# “On Bullshit”: Why Definitions Matter

“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, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, 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, we have no theory. I propose to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis. I shall not consider the rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit. My aim is simply to give a rough account of what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not, or (putting it somewhat differently) to articulate, more or less sketchily, the structure of its concept.” -Harry Frankfurt (Frankfurt 2009)

In this lesson, we’ll be answering the following questions:

1. What is Frankfurt’s goal in “On Bullshit”?
2. What is a **vague** term or concept? What is a **precising definition**?
3. What does Max Black mean by **humbug?** Can you give an example of humbug?
4. What bothered Ludwig Wittgenstein about sloppy language? How does this relate to bullshit?
5. What is Frankfurt’s final analysis of **bullshit**? Why does he think that it is so widespread?

**Background.** Harry Frankfurt’s “On Bullshit” offers an analysis of what *bullshit* is, and why we should care about it. It was first published as an article in a small journal in 1986, but didn’t immediately garner much attention outside of a few philosophers. However, in 2005, it was republished as a short book for a mass audience which sold very well, and it suddenly became *very* influential, with all sorts of people (from all sorts of disciplines) seeing potential applications for Frankfurt’s idea in analyzing politics, business, etc. Frankfurt even appeared on late night TV shows (something very unusual for a philosopher!) As of 2019, it has been cited over 1,500 times in academic sources. It’s also inspired a wide number of books/articles that have tried to follow Frankfurt’s general method.

Frankfurt’s article provides a good example of how “informal logic” looks in practice (i.e., of how we can analyze arguments without the use of formal symbolic systems). Among other things, he offers careful definitions, gives charitable readings of the arguments of others, and ends up offering an argument for an interesting conclusion (one that might not seem obvious at first glance). Moreover, Frankfurt’s topic—that of “bullshit” and how it differs from things like “lying”—are themselves topics of inherent interest to anyone who care about reasoning well (since many of us want to avoid both being bullshitted and accidentally bullshitting others).

## Preliminaries: Why Definitions are Tough

It is often very difficult to give precise definitions of ordinary words or concepts such as *bullshit*. People use the same word in slightly different ways, or they might use a different word to pick out the same concept. Many words and concepts are **vague—**they don’t have precise boundaries. The fact that a word or concept is vague does not mean that we can’t say anything interesting about it, though, and it certainly does not mean “there is no such thing as bullshit.” What we need to try to do is to present a useful account that gets “to the heart” of many (though perhaps not at all) of the various uses of the concept or word. This is what Frankfurt wants to do for bullshit. He wants to offer a **precising definition** (or **explication)** of bullshit, and then say why it matters. This involves *starting* with our ordinary **lexical definition** of bullshit (of the sort that can be found in an ordinary dictionary) and then making it narrower/more precise, in order to focus on a particular phenomena he finds especially interesting and important.

**Max Black’s Humbug.** Like any good scholar, Frankfurt begins by considering what others have said about bullshit and similar phenomena. He begins with the philosopher Max Black, who defines **humbug**as “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.” (Black 1982) In essence, Black thinks humbug involves an intentional misrepresenting of the state of one’s own mind, rather than an intentional misrepresenting state of the world (which would be a plain old lie).

* Example: An orator giving a fourth-of-July speech who talks about the founding of our “blessed” country by “divinely inspired founding fathers.” This orator commits humbug to the degree that he is trying to misrepresent *himself* to the audience as a “true patriot” and NOT trying to deceive his audience about American history.

Frankfurt thinks this example is an interesting one (and he thinks Black is on to something), but isn’t convinced that Black is right in thinking that humbug/bullshit *necessarily* has to involve pretentiousness or an intention to conceal one’s state of mind. He also thinks its relationship with lying is more complex than Black lets on.

**Wittgenstein on Sloppy, Lazy Thinking.** Frankfurt then moves on to a revealing story about **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (perhaps the most famous and influential philosopher and logician of the modern era). He notes that Wittgenstein famously demanded precise, accurate use of language from his students and colleagues; Frankfurt thinks that what he was opposed to was bullshit. So, a (probably exaggerated) anecdote has Wittgenstein complain that a hospitalized friend’s saying “I feel like a dog that has been run over” was an instance of bullshit. Why?

1. She doesn’t know what a run-over dog feels like, and doesn’t especially care. She either made it up or repeated a phrase she heard from someone else.
2. Wittgenstein’s complaint: when we talk in this way, we are being “careless.” We don’t even *try* to describe the facts accurately. At least when we lie, we are forced to consider what we really do believe to be true.

## “Bull Sessions”, “Talking Bull”, “Bluffing”, and (Finally) Bullshit

Frankfurt works towards his own definition of *bullshit* by considering the (dictionary) definitions of a few related terms, and reflecting on what we can learn from them. These are what we earlier called “lexical definitions.” Remember, though, that Frankfurt’s goal is NOT just to give us another lexical definition; instead, his goal is to describe something more precise/interesting.

* In a *bull session,* people talk about religion, sex, politics, etc. and often express opinions that they don’t really believe are true. They’re saying things just to be outlandish, just to disagree with their friends, etc. They are just “trying out” opinions. This isn’t necessarily ALL “bullshit,” but it’s clear that it can/does involve bullshit.
* Frankfurt considers a variety of lexical/dictionary definitions of *bull,* but Frankfurt doesn’t think any of them quite get to the heart of what he means by bullshit. *Bull* involves talk that is “insincere”, “not truthful”, “not to the purpose”, or is “hot air”. Just as hot air is speech without content, excrement is food emptied of content (and you can’t sustain yourself by eating it…).

Frankfurt’s favorite OED definition has bullshit as “to bluff one’s way through (something) by talking nonsense.” He claims bullshit is closer to *bluffing* than it is to *lying.*  A liar is someone who deliberately tries to get other people to believe something that he or she believes to be false. It requires that you consider what is really true, then figure out how to deceive your audience. In a *bluff*, you are also misrepresenting reality (e.g., you bluff your way into a good job by pretending you are awesome, or something like that), but it also essentially involves “fakery.” Bullshitting involves the “fakery” aspect of bluffing and has less analytical constraints than lying. In particular, it doesn’t require that you think about what you really believe to be true.

**So, What is Bullshit?** This brings to Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit:

“The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides…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 co conceal it.”

“When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.”

**Why Does This Matter?** Frankfurt claims that bullshit, defined in this way, is a “greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” THIS is the point of his essay—that bullshit is NOT harmless, at least not when it becomes widespread. So why does he think this? In Frankfurt’s view both the habitual truth-teller and the liar have to pay attention to *the way things really are* when they speak. Habitual bullshitters, by contrast, simply say whatever strikes them. They pay no attention to the external world. In this sense, bullshit is a greater danger to communication than is lying. So, if we become accustomed to simply bullshitting (or tolerating bullshit) when talking about things like politics, we risk losing touch with reality, in a pretty literal sense—we’ll simply stop paying attention to what is real!

**Why is bullshit so widespread? Why is it getting worse?** Frankfurt speculates that, in the modern world, people are often asked to express opinions (in school, in the workplace, on social media, etc.) on complex scientific, political, or moral issues that they basically know nothing about. So they bullshit, and just say whatever they think will give the right impression to those they are talking to. This might involve sounding “smart” or “sincere” or “angry” or whatever. It doesn’t involve actually having a definite opinion about the issues, though. In addition, people may (falsely) believe there is no “right answer” about any issue that seems difficult for them to resolve, and that “all opinions are equal.” (After all, if they thought there was a right answer, they’d have to admit they didn’t know it!) So, they express their sincerebeliefsabout the issues *without making any effort to consider how these beliefs relate to anything they believe, or how they relate to the evidence.* These reasons for bullshitting might be understandable; unfortunately, though, they aren’t always harmless, since they make it much more difficult to actually solve the underlying problems/issues.

## Review Questions

Try to come with examples of the following:

1. An example of bullshit by a public figure (politician, celebrity, talk radio host, etc.).
2. An example of bullshit you’ve recently engaged in (Did someone bullshit you? Did you bullshit someone else?).

Then, consider the following questions:

1. Do you think these sorts of bullshit are (in certain ways, at least) “worse than lying”?
2. Why do you think society is so much more tolerant of bullshit than it is of lies?
3. If logic involves assessing the relationship between beliefs and evidence, why is bullshit especially worrisome?