

*On Bullshit*

Harry G. Frankfurt

Princeton University Press, 2005

67pp. \$14.95, ISBN0 691 12294 6

---

Despite its provocative title, *On Bullshit* is a serious little book of philosophy, the commercial and critical success of which makes it the surprise publication of the year.

It is rare for an academic essay of this kind to receive much popular attention, but Harry G. Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* works hard at being accessible, entertaining and undemanding. The basis of Frankfurt's theory is immediately recognisable to us all, whether we like to admit it or not, because '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'. And who doesn't like to read all about themselves?

The problem in our social and cultural context is as Frankfurt states: there really is so much bullshit. Everywhere. The problem from a philosophical point of view is that there is no clear understanding of what bullshit is, 'we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us'. So Frankfurt sets about beginning the development of a 'theory of bullshit'.

Frankfurt's theory is that bullshit is worse than a lie. Telling the truth and lying are two sides of the same game, both positions acknowledge and have a relationship to 'truth', whereas bullshit has no concern for the truth at all. The only concern of the bullshitter is his image, what people may think of him. The bullshitter may actually alight on the truth, more by accident than design, but that is not the motive of bullshit and is of no consequence to the bullshitter.

We all bullshit, we all feel confident of our ability to recognise bullshit when we encounter it, and for these reasons we are surprisingly tolerant of it. While we are all happily contributing to the global quantity of bullshit, we are also consuming it in ever increasing proportions. We accept bullshit as part of modern life and while blaming politicians, the media, PR machines and magazine editors for producing vast quantities of the stuff, we are also buying it in record proportions; when we run out, we demand more; we are always on the lookout for better bullshit than we can ourselves produce. Being fed bullshit is entertaining and it is easy.

These days bullshit is, in fact, just a form of good manners; it greases the wheels of modern social interaction, commerce and government. Telstra-like boardrooms all around the country are steeped in the practice. Indeed straight-out truth telling is considered to be rude and undiplomatically blunt, the truth is rarely cool, fun or entertaining. To be sure, no one wants to be told a barefaced lie either as there are too many consequences requiring some kind of effort when you know you are being lied to. Nope, bullshit is where it's at. Bullshit skims along between the boundaries, comfortably never quite puncturing the surface of truth or lies, but always exhibiting just enough reality to be acceptable.

A problem arises when our bullshit-antennae fail us. When the bullshit is so artful, so convincing, so cleverly crafted that it appears to even the most experienced among us to be completely and utterly the truth, when in actual fact it is untrue or, worse, unmitigated bullshit, this is the work of the 'bullshit artist'.

When discovering we have been taken in by a bullshit artist, we are unrelenting in our vengeance. The hoary old paradigm of the feted and much promoted self-made/media-created celebrity who, suffering a fall from grace, is torn limb from limb by a media fuelled by the outrage of its audience (and the ker-ching of advertising dollars). Latham, Vizard, Hanson are just a few recent notable cases. While Frankfurt's theory proposes a moral position (that to lie

is bad, but to bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lying) it is often difficult to disentangle such situations to arrive at a moral or even ethical position; the bullshit artist is obviously 'bad', those that promote and support the bullshit artist are complicit; we are angry because we have been duped. If only we had *known* it was all bullshit ... We all *knew* Hawke's famous 'by 1990 no Australian child shall live in poverty' was utter bullshit. And we were happy with that, we played along.

So acknowledged bullshit, consciously or otherwise, is fine. It may be morally and ethically pernicious, or it may just be shallow and mindless, but like French fries cooked in beef fat that encourage obesity, promote heart disease and kill people, we still swallow it. Happily, greedily, we suck it up.

The reasons for this are complex. Frankfurt doesn't spend time analysing any rhetorical uses or misuses of bullshit nor its consequences. He admits his essay is just the beginning of a philosophical analysis, an attempt to 'articulate, more or less sketchily, the structure of its concept'. Not because he is not interested, or has not thought it through that far—obviously he is and I'm sure he has. No doubt he doesn't want to go into the complexity of 'why' because we'll lose interest, get bored and switch on the TV wondering who's left on Big Brother.

He does however, at the very end of the piece, suggest a possible source for the contemporary proliferation of bullshit: 'antirealist' doctrines such as 'postmodernism' within which 'reality', 'truth' and 'rationality' are indefinable and meaningless and the best we can each hope to know is how we *feel* and to be '*sincere*' about that. In political terms jump aboard the 'Opportunity Express' - there are no individual seats we all just pile in together, the important person is not the driver with the map, but the funny bloke up the back who cracks lots of bum jokes and don't ask why we are going round in circles, because driving in circles is just as valid as going in straight lines, y'know.

'Opportunity Express', 'ladders of opportunity' ... they are examples of nice sounding, sincere ideas that are basically meaningless in a practical and real sense and are, therefore, potentially dangerous. Insofar as this is true, as Frankfurt says: 'sincerity is bullshit'.

Amalia Matheson