


Harry G. Frankfurt

Bullshit surrounds us, we contribute to it, but think we can recognize and avoid being taken in by it. Yet we don't have a clear sense of **what it is**, **what function** it serves, & **why there is so much** of it. We lack a **theory of bullshit!**

Aim: provide a tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis.


Caveat: As the expression 'bullshit' [BS] has many uses, any proposed definition will be somewhat arbitrary & too rough. But one needs to start somewhere...

AFAIK, there is little literature to draw on, some dictionary entries & Max Black's paper *The Prevalence of Humbug*, with 'humbug' being similar to [yet more polite than] 'BS.'



Max Black

Humbug: deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.

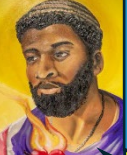


Since the misrepresentation is **deliberate**, humbug is not some specific kind of utterance, but one accompanied by a **state of mind**: an intention to deceive.

Question: Can **any** utterance that is accompanied by the relevant state of mind be a vehicle for humbug?


causes of much BS: people (a) are asked to **speak of matters they don't know enough about**; (b) think they should have **opinions on all matters of [inter-]national importance**; (c) **skeptical** that one can find objective truth at all, try to be **sincere**, i.e., true with regard to representing their own selves.

Knowledge of our unstable self depends on knowledge of other things & is hard to get. **Sincerity, too, is BS!**



St. Augustine

Real liars are rare. For most of us, a statement's being false is a [defeasible] reason **against** making it, whereas for real liars, it is a reason **for** making it. Liars know the truth, BSers don't care about it, may even forget what it is.



Real lies are told not for some ulterior ends, but for the pleasure of lying and deceiving.

Liars hide that they are trying to make us believe what they think is false, BSers hide from us that they don't care about whether what they say is true or false [it may be either & they may not know what it is], for their motive in speaking is unrelated to truth or falsity.

BS differs from lies in its misrepresentational intent. BS need not involve misrepresenting facts or the BSer's beliefs about them. **It essentially involves deceit about what the BSer is up to.**

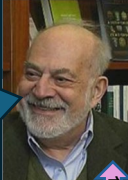
BSing one's way through affords more freedom, doesn't have a sharp focus, may involve faking everything [also the context], allows for more creativity, improvisation, imaginative play [it is artful, whence the notion of a **bullshit artist**].

The act of lying has a sharp focus, requires craftsmanship, must be rigorously designed to [seemingly] fit the constraints coming from the other facts that the liar knows to be true.

It seems that our attitude towards BS tends to be more benign than that towards lying [which may strike one as a personal affront].

BSing, while not morally superior to or more effective than lying, may be easier to get away with & consequences of being caught may not be as severe.

Response: **Liars** deceive by deliberately promulgating falsehoods; **bluffers** deceive by fakery. **BS**, too, is not false, but **phony** [note: fakes need not be useless; & what BSers say may at times be true].




Entry 3: bullshit as a verb
The request not to bullshit one is a request for facts, uttered against the backdrop of a suspicion that the other, in proposing to have expertise, has been bluffing.

Question: If BSing is like bluffing, what's the relevant difference between a bluff & a lie?

Of note: Not all bullshitting must be insincere or even intentional [FP, arguably, is not insincere].

That **BS** is so unconcerned with truth or falsity makes it the **greater enemy to the truth** than lies.




W. is taking FP to be engaged in an activity [making a statement about FP's feelings] to which the distinction between truth & falsity is relevant, & blames FP for not minding the distinction.


This, I think, is the **essence of bullshitting**: a lack of connection to a concern with truth, an indifference to how things really are.


Think about: What, exactly, are the differences, according to Frankfurt, between (a) humbug, (b) bullshitting, and (c) lying? [Is the bombastic orator bullshitting? Is FP engaged in humbug? Is either of them lying?]

What bugs W. [I think] is **not** that FP fails to get things right, **but** that FP is not even trying.



Surely, W.'s reaction is absurdly intolerant. He seems to perceive her as speaking about FP's feelings thoughtlessly, in a **lax, careless way**.







The problem is this: What FP says is **unconnected** to a concern with truth, is **made-up**, not even remotely intended as an accurate description of reality.

Next step: consider selective **dictionary entries** [from the OED] that are pertinent to the nature of BS.

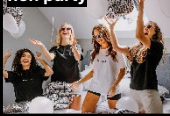
Entry 1: **bull session**
informal conversation or discussion, esp. of a group of males



Not so! True, just like **hen sessions** [= hen nights / hen parties] are typically for female participants only, **bull sessions** are for male participants, but [with respect to both terms] there is more than gender that the term conveys: It conveys that the discussion, while possibly intense and significant, is in a certain respect not "for real" as its participants tend to say not what they really think about the topic [typically an emotional topic such as politics, religion, or sex] but instead try out various thoughts and attitudes to see what it feels like to express them and to see how others react [without anyone assuming that participants are serious].




bull session



hen party

In a **bull session**, nobody expects participants to harbor a serious concern with truth. But there is also no pretense that things are otherwise.

Entry 2: **bull** [British usage]
unnecessary routine tasks or ceremonial; excessive discipline or 'spit-and-polish'; red tape



'bull' refers to pointless tasks that are disconnected from the legitimating motives of the activities on which they are imposed [like bullshit is disconnected from a concern with truth]

'bull' is also used as a less coarse equivalent of 'BS.' While the OED is somewhat on the right track in pointing out that bull, so construed, is **insincere** or untruthful, a better characterization is **'hot air'**, understood as speech that doesn't contribute to the purpose of communication [& is, thus, as useful to that purpose as exhaling hot air would be].

FP was not lying, but FP is misrepresenting themselves as having a very particular feeling... which is BS.

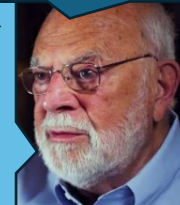
Suppose he was serious. If so, what in FP's statement could he have found objectionable?

When W. objected, disgusted, to his acquaintance, FP, who, being sick, said that FP felt like a run-over dog, that one **could not know what that felt like**, was he...

...making a **joke** [that misfired]?
.....serious?

Back to Wittgenstein: W. devoted his philosophical energy on detecting and combating disruptive forms of nonsense – even in his personal life.

Clearly, meticulous craftsmen work in these areas. And still, there **is** a characteristic **laxity** in the BS-er's work.



No, BS **can** be carefully wrought [think of advertising, PR, or politics, all of which are replete with unmitigated BS].


More questions: What is the phrase '**short of lying**' supposed to pick out? Is there a continuum of misrepresentations, some of which are just humbug, others actual forms of lying? But why think that the relevant difference is one of degree? Also, can actions really be humbug, too?

Comment: pretentiousness can be the motive of humbug, but humbug need not be so motivated. In other words: **pretentiousness is not an essential aspect of humbug** [or of BS].


Comment: plausibly, humbug can concern other things than one's attitudes or what one thinks or feels.

Hypothesis: Perhaps, what is essential to humbug is not so much that a lie is told [i.e., that a false statement is made], but that one, in misrepresenting some state of affairs, intends to convey that one is in a state of mind that one is not really in.

Example: In claiming [falsely] that one has 20\$ in one's pocket, one doesn't in fact say that one believes that to be so, and thus one doesn't literally lie about what one believes. One is, of course, lying about what's in one's pocket, but one does something **short of lying with respect to one's state of mind**, one **conveys** or strongly suggests to one's audience that one is in a state that one is not in i.e. that of [believing that one has 20\$ in one's pocket].




There **are** examples of humbug so construed, e.g., a bombastic 4th of July orator, who cares not about the truth of what he says [nor about whether people actually believe him], but only about how what he says makes his audience think about him and about what he believes and feels.



Thesis: BS differs from humbug so construed. BS, too, is short of lying, and involves misrepresenting oneself. But Black doesn't get either of these features right. Drawing on biographical material concerning Wittgenstein, I will develop a better account.

Wittgenstein's alleged motto:
In the elder days of art
Builders wrought with
greatest care
Each minute and unseen part,
For the Gods are everywhere.
[Longfellow]



Ludwig Wittgenstein

Nah! Relax!

Interpretation: In the old days, craftsmen did not cut corners even with respect to details nobody would notice; there was no BS.

Wait a minute, are you going to call me a **bullshitter**? Bollocks!

Are carelessly made, shoddy goods like BS? How? & Are BSers mindless slobs and their products messy or unrefined?