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Books

On Bullshit by Harry Frankfurt

Petter Naessan examines Harry Frankfurt's famous little book *On Bullshit*.

Harry Frankfurt, a moral philosopher, starts this little book with the following observation: "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit." He then proceeds to develop a theoretical understanding of bullshit – what it is, and what it is not.

Aspects of the bullshit problem are discussed partly with reference to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Wittgenstein and Saint Augustine. Three points seem especially important – the distinction between lying and bullshitting, the question of why there is so much bullshit in the current day and age, and a critique of sincerity *qua* bullshit.

Frankfurt makes an important distinction between lying and bullshitting. Both the liar and the bullshitter try to get away with something. But 'lying' is perceived to be a conscious act of deception, whereas 'bullshitting' is unconnected to a concern for truth. Frankfurt regards this 'indifference to how things really are', as the essence of bullshit. Furthermore, a lie is necessarily false, but bullshit is not – bullshit may happen to be correct or incorrect. The crux of the matter is that bullshitters hide their lack of commitment to truth. Since bullshitters ignore truth instead of acknowledging and subverting it, bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies.

Having established the grave danger of bullshit, Frankfurt's next step is to ask why there is so much bullshit around. The main answer to this is that bullshit is unavoidable when people are convinced that they must have opinions about "events and conditions in all parts of the world", about more or less anything and everything – so they speak quite extensively about things they know virtually nothing about. Frankfurt is non-committal as to whether there is *more* bullshit around now than before, but he maintains that there is currently a great deal.

There is an interesting problem sketched at the end of the book, wherein sincerity is described as an ideal for those who do not believe that there is any (objective) truth, thus departing from the ideal of correctness. Now, Frankfurt does not mention the word 'postmodern' at all in his book (which is a good thing, I think), but to some extent the last pages may be understood to be a critical punch on a postmodern rejection of the ideal of the truth. Be this as it may, when a person rejects the notion of being true to the facts and turns instead to an ideal of being true to their own substantial and determinate nature, then according to Frankfurt this sincerity is bullshit.

Bullshit seems to be defined largely negatively, that is, as *not lying*. Frankfurt's discussion – which he admits is not likely to be decisive – reveals that there is nothing really distinctive about bullshit when it comes to either the form or meaning of utterances. It is predominantly about the intention and disregard for truth of the bullshitter. How then do we discern bullshit from other types of speech behaviour? Is it really possible to accurately know the values (or lack thereof) involved when a person speaks?

Probably not. One may have some intuition that certain utterances constitute bullshit. Frankfurt does not provide any answers here, but one could perhaps suggest that the 'cooperative principle' of H.P. Grice (1913-1988) might provide some further food for thought within the emerging field of bullshitology (as I would like to call the scientific study of bullshit). Grice, in his 1975 book *Logic*

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and Conversation, outlined a number of underlying principles ('maxims') that are assumed by people engaged in conversation. Speakers and listeners assume that the others abide by certain, predominantly unstated, speech norms. The cooperative principle can be divided more specifically into the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. For bullshitological purposes, the *violation* of the maxims would appear to be relevant. So if utterances convey not enough or too much information (quantity), are intentionally false or lack evidence (quality), are irrelevant to any current topic or issue (relevance), and are obscure, ambiguous, unnecessarily wordy or disorderly (manner), they would seem to qualify, although not necessarily, as bullshit (minus the intentionally false utterance, of course). These elements may be added to the condition of the bullshitter's indifference to the ideal of truth. Then again, can we be certain that to identify utterances as bullshit in any given situation necessarily is connected to an understanding of the bullshitter's indifference to the truth?

Needless to say, there are numerous problems which may be expanded, looked into and analysed concerning bullshit. And I dare say that Frankfurt's little book is a nice starting point.

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• *On Bullshit* by Harry G. Frankfurt, Princeton University Press (2005). £6.50/\$9.95 pp.67. ISBN: 0691122946. This book is at the *Philosophy Now* [Bookstore](#).

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