certain academic circles and best exemplified by the French continental tradition. This sort of bullshit cannot be explained by reference to the indifference or insincerity of the producer. After all, some of the most hideous examples appear to be the result of honest academic efforts. What is missing in these cases is an appropriate connection to the truth, not as far as the state of mind of the producer is concerned but with respect to features of the texts themselves. More specifically, it is the "unclarifiable unclarity" of those philosophical or sociological texts, says Cohen, that constitutes their high bullshit content.

An unclarifiable text is not only obscure but is incapable of being rendered unobscure, at least in a text that could be recognized as a version of what was originally said. A helpful trick is this: add or subtract a negation sign from a text and see whether that makes any difference to its plausibility. If not, Cohen says, one may be sure that one is dealing with bullshit (p. 132). Unsurprisingly, he concludes his analysis in the same way as Frankfurt, with a call to oppose and expose bullshit whenever possible. Academic discourse should always aim for the truth, and texts that are so obscure that the question of truth becomes irrelevant are a threat to any serious academic enterprise.

Now that we have a basic distinction between two kinds of bullshit, Frankfurt-bullshit and Cohen-bullshit, we can ask the question: does this distinction enable us to classify all the “flowers in the lush garden of bullshit”? In other words, is every instance of bullshit necessarily an instance of Frankfurt-bullshit or Cohen-bullshit? To answer this question, let us return to books like *Chakra Balancing Kit* or *The Hidden Messages in Water Crystals* or *Numerology Helps You to Master Your Relationship and to Find the Right Career* or *Astrology: A Cosmic Science*. Do we have a convincing account now of the specific kind of bullshit to be found in these pseudoscientific works? It does not appear so.

The plethora of pseudoscientific nonsense, though widely recognized as a paradigm of bullshit (if you Google ‘astrology and bullshit’, for instance, you get 290,000 hits), remains surprisingly unharmed by the attacks of Frankfurt and Cohen. Neither provides an appropriate explanation for this form of bullshit. Firstly, pseudoscientists typically have a firm and sincere belief in their practice and go to great lengths to prove the truth of the doctrines they endorse. They are not indifferent to the truth, quite the contrary. Thus, Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit does not seem to apply. But Cohen’s definition falls short as well, for the predictions and statements of pseudoscientists are often very specific and explicit as opposed to unclear or unclarifiable. Just think of astrologers predicting an earthquake or hurricane on a specific date or bogus healers providing a detailed diagnosis and assessment of a patient’s condition.

Here’s a serious lacuna in the literature on bullshit. Not only is pseudoscientific bullshit very prominent and visible, there is also no doubt that the bullshit of pseudoscientists is at least as damaging and therefore as deserving of strict scrutiny as the bullshit produced by advertisers or academics. After all, how many people are really affected by the philosophical impotence targeted by Cohen? And how many people are nowadays really deceived by advertisers? (In fact, people often seem to expect “good bullshit” from these professionals rather than complete truthfulness . . .) Pseudoscience, though sometimes an innocent pastime, is known to have a large and damaging impact on the lives of many and to pose a threat to the credibility of science, medicine and even politics. These effects certainly warrant fur-

ther investigation into the what, how, and why of this third kind of bullshit.

But this is not the right place to carry out that kind of investigation. For one thing, it would necessitate a detailed account of the nature of pseudoscience which would go beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we do want to draw attention to a short, pertinent remark made by Cohen. After discussing unclarifiability as the key component of bullshit, he briefly identifies “arguments that are grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence” as another possible source of bullshit (p. 131).

These features, insensitivity to evidence and fallacious reasoning, must be central to any analysis of pseudoscientific bullshit. Admittedly, this characterization remains rather vague. But as a general rule, and in order to avoid bullshit, we believe it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong.

