

On Bullshit. Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. 80. Hbk \$9.95/£6.50.

How is it that “sincerity itself is bullshit”?

It is fortunate that Harry Frankfurt is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Princeton University, for it is difficult to imagine how anyone but the likes of him could publish a book thus titled with the likes of Princeton University Press. To be true, in my teaching of the skills associated with thinking critically and while spewing forth my own rendition of this genre, I have often been stumped in my search for a more genteel term. Humbug? Or any of its synonyms proposed by Max Black and cited by Frankfurt: *balderdash*, *claptrap*, *hokum*, *drivel*, *buncombe*, *imposture*, and *quackery* (1985, p. 5)? None, you will agree, quite captures or expresses what bullshit does. They are little more than “quaint equivalents [that are] not very helpful” (ibid.)

Perhaps it is because bullshit is without peer as a concept that Frankfurt has seen fit to publish such a careful conceptual analysis of it – and within austere black cloth covers whose severity is ironically contrasted with the 67 very small pages within – but this is part of the humour that lies just beneath. It is a very serious book and a very funny book. Very short too, and with a keen sense of respect I have taken care to ensure that this review is indeed shorter than the book.

This book’s topic is of course not the first in the field that may be an affront to some. Neil Postman’s paper, “Bullshit and the art of crap-detection” (1969), comes first to mind. There Postman argued that our key task, both as philosophers and educators, is to be on the lookout for and to identify bullshit, and to educate our students in such a manner that they might do the same. For Postman, bullshit is associated with pomposity, bigotry, inanity (by which he means “ignorance presented in the cloak of sincerity” [p. 4]), and superstition (by which he means “ignorance presented in the cloak of authority” [ibid.]). Crap-detection is, well, just that, a phrase he attributes to Ernest Hemingway, who responded when asked about the most important quality a writer can have, “A built-in, shock-proof, crap detector” (p. 1).

Hannah Arendt addressed the issue of lying in politics in her 1973 essay of that title. “Truthfulness,” she suggested, “has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case (Arendt, 1973, p. 10)”. Frankfurt makes no reference to Arendt, or to Postman, however. His literature review is, like his book, short.

On Bullshit is made up of just those 67 pages, at about 100 words a page. Since I am currently a denizen of greater China, I was reminded of its similarity – in size only, for there their common features most certainly end – to Mao’s *Little Red Book*. And I began to wonder how much less suffering there might have been in the Cultural Revolution had the Red Guards been able to absorb the contents of *On Bullshit* with the same diligence with which they appear to have clutched their

copies of Mao's tomette. I also began to wonder whether the world might have been spared another four years of George W. Bush had more of the denizens of the Land of the Free, Home of the Brave been able to see through the Machiavellian bullshit of Karl Rove with the help of this marvellous little book. Fortunately for Tony Blair not more of the British electorate read it prior to that country's recent election. How else could we explain that Alastair Campbell was once again successful in spinning Labour into its third term?

Frankfurt has written the book not only because of bullshit's peerlessness, but because it is so ubiquitous. "One of the most salient features of our culture," he claims in his opening sentence, "is that there is so much bullshit." We all know this; we take it for granted. We have consequently not thought about it very carefully or systematically. The problem, "in other words, [is that] we have no theory" of bullshit (p. 1). Frankfurt's aim is "to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis" (pp. 1-2). It is a very serious and careful analysis that he provides. Heavyweights such as Saint Augustine and Wittgenstein are marshalled to this end. Augustine's distinction of eight types of lies in his essay "Lying" does sterling duty. Wittgenstein's contribution comes not from the *Tractatus* but from his reported rebuke to a friend, Pascal, who, having just had her tonsils out, sornily croaks that she feels "just like a dog that has been run over" (p. 24). "Bullshit," thinks Wittgenstein (suggests Frankfurt), "You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like" (ibid.). While Pascal, continues Frankfurt, surely "does know something about the quality of the feeling to which the phrase [the feeling of a run-over dog] refers: she knows at least that it is an undesirable and unenjoyable feeling, a *bad* feeling, ... hers is not just any bad feeling but, according to her account, the distinctive kind of bad feeling that a dog has when it is run over" (pp. 28-9). To Wittgenstein, this is "unconnected to a concern with the truth, ... not germane to the enterprise of describing reality" (p. 30) - it is "just bullshit" (p. 29). Key to Frankfurt's conceptual analysis is that Pascal is not lying: "she does not presume that she knows the truth, and therefore she cannot be deliberately promulgating a proposition that she presumes to be false" (p. 33). What she is guilty of is this "lack of connection to a concern with truth - this indifference to how things really are" (pp. 33-4). This, for Frankfurt, is "the essence of bullshit" (ibid.).

Where the likes of Karl Rove and Alastair Campbell are concerned, it is a deliberate, rather than a careless, indifference to how things really are. How else should we understand the "sexing-up" of intelligence dossiers to include claims of Saddam Hussein's 45-minute battle readiness with chemical warheads on the evidence of one opposition fugitive? Rove and Campbell are not credited with so much as a mention in the book, but they and their kind are its chief target: "The realms of advertising and of public relations, 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" (p. 22). The "craftsmen" responsible for this bullshit are indeed "exquisitely sophisticated", "dedicating themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right" (p. 23).

There is, admits Frankfurt, in this notion of “carefully wrought bullshit” a “certain inner strain” (p. 22): “Excrement is”, after all, “not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case certainly not *wrought*” (pp. 21-2). This paradox, this “inner strain” in the idea of “carefully wrought bullshit”, we can understand in the light of the deliberateness of the indifference to how things really are that is the hallmark of the spin doctor and other purveyors of snake oil. The “mode of laxity” (p. 23) pertinent to both the excreter and the bullshitter doing it at your front door is that they are both “trying to get away with something” (p. 23). A careless lack of connection to a concern with truth this is not.

Why the incidence of bullshit appears so great today Frankfurt addresses by considering who might display such carelessness. First, it’s those whose “obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed [their] knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic”, a “discrepancy common in public life, where people are frequently impelled – whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others – to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant” (p. 63). Naturally I couldn’t help thinking also of those of us in the academy. Second, it’s those who believe that it is their responsibility as citizens of information-saturated democracies “to have opinions about everything” (p. 64). Worse, “the lack of any significant connection between a person’s opinions and his apprehension of reality will be even more severe ... for someone who believes it is his responsibility, as a conscientious moral agent, to evaluate events and conditions in all parts of the world” (ibid.).

But those for whom Frankfurt reserves his well veiled invective in the book’s closing pages are those who, in keeping with the intellectual climate of the last few decades, “deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality” (p. 64). Both the liar and the truth-teller assume “that there are indeed facts that are in some way both determinate and knowable” (p. 61). But while the liar and the truth-teller both recognize the authority of the truth (the liar simply defies it by refusing to meet its demands), the bullshitter “ignores these demands altogether” (p. 61). The bullshitter, as “someone who ceases to believe in the possibility of identifying certain statements as true and others as false” (ibid.) is therefore “a greater enemy of the truth” (ibid.) than is the liar. With the less mature postmoderns in his sights (for him they are clearly no better than the likes of Campbell or Rove), Frankfurt disparages those who have undermined “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).

One response to this loss of confidence, he suggests, has been a retreat from a “dedication to the ideal of *correctness*” (p. 65) to the pursuit of *sincerity* as an epistemological ideal. Here he echoes Charles Taylor’s lamenting the contemporary predilection for imbuing a conviction with significance simply because it has been authentically reached: “My view is worthwhile because it is mine”. While Taylor is concerned to show that moral conclusions reached by an individual without regard to her “horizons of significance” (1991, p. 37) are ultimately hollow, he parallels Frankfurt’s epistemological concerns. For the latter, “since it makes no sense [to the

sceptic] to try to be true to the facts, he must therefore try instead to be true to himself" (p. 66).

But while Frankfurt shares Taylor's rejection of such radical individualism (authenticity for Taylor is to be sought in a communitarian approach to ethics, after all) he will have nothing to do with any mention of authenticity or sincerity in the sense of trying to be true to one's nature as if it were a determinate and knowable entity: "It is preposterous to imagine that we ourselves are determinate, and hence susceptible both to correct and to incorrect descriptions, while supposing that the ascription of determinacy to anything else has been exposed as a mistake" (p. 66). "Our natures are," he concludes, "elusively insubstantial – notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things" (p. 67). Insofar as this is the case, that is how "sincerity itself is bullshit" (ibid.).

But this review is now at least a fifth as long as Frankfurt's marvellous book is, and I did promise to respect its brevity by trying to be similarly succinct.

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