

On Bullshit

"One of the most salient features of our culture 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 phenomena has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor 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."

In a nutshell

Bullshit pervades our culture and we need to know how it is different from lying.

In a similar vein

Noam Chomsky *Understanding Power* (p 68)

Michel de Montaigne *Essays* (p 208)

Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (p 300)

Harry Frankfurt

In 2005, this little book of only 67 pages became a surprise bestseller. It seemed to tap into public concern about the "spin" surrounding America and Britain's launch of the second Iraq War, but its message has resonated beyond particular events.

Bullshit surrounds us, says Harry Frankfurt, a Princeton moral philosophy professor, but we don't see it for what it is. This is why we need a theory of it.

Why it is different to lying

Frankfurt asks whether bullshit is simply the same as "humbug." In his book *The Prevalence of Humbug* (1985), Max Black defined humbug as "deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, and attitudes."

Bullshit is similar to humbug in that it is an attempt to deliberately mislead, and yet stops short of an outright lie. Bullshit can also be pretentious, and a conscious misrepresentation of the way one really sees a situation. Both humbug and bullshit therefore aim to create an impression that I am thinking or believing something, even if I have not come out and actually said it. In this gap, therefore, a mistruth can arise without my actually stating a lie. Humbug's main aim is not to create a different kind of reality through changing the "facts," but rather for the speaker to be seen differently. A grand political speech, for instance, does not aim to say how the world actually is; its purpose is to make the speaker sound like a patriot, or a spiritual person, or a protector of morals.

Frankfurt concludes that humbug does not fully grasp the real nature of bullshit. To explain why, he begins by quoting Longfellow: "In the elder days of art/ Builders wrought with greatest care/ Each minute and unseen part,/ For the Gods are everywhere." An old-school craftsman was not out to make an impression, but rather its opposite: to make sure that something was done right, even if no one noticed the detail of the work. In contrast, shoddily made items are bullshit, because time, craftsmanship, and care are totally left out of the process. Everything is about a hoped-for short-term effect that will benefit the producer, and the quality of the good and its durability are irrelevant.

Frankfurt mentions a recollection by Fania Pascal of her friend Wittgenstein, who called her while she was in hospital having her tonsils out. When she told

him, post-operation, that she felt like "a dog that had just been run over," he was disgusted, noting that "You don't know how a dog feels when it is run over." Wittgenstein was not standing up for dogs' feelings, but rather the famous linguistic analyst felt that Pascal was not making the proper effort with language. She was neither stating the facts of her own feelings, nor could she know how a dog felt. Though Wittgenstein's reaction was obviously over the top, Frankfurt draws from it to fashion his own definition of bullshit: that it is not simply outright lying, and indeed often stops short of lying, but is rather a *lack of any concern* whether something is true or not.

The difference between liars and bullshit artists

In a "bull session" (a group of guys getting together to chat about women or politics or sport or cars), the purpose is not to uncover or state any great truth, but merely to talk for the pleasure of it: as a verb, "to bullshit" can simply be a way of revealing one's personality (a world away from giving one's final word or commitment on a subject). Problems start, however, when this kind of self-conscious table talk, in which one is not that concerned with truth, becomes one's whole way of being. To operate well in life we need facts, and when someone seems full of "hot air" we are infuriated.

"Telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus," Frankfurt says, an act that can involve an element of craftsmanship, because we have to create our mistruth against what we clearly know are the facts or accepted morality. The liar, therefore, "In order to invent a lie at all ... must think he knows what is true."

In contrast, a person who wants to bullshit their way through life has much more freedom, because they do not have to fabricate lies in light of the truth, but rather are "running a story" that does not even have to be related to truth or untruth. They can be a lot more creative; the appropriate analogy is art, not craft. The bullshit artist does not actually have to misrepresent or change the facts, because they are a master at spinning them in a way that supports or justifies what they are up to. Unlike the liar or the honest person, the bullshitter's eyes are not on the facts at all; facts are important only to the extent that they help them "get away with it." Given this, Frankfurt concludes, "bullshit is the greater enemy of truth than lies are."

Why is there so much bullshit?

Frankfurt admits that one cannot say whether there is more bullshit now than in previous times, only that the volume is now "undeniably great." One reason is that many of us are called on to talk about matters of which we know little; in a democracy we are expected to have opinions on a range of political issues, so we offer them to avoid saying "I don't know." In addition, we live in a more relativistic world

in which the belief that we can actually attain objective truth is being replaced with the ideal of *sincerity*: so the ideal of revealing what is correct is being replaced with the ideal of *sincerity*.

"Rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of the common world, the individual turns toward trying to provide honest representations of himself. Convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which he might hope to identify as the truth about things, he devotes himself to being true to his own nature."

Though Frankfurt does not mention him, it could be argued that this particular rat set in with Montaigne, who took delight in saying how little he actually knew of the world and so fell back on examining what he did know: himself. Frankfurt points out the flaw in this view: we cannot say that there is a correct or true view of ourselves, but at the same time suggest that nothing for certain can be said of anything else. Rather, the more we know about the world, the more likely we are to begin to reveal something true of ourselves.

Final comments

A lie can shock or startle, but we accept it as being, after all, consistent with human nature. Bullshitting, however, particularly when it extends beyond individuals to organizations and governments, is perverse, a corruption of humanity. Rejection of the "authority of truth" in favor of selling or telling a story can lead to the rise of Hitlers and Pol Pots, whose spin on history is so captivating that it attracts millions of followers.

Bullshit matters, and in turning it into a theory Frankfurt has made a valuable contribution to philosophy. Of course, others have written about the subject in other ways; Sartre gave us the concept of "authenticity," for instance, but it was buried in a long, difficult book. If more philosophers used common terms and wrote very succinct books such as this one, their impact on the average person would surely increase.

Harry G. Frankfurt

Born in 1929, Frankfurt received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1954. He taught at Yale and Rockefeller Universities before taking up his position at Princeton, where he remained a professor of moral philosophy until 2002. His areas of academic interest have included Cartesian rationality and truth, the free will-determinism issue (particularly its implications for moral responsibility), and caring and love. Other books include *The Importance of What We Care About* (1988), *The Reasons of Love* (2004), *On Truth* (2006), and *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (2006). On Bullshit was originally published in the literary journal *Raritan* in 1986.