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## A Critique of Pure BS

By [Scott McLemee](#)

Harry Frankfurt's [On Bullshit](#) has just been published by Princeton University Press as a handsome little volume you would call a pamphlet if it were not in hardback. I haven't actually done much more than glance it over for a few minutes in a bookstore, but am going to write about it anyway.

No, that does not mean that this column will bullshit on *On Bullshit*. In fact the volume is simply a reprint — incorporating two or three quite infinitesimal changes — of a paper originally presented by Frankfurt, a professor of philosophy at Princeton, in 1986. It was reprinted in a collection of his essays, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), and has been available [online](#) for some time now.



Anyone involved in either academe or journalism certainly ought to be familiar with “On Bullshit,” and for those of us at their fragrant crossroads, it is indispensable. Alas, nothing in the new edition informs the reader of the essay's scholarly provenance. It tells you the book appeared in 2005, not that it is already a classic. Then again, most copies of the book will doubtless be purchased, not by those with a sincere interest in bullshitological studies, but as gag gifts — with a likely spike of sales coming right around graduation time.

It is, however, a serious exercise in conceptual definition. Frankfurt writes with a certain dry eloquence, and commands impressive analytic perspicacity — all of which is thrown into still more striking relief by the appearance, every few sentences, of the word “bullshit.”

Something of the quality is evident in the book's opening lines (perhaps the most arresting in contemporary philosophical prose). “One of the most salient features of our culture,” writes Frankfurt, “is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves.”

**The stakes are not trivial.** At the risk of pitching a little of it myself, it is tempting to say that *On Bullshit* comes very close to defining the essence of postindustrial society. “The realms of advertising and of public relations,” Frankfurt writes, “and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept.”

Such mass-produced bull has vast resources at its disposal: “There are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who — with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth — dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right.” In other words, bullshit is not just an irritant. It is a form of professional expertise. If it vanished overnight, the economy might collapse. A sobering thought, perhaps beyond the limits of satire to handle.

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How, then, should a philosopher grapple with bullshit? Frankfurt undertakes a careful review of the term's meanings in ordinary usage. But his own method is to define the concept primarily by reference to the process ("bullshitting") rather than the product. He emphasizes the difference in intentionality between a liar and a bullshitter.

A liar is engaged, obviously, in misrepresenting the truth about something. "Telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus," as Frankfurt puts it. The liar must carefully determine just how much to distort, conceal, and fabricate in order "to insert a particular falsehood at a specific point in a set or system of beliefs, in order to avoid the consequences of having that point occupied by the truth." For a liar to frame his lie halfway plausibly (let alone, get away with it), actually requires a fairly exacting degree of lucidity about truth and consequences.

More so, at any rate, than the bullshitter need manage. "It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth," writes Frankfurt. "Producing bullshit requires no such conviction." The bullshitter enjoys a level of freedom and creativity worthy of the Nietzschean superman: "His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared to fake the context as well, so far as need requires." Not by accident do we refer to someone with a peculiar gift for this as a "bullshit artist," for "the mode of creativity upon which it relies is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play." It also corrodes the mind's necessary power of "attending to the way things are...By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies are."

**My paraphrase omits** quite a few insightful lines of thought in Frankfurt's tour de force. *On Bullshit* rewards more than one reading. But classic though it is, the text did not offer the last word on the topic. Princeton University Press should be called to task for failing, in this edition, to send readers in the direction of G.A. Cohen's "Deeper into Bullshit," appearing in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (MIT Press, 2002).

Cohen suggests that, however suggestive Frankfurt's theory may be, it goes off the rails by analyzing bullshit primarily by reference to the bullshitter's state of mind. We are able to discern the liar's goal, ex post facto. In every case, the liar has as an end the advantage he gains from the listener not knowing the truth. (For some reason, the immortal words of Homer come to mind: "It takes two to lie, Marge, one to lie and one to listen.") But as Cohen notes, it is much less clear from Frankfurt's account what we could say about the goal of the bullshitter. Much of the bullshit produced by political or advertising campaigns could just as well be treated as a kind of lying.

Furthermore (and here Cohen begins cutting very close to the academic bone), there are forms of bullshit produced by people who would not recognize themselves as being indifferent to the truth. "An honest person might read some bullshit that a Frankfurt-bullshitter wrote, believe it to be the truth, and affirm it," writes Cohen. "When that honest person utters bullshit, *she's* not showing a disregard for the truth. So it is neither necessary nor sufficient for every kind of bullshit that it be produced by one who is informed by indifference to the truth, or indeed, by any other distinctive intentional state."

Or, to sum up that last sentence in shorter form: Gotcha!

Cohen's paper is itself a substantial contribution to understanding bullshit. In particular, he has opened an important line of study through his useful description of certain kinds of academic discourse as "unclarifiably unclear." Future scholarly work in this field will need to grapple with the notion of the "bullshit detector" (a device routinely praised, though seldom given the attention it is due).

It also bears mentioning that, in the pages of the *festschrift* dedicated to him, Frankfurt does comment on Cohen's critique. He does so with impressive philosophical rigor — and with still more admirable good grace. "If I am reluctant to endorse Cohen's claim that the short of bullshit on which my attention was focused 'is just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit,' " he writes, "it is not because I doubt his claim is true. It is only because I cannot help recalling that bullshit is an animal product and not a plant."

Scott McLemee writes Intellectual Affairs on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

## Comments

### Intellectual Affairs: On Bullshit

Oh my dog... this article is SO funny! Seriously, it's the funniest thing I've read all month—maybe even all year. And so true:

(For some reason, the immortal words of Homer come to mind: "It takes two to lie, Marge, one to lie and one to listen.")

Maybe later I will think of something more intellectual to say about the piece, but for now, this is just a brief note to express my gratitude. I laughed and laughed till my cat asked if I was okay...

**Theresa**, at 12:05 pm EST on February 15, 2005

### **Bullshit Artistry**

Thanks for posting this review. I have not read the pieces, I have to and I will. But here are some preliminary thoughts on the article in the NYTimes, and on the excerpts you cite. Frankfurt makes an unfortunate, albeit too common, connection between bullshit and rhetoric and sophistry. In fact, he places Plato above the Sophists in a move that, while perhaps warranted in Plato's own head, was not necessarily the case in Ancient Greece. That move aligns Frankfurt with a particular school of thought, about truth. The sophists and rhetoricians were doing much more than bullshitting, and philosophers and dialecticians were doing much less than "clarifying thought," and revealing truth.

Moreover, as you point in Cohen's rebuttal, and as I posted on my site, the distinction between liar and bullshitter is a bit thin. Much seems to be defined by the attitude of the bullshitter versus the attitude of the liar. Yet, as I also note, attitude is a form of orientation, and as such part of specific cultural frameworks.

I will have to check if Frankfurt talks about habits of bullshitting. The connections that could be drawn would be productive (Aristotle on Hexis, Bourdie on Habitus, etc.). Thanks,

**Nacho**, Willamette University, at 3:20 pm EST on February 15, 2005

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