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## BOOK PROFILE: *ON BULLSHIT*

A profile of Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: The Princeton University Press, 2005. 67 pp. \$9.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0-6911-2294-6.

**T**HIS BOOK CONSISTS ENTIRELY of a single moderately long article written by Harry G. Frankfurt, a leading analytic philosopher. It offers an elegant conceptual analysis of the term *bullshit* and of the phenomenon of bullshit in contemporary life.

Frankfurt begins his search for a proper understanding of bullshit by considering analyses of similar concepts, starting with philosopher Max Black's definition of *humbug*. As Frankfurt understands him, Black holds that humbug is deceptive speech aimed at creating a false impression of oneself in one's audience. Importantly, the deception involved does not quite involve a genuine lie. It later becomes clear that humbug is not quite identical to bullshit. Next, references to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Longfellow are mobilized in order to help develop a notion of careless, shoddy work. Again, *shoddy workmanship* seems to have some bearing upon the notion of bullshit. However, since (for instance) a politician can be intelligibly said to spew *fine-crafted* bullshit, *bullshitting* cannot be equated with *carelessness*.

Frankfurt analyzes another reference to Wittgenstein, this time an anecdote related by Fania Pascal. It inspires him to reach the main conceptual point of the essay, that bullshitting does not really involve out-and-out lying but rather it reflects an "indifference towards how things are" (34). Now Frankfurt discusses several items that appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entries for *bull session*, *shooting the bull* and the verb *to bullshit*, all of which seem convivial to his analysis. Examples from Ezra Pound and Eric Ambler are thrown in for good measure.

The upshot of all this is crystallized in a discussion of the difference between a liar and a bullshitter. A liar recognizes the difference between truth and

falsehood and deliberately chooses to embrace the latter (according to Saint Augustine, a real liar is motivated by the *sheer joy* of lying). The bullshitter is simply *oblivious* to issues of truth and falsity and just says whatever will serve his or her immediate purposes. As a result, claims Frankfurt, “bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies are” (61).

The book’s concluding pages are devoted to reflections upon the reasons for bullshit’s prevalence in contemporary western society. Several theses are proposed. It may be that the *percentage* of bullshit in modern discourse has not grown, while the *absolute quantity* of bullshit has simply increased together with the ever-growing quantity of speech and text produced by our hyper-communicative society. Furthermore, since “it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything” (64) people in contemporary democratic societies constantly find themselves having to speak on issues about which they know very little. They are left having to choose between either admitting that they are less-than-omniscient and less-than-perfect citizens or trying to save face by bullshitting their way through the conversation.

The book concludes with a “deeper” explanation of the prevalence of bullshit. The abundance of bullshit stems from the growing popularity of skeptical notions that “undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false” (65). Weakened by seemingly inescapable doubt, the search for truth loses its intellectual stature and is replaced by the veneration of sincerely held beliefs. Unfortunately, sincerity requires self knowledge. Since a person’s genuine self is usually a messy and protean entity at best, such self-knowledge is extremely hard to come by. Refusing to acknowledge defeat, people simply fabricate tales of their inner lives, in which case their “sincerity itself is bullshit” (67).

“On Bullshit” was a perfectly respectable piece when it appeared as chapter ten of Frankfurt’s 1988 collection, *The Importance of What We Care about: Philosophical Essays*. The textually identical book *On Bullshit* is remarkable for having being published at all. One expects more of a book. It makes no attempt to offer a social or historical context for the phenomenon it describes (a comparison with Paul Veyne’s *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* might make for a good start) and it does not even really flesh-out the ethical consequences of bullshitting. Credit must be given to the marketers at Princeton University Press. They managed to turn a published article into a book that has been seriously discussed both in the pages of New York Times and in a broadcast of WBUR public radio of Boston. One cannot help but imagine that quite a few people bought the book solely because of its mildly scatological title.

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