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# Bullshit and the Foibles of the Human Mind, or: What the Masters of the Dark Arts Know

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Public discourse in our times is in many ways debased. It contains a depressing stew of bullshit, propaganda, spin, and outright lies. The sources of these debasements are many. Those who seek to distract, manipulate, scam or mislead have full and easy access to the instruments of mass representation, communication and persuasion, while those who aim merely to speak the truth, no matter how discomfiting or inconvenient, or to advocate for hard, but necessary choices struggle to be heard.

Political discourse is the outstanding example. Politicians and their handlers typically subject us to an unrelenting stream of manipulative, mendacious misinformation, designed to mobilize the angry and dishearten the sober. We are seldom treated as democracy's primary and essential stakeholders, hardly ever treated to an honest, systematic and fair-minded exploration of the issues that face us, the cost and benefits of the available alternatives, or the real potential winners and losers of our policy choices. And politics is by no means the only contributor to the debasement of the public sphere. We are enticed by the hypnotic techniques of contemporary marketing into ever more buying and consumption, with hardly a concern for the downside costs of that consumption. Night after night on the so-called news, we are numbed by stories that momentarily titillate or shock, but seldom offer meat for sober reflection or lasting enlightenment.

It would be easy to lay blame for the debased state of public discourse in our times squarely and solely on the shoulders of those who purvey this endless stream of propaganda, bullshit,

spin and outright lies. Certainly, in these times, the production of bullshit, propaganda, and spin have been exquisitely honed into high, if dark, arts.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it altogether surprising that the bullshitting arts, as I will call the whole lot, should have reached such exalted heights. Given a putatively open public square, in which competing interests must freely contend for control of the means of shared representation and persuasion, the bullshitting arts could not dominate without being highly developed, insidious and infectious.

In a totalitarian state, by contrast, these arts can afford to remain crude and underdeveloped. Such a state exercises exclusive control over the means of public representation and persuasion. And it reserves onto itself the right to bludgeon citizens into at least the pretense of belief when official bullshit and its cousins fail to persuade of their own powers. Where the bullshitting arts are not backed by the power to bludgeon, they must stand entirely on their own and win dominance over the means of public representation and persuasion through their own art and artifice. Though one might antecedently have hoped that in an open marketplace of ideas, good discourse would spontaneously drive out bad, the purveyors of bullshit have proven themselves more than adequate to the seemingly daunting task of dominating large swaths of the marketplace. Over the air, on the printed page, in public debate, even in the lecture halls of the academy, bullshit confronts us at every turn.<sup>2</sup>

But the purveyors of bullshit, propaganda, spin and the outright lie cannot sell what we do not buy. So the fault for the pervasiveness of bullshit must lie partly within ourselves. The human mind is a powerful instrument, one of natural selection's most amazing products. It's the creator of art, science, and philosophy. It has spawned complex forms of social life and a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'bullshit' for a broader range of phenomena than Harry Frankfurt does. My focus here is less on one-on-one bullshit, and more on what we might call official, institutional bullshit.

<sup>2</sup> There is by now a vast and varied literature, written from a variety of scientific or political perspectives, on techniques of mass persuasion and propaganda and on how and why it works on the human mind. For a few recent and classical examples see Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: Freeman, 1992); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002); Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig, 2004 [1928]), and Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

dizzying variety of cultural formations. Yet, for all its astounding cognitive and cultural achievements, that very same mind not only produces, but is regularly taken in by bullshit, propaganda, spin, and the outright lie. Our susceptibility to these is, I shall argue, deeply rooted in the very architecture of the human mind. The human mind is afflicted with certain built-in architectural foibles and limits that render it permanently susceptible to a host of manipulations. Wherever there are humans cognizing, there is bound to be a niche for the bullshit artist, for purveyors of easy and comforting falsehoods or half-truths.

To be sure, no one self-consciously and explicitly says to herself, “That is pure bullshit, but I will take it at face value, nonetheless.” Like its cousins, the outright lie or the self-serving spin, bullshit works best when we don’t recognize it or acknowledge it for what it is. It’s most effective when we are blind to its effects. This is not to deny that we sometimes do willingly, if not quite knowingly or consciously, *co-operate* with the bullshit artist, the spinner, or even the liar. Allowing oneself to be taken in by a misrepresentation, but not quite consciously so, is, perhaps, an effective means of self-deception, one requiring less torturous mental gymnastics than the wholly self-driven variety. But even granting our propensity to believe the comforting falsehood over the discomforting truth, it is not altogether easy to explain why there is so very much bullshit and other forms of misrepresentation around, why we are so often taken in by it, and why we find it so hard to distinguish bullshit from its contraries. I address the bulk of this essay to these questions and focus on just a few of the many foibles of the human mind that render it liable to be taken in by bullshit and other forms of misrepresentation.

### **Some Cognitive Foibles of the Human Mind**

In recent decades, cognitive and evolutionary psychologists have logged a depressing catalog of the foibles of the human mind. For all our amazing cognitive achievements as a species, human cognition turns out to be a bewitching stew of the good and the bad. We are subject to confirmation bias, prone to self-deception, and bad at many and diverse forms of reasoning—including statistical reasoning, reasoning about conditionals, and the assessment of risks and rewards.

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war, then one will tend also to believe that it is perfectly reasonable to believe Bush's rationale, that one was not being duped or deceived into believing that rationale, and that any reasonable person would share one's belief. Such confidence, even when undeserved, will lead one to reject not just evidence suggesting that what Bush said was false, but any evidence suggesting that one was foolhardy or in some ways irrational in accepting that rationale. By the lights of the true believer, the person who rejects Bush's rationale for the war is not just mistaken but irrational, or in some way self-deceived. It is not the believer who is a dupe or a fool, but the unbeliever. But the deeper point is that any evidence that the skeptic might muster to try to convince the true believer otherwise is, in effect, antecedently discounted before the argument ever begins.

Confirmation bias helps to explain our dogged resistance to changing our beliefs.<sup>4</sup> But it may appear that confirmation bias must play only a negligible role in the *initial* formation of new beliefs. As such, it may appear to be of little aid to the propagandist or the bullshit artist in gaining initial leverage over our beliefs. Though there is a certain truth to this, we should not underestimate the extent to which confirmation bias aids the spread of bull. One has only to consider the rise of information cocoons like Fox News, right wing talk radio, Air America, and the fragmented and unruly blogosphere. Information cocoons systematically promote a certain narrow range of views and outlooks and systematically misrepresent or exclude alternative points of view and competing sources of evidence. That more and more Americans self-consciously seek their news and information from information cocoons is the direct result of confirmation bias run rampant. Though the creators of such cocoons are merely responding to our own self-generated demand, they are nonetheless able to exert great influence over public discourse through their highly skilled management of such cocoons. Once an information consumer's confirmation bias has led her to give herself over to the managers of an information cocoon, she has, I suggest, made herself easy pickings for the propagandist, the spinner, and the bullshit artist.

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<sup>4</sup> Explaining why exactly we should be liable to confirmation bias at all is, of course, an entirely different matter. I will not try to give an answer here.

There are, to be sure, a host of foibles of the mind that more directly and immediately affect the initial formation of our beliefs—and preferences—rather than just the dogged maintenance of them. I have in mind our susceptibility to framing effects on the formation of beliefs and preferences.<sup>5</sup> Imagine that the US government is preparing for an outbreak of the Avian flu. Suppose that without intervention the disease is expected to kill, say, six thousand people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. The exact scientific estimates of the consequences of each program are as follows:

If Program A is adopted, two thousand people will be saved.

If program B is adopted, there is one-third chance that six thousand people will be saved and a two-thirds chance that no one will be saved.

When experimental subjects are asked to choose between these programs, seventy-two percent choose program A, while twenty-eight percent choose program B.

Notice that the “expected return” in lives saved of the two programs is identical. So why are subjects not indifferent between the two programs? Because we tend to be *risk averse* when we choose between outcomes all of which have a positive expected return. That is, people tend to prefer a sure thing to a risky thing of equal or greater expected return when both expected returns are positive. This means that people tend to prefer the certainty of saving two thousand lives over an alternative that risks losing more lives, even if that alternative involves the possibility that more lives will be saved. In preferring A to B, people assign disproportionately greater weight to the two thousand additional lives that might be lost than to the additional four thousand lives that might be saved by pursuing program B.

<sup>5</sup> This example is adapted from a discussion in D. Kahneman and A. Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica* (1979). Reprinted in Kahneman and Tversky, *Choices, Values, and Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Now consider an alternative scenario that is typically presented to a different set of experimental subjects. As before, the government is preparing for an outbreak of the Avian flu. Two programs are being contemplated in response to the outbreak. The exact scientific estimates of the effectiveness of the programs look like this:

If program C is adopted, four thousand people will die.

If program D is adopted, there is a one-third chance that no one will die and a two-thirds chance that six thousand people will die.

Presented with a choice between programs C and D, seventy-eight percent of experimental subjects will choose program D, while twenty-two percent choose program C. Again, the expected return, this time in lives lost, is identical on the two programs. And again, we might wonder why subjects should prefer plan D to plan C. The answer is that people tend to be *risk seeking* with respect to losses. This means that people tend to prefer pursuing the chance that no one will die—even if it pursuing that chance means running the risk of more deaths—to the certainty that fewer will die. In preferring D to C, people are, in effect, assigning disproportionately less weight to the two thousand additional lives that might be lost than to the four thousand additional lives that might be saved by pursuing plan D over plan C.

What is striking about these results is the fact that program C and program A are *identical programs*. They are merely described differently—one in terms of lives lost, the other in terms of lives saved. If we pursue program A, two thousand people will be saved. But that just means that four thousand will die who otherwise might not have. *Exactly* this set of outcomes is envisioned by program C. Similarly, programs B and D also envision the same exact outcomes, with just the same probabilities. But B describes those outcomes in terms of lives saved, while D describes those outcomes in terms of lives lost. It seems painfully obvious that whatever rational basis there can be for preferring A to B, or vice versa, obtains equally well for the choice between C to D. But over and over again, experimenters find the choice between equivalent



typical experimental set-up. Subjects are given four cards. They are told that each card has a number on one side and a letter on the other. They are asked to name those cards and only those cards which should be turned over in order to determine whether the following rule is true or false of these four cards:

If a card has the letter D on one side, it has the number 3 on the other



Applying straight-forward propositional logic, the correct cards are the D card and the 7 card. If a D is on the other side of the 7, then the rule is falsified. If anything other than a 3 is on the other side of the D card, the rule will be falsified again.

Subjects perform remarkably poorly on this task. Typically, less than twenty-five percent of subjects give the correct choice. Indeed, in some version of Wason's original experiment this was as low as five percent. The most frequent choices are that only the D card need be turned over or that the D card together with the 3 card should be turned over. The 7 card is *seldom* chosen by subjects. Moreover, subjects are remarkably resistant to training on this task. If shown the correct response for a particular run, they get the point, but they seem to lack the ability to generalize to new runs of essentially the same task.

Notice that turning over the 3 card cannot falsify the rule. Whatever is on the other side of the 3 card is consistent with the rule. So there is a weak sense in which the 3 card might be thought to "confirm" the rule. Perhaps that is why subjects tend to turn it over. So we may be seeing our old friend confirmation bias rearing its head again.

The persistent inability of subjects to perform well on this and other tests that would seem to require little more than a certain minimal logical acumen has tempted many to conclude that human cognition is irredeemably irrational. But that conclusion is hasty and crude. For one thing, whatever can be said for the rational powers of this or that individual mind, our amazing cognitive achievements as a species suggest that human cognition, taken as a whole, must be one of natural selection's most consequential innovations. Only the first advent of sexual repro-

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## Reclaiming the Public Square

Our all-too brief examination of just a few of the many cognitive foibles of the human mind supports both a bleak conclusion and a more hopeful one. The hopeful conclusion is that our minds appear to be finely tuned instruments, well adapted for solving the plethora of recurrent cognitive challenges that were endemic in the information processing environments of our hunter-gather progenitors. To the extent that contemporary information processing environments match those in which we were designed to function, our cognitive capacities serve us well. Unfortunately, the modern world subjects human cognition to stresses and strains unlike anything encountered on the ancient savannah. We are bombarded with information and misinformation in a dizzying variety, often intentionally framed in ways unsuited for our natural cognitive capacities. The mismatch between our cognitive capacities and the informational environments in which we now find ourselves partly explains both why there is so much bull, spin, and propaganda about, and why we are so often taken in by it.

Now it bears stressing that the fundamental cognitive architecture of the human mind was fixed eons ago on the ancient savannah. So my claim is not that contemporary humans, as such, are any more or less susceptible to bullshit and other forms of misrepresentation than humans have ever been. Our minds are as they have always been. Only our circumstances have changed. Nor do I wish to deny the evident powers and achievements of the evolved human mind. The long march of human history has decisively established what a wondrous instrument the human mind is. It has scaled great cognitive heights. It has peered deeply into the innermost secrets of the natural world; it has given rise to cultures and to social formations complex and various; and it has even plumbed the depths of its own operations.

Lest I be accused of nostalgia for some bygone cognitive order, let me stress that I am fully aware that in every age and epoch, the mind has produced a profuse abundance of cognitive detritus. In every age of humankind, superstition, illusion, and falsehood of every variety has existed along side the highest art and deepest knowledge that the age has mustered. Moreover, we are blessed to live at a time when human beings

collectively have scaled greater cognitive heights than humans ever have before. We see far more deeply into the workings of everything natural and human. So how could it possibly be that there is more cognitive detritus about in our own times?

The answer is, I think, twofold. First, the masters of bullshit, propaganda, and spin have paradoxically been aided by our improved understanding of the workings of the human mind. In our times, the masters of the dark arts are astute students of the enduring foibles of the human mind. Second, the means of public representations and persuasion available to the masters of the dark arts have a vastly greater reach and efficacy than they have ever had. Consequently, in our own times, the masters of the dark arts are vastly more effective than their predecessors could have dreamt of being.

I don't mean to say that those who seek a hearing for sweet reason in the public square have no weapons of their own. The battle must be waged on at least two different fronts. First, it must be waged in the trenches of education. We must seek to instill in our children distaste for all dogma, an enduring suspicion of all easy and comforting falsehoods. We must instill in them an insatiable appetite for unyielding argument, a propensity to seek out and confront even the most disquieting evidence, even if doing so would undermine their or our most cherished beliefs. They must learn never to take at face value frames that are merely given. They must learn the skills of reframing, the habit of asking after that which is invariant across alternative frames. If our children are educated in this way, their minds will provide far less fertile ground for the spread of bullshit.

Though such a mind-by-mind slog in the trenches of education is necessary, it will not suffice. In addition, we must reconfigure the very means of public representation and persuasion. In our times, a narrow, self-serving elite, interested mostly in its own power, wealth and prestige enjoys a certain privileged access to the means of public representations and persuasion. We must seek to diminish that access by all the ways and means available to us—via the fragmented and unregulated internet, via politics, in still unoccupied small niches of the mass media. The purveyors of institutional and official bullshit will of course not yield easily. They are powerful, clever, and determined. Moreover, experience bears ample witness to the fact that good

discourse does not spontaneously drive out bad. Neither, however, will bad discourse wither on its own. If bullshit is to be driven from the public square, only those who seek more than bullshit can drive it out. So let the battle be joined.