

Harry G. Frankfurt

On Bullshit

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

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 phenomenon 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. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory. I propose to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis. I shall not consider the rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit. My aim is simply to give a rough account of what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not — or (putting it somewhat differently) to articulate, more or less sketchily, the structure of its concept.

Any suggestion about what conditions are logically both necessary and sufficient for the constitution of bullshit is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. For one thing, the expression is often employed quite loosely — simply as a generic term of abuse, with no very specific literal meaning. For another, the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous that no crisp and perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean. Nonetheless it should be possible to say something helpful, even though it is not likely to be decisive. Even the most basic and preliminary questions about bullshit remain, after all, not only unanswered but unasked.

So far as I am aware, very little work has been done on this subject. I

occupies a certain segment while humbug is located exclusively at earlier points. What continuum could this be, along which one encounters humbug only before one encounters lying? Both lying and humbug are modes of misrepresentation. It is not at first glance apparent, however, just how the difference between these varieties of misrepresentation might be construed as a difference in degree.

There are two points to notice here. First, Black identifies humbug not only as a category of speech but as a category of action as well; it may be accomplished either by words or by deeds. Second, his use of the qualifier “especially” indicates that Black does not regard pretentiousness as an essential or wholly indispensable characteristic of humbug. Undoubtedly, much humbug is pretentious. So far as concerns bullshit, moreover, “pretentious bullshit” is close to being a stock phrase. But I am inclined to think that when bullshit is pretentious, this happens because pretentiousness is its motive rather than a constitutive element of its essence. The fact that a person is behaving pretentiously is not, it seems to me, part of what is required to make his utterance an instance of bullshit. It is often, to be sure, what accounts for his making that utterance. However, it must not be assumed that bullshit always and necessarily has pretentiousness as its motive.

This provision that the perpetrator of humbug is essentially misrepresenting himself raises some very central issues. To begin with, whenever a person deliberately misrepresents he must inevitably misrepresent his own state of mind. It is possible, of course, for a person to misrepresent that alone — for instance, by pretending to have a desire or a feeling which he does not actually have. But suppose that a person, whether by telling a lie or in another way, misrepresents something else. Then he necessarily misrepresents at least two things. He misrepresents whatever he is talking about — i.e., the state of affairs that is the topic or referent of his discourse — and in doing this he cannot avoid misrepres

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trouble with her statement is that it purports to convey something more than simply that she feels bad. Her characterization of her feeling is too specific; it is excessively particular. 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. To the Wittgenstein in Pascal's story, judging from his response, this is just bullshit.

Now assuming that Wittgenstein doe \$ i

Although I was only seven when my father was killed, I still remember him very well and some of the things he used to say. . . . One of the first things he taught me was,

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This presumes not only that there is an important difference between lying and bullshitting, but that the latter is preferable to the former. Now the elder Simpson surely did not consider bullshitting morally superior to lying. Nor is it likely that he regarded lies as invariably less effective than bullshit in accomplishing the purposes for which either of them might be employed. After all, an intelligently crafted lie may do its work with unqualified success. It may be that Simpson thought it easier to get away with bullshitting than with lying. Or perhaps he meant that, although the risk of being caught is about the same in each case, the consequences of being caught are generally less severe for the bullshitter than for the liar.

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¹ Max Black,
University Press, 1985).

(Ithaca: Cornell

² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³ This is reported by Norman Malcolm, in his "Introduction" to
R. Rhees (ed.),
University Press, 1984), p. xiii.

(Oxford: Oxford

⁴ Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir," in R. Rhees,
op. cit., pp. 28-9.

⁵ It may be noted that the inclusion of insincerity among its essential conditions would imply that bull cannot be produced inadvertently; for it hardly seems possible to be inadvertently insincere.

⁶ Here is part of the context in which these lines occur: "Les Albigeois, a problem of history, / and the fleet at Salamis made with money lent by the state to the shipwrights / Tempus tacendi, tempus loquendi. / Never inside the country to raise the standard of living / bur always abroad to increase the profits of usurers, / dixit Lenin, / and gun sales lead to more gun sales / they do nor clutter the market for gunnery / there is no saturation / Pisa, in the

23rd year of the effort in sight of the tower / and Till was hung yesterday / for murder and rape with trimmings plus Cholkis / plus mythology, thought he was Zeus ram or another one / Hey Snag wots in the bibl' ? / wot are the books ov the bible? / Name 'em, don't bullshit ME."

⁷ E. Ambler, (1967), I. iii. 25. The citation is provided in the same entry as the one that included the passage from Pound. The closeness of the relation between bullshitting and bluffing is resonant, it seems to me, in the parallelism of the idioms: "bullshit your way through" and "bluff your way through."

⁸ "Lying," in

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