

## Book review

**On Bullshit**, Harry G. Frankfurt, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005, 67 pp., \$9.95, cloth (ISBN 0691122946).

*Gradually, the human brain filled up with such judgments and convictions, and in this tangle there arose ferment, struggle and lust for power. Not only usefulness and desire, but every sort of drive took sides in the struggle over "truths." The intellectual struggle became an occupation, an enticement, a profession, a duty, a thing of dignity – and finally, knowing and striving for the truth took their place as needs among the other needs. From then on, not only belief and conviction, but testing, denial, mistrust, contradiction became a *power*.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (§110)

There is plenty to think about in Harry G. Frankfurt's brief but compelling sketch for a theory of bullshit. But why do we need a theoretical analysis of bullshit? It appears no one has ever stopped to tie down the definitive nature of bullshit. We know it's all around us. We don't like to fall for it. We're confident we can detect it when it reaches our sector of experience. But we lack a "conscientiously developed appreciation" of bullshit – an understanding of what it *means* to us that there could be "so much bullshit" in our culture, and that we could *know* this and still manage to "contribute our share" (Frankfurt, 1) and treat it with benign indifference, as when we fall under its ruse with uncritical acceptance, or "turn away from it with an impatient or irritated shrug" (p. 50). What *does* it mean that there is so much bullshit around? What "function" does it serve? What "is" bullshit? What are we to make of our benign attitudes toward it? Would a correct understanding of bullshit change our attitudes? Should it? On what basis can we stake this claim? Nietzsche reveals the heart of this question in §344 of *The Gay Science*:

This unconditional will to truth: what is it? Is it the will *not to let oneself be deceived*? Is it the will *not to deceive*?

In the course of unfolding his analysis of bullshit, and to provide a basis for addressing these questions in a philosophical manner, Frankfurt gives special prominence to three issues. The first highlights our tolerance for bullshit, and considers how this attitude relates to our concerns with truth and falsity. The relation of bullshit to truth is shown to be one of *indifference* (Frankfurt, pp. 33-34). Since it is "of the essence of bullshit" to be "unconnected to a concern with the truth," we can only engage in the practice of bullshit with "indifference to how things really are" (p. 30). As a consequence of this indifference, we build up an indifference to bullshit itself. What are we to make of this general disaffection with bullshit, especially when there is "so much" of it around? The manifestations of our indifference are clear enough:

We may seek to distance ourselves from bullshit, but we are more likely to turn away from it with an impatient or irritated shrug than with the sense of violation

or outrage that lies often inspire. The problem of understanding why our attitude toward bullshit is generally more benign than our attitude toward lying is an important one, which I shall leave as an exercise for the reader. (p. 50)

Lest we remain indifferent to this benign attitude toward bullshit, Frankfurt directs us to his crucial discovery: by displacing our attention to the constraints of truth, bullshit is “a greater enemy of the truth” than are the lies we find so violating or outrageous (pp. 60-61). While the liar intends to mislead us “about the facts or what he takes the facts to be,” bullshit misrepresents the very “enterprise” of discourse. It accomplishes this by misdirecting our attention away from *what the speaker is up to*: bullshit may at times resonate like a discourse of truth, but in fact “the truth-values of [the bullshitter’s] statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it” (p. 55). He speaks only to “suit his purpose” (p. 56) and “pays no attention” to the “authority” of truth.

This marks a significant difference from lying, for we cannot lie without being “guided” by our “beliefs concerning the way things are.” After all, the point of lying is to “insert a 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” (p. 50). It follows that telling a lie “does not unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that bullshit tends to.” But because the practice of bullshit falls outside the game of truth and falsity, any “excessive indulgence” in bullshit poses a risk to our “normal habit of attending to the way things are.” Frankfurt’s concern is not that bullshitters “reject” the “authority” of how things are, but that they “pay no attention to [truth] at all.” Bullshitters simply suspend the distinction between “getting things wrong and getting them right,” all the while “making assertions that purport to describe the way things are” (p. 62).

And just “why is there so much bullshit?”(p. 64) Frankfurt’s initial response is that circumstances encourage or require us to talk about things without knowing what we are talking about (e.g., from a sense of responsibility to have opinions, or from a desire to appear knowledgeable about things we actually know little about). But Frankfurt carries his analysis further, with a rather challenging point regarding bullshit and sincerity in which postmodern skeptics are cast as the “deeper sources” of the “proliferation of bullshit” that is so clearly evident throughout our culture (p. 64). “These ‘antirealist’ doctrines” are said to promote bullshit to the extent that they “undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false, and even in the intelligibility of the notion of objective inquiry” (p. 65). In the process, these skeptical views undermine our interest in truth by promoting “a retreat” from one kind of discipline -- “the discipline required by dedication to the ideal of correctness” -- to another “quite different sort of discipline,” one “which is imposed by pursuit of an alternative ideal of *sincerity*.”

Rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of a common world, the individual turns toward trying to provide honest representations of himself. Convinced that reality has no inherent nature . . . he devotes himself to being *true to his own nature*. (p. 65, my emphasis)

Of course, Frankfurt will have none of this: the truth about oneself is simply not the easiest thing to know. That is, the “facts” we learn about ourselves through specters of intimate acquaintance “are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution,” and our natures “are indeed elusively insubstantial -- notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things” (p. 66). In the final analysis, any motivation to achieve “sincerity” in regard to ourselves is itself just another form of bullshit (p. 67).

But what’s at stake in this analysis of bullshit? Can we establish any relevance for philosophical practice? Do the fruits of this analysis improve our capacity to *detect* bullshit? Do we increase our leverage to *disempower* it? Do we reduce the odds of being *taken in* by it? Can we suddenly *deal with it more effectively*? What would it mean to put Frankfurt’s analysis into practice? Would it improve our capacity to subject real bullshit to productive philosophical analysis?

Take for instance the point about truth. Bullshit preys on indifference to epistemic authority. This is why Frankfurt considers it a greater enemy of truth than the lie, and describes it as a form of misrepresentation seemingly immune to “intellectual conscience.” The parallels to Nietzsche’s analysis are perhaps a bit ironic. As Nietzsche remarked in *The Gay Science* over a century ago, “*the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*” (GS, §2).

Nobody even blushes when you intimate that their weights are underweight; nor do people feel outraged; they merely laugh at your doubts. I mean: *the great majority of people* does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves with such reasons afterward: . . . But what is goodheartedness, refinement or genius to me . . . when one does not account *the desire for certainty* as ones inmost craving and deepest distress – as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §2)

Of course, the desire for certainty operating *without* an intellectual conscience is simply “the demand . . . that something should be firm” (GS, §347). Bullshit operates in much the same manner. The impetus behind bullshit is to conserve an enterprise without revealing what the enterprise is *about*. Bullshit holds sway by controlling the environment of reception; it accomplishes this by numbing our temptation to expose discourse to critical account. The reasons for bullshit run deeper than Frankfurt’s analysis. They can be traced to the long-standing struggle between the different sorts of need that operate in us. The need for truth, for intellectual honesty, and for a critical accounting structure to hem in narrative license is challenged everyday by our need to speak beyond the range of what we can expose to critical scrutiny.

Philosophical practice invites the challenge to face this exposure, and it offers methods to strengthen our intellectual conscience. Why this might inspire some thinkers to challenge the privilege Frankfurt accords to this concern with truth I leave to the reader’s imagination. The impetus to secure a controlling interest in life will often numb our ability to speak in an open, forthright manner on matters of consequence. Furthermore, the “enterprise” of bullshit is not always clear and

evident to the one who bullshits us (nor is the enterprise always so clear and evident when the bullshit is our own). But is it not compelling to think of philosophical work as incompatible with bullshit? The calculating gestures of philosophical questioning take flight only within an atmosphere of philosophical interrogation. Bullshit survives on the wings of its own enterprise, much the way sweetness engages with the body. An entire economy of experience revolves around sweetness, just as certain modes of life seem to revolve around bullshit. By introducing valuations callibrated to a "connection" with "the true and the false," we begin to challenge the integrity of these economies of experience and modes of life. The competing schemes of valuation contest one another for prominence. But the contests are not always about truth. As Frankfurt makes clear in his analysis, our connection to a concern for truth and falsity is by no means secure. There are other concerns afoot. Bullshit can be nourished by some of these other concerns because the cause of truth is not always the dominant priority, much less the foundation of the enterprise. Perhaps the philosopher's relation to bullshit is more ambiguous than we thought.

