

## Deeper into Bullshit

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**bullshit** *n.* & *v.* *coarse sl.*—*n.* 1 (Often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. 2 trivial or insincere talk or writing.—*v. intr.* (-shitted, -shitting) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** *n.*

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit.

—*Harry Frankfurt*

### I

Harry Frankfurt's essay "On Bullshit"<sup>1</sup> is a pioneering and brilliant discussion of a widespread but largely unexamined cultural phenomenon. On being honored by an invitation to contribute to the present volume, I decided to focus on Frankfurt's work on bullshit, partly because it is so original and so interesting, and partly because bullshit, and the struggle against it, have played a large role in my own intellectual life. They have

played that role because of my interest in Marxism, which caused me to read, when I was in my twenties, a great deal of the French Marxism of the 1960s, deriving principally from the Althusserian school.

I found that material hard to understand, and, because I was naive enough to believe that writings that were attracting a great deal of respectful, and even reverent, attention could not be loaded with bullshit, I was inclined to put the blame for finding the Althusserians hard entirely on myself. And when I managed to extract what seemed like a reasonable idea from one of their texts, I attributed to it more interest and/or importance (so I later came to see) than it had, partly, no doubt, because I did not want to think that I had been wasting my time. (That psychological mechanism, a blend, perhaps, of “cognitive dissonance reduction” and “adaptive preference formation,” is, I believe, at work quite widely. Someone struggles for ages with some rebarbative text, manages to find some sense in it, and then reports that sense with enthusiasm, even though it is a banality that could have been expressed in a couple of sentences instead of across the course of the dozens of paragraphs to which the said someone has subjected herself.)<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although I was for a time attracted to Althusserianism, I did not end by succumbing to its intoxication, because I came to see that its reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigor was not matched by conceptual rigor in its intellectual practices. The ideas that the Althusserians generated, for example, of the interpellation of the individual as a subject, or of contradiction and overdetermination, possessed a surface allure, but it often seemed impossible to determine whether or not the theses in which those ideas figured were true, and, at other times, those theses seemed capable of just two interpretations: on one of them they were true but uninteresting, and, on the other, they were interesting, but quite obviously false. (Failure to distinguish those opposed interpretations produces an illusory impression of interesting truth.)

No doubt at least partly because of my misguided Althusserian dalliance, I became, as far as bullshit is concerned, among the least tolerant people I knew. And when a set of Marxists or semi-Marxists, who, like me, had come to abhor what we considered to be the obscurity that had come to infest Marxism—when we formed, at the end of the 1970s, a Marxist discussion group that meets annually, and to which I am pleased to belong, I was glad that my colleagues were willing to call it

the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group. Hence the emblem at the head of this article, which says, in Latin, “Marxism without the shit of the bull.” (The group is also called, less polemically, and as you can see, the September Group, since we meet each September, for three days.)

## II

I should like to explain how this essay reached its present state. I read Frankfurt’s article in 1986, when it first appeared. I loved it, but I didn’t think critically about it.

Having been asked to contribute to the present volume, I reread the article, in order to write about it. I came to realize that its proposal about the “essence” of bullshit worked quite badly for the bullshit (see section I) that has occupied me. So I wrote a first draft that trained counterexamples drawn from the domain of the bullshit that interests me against Frankfurt’s account. But I then realized that it was inappropriate to train those examples against Frankfurt, that he and I are, in fact, interested in different bullshits, and, therefore, in different *explicanda*. Frankfurt is interested in a bullshit of ordinary life,<sup>3</sup> whereas I am interested in a bullshit that appears in academic works, and, so I have discovered, the word “bullshit” characteristically denotes *structurally* different things that correspond to those different interests. Finally, and, belatedly, I considered, with some care, the OED account of “bullshit,” and, to my surprise, I discovered (and this was, of course, reassuring) that something like the distinct *explicanda* that I had come to distinguish are listed there under two distinct entries.<sup>4</sup>

So, instead of citing cases of the bullshit that interests me in disconfirmation of Frankfurt’s account, I now regard it as bullshit of a different kind<sup>5</sup>—which is not to say that I have no criticism of Frankfurt’s treatment of the kind of bullshit that interests him.

Frankfurt is partly responsible for my original, misdirected, approach. For he speaks, after all—see the second epigraph at the beginning of this article—of the “essence” of bullshit, and he does not acknowledge that the *explicandum* that attracted his interest is just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit. He begins by saying that the term “bullshit” is very hard to handle, analytically, but, as we shall see, he rather abandons caution when he comes to offer his own account of it.

Consider, then, the OED reading of “bullshit”:

**bullshit** n. & v. *coarse sl.*—n. 1 (Often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. 2 trivial or insincere talk or writing.<sup>6</sup>—v. *intr.* (-shitted, -shitting) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** n.

The bullshit that interests me falls under definition 1 of the noun, but the bullshit that interests Frankfurt is closer to what falls under definition 2 of the noun. And that is because of the appearance of the word “insincere” in that second definition of “bullshit.” In definition 2 of the noun “bullshit,” bullshit is constituted as such through being the product of discourse governed by a certain state of mind. In this activity-centered definition of bullshit, the bull, conceptually speaking, wears the trousers: bullshit is bullshit because it was produced by a bullshitter, or, at any rate, by someone who was bullshitting at the time. Bullshit is, by nature, the product of bullshitting, and bullshitting, by nature, produces bullshit, and that biconditional, so understood that “bullshitting” enjoys semantic primacy, is true of Frankfurt’s view of the matter.<sup>7</sup>

Definition 1, by contrast, defines “bullshit” without reference to the bullshit-producer’s state of mind. The defect of this bullshit does not derive from its provenance: almost any state of mind can emit nonsense or rubbish, with any old mix of sincerity and its lack. Here the shit wears the trousers, and *if* there are indeed “bullshitters,” and “bullshittings,” that correspond to the bullshit of definition 1, then they are defined by reference to bullshit. But it may be the case, as I meant to imply by that “*if*,” that the words “bullshitting” and “bullshitter” don’t have a stable place on this side of the *explicandum* divide.<sup>8</sup> However that may be, definition 1 supplies an output-centered definition of the noun: the character of the process that produces bullshit is immaterial here.

Note, moreover, how the alternatives in the brief entry on the verb “to bullshit” match alternatives 1 and 2 in the definition of the noun (even though that entry isn’t, as it perhaps should have been, subnumbered “1” and “2”). One can “talk nonsense” with any intentions whatsoever, but one cannot unknowingly or inadvertently “bluff”: bluffing is a way of intending to deceive. (I’m not sure, by the way, that the dictionary is right in its implication that it suffices for bullshitting, in the nonbluff sense, that you produce bullshit, in sense 1: innocent producers of bullshit might be said not to be bullshitting when they produce it.)<sup>9</sup>

It is a limitation of Frankfurt's article that, as we shall see, he took for granted that the bull wears the semantic trousers: he therefore focused on one kind of bullshit only, and he did not address another, equally interesting, and academically more significant, kind. Bullshit as insincere talk or writing is indeed what it is because it is the product of something like bluffing, but talking nonsense is what it is because of the character of its output, and nonsense is not nonsense because of features of the nonsense-talker's mental state.

### III

At the beginning of his article, Frankfurt describes a complexity that afflicts the study of bullshit:

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 *bullshit* 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. (117)

I have no problem with Frankfurt's first remark, to wit, that "bullshit" has a wide use in which it covers almost any kind of intellectual fault. To circumvent this problem, to identify a worthwhile *explicandum*, we could ask what "bullshit" denotes where the term does carry (as Frankfurt implies that it sometimes does) a (more or less) "specific literal meaning," one that differs, in particular, from the meanings carried by words that are close to "bullshit," but instructively different in meaning from it, such as the word "horseshit," which, at least in the United States, denotes, I believe, something characteristically produced with less deviousness than characterizes the production of (OED-2) bullshit. And I think that, for one such meaning, Frankfurt has provided an impressively discriminating (though not, as we shall see, fault-free) treatment: much of what he says about one kind of bullshit is true of it but false, for example, of horseshit.

Frankfurt's second remark, about the difficulty caused by the fact that "the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous," is more problematic.

Notice that this remark is meant to be independent of the first one (hence the words “For another . . .”), as indeed it must be, since no *phenomenon* could be thought to correspond to “bullshit” where it is an undifferentiated term of abuse. In making this remark, Frankfurt must suppose, if, that is, he supposes, as he appears to do, that he will command the reader’s agreement, that the reader has some “specific, literal meaning” of “bullshit” implicitly in mind. But that is extremely doubtful, partly because it is a gratuitous assumption (and, indeed, as the OED reveals, a false one) that “bullshit” has some *single* “specific, literal meaning.” In a word: how can we be expected to agree, *already*, that bullshit is “vast” and “amorphous,” when no specification of “bullshit” has yet been provided?

However that may be, Frankfurt leaves these preliminary problems behind, and plunges right into his subject, by reviewing, refining, and developing a definition that Max Black once gave of “humbug” (which is close to bullshit of the OED-2 kind), and then by commenting on an example of real or feigned rage expressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein against (putative) bullshit uttered by Fania Pascal.

Emerging from the Black and Wittgenstein discussions, Frankfurt very surprisingly says, that “the essence of bullshit . . . is . . . lack of connection to a concern with truth— . . . indifference to how things really are . . .” (125), where that indifference (see the Frankfurt passage quoted in the paragraph that follows here) is concealed by the speaker. It’s the word “essence” that surprises me here: it seemed to be implied by Frankfurt’s preliminary remarks that the term “bullshit,” considered comprehensively, denotes no one thing whose essence one might try to specify,<sup>10</sup> and Frankfurt had not in the interim indicated a particular *region* of bullshit, whose bullshit might, perhaps, be identified by an essence.

Frankfurt later elaborates his definition as follows:

This is the crux of the distinction between him [the bullshitter] and the liar. Both he [the bullshitter] and the liar represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth. The success of each depends upon deceiving us about that. But the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his 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. This does not mean that his

speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. (130)

Notice that, when Frankfurt elaborates what is supposed to be a proposal about bullshit, he speaks not of “bullshit” but of the “bullshitter.” This confirms that, in Frankfurt’s account, it is the bull that wears the trousers. But he wrongly takes for granted that that is the only important or interesting bullshit that there is.

Now, in the light of the semantic promiscuity of “bullshit” that was discussed at the outset of this section, it was, so I have suggested, unwise of Frankfurt to cast his claim as one about the “essence” of bullshit, as he does in the page 125 passage. He should have submitted his indifference-to-truth thesis as an attempt to characterize (at least) one interesting kind of bullshit, whether or not there are other interesting kinds of it. Let us assess his thesis as such, that is, not with the ambitiously generalizing status that Frankfurt assigns to it, but as an attempt to characterize one kind of bullshit, and, in particular, an activity-centered kind of bullshit. I return to the distinct bullshit-*explicandum*, which corresponds to OED definition 1, in section 4 below.

Consider Frankfurt’s statement, with which we may readily agree, that:

[t]he 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. (122)

I find it hard to align this remark with Frankfurt’s proposal about the essence of bullshit: advertisers and politicians are often very concerned indeed “to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality” (130) and to design what we might well call “bullshit” to serve that end (yet the quoted page 130 words are used by Frankfurt to characterize the purpose of liars *as opposed* to bullshitters). Is it not a problem for Frankfurt’s proposal about the essence of bullshit that those whom he designates as paradigm bullshitters engage in a great deal of what is not, for Frankfurt, bullshitting?

Frankfurt might say (as he must, to sustain his proposal) that, when advertisers and politicians seek to cover up the truth, they are doing something *other* than bullshitting. But when we are inclined to agree with Frankfurt that advertising and politics supply paradigms of bullshit,

it is not the subset of their doings to which his proposal points that induces our inclination to agree. I think we are induced to agree partly because we recognize at least some lying to be also bullshitting.<sup>11</sup> Frankfurt's contrast between lying and bullshitting is malconstructed, and he erred, I believe, because he failed to distinguish two dimensions of lying, which we must separate if we are to determine the relationship between lying and Frankfurt's bullshitting.

Standardly, a liar says what he believes to be false: let us call that his standard *tactic* (or, for short, his tactic). Liars also standardly seek to deceive their listeners about some fact (other than the fact that they disbelieve what they say): we can call that the liar's (standard) *goal*. And normally a liar pursues the stated *goal* by executing the stated *tactic*: he says something that he believes to be false *in order to* induce his listener to believe something false. (Usually, of course, what I have called the liar's "standard goal" is not also his ultimate or final goal, which may be to protect his reputation, to sell a bill of goods, to exploit his listener, or whatever.<sup>12</sup> But the liar standardly pursues such further goals by pursuing the goal which liars standardly seek. None of these further goals *distinguish* the liar from nonliars.)

Now, what I have called the "standard tactic" and the "standard goal" of lying can come apart. Consider what was one of Sigmund Freud's favorite jokes:

Dialogue between two travelers on a train from Moscow:

"Where are you going?"

"To Pinsk."

"Liar! You say you are going to Pinsk in order to make me believe you are going to Minsk. But I *know* you are going to Pinsk. So whom are you trying to fool?"<sup>13</sup>

Suppose that the first traveler's diagnosis of the purpose of the second traveler's uttering "To Pinsk" is correct: let us therefore call the second traveler Pavel (because of the "P" in Pinsk), and let us call the first traveler Trofim. On the indicated supposition, Trofim is right to call Pinsk-bound Pavel a liar, since, as Frankfurt says, the liar is someone who tries "to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality" (130), and that's what Pavel is trying to do to Trofim. The peculiarity of the present example is that Pavel here seeks to deceive by telling the truth. Pavel does not, in my view, lie, on this occasion, but he nevertheless proves himself



to be a liar. Pavel's goal is the standard goal of the liar, but his tactic, here, is to speak the truth. (The important and entirely nonverbal point is that the standard goal and the standard tactic of lying lose their normal association here, not whether Pavel is lying, or telling a lie, etc.)

A converse case, in which the standard tactic subserves a nonstandard goal, would go as follows. Pavel knows that Trofim knows that Pavel habitually lies, at any rate when it comes to disclosing his intended destinations. But, on the present occasion, it is very important to Pavel that Trofim should believe the truth about where Pavel is going. So Pavel, once again travelling to Pinsk, says that he is going to Minsk, precisely because he wants Trofim to believe the truth, which is that Pavel is going to Pinsk. I don't know, or very much care, whether Pavel thereby lies, but he is not here "attempting to lead [Trofim] away from a correct apprehension of reality," save with respect to his own state of mind: he wants him to think he's trying to get Trofim to believe something false, when he's not.

We must, accordingly, distinguish two respects in which liars characteristically traffic in falsehood. Liars usually intend to utter falsehoods, while intending that they be thought to be speaking truthfully; but that is quite separate from their standard goal, which is to cause a misrepresentation of reality in the listener's mind.

What is the bearing, if any, of this distinction, on Frankfurt's distinction between lying and bullshitting?

The root difficulty for Frankfurt's bullshitting/lying distinction, the difficulty underlying the problem with his advertiser example, is that, while Frankfurt identifies the liar by his goal, which is to mislead with respect to reality, he assigns no distinctive goal to the bullshitter, but, instead, identifies the bullshitter's activity at the level that corresponds to what I have called the liar's tactic. The standard liar pursues his distinctive goal by asserting what he believes to be false and concealing that fact. Frankfurt's bullshitter asserts statements whose truth-values are of no interest to him, and he conceals *that* fact. But Frankfurt assigns no distinctive goal to the bullshitter that would distinguish him from the liar. And, in fact, Frankfurt's bullshitters, as he identifies them, have no distinguishing goal: they have a variety of goals, one of which can be precisely to mislead with respect to reality, and that, indeed, is the goal of bullshit advertising.<sup>14</sup> Advertisers and politicians spew a lot of bullshit, and they

indeed seek to induce false beliefs about reality, but those are not, as Frankfurt must have it, separate but, typically, coincident activities on their parts.

The failure to distinguish the level of tactic from the level of goal runs throughout the discussion. Frankfurt writes at page 128:

Bluffing too is typically devoted to conveying something false. Unlike plain lying, however, it is more especially a matter not of falsity but of fakery. This is what accounts for its nearness to bullshit. For the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*. (my emphases)

The problem is that this falsehood is at the level of tactic, whereas phoniness is at the level of goal. If bluffing is like bullshit, that is partly because bullshitting, too, is often devoted to conveying something false—although often not by saying that false thing itself.

As Frankfurt says, the bullshitter may not care whether or not what he says is true. But Frankfurt has confused that with the bullshitter's not caring whether his audience is caused to believe something true or false. That explains an error that Frankfurt makes about the Fourth of July orator whom he describes at pages 120–121:<sup>15</sup>

Consider a Fourth of July orator, who goes on bombastically about “our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.” This is surely humbug. . . . the orator is not lying. He would be lying only if it were his intention to bring about in his audience beliefs which he himself regards as false, concerning such matters as whether our country is great, whether it is blessed, whether the Founders had divine guidance, and whether what they did was in fact to create a new beginning for mankind. But the orator does not really care what his audience thinks about the Founding Fathers, or about the role of the deity in our country's history, or the like. At least, it is not an interest in what anyone thinks about these matters that motivates his speech.

It is clear that what makes Fourth of July oration humbug is not fundamentally that *the speaker regards his statement as false*. Rather . . . the orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. *He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history*. (my emphases)

The orator's unconcern about truth is, mistakenly, identified at the level of his goal, rather than, in line with page 130, merely at the level of his immediate tactic. For the bullshitting orator, as Frankfurt describes him, might well care a lot about what the audience thinks about the Founding Fathers.<sup>16</sup> If the orator had been Joseph McCarthy, he would have wanted the audience to think that the “new beginning” that the Found-

ing Fathers “created” should persuade the audience to oppose the tyranny supposedly threatened by American communism. The fact that it is not “fundamental” that “the speaker regards his statements as false” in no way implies that “he is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history.” (Similarly, advertisers may not care whether or not what they say is true, but they do care about what their audience is caused to believe, or, rather, more generally, about the thought-processes that they seek to induce in people.)<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

Unlike Frankfurt’s bullshitting, lying is identified in terms of the defect at which it aims, namely, falsehood. We clarify what a liar is by reference to falsehood, rather than the other way around; we do not, that is, when asked to characterize what falsehood is, say that falsehood is what a liar aims to say. In parallel, we might, unlike Frankfurt, seek to clarify what a bullshitter is by reference to what he aims at, to wit, bullshit. We might start with the shit, not with the bull. And that would induce us to consider OED definition 1 (“nonsense, rubbish”) the one that fits the bullshit that interests me, rather than the bullshit that interests Frankfurt. My bullshit belongs to the category of *statement* or *text*. It is not primarily an activity but the result of an activity (whether or not *that* activity always qualifies as an activity of bullshitting).<sup>18</sup>

A liar who tries to say something false may inadvertently speak the truth, whether or not he is then lying, and whether or not what he then says is a lie. And there is also the opposite case in which an honest person, by mistake, speaks falsely. The bullshit that interests me is relevantly parallel. I countenance a bullshitter who has tried, but failed, to produce bullshit—what comes out, by accident, is good sense—and I also countenance a lover of truth who utters what he does not realize is bullshit. A person may avow, in full honesty, “I’m not sure whether what I’m about to say is bullshit.” These are not possibilities for the bullshit that interests Frankfurt. But they are possibilities. So the bullshit that interests Frankfurt doesn’t cover the waterfront.

A person who speaks with Frankfurterian indifference to the truth might do so yet *happen* to say something true, and, in at least one sense of the term, the one that interests me, what he says could not then be bullshit.<sup>19</sup>

And, oppositely, an honest person might read some bullshit that a Frankfurt-bullshitter wrote, believe it to be the truth, and affirm it. When that honest person utters bullshit, *she's* not showing a disregard for truth. So it is neither necessary nor sufficient for every kind of bullshit that it be produced by one who is informed by indifference to the truth, or, indeed, by any other distinctive intentional state.

The honest follower, or the honest confused producer of bullshit, may or may not count as a bullshitter,<sup>20</sup> but she is certainly honest, and she certainly utters (one kind of) bullshit. There exists bullshit as a feature of utterances that does not qualify as bullshit by virtue of the intentional state of the utterance's producer (although that state may, of course, causally explain why the bullshit is there, and/or why what's there is bullshit).

But what *is* that feature of utterances? *One thing it can be*, at least to a first approximation, is what the OED calls it, to wit, *nonsense*. But what particularly interests me is a certain variety of nonsense, namely, that which is found in discourse that is by nature *unclarifiable*, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscure creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what was said. That is why it is frequently an appropriate response to a charge of bullshit to set about trying to clarify what was said. (Think of attempts to vindicate Heidegger, or Hegel. The way to show that they weren't bullshitters is not by showing that they cared about the truth, but by showing that what they said, resourcefully construed, makes sense. Those who call them bullshitters do not doubt that they cared about the truth, or, at any rate, it is not *because* of any such doubt that they think Hegel and Heidegger were bullshitters.<sup>21</sup> That Frankfurt issue isn't the issue here.)

Something is unclarifiable if and only if it cannot be made clear, but I shall not try to say what "clear" means in this essay. (I'm inclined to think it's not possible to do so, in an illuminating way.) Note, however, that there are relevantly different forms of unclarity, all of which have bearing here. There is the unclarity of a sentence itself, and then there is the unclarity as to why a certain (possibly perfectly clear) sentence is uttered in a given context. So, for example, the meaning of Wittgenstein's "If a lion could speak, we would not understand him" is in one way perfectly clear, but it might nevertheless be judged obscure, and

unclarifiably obscure, by one who doubts that it carries, in context, a graspable point. There is also the unclarity of why one statement should be taken to lend credence to another statement. And there are no doubt other pertinent unclarities too.

Note that it is not an objection to the proposed sufficient condition of bullshit that different people might, in the light of different background beliefs, impose different standards of clarity, and, therefore, identify different pieces of texts as bullshit. Some of the people might, of course, be wrong.

I emphasized “one thing it can be” three paragraphs back because defects other than unclarifiable unclarity can suffice to stigmatize a text as bullshit. I focus on this variety of the phenomenon because it commands a greater academic following than other varieties do. In the various varieties of bullshit, what is wanting, speaking very generally, is an appropriate connection to truth, but not, as in Frankfurt’s bullshit, as far as the state of mind of the producer is concerned, but with respect to features of the piece of text itself. Unclarifiable unclarity is one such feature. Rubbish, in the sense of arguments that are grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence, is another. A third is irretrievably speculative comment, which is neither unclear nor wanting in logic, such as David Miller’s excellent example, “Of course, everyone spends much more time thinking about sex now than people did a hundred years ago.”

I focus on unclarifiable unclarity in particular in preparation for a further inquiry into bullshit that addresses the question why so much of that particular kind of bullshit is produced in France. This kind of academic bullshit, unlike the two contrasting types of bullshit, be they academic or not, mentioned in the previous paragraph, comes close to being celebrated for its very unclarity by some of its producers and consumers. What some of them certainly celebrate is a disconnection with truth: in what perhaps ranks as the consummation of the development of unclarity-type bullshit, a consummation that Hegel might have called “bullshit risen to consciousness of itself,” truth is, in much postmodernism, *expressly* disparaged.

Although I foreswear a definition of “clarity,” I can offer a sufficient condition of unclarity. It is that adding or subtracting (if it has one) a negation sign from a text makes no difference to its level of plausibility<sup>22</sup>:

no force in a statement has been grasped if its putative grasper would react no differently to its negation from how he reacts to the original statement. The deliberate bullshit published by Alan Sokal no doubt comes out as unclarifiable, by that criterion.<sup>23</sup> Note that this test does not apply to the different sorts of bullshit reviewed a couple of paragraphs back, and, being a merely sufficient condition of unclarifiability, it does not characterize *all* cases of the latter either.

An objection that faces my account is that it appears to classify good poetry that isn't bullshit as bullshit, since a piece of good poetry may be unclarifiable. A tempting way of acquitting such poetry of the charge of bullshit is by reference to its designation *as* poetry, rather than *as* some sort of contribution to knowledge in a more straightforward sense. But then the same text would be bullshit or not according, Frankfurt-like, to its, as it were, intentional encasement, and I am trying to characterize an intention-independent sense of the term.

An unclarifiable text can be valuable because of its suggestiveness: it can stimulate thought, it can be worthwhile seeking to interpret it in a spirit which tolerates multiplicity of interpretation, and which therefore denies that it means some one given thing, as a clarifiable piece of text does. So let us say, to spare good poetry, that the bullshit that concerns me is not only unclarifiable but also lacks this virtue of suggestiveness.<sup>24</sup> (I am sure that many academic bullshitters get away with a lot of bullshit because *some* of their unclarifiabilia are valuably suggestive, and therefore not bullshit. Their readers then mistakenly expect more, or most, of it to be so.)

So much by way of a preliminary attempt to identify the *bullshit* that interests me. But what reading of "bullshitter," if any, corresponds to the bullshit that I have tried to identify? Producers of Cohen-bullshit are clearly not by nature bullshitters, in Frankfurt's sense, though Frankfurt-bullshitters often produce Cohen-bullshit, at least in the academy. Rather, I would say that the word "bullshitter" that corresponds to my bullshit has two readings. In one of its readings, a bullshitter is a person who is *disposed* to bullshit: he tends, *for whatever reason*, to produce a lot of unclarifiable stuff. In a second acceptable reading of the term, a bullshitter is a person who *aims* at bullshit, however frequently or infrequently he hits his target.<sup>25</sup> (Notice that other nouns that signify that their denotations engage in a certain activity display a similar pair of

readings: a killer may be a being that tends to kill, with whatever intention or lack of it [a weed-killer, for example, is a killer, and a merely careless human stomper on flowers is a (flower-) killer]; or he may be a being who intends to kill, whether or not he ever does.) Aim-(Cohen)-bullshitters *seek* and *rely* on unclarifiability, whereas innocent speakers of bullshit are merely victims of it. Aim-bullshitters resort to bullshit when they have reason to want what they say to be unintelligible, for example, in order to impress, or in order to give spurious support to a claim: the motives for producing bullshit vary. (And just as a person might sometimes kill, without being a killer in either of the senses I distinguished, so a person who is in neither of the senses I distinguished a bullshitter might, on occasion, produce bullshit.)

What about the verb, “to bullshit”? Does the producer of my bullshit, always bullshit when she produces bullshit, as Frankfurt’s does? I see no reason for saying that an innocent does, especially if she’s not even a disposition-bullshitter. But an aim-bullshitter who produces bullshit indeed bullshits.<sup>26</sup>

## V

It matters that bullshit can come in the non-intention-freighted form by which I am exercised. For there is, today, a great deal of my kind of bullshit in certain areas of philosophical and semi-philosophical culture, and if, as we should, we are to conduct a struggle against it, the sort of struggle that, so one might say, Alan Sokal has inaugurated,<sup>27</sup> then it is important not to make false accusations, and not, therefore, for example, to charge possibly innocent traffickers in bullshit of lacking a concern for truth, or of deliberately conniving at obscurity.<sup>28</sup> Our proper polemical target is bullshit, and not bullshitters, or producers of bullshit, as such. So while it’s lots of fun for people like me, who have a developed infantile streak, to talk about bullshit, and even just to write “bullshit” over and over again, in an academic essay, there is nevertheless, in my opinion, something important at stake here, and the character of what is at stake makes the bullshitter/bullshit distinction important.

To prevent misunderstanding, let me add that I do believe that there is quite a lot of *aiming* at obscurity in the production of philosophical bullshit, and a lot, to boot, in this region, of lack of concern with truth.<sup>29</sup>

But these moral faults should not be our primary focus. For reasons of courtesy, strategy, and good evidence, we should criticize the product, which is visible, and not the process, which is not.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

1. Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," in his *The Importance of What we Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).
2. As Diego Gambetta has pointed out to me, a mechanism merits mention that is different from the "sunk cost" one that figures above. You can be so happy that you've got *something* (after whatever amount of labor, or lack of it, you've expended) from someone who is reputed to be terrific that you overvalue it. In both mechanisms you misattribute the pleasure of getting *something* to the quality of the text you got it from.
3. His essay begins as follows: "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."
4. Frankfurt himself cites the OED, but mainly with respect to meanings and uses of the word "bull": he touches on its definition of "bullshit" only in its use as a verb. I disagree with his discussion of the entries he cites, but it would be an imposition on the reader's capacity to endure tedium to explain why.
5. Four differences between the kinds of bullshit that exercise Frankfurt and me are listed in note 26 below. The import of those differences will emerge in due course, but the reader will probably follow me better if he or she glances ahead now to note 26.
6. "Trivial" is very different from "insincere," partly because it has weaker implications for the state of mind of the speaker/writer. I shall take 2 with the accent on "insincere."
7. Frankfurt certainly believes that a person bullshits if he produces bullshit, since he thinks it a necessary condition of bullshit that it was produced with a bullshitting intention. He (in effect) raises the question whether that intention is also sufficient for bullshit at p. 119. But, although he doesn't expressly pursue



that question, his definition of “bullshit” (125), and its elaboration (130), show that he holds the sufficiency view as well. It is because Frankfurt asserts sufficiency that he can say (129) that a piece of bullshit can be true.

8. See, further, the last two paragraphs of section IV below.

9. See, once again, the last two paragraphs of section IV below.

10. Does Frankfurt think that the phenomenon of “indifference to how things really are” is “vast and amorphous”? Surely not. Then *what*, again, is he asserting to be “vast and amorphous,” in his second preliminary remark, which I criticized two paragraphs back?

11. I suppose all lying is insincere talk, and I do not think all lying is bullshitting; at least to that extent, the OED-2 definition is too wide. But *some* lying is undoubtedly also bullshitting, so Frankfurt’s definition of activity-centered bullshit is too narrow.

12. Few liars care about nothing more than inducing false beliefs: that is the ultimate goal of only one of the eight types of liar distinguished by St. Augustine. See “On Bullshit,” 131.

13. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. In *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Modern Library, 1965).

14. It is not, of course, the ultimate goal of that advertising, which is to cause (some of) its audience to buy what’s advertised.

15. Strictly, the orator’s oration is presented as an example of humbug, rather than bullshit. But it’s clear that Frankfurt would also say that he is a bullshitter, precisely in virtue of what makes him a purveyor of humbug, whatever difference between humbug and bullshit Frankfurt might want to affirm.

16. I do not think Frankfurt means to be *stipulating* otherwise: we are meant to agree with what he says about the orator on the basis of his initial, first-sentence of the passage, description of him. “Surely,” in the second sentence, would otherwise make no sense.

17. Although this is not, again (see the text to note 13 above), their ultimate goal.

18. See the final paragraph of this section.

19. Perhaps in contrast with Frankfurt’s sense, and certainly in contrast with what Frankfurt says about that sense (see p. 129).

20. That question is addressed in the penultimate paragraph of this section.

21. For the record, I do not believe that Hegel was a bullshitter, and I am too ignorant of the work of Heidegger to say whether or not he was a bullshitter. But I agree with my late supervisor Gilbert Ryle that Heidegger was a *shit*. I once asked Ryle whether he had continued to study Heidegger after he had written a long review of *Being and Time* in *Mind*. Ryle’s reply: “No, because when the Nazis came to power, Heidegger showed that he was a shit, from the heels up, and a shit from the heels up can’t do good philosophy.” (Experience has, alas, induced me to disagree with the stated Rylean generalization.)

22. This criterion of bullshit was devised by Professor Arthur J. Brown, to whom I am indebted.

23. In his wonderful spoof, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text* 46 (1996): 217–252 (which was published as a nonspoof in the thereby self-condemning *Social Text*).

24. I am allowing that the unclarifiable may be productively suggestive, but I would not go as far as Fung Yu-lan does: “Aphorisms, allusions, and illustrations are . . . not articulate enough. Their insufficiency in articulateness is compensated for, however, by their suggestiveness. Articulateness and suggestiveness are, of course, incompatible. The more an expression is articulate, the less it is suggestive—just as the more an expression is prosaic, the less it is poetic. The sayings and writings of the Chinese philosophers are so inarticulate that their suggestiveness is almost boundless.” *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York, 1960), 12.

25. Michael Otsuka comments insightfully on a familiar academic “case in which the two come apart: i.e., in which someone is disposed to unclarifiable unclarity without aiming at it. Many academics (including perhaps an especially high proportion of graduate students) are disposed to produce the unclarifiable unclarity that is bullshit, not because they are aiming at unclarifiable unclarity, but rather because they are aiming at profundity. Their lucid utterances are manifestly unprofound, even to them. Their clarifiable unclear utterances can be rendered manifestly not profound through clarification. But their unclarifiably unclear utterances are unmanifestly not profound. Hence it is safe for them to think that they are profound. These utterances are not profound either because they are meaningful (in some subtle way, should there be one, that is consistent with their unclarifiable unclarity) but unprofound or because they are meaningless. They are *unmanifestly* not profound because it is hard to demonstrate that they are not profound, given their unclarifiability. By aiming at profundity, these academics tend to produce obscurity. But they do not aim at obscurity, not even as a means of generating profundity” (Private communication, September 2, 1999).

26. Let me now list some central differences between the two kinds of bullshit that I have distinguished:

	Typical context of Utterance	Corresponding OED Definition	Primary Locus	Essence
Frankfurt’s bullshit	everyday life	2	activity	indifference to truth
Cohen’s bullshit	the academy	1	output	unclarifiability

27. Initially in the article referenced in note 23, and then more comprehensively in *Intellectual Impostures*, which he wrote with Jean Bricmont (London: Profile Books, 1998).

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28. Consider this sentence from the work of Etienne Balibar: “This is precisely the first meaning we can give to the idea of dialectic: a logic or form of explanation specifically adapted to the determinant intervention of class struggle in the very fabric of history.” *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1995). If you read that sentence quickly, it can sound pretty good. The remedy is to read it more slowly, and you will then recognize it to be a wonderful paradigm of bullshit: yet I know Balibar to be an honest thinker.

29. The evidence assembled in Sokal and Bricmont’s *Intellectual Impostures* proves, so I think, the truth of those beliefs.

30. We may hope that success in discrediting the product will contribute to extinguishing the process. I try to contribute to the project of discrediting the product in an unpublished discussion of Why One Kind of Bullshit Flourishes in France, a copy of which will be supplied upon application to me.

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## REPLY TO G. A. COHEN

Harry Frankfurt

1. Cohen's essay is, so far as I am aware, the first significant attempt either to criticize or to extend my work on bullshit. So I welcome it with particular appreciation and interest. Let me say at once that I am by no means inclined to resist his suggestion that there are important varieties of bullshit other than the one I discussed in my essay.<sup>1</sup> It is true that I did speak there of "the essence" of bullshit. That was perhaps misleading, insofar as it may have suggested that all genuine instances of bullshit must be of the kind I discussed. If I am reluctant to endorse Cohen's claim that the sort of bullshit on which my attention was focused "is just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit," it is not because I doubt that his claim is true. It is only because I cannot help recalling that bullshit is an animal product and not a plant. In any case, I am neither surprised nor dismayed that Cohen believes he has identified a type of bullshit that was, by the sort of procrustean maneuver that I acknowledged I would be unable to avoid, cut out of the concept as I analyzed it.

2. As Cohen correctly points out, my account of bullshit is activity-centered, rather than output-centered. On my account, the mental state of the person who creates some piece of discourse is a crucial factor in determining whether or not what is created is bullshit. The defining feature of the sort of bullshit that I considered is a lack of concern with truth, or an indifference to how things really are. This does not mean that something can count as bullshit only if it is uttered by a person who is, at least on that occasion, lacking in concern for truth. It is possible for a sincere and honest person to believe some bullshit that has been created by another, and to repeat it without manifesting any indifference to how things really are. What he repeats is bullshit as he repeats it, insofar as it was originated by someone who was unconcerned with whether what he was saying was true or false. A person who believes a lie may repeat it without lying, but what he is repeating is nonetheless a lie. The situation is the same with regard to bullshit, which may be repeated as bullshit even by someone who is not a bullshitter.

The relationship between bullshit and lies is not as problematic on my account, it seems to me, as Cohen maintains. It is certainly true that

advertisers may qualify as liars, since they may know that they are purveying falsehoods with an intention to deceive. However, in the sort of case that I had in mind, their most fundamental commitment is as bullshitters. They are liars only, as it were, incidentally or by accident. My presumption is that advertisers generally decide what they are going to say in their advertisements without caring what the truth is. Therefore, what they say in their advertisements is bullshit. Of course, they may sometimes also happen to know, or they may happen subsequently to discover, disadvantageous truths about their product. In that case what they choose to convey is something that they know to be false, and so they end up not merely bullshitting but telling lies as well.

Cohen suggests that what he refers to as the “root difficulty” for my distinction between bullshit and lying is that I identify the liar by his goal (i.e., the goal of misleading his hearers) whereas I assign no distinctive goal to the bullshitter that distinguishes him from the liar. But the bullshitter is distinguished from the liar precisely insofar as he lacks any goal such as that by which the liar is defined. In his effort to stimulate sales, the bullshitting advertiser probably wouldn’t mind if what he tells people is true; on the other hand, he doesn’t really care one way or the other. The cigarette company conveys in its advertisements the message that smoking Marlboros makes men as manly as cowboys. I suppose it is reasonable to assume that the company believes that this is false and that it knows it is trying to mislead people; but it is not motivated primarily by an intention to deceive. Its advertising campaign is not designed especially to conceal a truth. The company is willing to deceive, but the fact that it finds itself undertaking to do so is in a way supererogatory. Its advertising campaign is designed and planned without any real attention to the actual relationship between Marlboros and manliness.<sup>2</sup>

3. Cohen maintains that there is a kind of bullshit “equally interesting, and academically more significant” than the kind with which I have dealt. This variety consists of discourse that is “by nature unclarifiable.” He does not say much about what he means by “unclarifiable.” Indeed, he declares that he will “not try to say what ‘clear’ means in this essay,” and goes on to confess that he is “inclined to think it’s not possible to do so, in an illuminating way.” This comes pretty close to conceding that “clear” is unclarifiable, and hence to hoisting Cohen’s account of bullshit

by its own petard. But perhaps construing what he says in this way is somehow too harsh.

Be that as it may, it must surely be conceded that there are no generally accepted or authoritative criteria of what counts as meaningful. Standards of clarity are quite impressionistic, most discourse is by some standards and in some respects and to some extent unclear, and Cohen does not explain how clear a text must be in order to escape condemnation. Moreover, and perhaps even more serious, it is quite problematic what it means to say of some text that it is “unclarifiable,” and it is comparably problematic how the unclarifiability of a text is to be established. It is not so easy, accordingly, to know just what sort of discourse it is that Cohen proposes to identify as bullshit.

The only actual example of unclarifiable discourse that he offers is the following sentence from a work by Etienne Balibar: “This is precisely the first meaning we can give to the idea of dialectic: a logic or form of explanation specifically adapted to the determinant intervention of class struggle in the very fabric of history.” I find this very unconvincing as an example of unclarifiable discourse. For one thing, it occurs to me that the meaning of the sentence might be much more readily apparent within the context from which Cohen detaches it than it is when taken by itself. Second, even without knowing its context, I think I can make a fairly good stab at understanding what the sentence means. My guess is that it means something like this: “The most distinctive point of dialectical explanations is precisely that they are supposed to be particularly helpful in illuminating how class struggle has significantly determined the course of history.” This is, to be sure, a bit vague; but it is no more vague than most of what is generally accepted not only as intelligible but as reasonably clear. Have I succeeded, then, in clarifying a text that Cohen finds unclarifiable?

4. Anyhow, I am not sure that I want to dismiss as bullshit every utterance that I regard as unclarifiable. People who intend to say something meaningful, and who make conscientious efforts to do so, may nonetheless fail because of deep conceptual problems that do not reflect any reprehensible intellectual negligence or confusion on their part. The problems may not be due to them at all, but rather to the inadequacies of a system of thought that is currently standard and that is confidently assumed by everyone to be entirely reliable. These inadequacies may be

hidden and unsuspected even by the best thinkers. Thus it may one day be discovered that statements accepted for generations by all responsible authorities actually involve obscurities or logical flaws that vitiate their intelligibility, that cannot be repaired, and that are therefore unclarifiable. It seems inappropriate to insist that those statements were always bullshit. Characterizing something as bullshit is naturally construed as seriously pejorative, and in the kind of case I have imagined, the opprobrium is not warranted.

5. The species of bullshit that interests Cohen may well be, as he says, more significant in the academic world than the species I have discussed. Whether or not that is so, it is certainly worth trying to understand the phenomenon of unclarifiable discourse better than we do. On the other hand, I do not consider that phenomenon to be as important a threat to our culture as the species of bullshit with which I have been concerned. For one thing, while what goes on in the academic world may sometimes have considerable influence elsewhere, it very often does not. For another, it is difficult to suppose that an author is likely to do very drastic harm when no one can understand what he is talking about. The occurrence of discourse that is genuinely without meaning may be offensive, or even infuriating, especially when for some reason people appear to take it seriously or profess to admire it. Nevertheless, texts that are genuinely unintelligible will very likely not be widely read, and it is even less likely that much will for very long be based on them.

In contrast, indifference to the truth is extremely dangerous. The conduct of civilized life, and the vitality of the institutions that are indispensable to it, depend very fundamentally on respect for the distinction between the true and the false. Insofar as the authority of this distinction is undermined by the prevalence of bullshit and by the mindlessly frivolous attitude that accepts the proliferation of bullshit as innocuous, an indispensable human treasure is squandered. Unintelligibility bears its fault on its face in a way that falsehood does not. For this reason, even apart from anything else, it is less insidious. The nonsense generated by negligent or pretentious or silly academics can be an irritating distraction from productive inquiry and an impediment to intellectual progress. I do not mean to dismiss it as inconsequential. It seems to me, however, that the harm promulgated by a lack of concern for the truth is a deeper and a more urgent issue.

## Notes

1. Moreover, I welcome the provocative references that he makes to related deformities of discourse and thought, such as horseshit, which also merit serious inquiry and discussion.
2. My understanding of the Fourth of July orator is similar. He may know that what he says about American history is false, and he may intend his listeners to be deceived about it, but while this may make him a liar it does not imply that he is any less a bullshitter.

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