

Bullshit

Amid the industrial and agricultural chemicals leaching into our drinking water, the automobile emissions fouling the air, and the herbicides and hormones with which much of our food supply is laced, one pollutant poses a far greater threat. It permeates not our water, air, and food but our social and psychological environments. It does not cause cancer or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, but it does take an immense toll on our capacity to trust, to believe what we hear and say. This pollutant is known colloquially as bullshit.

Among the most intriguing books published in 2005 was a slim monograph on this very topic by Princeton University philosopher Harry Frankfurt [1]. Titled simply, if idiomatically, *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt's modest monograph exposes the origins and implications of this sadly pervasive feature of contemporary life. Even the medical profession is not free of it. Yet respect for the standards and aspirations of the life of the mind require that we take steps to reduce its spread. What is bullshit? Why is it on the rise? What can we do about it?

Frankfurt defines bullshit as deliberate misrepresentation. It is not, however, synonymous with lying. When people tell a lie, they do so intending to mislead. In so doing, they are very mindful of the difference between truth and falsity. Liars recognize what is true and what is false and attempt to convince the listener that what is false is in fact true. This sort of deception underlies most scientific and literary misconduct, in which data have been falsified or writers have attempted to take credit for someone else's work. We know the truth, but we choose to say something else.

Bullshit is different. Although it too is a form of deliberate misrepresentation, bullshitters do not really care whether what they are saying is true or not. Bullshitters merely do not want to be revealed as unknowing. They want everyone to think they know what they are talking about, so even when they don't, they go ahead and act as if they do. They care most about appearances, and they will say what they need to say to maintain the impression of authority. To tell a lie, it is necessary to know the truth, but to bullshit it is only necessary not to care about it.

Here is a beautiful example of bullshit from one of the greatest novels ever composed, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Book III, chapter 7):

[Boris] asked him to tell them how and where he got his wound. This pleased Rostov and he began talking about it, and as he went on became more and more animated. He told them of his Schon Grabern affair, just as those who have taken part in a battle generally do describe it, that is, as they would like it to have been, as they have heard it described by others, and as sounds well, but not at all as it really was. Rostov was a truthful young man and would on no account have told a deliberate lie. He began his story meaning to tell everything just as it happened, but imperceptibly, involuntarily, and inevitably he lapsed into falsehood. If he had told the truth to his hearers—who like himself had often heard stories of attacks and had formed a definite idea of what an attack was and were expecting to hear just such a story—they would either not have believed him or, still worse, would have thought that Rostov was himself to blame since what generally happens to the narrators of cavalry attacks had not happened to him. He could not tell them simply that everyone went at a trot and that he fell off his horse and sprained his arm and then ran as hard as he could from a Frenchman into the wood. Besides, to tell everything as it really happened, it would have been necessary to make an effort of will to tell only what happened. It is very difficult to tell the truth, and young people are rarely capable of it. His hearers expected a story of how beside himself and all aflame

with excitement, he had flown like a storm at the square, cut his way in, slashed right and left, how his saber had tasted flesh and he had fallen exhausted, and so on. And so he told them all that.

Of course, bullshit is the namesake of excrement. Frankfurt describes excrement as the “corpse” of nourishment, or what remains after the vital elements in food have been exhausted. In this sense, bullshit is an appropriate term for this form of mendacity because it belies the very essence of communication. Consider the ancient philosophical puzzle called the Epimenides paradox: “Everything I tell you is a lie.” Yet how can everything I say be a lie if this very statement, asserting that I lie, is itself a lie? Would this not indicate that I am telling the truth?

Communication is only possible when we can assume a shared system of meaning respected by both parties. Like the boy who cried wolf, if we habitually mislead, we will soon gain the reputation of untrustworthiness. As a result, even when we seek earnestly to tell the truth, we will not be believed. A student, professor, colleague, or friend who has lost the trust of others has suffered one of the most serious professional injuries. Trust is perhaps the most fundamental of all virtues in the professions, where we put allegiance to the pursuit of truth over the promotion of self-interest.

Why is bullshit on the rise? Frankfurt asserts that bullshit is inevitable in situations that require us to talk or write about something we do not understand. This is one of the dangers in perpetuating the myth of the omniscient physician. It promotes in patients, colleagues, and perhaps even ourselves the expectation among that there is nothing we do not know. When we begin

to feel that we cannot admit “I don’t know” without destroying our self-image, and therefore feel obliged to make pronouncements on every topic we encounter, we have joined the ranks of the bullshitters.

When a conversation shifts to a topic about which we know nothing, we face an important choice. We can either remain silent, or at least admit our ignorance, or we can bullshit. The most truthful course of action, of course, is to remain silent, or at least to admit that we do not know. For people whose sense of pride and very self-identity is bound up with knowing, the greater temptation is to speak. Who will be the biggest bullshitters of all? People who feel obliged to render an opinion on everything. Unfortunately, taking on formal authority can augment this impulse, promoting any preexisting inclinations in this direction.

Of course, hiding our ignorance is not the only reason we bullshit. There is also the impulse to avoid the unpleasant or threatening aspects of daily life. For example, we may downplay or seek to explain away signs of a brewing storm in an organization in an effort to distract others and ourselves from unpleasant prospects. If we are to avoid this pitfall, we must be willing to look threats in the eye. When someone has something unpleasant to tell us, we must be prepared to give a full hearing rather than escape at the first opportunity.

Another reason we bullshit is the desire to avoid an otherwise embarrassing silence. Rather than allow a lull in the conversation to go on for more than a few seemingly interminable seconds, someone chimes in with an inapposite point that merely distracts everyone from what really needs to be said. This is a terrible pitfall in the practice of medicine, when patients and colleagues may need a few minutes to

compose themselves before they can find the words to say what really needs to be said. In this respect, silence can be golden, for it is sometimes only in silence that the truth can emerge.

Frankfurt suggests that a new bullshit-friendly attitude is exacerbating our contemporary situation. This is the view that there is no objective reality, no truth with a capital T, to which our utterances can even correspond. Associated with a school of literary criticism called postmodernism, this view implies that we can no longer concern ourselves with whether someone’s statement is correct or not. We lack a standard by which to distinguish the true from the false. Instead the only determination we can make is whether the statement is sincere or not.

Frankfurt calls this an antirealist position, a view that seems to permeate many television talk shows. The antirealist says simply, “If we can no longer be true to the way the world is because we no longer presume to know it, then at least we can be true to ourselves.” The problem with this perspective, Frankfurt argues, is that it makes even sincerity itself bullshit. In forsaking truth and falsehood and being merely sincere, we are admitting that we no longer care what is true or false, which is the essence of bullshit.

What can we do about bullshit? First, we must clarify in our own minds whether we think truth is a possibility. If all utterances are equally valid, then there is no point talking about truth or falsehood in the first place. Once we admit that there is some objective standard by which to assess the accuracy of the things we say to one another, then we can take steps to rectify the conditions that promote bullshit. Next, we must cease expecting ourselves and others to render authoritative opin-

ions on matters that we do not understand. If we do not know something, we must be prepared to admit it.

This was the essence of the teachings of the prototypical ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, who famously declared that he was the wisest man in all of Athens precisely because he recognized that he did not know. The quest for knowledge begins in the recognition of ignorance. If we think we know everything, or at least are prepared to act as if we do, then we are unlikely to learn very much. Instead of helping clarify matters, we render ourselves major polluters who merely cloud the understandings of others. We shed smoke, not light, and everyone suffers from our presence.

Ignorance is our friend because it helps us figure out what we need to learn. However, some of us are so insecure in our knowledge or so fearful of revealing a chink in our cognitive armor that, rather than admit we do not know something, we bullshit as listeners, too, by feigning understanding of any topic under discussion. We nod when we should question. This is a problem, both for the individuals involved and for the organizations in which we work. For one thing, it alienates us from ourselves, prompting us to live with a false image of who we really are. It also promotes a culture of obscurity in which it becomes harder and harder to distinguish between what we know, what we don’t know, and what we merely pretend to know.

Far from fleeing what we do not know, we must become connoisseurs of our own ignorance. Biomedical science marches forward not by converting the print already in textbooks to bold font, but by identifying what the textbooks got wrong, or even better, what the textbooks fail to address. To discover is to loosen our hold on what we think we know. If the renaiss-

sance Europeans had failed to do so, the world would have gone unexplored. Instead we need to seek out and explore what we do not know. And those explorations need to embody a determination to distinguish with as much fidelity as we can muster the true from the false.

There is a vital difference between telling the truth and being

truthful. In some situations, we may not know with sufficient confidence what is true and what is not. In those cases, we should be as truthful as we can. At times, we will be wrong. In other cases, we may be victims of deception. But we must be vigilant in our efforts to assess the truth of what we suppose we know. When we are wrong, we should be the first to ad-

mit it. In all cases, it is vital that we commit to veracity. From a professional point of view, it is more important to rescue the understanding than to save face.

REFERENCE

1. Frankfurt HG. *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2005.

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