



# On Bullshit

*Harry G. Frankfurt*

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A #1 "NEW YORK TIMES" BESTSELLER

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern. We have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, as Harry Frankfurt writes, "we have no theory."

Frankfurt, one of the world's most influential moral philosophers, attempts to build such a theory here. With his characteristic combination of philosophical acuity, psychological insight, and wry humor, Frankfurt proceeds by exploring how bullshit and the related concept of humbug are distinct from lying. He argues that bullshitters misrepresent themselves to their audience not as liars do, that is, by deliberately making false claims about what is true. In fact, bullshit need not be untrue at all.

Rather, bullshitters seek to convey a certain impression of themselves without being concerned about whether anything at all is true. They quietly change the rules governing their end of the conversation so that claims about truth and falsity are irrelevant. Frankfurt concludes that although bullshit can take many innocent forms, excessive indulgence in it can eventually undermine the practitioner's capacity to tell the truth in a way that lying does not. Liars at least acknowledge that it matters what is true. By virtue of this, Frankfurt writes, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

## On Bullshit Details

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## **From Reader Review On Bullshit for online ebook**

### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

At the request of someone here on GR (forgive me but I cannot remember who, I am sure you'll let me know in the comments though), I read this short masterpiece *On Bullshit* and thoroughly enjoyed it. As others on GR have remarked, we have entered into a political era in the US of pure, unadulterated bullshit with the election of Drumpf and so it is quite the timely read. Mr. Frankfurt starts by looking at dictionary definitions of "humbug" and "bull session" and compares them to the concept of bullshit: the line to be drawn semantically between lying and bullshitting is quite a convoluted one as it turns out. He has one animated story about a certain Pascal who is castigated by a certain Wittgenstein for using the phrase "I feel like a dog that got run over" as an example where W calls her out on bullshit. I thought that line was a bit thin and that expressions such as this are purely allegorical and do not really fall into the bullshit category and that Wittgenstein was annoying splitting hairs over it. The author also quotes the amazing Ezra Pound, where the poet does not want to be bullshitted. (I laughed out loud at that one.) But most importantly, just before the conclusion of this short 65-page essay, he makes a valid point that bullshitting is a greater enemy to the truth than lies - precisely because it is manipulative and never benevolent. Putting that in the perspective of the nightly flood of excrement on CNN and Fox seems very apt to me. The essay ends with a facetious but humorous point about all sincerity being bullshit. OK, that may be true, it does not undermine his previous points.

So, take a shot at this little marvel and see where you stand *On Bullshit*!

Thanks for all the comments and Likes! Who'd've thought that *Bullshit* could be so popular? Oh, I forgot about my CNN/Fox comment, of COURSE it is! :)

In case you missed it, Frankfurt published an article on Drumpf and bullshit in May 2016 in *Time Magazine*: [here](#)

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### **John Wiswell says**

Yes, the subject is a funny word. But the text is dry, and the substance is suspect. Frankfurt spends most of his (admirably few) pages examining causes for bullshitting, in very dry and highly speculative fashion. While it is interesting to read exactly how "bullshit" is different from "nonsense," "lies," and "deception," the term can be used to mean just those things. Like other popular swears, it's a broad word. Frankfurt is more interested in a phenomenon that he believes can only be described under this word, though, which hurts a treatise that ought to encapsulate the word entirely. This book could easily be used to condemn all art and human emotion as "bullshit," and while that might make you or Mr. Frankfurt feel clever, it's not useful. His speculation on precisely what makes people bullshit is useful, though it misses the gravity of the biggest cause: that people don't care.

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### **Khadidja says**

Everyone lies, for many psychological reasons, it's just a question of how, when and why, in this book Harry G. Frankfurt demonstrates, through argument and example, the difference between lying and bullshit. A liar is the one who knows the truth but tells something else, a bullshitter "does not care whether

the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up to suit his purpose."  
This is a perfect description of politicians

**While liars say things they know are untrue, bullshitters say whatever they think will work best and have no interest in whether their statements are true or not.**

**"Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about".**

you know what they say “dance like nobody's watching” I feel like bullshitters/Liars and especially politicians hear this “lie like no one is fact-checking you” and the perfect example of pathological liar is Donald trump !

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

I found this tiny book both illuminating and useful when I first read it in 2005. Now, amidst the bullshit-crammed tweet storms of Dear Leader Trump, I find it central to understanding the devolution of our political discourse.

Frankfurt demonstrates, through argument and example, the difference between *lying* and *bullshit*: the liar knows what is true (or else he would not be lying), whereas the bullshitter cares nothing about truth or lies. The bullshitter really does not give a damn.

I find this distinction useful when dealing with any instance of political bloviating or religious propaganda. I used to look at each jeremiad as a fabric of lies, isolating each untruthful or illogical thread, refuting and dismantling it bit by bit. This of course took up much of my time which would be better spent writing Goodreads reviews or working on my novel.

But now, since reading Harry G. Frankfurt, I just recognize the thing for the pile of bullshit it is, sweep it up, and dump it in the trash. (Why the trash? Unlike *other* forms of shit, *this* shit does *not* make good fertilizer.)

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### **Lynne King says**

*In this paper, we distinguish three important classes of dishonesty that can occur in multi-agent systems, as well as in human society. In particular, the distinction is being made between lies and bullshit, following the work of Harry Frankfurt. The difference is that someone who tells a lie has access to the truth, whereas the concept of bullshit requires no knowledge of the truth at all. That is, the liar knows that what he says is not true, whereas the bullshitter has no proper knowledge to support the statements he or she is making. (Martin Caminada, University of Luxembourg).*

Before I read this essay, I had no idea who Harry Frankfurt was and it wasn't until I had done some research last night before beginning this book that I found out that he's a renowned moral philosopher and realized *He is professor emeritus of philosophy at Princeton University and has previously taught at Yale University and Rockefeller University.*

So the tiny hardback that I had initially purchased had been because of the title and I thought that it would prove to be amusing. I wouldn't really call this book amusing but it made me think, and thus when reasoning came into the equation, the book thus took me far longer to read.

I always thought that "bullshit" was on a par with "lying" and "bull" but obviously that's not the case and as for "humbug"? I must confess that I haven't really thought about it. Basically don't they all deal with some form of nonsense? One can just sail through life with vocabulary and actually be unaware of the true essence of words.

I can give you an example of what I perceived to be bullshit at the time. I have a brother, Roy, who is eleven years older than me. He's indeed a bullshitter and known for it by our family and all of his friends. I recall when I was about ten he took me out in his car through the countryside, as he was en route to his girlfriend Sue. My mother had insisted that I went along. Was I some kind of junior chaperone? When we arrived at Sue's home, I was given a book to read and stayed in the lounge on my own for about two hours. What did they get up to?

Well we passed some cows in the field on the left and Roy laughed. "Guess what Lynne? I was following a mini the other day and it came to this exact spot. It then suddenly flipped over the hedge and landed on top of a cow"! I ask you. It's nonsense I know but is that bullshit, bull or humbug? I knew that it was fanciful and did Roy make me laugh. I never could find out though what had happened to the cow or the car.

I realize that philosophers are searching for wisdom and enlightenment but it is really all down to interpretation and the thought processes are all so different. I didn't have too much of a problem with Descartes as I read him at university and also Seneca but when it gets to Roger Scruton; he is way above me in his thinking process.

So this book, although thoroughly enjoyable, I wondered, when I arrived at a reference to Wittgenstein, how I would react to him. He evidently detested any form of "nonsense" which actually rather amused me and so I could certainly appreciate how he would relate to a comment made by Fania Pascal, who had known him at Cambridge in the thirties:

*I had my tonsils out and was in the Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself. Wittgenstein called. I croaked "I feel just like a dog that has been run over." He was disgusted: "You don't what a dog that has been run over feels like."*

It makes one wonder though if what Fania said was true or was Wittgenstein joking or trying to joke anyway? Difficult really to determine without knowing the facts.

I don't think that I could have handled a much larger book than this but this was definitely good as a taster and sometimes tasters are the best things in life.

Thanks Rakhi for enticing me with your somewhat brief review.

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## **Jokoloyo says**

[But please don't be intimidated by author's career in academic. Just read this book alone we can have a glimpse of author's mind. (hide spoiler)]

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## **Petra X says**

The title is no irony, it's what it says it is. BS. It's one long ~~mental wank~~ lecture by a college professor of the word and its meanings in every possible boring, mildly-interesting, wow, I didn't know that, kind of way. It's intellectual humour done not to amuse an audience as its first aim but because the professor is amusing himself that he can do this sort of thing, and well.

All this sounds like I didn't enjoy it, but you know when it comes to stars I'm wavering between 1.5 and 4.5, I can't decide. You can read the paragraph above in a slightly negative tone of voice and then it also reads in an ironic kind of way that I kind of admire the professor and had also quite enjoyed both his work and why he did it. I just can't decide so three stars it is.

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## **David Schaafsma says**

“On Bullshit” is a short academic essay packaged into a small hardcover, published in 2005, before the current iteration of political discourse.

I worried this about Bush as I now do Trump: Is he a pathological liar? Is he crazy? Is he stupid? Is he just a bullshitter?

Frankfurt is a bit helpful here in making a distinction between lying and bullshit:

“It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.”

Humbug. Balderdash. Claptrap. Hokum. Quackery. Drivel.

“Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through”—E. Ambler

In the end he also says all claims to sincerity are bullshit, which would include his essay, a claim about which I agree. I didn't know what to expect exactly when I began reading it, but I didn't expect it to be so flat and scholarly and dull. I was hoping for more laughs, which we all need in this Time of Remarkable Bullshit.

Thanks to Michael for posting Frankfurt's 2016 Time Magazine article on Trump and bullshit:

here

“Everybody Knows,” Leonard Cohen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lin-a...>

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## **Manny says**

This slim, elegant little book looks at first like an elaborate joke, but I think it is actually quite serious. What is "bullshit"? asks the author, a distinguished moral philosopher. He examines and discards various plausible hypotheses, for example that bullshit is merely lying or careless use of language. As he points out, the bullshit artist often lies, but need not do so: some bullshit is, more or less by accident, perfectly true. And similarly, although much bullshit is hasty or careless, some of the worst bullshit around is crafted with exquisite care and attention to detail; one need only think of commercial advertising and political campaigns.

**The rest of this review is available elsewhere (the location cannot be given for Goodreads policy reasons)**

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## **Nandakishore Varma says**

During my youth, the consulting company I worked for sent me as an "expert" to a chemical plant - a process about which I had only the vaguest idea.

The job was generic and relatively straightforward, and did not require any special expertise: I concluded my two week visit successfully. Imagine my horror when, during the concluding meeting, the Head of Engineering said: "Mr. Varma, from your vast expertise, can you give some advice about a problem in operations?"

My knees turned weak and heart started doing double-time: however, hiding my nervousness, I nodded.

He continued. "Our reactor is facing solid deposition. The agitator inside the reactor was placed two metres above the bottom - to combat this problem, we reduced the clearance to a metre. The deposition has decreased, and we are able to live with it. However, we'd like to know whether we can lower it further. Can you advise?"

I looked at the ceiling for a moment, and scratched my chin. The whole production team was staring expectantly at me.

To gain time, I asked: "How much was the gap initially?"

"Two metres."

"Hmm... and how much now?"

"A metre."

"And you say the deposition has decreased, and you can live with it."

"Yes."

"Well..." I said, scratching my chin and trying to look knowledgeable: "You've left it very narrow, but it seems to be OK. Don't reduce it any further, however."

"Oh no!" The Head of Engineering and the production team heaved a collective sigh of relief.

The expert had spoken.

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Now, thanks to Harry Frankfurt, I know that what I did could be called "bullshitting" - not exactly lying, nor telling the truth, but speaking with scant regard to whether whatever I am saying is true or false - to create a certain impression of oneself on an audience.

Of course, I have the defence that I was trying to save my life (well, reputation, anyway). What justification do our politicians have, when they do it daily on the TV (other than entertainment value), I wonder.

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12/05/2016

Well, what do you know! Our estimable Prime Minister is also showing his capabilities in this art...

Prime Minister Modi compares Kerala to Somalia

Story behind the picture that provoked PM Modi's Somalia jibe in Kerala

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## **Manuel Antão says**

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

"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."

In "On Bullshit" by Harry G. Frankfurt

"a person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has much more freedom. His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared to take the context as well, so far as need requires. This freedom from the constraints to which the liar must submit does not necessarily mean, of course, that his task is easier than the task of the liar. But the mode of creativity upon





appreciated in the age of continental philosopher (or as I call them, lazy-ass-dramatic-claimer). Also, his style of writing is fun, elegant and rather enjoyable to read.

I would recommend reading this essay to almost anyone who has time for 64 pages of reading.

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## **Darwin8u says**

*"It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction."*

? Harry G. Frankfurt, On Bullshit

Sometimes what is natural still deserves a little study. What is exactly is bullshit? How is bullshit different from a lie? How is bullshit different than humbug? If these questions plague you or you are just seeking a philosopher's take on the nature, design, function, and theory of bullshit -- well do I have a book (a short book) for you.

In the current election year especially, this title deserves a bit more attention. Upon reflection, this book might suggest that Trump is, at heart, more of a bullshitter than a prevaricator. He isn't saying things he knowingly KNOWS false (although he probably does that too), but rather he just talks without knowing about the things he talks about.

I've got a good friend who is a ghostwriter for Trump. At dinner a few weeks ago, he suggested that most people underestimate just how little Trump actually knows. So perhaps, (and this is certainly no excuse and NO REASON to elect the man) Trump isn't a liar but a well-formed, well-practiced, toxic bullshit artist. He is just the guy on the corner selling bullshit. I guess, now that he looks to be almost unelectable, I'm more concerned really about the people standing in line STILL to buy some of that bullshit.

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## **Rakhi Dalal says**

"Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial-notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit."

This is how the work ends :)

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