OUR VISION AND OUR MISSION: BULLSHIT, ASSERTION AND BELIEF

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Abstract
“Bullshit”, as Harry Frankfurt writes in his recent book “On Bullshit”, is a communication that pretends to be genuinely informative but really is not. The person who talks bullshit, Frankfurt holds, is unconcerned with whether what he says is true, but is very concerned with how he is thought of by the listener. In this paper, I discuss Frankfurt’s theory of bullshit, making specific reference to the requirement for deceptive intent on the part of the bullshitter and to whether bullshitting must involve conscious dishonesty. I hold that the really disturbing feature of much bullshit is that people often “believe their own bullshit” and that this requires making room for believing one’s own bullshit as a form of self-deception. Some choice examples of bullshit are nosed and it is asked whether Frankfurt really has it in for postmodernism.

Bullshit

According to the (South African) Department of Home Affairs¹,

“The vision of the Department of Home Affairs is rendering a world-class service. The Department strives to become the leading state department in South Africa in terms of service delivery. Through successful stakeholder relationships, collective and collaborative solution finding, empowerment, flexibility and creativity, the Department will transform itself from a reactive to a proactive organisation recognised for successful service delivery and effective and committed staff members.”

The department also has a “mission” and commits itself, inter alia, to “…effectively [balance] the immediate need for information to guide the management of resources with the need for long-range, strategic information.”

To a recent “customer” of the department at their Wynberg branch, this appears to be empty rhetoric at best: no such striving, nor any such management nous was evident in his dealings with the department (quite the opposite). As a communication of the values of the department, the statement of its “vision” and “mission” is mangled and inept, veering from too vague (“proactive organisation”) to overly specific (compare the

talk of balancing the requirements for information needed on the long and sort term). More interesting than the jargon it contains (and partly explanatory of it) is the motivation behind the department’s publicising its vision and mission. Stated reasons for it may include a wish to be open regarding the organisation’s values, inspiring confidence in the public or encouraging loyalty in its employees, but that this is the real motive is belied by the smugness of the language in which it is couched as much as by the service offered by the department. Rather, propounding a “vision” and “mission” is a fad indulged in by South African organisations since the early 1990’s at the latest: South African organisations from universities and schools to state departments and private companies plaster similar vacuous phrases – dreamed up at “team-building sessions” – over walls and websites in order to appear effective and smart and definitely not because they really care about values. What offends about this and other forms of “management-speak” is both the emptiness of it and the cynicism with which it is trotted out: it is bad organisations pretending to be good because they have to be seen to be and caring little that an intelligent public and work-force sees through the trick.

**Frankfurt on Bullshit**

First writing on the topic in 1986, Harry Frankfurt bemoans what he sees as a significant feature of our culture: that there is so much bullshit about. The bullshit (in advertising, politics, the media and the academy) that he mentions is – of course – not confined to South Africa; bullshit is found world-wide and in many cultures and has been around for some time. But there is reason to worry about the volume of bullshit that is about these days and in western culture specifically: Frankfurt attributes the quantity of bullshit out there to such cornerstones of western democracies as the mass (and now rolling, 24-hour) media, advertising, the party political system and some features of contemporary academic thought.

In his article “On Bullshit”², Frankfurt develops a theoretical understanding of what bullshit is and attempts to provide a definition. Why seek to define bullshit? Frankfurt is aware that most people, while they may not be able to define it, recognise bullshit when they see it and realises that attempting to provide (as analytic philosophers are wont to do) a minutely argued list of necessary and sufficient conditions for being bullshit will smell to many people exactly like what he is trying to define. This has lead at least one commentator to hold that what Frankfurt writes is itself bullshit or a clever parody on analytic philosophy.³ In contrast, Frankfurt has a serious intent in writing about bullshit: in addition to explaining why there is so much of it about, he aims to capture the particular form of dishonesty involved in bullshitting people and, in so doing, provides conceptual weaponry for those who deplore bullshit: part of the effort in defining bullshit is to convince that some communications are worthy of the disapproval involved in calling something “shit” and to show which ones they are.

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² Published as a book with the same title by Princeton University Press in 2005. Page references are to this book.
³ See Baggini’s (2005) review of *On Bullshit*. 

Black on bullshit

What does “bullshit” mean? Rather than write about “bullshit”, Max Black (in his essay “The Prevalence of Humbug”) calls what Frankfurt writes about “humbug”, but they are concerned with the same phenomenon. Black suggests synonyms for “humbug” like “balderdash”, “claptrap”, “hokum” and “imposture” and defines “humbug” as

“deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.” (Frankfurt, 2005: 6)

Like Black, Frankfurt holds that bullshit involves a “deliberate misrepresentation”; like lying, bullshitting amounts to someone trying to deceive another. Bullshitting involves deceptive intent, making whether an utterance is bullshit dependent on the state of mind of the bullshitter rather than on features of the utterance itself.5 (Frankfurt, 2005: 6 – 7)

Black distinguishes between two matters that a speaker may mislead a listener about: the speaker may mislead the listener about his own feelings or attitudes or he may mislead the listener about what is the case in the world and about his own feelings and attitudes. Take the example of the murderer Smith, on trial, unrepentant and intent on deceiving the court. Smith may admit in a mournful voice to having killed the victim, pleading for forgiveness; if his ruse is successful, he will have deceived the court not about who committed the crime, but about his own attitudes and feelings: the court will think that Smith is contrite when he is not. Alternatively, Smith may lie to the court (with pathos or not), saying that Jones committed the murder and thereby deceive the court twice over, firstly into believing that it is Jones who committed the murder and secondly into believing that he (Smith) believes that it is Jones who committed the murder. If Smith is successful in this second deception, he will have deceived the court both about what actually happened and about what he thinks and feels about it.

Black holds that the primary intention in humbug is not to deceive the listener about what is the case in the world (as in Smith’s second deception) but to deceive the listener about the speaker himself or about his (the speaker’s) state of mind. Take the case of the social theorist who writes that

“…the anthropomorphic cult, with its code of devout observances, suffers a progressive disintegration through the stress of economic exigencies and the decay of the system of status”. (Black, 1983: 10)

4 “Imposture” is an interesting choice. It calls to mind the book (written after Frankfurt’s article) called Intellectual Impostures (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998), accusing a number of postmodern philosophers of bullshitting when they write about science. The American edition of that book was called Fashionable Nonsense, but “nonsense” is different from imposture; what the difference is will become clear below.

5 Frankfurt’s stance prompts the question whether any statement whatsoever can be bullshit, as long as the bullshitter has bullshitting intent in uttering it or whether there are properties of the utterance itself that mark it out as bullshit independently of the speakers intent. See Cohen’s (2002) criticism of Frankfurt, discussed below.
On this view, the theorist cares little about what the reader comes to believe about the topic about which he is writing (the “leisure class”), but is rather most interested in impressing on the reader that he really is a very brilliant and sensitive fellow.

Frankfurt on bullshit and truth

Distinguishing his account from Black’s, a great part of Frankfurt’s efforts is directed at capturing the particular dishonesty that is involved in talking bullshit and distinguishing bullshit sharply from lying. Although Frankfurt thinks it correct that bullshit is “short of lying” and that the bullshitter misrepresents himself in the way that Black describes, he holds that Black’s account of this misrepresentation is off the mark. (2005: 19) He chooses to develop an account of bullshit on the basis of some things he takes Wittgenstein to have held about nonsense.

Frankfurt points out that bullshit, often, is just shoddy or careless communication (even though it is often couched in high-falutin terms). Consider this as an example of bullshit: the student does not study for his exam and the next day writes pages of whatever he can remember was said in the course, whether relating to the question or not, using every item of remembered or misremembered technical vocabulary. This is called “bullshitting an exam”. One can also bullshit a class if one is a teacher or one can bullshit a job interview or a sales presentation – in this sense, bullshit involves a scantiness of preparation coupled with a delivery confident that this deficiency will not be noticed. When bullshitting, the content of what is said is unimportant as long as the communication sounds right.

Frankfurt points out, though, that bullshit is not always just such careless talk. Sometimes bullshit is very carefully crafted: he notes that in enterprises like advertising, public relations and politics (amongst others) people take great care in ensuring that they will mislead others about their own feelings and attitudes without quite lying: much thought and preparation – rather than very little – is the hallmark of this smooth-talking bullshit. The exceptional people capable of fooling others in this way without their noticing or caring we call bullshit artists. Frankfurt (2005: 22) thinks that there is a tension between the idea that bullshit is typically a shoddy or careless communication, but can also be something that great care is taken over. He concludes, though, that there is always something substandard even to such carefully crafted bullshit, because even the bullshit artist is trying to “get away with something” (or is selling the listener short) in some respect. The bullshit artist may be careful about how he portrays himself and his message, but he is not careful about the truth of what he says.

Bullshit and meaning

The concern with truth forms the central plank of Frankfurt’s argument. It captures his disagreement with Black and is the reason why Frankfurt’s little article on bullshit makes a not insignificant contribution to the philosophy of language: by distinguishing bullshit from lying it helps us understand better what goes on when someone lies and, more
importantly, by saying what good speech is not, it helps to make clear what it is to speak at all.

At its most basic, the activity of speaking is one of sharing truths; what people do in speaking is provide each other with handy information about where to find what they want – food, water, shelter and the like at the most basic end – and avoid what they fear. When we speak about engineering, computer science or economics today we are still communicating information that is of interest to other people, although admittedly of a type less concerned with such direct needs. Be that as it may, in order to be an efficient participant in this activity of “speaking to each other” one needs to speak the truth – if you say something that is false (for whatever reason) you are transmitting potentially damaging information to the listener. Naturally, all of us say things that are false sometimes and mostly this is just due to honest mistake. Most people do not try (or, at least, try most of the time) to say what is false. Of course, everyone lies at some point: whether it be a white lie or a bare-faced lie does not matter – lying is saying something that is untrue knowing that it is untrue and knowing that the listener takes one to be speaking the truth. Morally speaking, we disapprove of lying, but lying is not just wrong for moral reasons: it is wrong for a semantic reason too: there would be nothing like communication of handy truths to others – there would be no speech – if everyone lied all of the time. If everyone lied all of the time speech would have no point, firstly, but, more strikingly, words could have no meanings at all if they were not used to communicate the truth in the first instance. If no-one ever used a sentence like “the cat is on the mat” when there is a cat on the mat in clear view, that sentence would not mean that the cat is on the mat. If it was consistently used to describe another situation (say the dog standing in the door) “the cat is on the mat” would mean the dog is standing in the door; and if “the cat is on the mat” were not used consistently to describe one kind of situation at all, it would simply mean nothing. The point is that no-one could develop (or learn) a language at all if people did not for the most part speak the truth. This insight is captured most strikingly in Davidson’s (1973) principle of charity and is the most compelling reason why one theory of meaning should be truth-conditional.

In writing about bullshit and lying, Frankfurt relies on this insight. He notes that without the activity of speaking the truth there could be no lying: lying depends, conceptually, on speaking the truth. This is easy to see if one considers matters practically: the (successful) liar is someone who knows that others will take him to be speaking the truth and derives a benefit from the fact that what he says is false; he could not derive this benefit if people did not have the expectation that what he says is true. But the best reason for holding lying to depend on speaking the truth is conceptual: no-one could tell a lie if there were no practice of communicating things to each other in the first place. After all, lying is just asserting something as true that one knows is false – to be in a position to do this there has to exist, firstly, the practice of asserting and interpreting utterances as true. Think of counterfeiting money: if there were no real money it would be impossible to make fake or counterfeit money. In this sense, we might say that lying is like transacting in fake truth.

Seen against this background, it becomes possible to state the difference between bullshit and lying. In lying, Frankfurt holds, the liar is engaged in the practice of telling the truth
just as the speaker who is speaking the truth is. By this, he means that the liar is transmitting to the hearer a discreet piece of information that is of interest to the hearer and that is portrayed as true. The information the liar transmits is, of course, false\(^6\) – the point is that it pretends to be true and that it is straightforwardly and verifiably true or false. Furthermore, in saying what he says the liar is \textit{guided} by the truth. The liar could not lie if he did not have definite opinions about what is true and false and consciously avoided telling the truth: he cares about what is true and is guided in what he says \textit{by} what is true in as much as he \textit{avoids} saying what is true. (Frankfurt, 2005: 56 – 61) In bullshitting, the situation is different. The bullshitter does not make a straightforward communication of something that he believes is false. In reality, the bullshitter does not care much about what he actually says – his aim is not to lead the listener into believing something that is not true\(^7\), but to confuse the listener into believing that he is communicating something \textit{at all} when he is doing nothing of the sort. Whereas the liar \textit{informs} the listener (but wrongly), the bullshitter is faking taking part in the activity of information transmission. The liar contributes to the cooperative effort that is communication, but he contributes something bad, while the bullshitter pretends to contribute but contributes nothing at all. The difference between the two, one might say, is like that between a thief and a freeloader.

Frankfurt’s main addition to thought about bullshit (and also what his account offers over that of Black) concerns the relationship between bullshitting and truth talking. The bullshitter not only portrays himself as believing or feeling what he does not (as Black suggests), in speaking he shows a disregard for what is true. Frankfurt calls this – that the bullshitter misrepresents that he has genuine communicative intent – the “only indispensable distinctively characteristic” of bullshit. What is bad about bullshit is that bullshitting is not guided by the truth like truth-telling or lying is. In bullshit, no attention is paid to the truth at all. This makes the bullshitter, for Frankfurt, “a greater enemy of the truth than [the liar].” (2005: 61)

\textit{“Frankfurt-bullshitters” and “Cohen-bullshit”}

An interesting consequence of Frankfurt’s view is that bullshit need not actually be false: it is not the truth or falsity (or even meaninglessness) of a sentence that makes it bullshit, it is that it is uttered without a concern for what is true. Given Frankfurt’s view, it is

\footnote{\textsuperscript{6} More accurately, the information is believed to be false by the liar.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{7} Cohen (2002: 327 – 8) disagrees. He holds that bullshit is often designed to lead to a misapprehension on the part of the listener. This is true especially in politics and advertising, where bullshit is exactly used to mislead people into believing that, say, conservatism is the compassionate way or that Omo washes whiter. In holding that some lying may also be bullshitting, Cohen misses the precise distinction: advertisers may of course lie, the point is that, in so far as they are merely bullshitting, there is no \textit{specific} thing that they want to mislead the listener about. What bullshitters in advertising or politics \textit{want} is not for the public to believe something specific, it is just wanted that they believe whatever will make them vote for the politician or buy the company’s goods. Say the politician tells the voters that Senator John was a friend of the North-Vietnamese knowing that this is not true and in order to make the public believe that Senator John was a friend of the North-Vietnamese. This is lying. But say the same politician says that Senator John “flipflops around on the left bank of public opinion” meaning not for the public to believe anything specific about John’s policy ideas, but in order to create a range of negative impressions of John that might vary from voter to voter. Then the politician merely bullshits.}
possible that one can make a *true* utterance without concern for the truth and still turn out bullshit. (Take the example of the student bullshitting his essay: say that he, accidentally – and without really caring, writes something that is true. Due to his not caring about the truth of what he writes this will be bullshit even though it is true.)

Concerned about this, G.A. Cohen distinguishes between two *kinds* to bullshit and criticises Frankfurt's account. Cohen distinguishes between the producer of bullshit’s intention (that is bullshitting someone) – and the product that the bullshitter produces (the bullshit that he utters). For Frankfurt, bullshit is what is produced when one has a bullshitting intention, or the essence of bullshit is that behind it lies the intention to bullshite someone. Cohen, however, holds that not all bullshit is bullshit because it was produced with a bullshitting intention: some of it is bullshit simply by virtue of features of the utterance itself, independently of the speaker’s intention. (2002: 324)

The reason is this: Cohen is concerned with the bullshit that pervades academia; as an example he mentions the writings of the Althusserian Marxists, but he holds French philosophy quite generally to be full of bullshit. (2002: 322, 333) He describes a situation that many academics are all too familiar with: reading pages of impenetrable jargonised text by some writer known for the complexity of his work, one sometimes gives up on the piece, brow-beaten by the academic's style to think that, as one cannot understand the deep point he is striving to make the author must be cleverer than oneself. Cohen’s concern is that, rather than being simply too deep for one to understand, such work is often bullshit: when one digs through the jargon to discover the heart of what is asserted, one finds the piece either (1) to make no real sense, (2) to state something more obvious than it pretends or (3) to be a patent absurdity.

Cohen holds that Frankfurt's analysis works quite badly for this sort of bullshit. Specifically he holds that a piece of academic writing is bullshit is not necessarily due to one author's dishonest intentions. He holds that someone may have entirely honest intentions and still bullshit: Firstly, entirely honest people often repeat on trust what other seemingly trustworthy people say; if these people talk bullshit, this bullshit is liable to be repeated, but, on Frankfurt’s view, according to which bullshit requires dishonesty, as soon as the honest person repeats it, the utterance will stop being bullshit. Secondly, it is possible that an honest person may simply have a bullshit idea and voice it; especially if this bullshit is repeated by others this person may even be encouraged to spout more of similar sounding bullshit and others may begin to produce such bullshit of their own under the spell of the original. Because of this possible disconnect between the shittiness of what is said and the utterer’s state of mind, Cohen holds that dishonesty is neither sufficient nor necessary for bullshit. (2002: 331 – 2)

In order to accommodate this possibility, Cohen suggests that one distinguish between two types of bullshit: what he calls Frankfurt-bullshit, which is characterised by the bullshitter’s intention to deceive and lack of care for the truth and another kind, what he calls “Cohen-bullshit”: Cohen-bullshit is bullshit with a life of its own and is bullshit independently of the bullshitters intent to deceive. (2002: 331 – 5)

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8 Cohen is a Marx scholar.
Cohen attempts to explain the features that an utterance must, as it were “have in itself” if it is to count as bullshit. In the sense that Cohen is interested in, bullshit is a species of nonsense: specifically, it is “unclarifiable nonsense”.\(^9\) (2002: 332 – 3) If one makes a pronouncement that cannot be made clear (if it remains uncertain what is being said no matter how one tries) it is bullshit. Cohen cannot offer a definition of clarity, but he offers a sufficient condition of unclarity: if “…adding or subtracting a negation sign from a text makes no difference to its level of plausibility…” the text is definitely unclear.\(^10\) (2002: 333) Such, he thinks, is the case with many of the abuses of scientific terminology that Sokal and Bricmont (1998) identify when they accuse a number of prominent French intellectuals of “imposture” (effectively “bullshit”). To say, as Baudrillard does, that “the space of the event has become a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean” is so obscure that it does not really say anything: non-Euclidan geometries, involving the possibility that there are multiple lines parallel to a first one passing through the same point is so unlike armed conflict that one cannot usefully compare the two, while “hyperspace with multiple refractivity” just means nothing, mathematically speaking. (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998: 137 – 8). Cohen holds that there may be even more kinds of bullshit besides unclarifiable nonsense, but it is clear that this is the sense of bullshit that he most clearly has in mind as another form of bullshit besides Frankfurt-bullshit.

In a reply to Cohen, Frankfurt concedes that someone may repeat someone else’s bullshit and thereby say something that is bullshit, even though sincere. (2002: 340) In this, Frankfurt seems to open the door for an account according to which repeated bullshit is still bullshit due to the fact that the bullshitter with whom the bullshit originated had a dishonest intent. This partly explains what Cohen worries about: that there can be whole fields of bullshit, containing honest well-meaning people taken in by it and repeating the bullshit of others. The real problem with Cohen’s account of bullshit, though, is that he refuses to define what it is for an utterance to be clear.\(^11\) This, Frankfurt holds, may amount to Cohen “…hoisting [his] account of bullshit by its own petard…” Not being able to define clarity, Cohen’s own account is unclear and, therefore bullshit by its own standards. (Frankfurt, 2002: 341 – 2)

Cohen’s concern, though, is serious and definitely not bullshit, so it is a shortcoming of his theory that it is lumped in with bullshit by its own test. In what follows, I attempt to

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\(^9\) Cohen leaves the possibility open that there can be even more sorts of bullshit, such as “rubbish” (arguments grossly deficient in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence) or “irretrievably speculative comment”. (2002: 332 – 3)

\(^10\) Cohen realises that, on this definition, poetry will be bullshit. (For Frankfurt it does not have to be, because the poet does not have the intention to deceive.) In order to save poetry, Cohen has to say that the unclear text is also one that is unsuggestive (or that poetry, being suggestive, is not bullshit). (2002: 334) A great problem with Cohen’s account is that more or less any French philosopher can claim to be suggestive: being suggestive is the trademark of French philosophy, if anything is.

\(^11\) Cohen holds that one cannot define clarity. (2002: 332) Cohen’s hesitation may be due to his knowing that it is difficult to provide a theory of nonsense or (even) memory of the failure of the verificationist project, that, in a sense, also sought to define bullshit as nonsense. In providing an account of bullshit it would be better for Cohen not to hitch his wagon to the “theory of nonsense”-train, as there is no telling where that train might go (if anywhere).
accommodate Cohen-bullshit in Frankfurt’s framework; I point out another problem that faces Cohen’s account and show how this can best be overcome by holding that all bullshit is Frankfurrian.

**Believing one’s own Bullshit**

Consider what is called “postmodernism” in the humanities. While the movement is on the wane, a lot of bullshit masquerades as serious academic thought in “postmodern” “theory”. What has always disturbed me about this movement (and what seems to puzzle Cohen) is the absolute earnestness and preachy air with which postmodernists attempt to convince scientists and analytic philosophers that the pursuit of truth in the whole of science is misguided, or worse: politically repressive. The puzzlement (and for postmodernists, as far as Cohen is concerned, their essential honesty) lies in the fact that many people seem to believe this and in exactly those terms: they repeat it often enough and are more than willing to declare that truth, quite generally, is bunk. Indeed, we often say of people that they believe their own bullshit: by this, we mean that they have become so caught up by the grand but empty things that they say that they repeat it whenever opportunity presents and even attempt to act in ways bearing out this belief. Could people do this if they did not believe their own bullshit?

The problem that this poses for Cohen’s account is the following: if “Cohen-bullshit” is essentially a species of nonsense (“unclarifiable nonsense”), how can someone then believe their own bullshit? The point is that nonsense, at least as that term is used in Wittgenstein inspired philosophy of language, is not something that anyone can believe. What “nonsense” in the Wittgensteinian sense is, has attracted much discussion; while views differ, one may say that an example of a piece of nonsense may be the sentence “Socrates is identical”: in one common garb, it is a string of words that appears grammatical, but makes no sense. Wherein it consists that a sentence like this does not make sense is that the (pseudo-) sentences in question cannot have a truth value; it is not something that can be either true or false, so it is not fit to describe reality. Beliefs, though, are propositional attitudes of the following sort: when one believes that p, one takes p to be true, that is, one takes it that what the belief describes is in fact the case. One’s belief may be wrong, but it needs, in any case, to describe something definite that one can be right or wrong about. Seeing as “Socrates is identical” cannot be true or false, it fails this test. One wants to say with Frege that only propositions can be believed and that, because “Socrates is identical” expresses no proposition, it cannot be believed.

On Cohen’s “nonsense” account of bullshit, no-one can believe their own bullshit. More importantly, on his account no-one can assert bullshit either. Standardly, assertion is taken to be just saying what one truly believes (if someone says “the cat is on the mat”, we are entitled to believe that they believe that the cat is on the mat). The problem for Cohen is that, if bullshit is nonsense and nonsense cannot be believed, then it cannot be asserted either. To be fair, someone may move his lips and out may come the sound “the space of war is definitively non-Euclidean”, but seeing as this is not something that can be believed, no one can say that it is truly the case that the space of war is non-Euclidean. When one asserts anything, one portrays the world to be like one says it is and as no-one
has any idea of what reality would be like if war’s space were non-Euclidean, no-one can seriously say that reality is like that. However, this does seem to happen: people do seem to assert and believe bullshit and on the “nonsense” view of bullshit, this is impossible to explain. Indeed Cohen’s thought depends on the possibility that bullshit may be asserted and believed, since – on his account – there are many entirely honest bullshitters in the world: he attempts to explain, after all, why people who are not engaged in deception may still speak bullshit. It is important that the sort of honest bullshitter Cohen imagines will have to be an asserter of bullshit and not just someone who mouths nonsense sentences, for just mouthing nonsense is in itself a serious dishonesty. But this thought – that someone can assert bullshit – is irreconcilable with the idea that what marks what they say out as bullshit is that it is nonsense.

What is wrong about bullshit, indeed, has to be addressed not at the level of whether an utterance is defective in itself, but at the level of what makes an utterance an assertion (which is where Frankfurt situates his discussion of bullshit) and I think Frankfurt has matters aright: asserting that p involves that one cares about the truth of p inasmuch as one says that p because p. Putting it in normative terms, we might say that it is the fact that p that makes the asserter say that p or that guides the speaker to saying that p. Bullshitting, again, is parasitic on assertion: it is when one pretends to assert or pretends to be guided in what one says by what is true, but says what one does under the guidance of something else – the inclination to fool someone.12

However, the possibility that someone may believe their own bullshit also poses a problem for Frankfurt’s account of bullshit. For Frankfurt, bullshit involves deception. Were one to believe one’s own bullshit, then, this would require a self-deception and it is hard to see how someone may deceive himself consciously, for deception requires that the deceived not know about the deception and if deceiver and deceived are the same person, this appears impossible. The barest knowledge of practical psychology, though, tells us that people do deceive themselves and more often than they would admit. Prima facie, believing one’s own bullshit can be explained as a case of self-deception, perhaps as follows: Take someone who bullshits people repeatedly and with great success. Say the bullshitting behaviour becomes more or less automatic (to the point where this person repeats his own bullshit “without a second thought”). Now, were the memory of the original deception to begin to fade in this bullshitter’s mind and were he encouraged by others to admire what he himself has said in the past, this person becomes like someone who repeats the bullshit of another (and becomes less of an original bullshitter). We would say that he has started to believe his own bullshit, but that what he believes is still bullshit due to the fact that, when he originally said it, it was bullshit. Frankfurt’s view that bullshit may be repeated and remain bullshit can also be applied to this case; it implies the following amendment to his theory – that something is bullshit if it was produced with bullshitting intent or is a repetition of a piece of original uttered bullshit.13

12 Lying, of course, is also guided by the truth, as was made clear above.
13 A precedent for this sort of characterisation can be found in some things we say about lies: Lying requires deceptive intent and someone who repeats a lie unknowingly is not always taken to be a liar… however, there are some lies out there that are so pernicious (I have in mind specifically the lie that there was no holocaust) that we call them lies no matter what intent it is uttered with.
Inasmuch as someone repeats a piece of bullshit only because it sounds impressive, of course, that person will also be an original bullshitter.

On this view, bullshit is something that is said (or believed!) by someone who does not care about the truth of what they say and say what they say to impress others or repeat something first said with that intention. In either case, what is actually said may be (trivially) true or simply false, or it may be nonsense – which it does not matter to whether what is said (and possibly believed) is bullshit. When the bullshit is true or false, it is easy to see how it may not only be said, but also believed, but when the bullshit is nonsense, it seems, it can only be said and not believed.

Conclusion: The Ubiquity of Bullshit

A question of central concern for Frankfurt is that of why there is so much bullshit in our culture. He gives two reasons, although he hints that there may be many. Frankfurt writes that, firstly, bullshit is “unaavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about”. (2005: 63) One thinks, in this regard, of the unhelpful answers that newspapers and phone-in shows receive when they ask “the common man” his view about matters of current interest. What one might also like to mention is the demands of rolling 24 hour news where, for major stories, the studios invite “talking heads” to speculate on the causes and consequences of events while news about those events is unavailable or is still streaming in.

The other reason for the proliferation of bullshit in our time that Frankfurt mentions has to do with today’s philosophical climate. Specifically, Frankfurt blames “…various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are.” (2005: 64) Here, Frankfurt has hit the mark squarely. Of course if it is part of one’s world-view that we cannot say how things truly are (or worse, if one believes that there is no “how things truly are”) this will lead to a proliferation of bullshit. For if there is no fact of the matter as to how anything really is, there can also be no better or worse descriptions of how things are, because nothing one says or thinks can reflect how things are in the world anyway. One might go so far as to say that on this view there can be no genuine assertion and consequently no lying at all: if we cannot think or say how things truly are, this means that we cannot aim at reflecting the truth in what we think and say (thinking and speaking honestly), nor could one aim to say what is not true – one could not lie, because by assumption one cannot know what is true and false in the first place. Due to the absence of the possibility that anyone is guided by the truth in such a world, everything

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14 Wanderer (unpublished) mentions the possibility that there may be complete dishonest cultures in which whole groups of people have given up on the practice of paying attention to truth and giving and asking for good reasons for what they say. He presents a different solution to the problem of how someone may be (individually) honest, but may still talk bullshit: the person is a member of a bullshitting culture.

15 The closest that we can come to someone believing a piece of bullshit that is also nonsense is this: someone may believe that they believe something, about, say, war and geometry when they actually believe nothing. Such a case can be uncovered by asking someone to make clear what they believe about war and geometry. If they cannot, the probability is high that they merely believe that they believe something while they actually believe nothing.
that we say or think in such a world would be bullshit by Frankfurt’s lights; there would only be pretend speech and pretend thought in such a world. Of course, that there can ever only be pretend speech and thought without real speech and thought is as impossible as that there can only be fake money or fake art. In order to fashion a pretend anything, the real thing first has to exist, which is why the very existence of bullshit (fake assertion) proves that we language users really are in the business of making assertions that purport to reflect reality.

But that all speech and thought is fake is precisely what “postmodern” philosophy tells us quite explicitly, in advancing the view that no-one can ever say or think something true. Cohen holds that, if bullshit involves “expressly disparaging truth”, postmodernism is “bullshit risen to consciousness of itself”. (2002: 333) That is nicely put, even though I have to disagree. The central tenet of postmodernism is not bullshit, but is simply false. Anyone can see this by taking what I shall call the “bullshit” challenge to postmodernism: “Explain how it is not a consequence of your views on truth that all that everyone – including you – ever says is bullshit, reducing your position to absurdity. If you are happy to believe that everyone bullshits all the time and has always done so, explain further how there may exist what we call communication in such a world or how you may think something definite. Take as long as you like, but be very clear.”

Bibliography


Wanderer, J. Unpublished., “When does Corporate Cliché become Bullshit?”