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Bullshit, Pseudoscience and Pseudophilosophy

by

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Abstract: In this article I give a unified account of three phenomena: *bullshit*, *pseudoscience* and *pseudophilosophy*. My aims are partly conceptual, partly evaluative. Drawing on Harry Frankfurt's seminal analysis of bullshit, I give an account of the three phenomena and of how they are related, and I use this account to explain what is *bad* about all three. More specifically, I argue that what is defective about pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy is precisely that they are special cases of bullshit. Apart from raising interesting philosophical issues, gaining a clearer understanding of these phenomena is also of *practical* importance, in that it bears on how best to tackle the threat that they pose.

Keywords: bullshit, pseudoscience, pseudophilosophy, Harry Frankfurt

IN THIS ARTICLE I give a unified account of three phenomena: *bullshit*, *pseudoscience* and *pseudophilosophy*. My aims are partly conceptual, partly evaluative. Drawing on Harry Frankfurt's (1988) seminal analysis of bullshit, I will give an account of the three phenomena and of how they are related, and I will use this account to explain what is *bad* about all three. More specifically, I will argue that what is defective about pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy is precisely that they are special cases of bullshit.

Apart from raising interesting philosophical issues, gaining a clearer understanding of these phenomena is also of *practical* importance, in that it bears on how best to tackle the threat that they pose. I will illustrate this point toward the end of the article.

I begin in section 1 by characterizing bullshit, taking Frankfurt's analysis as my point of departure. In section 2 I analyse pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy as special cases of bullshit, and in section 3 I argue that this unified account has several attractive implications. In section 4 I address a number of possible objections, and in section 5 some concluding remarks are made.

1. Bullshit

Frankfurt opens his discussion with a deliciously forthright statement:

> One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 117)

While Frankfurt is presumably referring to American culture during the Reagan era, his statement seems equally applicable to our present time. Indeed, bullshit today is new and improved, with social media providing a global platform. Its potential impact on crucial political issues concerning health, immigration, inequality and climate change is truly frightening. All the more important, then, that we understand the phenomenon properly.

According to Frankfurt's analysis, the essence of bullshit is *unconcern with truth*. Unlike the liar and the honest person, who both have their eyes on how things are, the bullshitter is *indifferent* toward the truth:

> It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth … A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of 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 consider 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 … He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. (Frankfurt, 1988, pp. 130–131)

Thus, the distinguishing feature of bullshit is that it stems from a lack of concern with the truth of one's statements.

The kind of concern that is lacking is specifically a concern with the truth of one's statements or assertions, not their content as such. To illustrate, while I might not really care whether the proposition that there is methane in Saturn's atmosphere is true or false, if I should find myself in a situation where I had to make a statement on the matter, I might care very much about getting things right (cf. Gjelsvik, 2018, section 4).

Although Frankfurt does not say so explicitly, he clearly has in mind *culpable* lack of concern with truth. Thus, the actor on stage who says whatever is in the script is not bullshitting, since the actor is not culpably unconcerned with truth. Similarly, the incoherent ramblings of a person in a state of acute psychosis are not bullshit either, since there is no culpability involved. Bullshit is an inherently normative notion, implying blameworthiness or fault.

Presumably the relevant form of culpability is specifically *epistemic*, although this may (and often does) tie in with other kinds of culpability, such as moral, prudential or even aesthetic culpability. The actor is not epistemically at fault, since the utterances in question are not assertions. Similarly, the mentally ill person is not epistemically at fault, since they do not (for the moment) possess the relevant form of epistemic agency. The bullshitter is assumed to be capable of responding to reasons and argument, but fails to do so.

Being culpably unconcerned with truth can be understood in a narrow and a wide sense, however, and Frankfurt tends to run these two senses together. It is one thing to be culpably *indifferent* toward the truth of one's statements. It is another thing to be culpably *unconscientious* with respect to the truth of one's statements. Those who are indifferent toward the truth of their statements are of course lacking in epistemic conscientiousness, but the converse need not hold. One can *care* about the truth of one's statements without *taking care* with respect to them. Being intellectually humble, honest and discerning even to a minimal degree is, unfortunately, not guaranteed by a desire that one's statements be true.

While Frankfurt mostly endorses the narrow sense, saying, for example, that "indifference to how things really are [is] the essence of bullshit" (1988, p. 125), some of his remarks point rather toward the wide sense.[1] In any case, I believe that the wider notion is more appropriate for characterizing bullshit. Consider *astrology*, for example. The term "bullshit" certainly seems applicable to astrology, but taken in the narrow sense this presupposes that proponents of astrology are indifferent toward the truth of their claims. This seems wrong. Astrology should be classified as bullshit even if its proponents are sincere in this regard. No doubt there are plenty of profit-seeking charlatans within astrology, who really are indifferent toward the truth of their statements. But the point is that astrology's status as bullshit cannot plausibly hinge on that. What makes astrology bullshit is more plausibly that its proponents are lacking in epistemic conscientiousness. Their adherence to astrology manifests a kind of self-willed ineptitude that neither presupposes nor rules out indifference toward the truth. I suggest that we understand bullshit accordingly. The relevant form of unconcern with truth thus consists in a culpable lack of epistemic conscientiousness, regardless of whether this manifests itself as indifference toward the truth.[2]

A problem, of course, is that most of us are lacking in epistemic conscientiousness, at least sometimes and to some extent (cf. Wikforss, 2017, ch. 3). To avoid extensional inaccuracy, for a statement to count as bullshit some minimal *degree* of unconscientiousness is thus required. I do not think it is possible to say

1 See especially his discussion of Fania Pascal's anecdote about Wittgenstein (Frankfurt, 1988, pp. 123–125), where bullshitting is said to be a matter of speaking "thoughtlessly, without conscientious attention to the relevant facts" (p. 124) and "without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavour to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes" (p. 125). This does not sound like something that obviously presupposes indifference toward the truth of one's statements.

2 Interestingly, however, the wide interpretation of Frankfurt's account, focusing on epistemic unconscientiousness rather than indifference toward truth, may be more plausible with respect to *bullshit* than with respect to *bullshitting*. When we talk about bullshitting (and bullshitters), we may have a more narrow conception of bullshit in mind, which really does involve indifference toward truth. Put another way, it may be that, as the terms are ordinarily used, producing bullshit is not sufficient for bullshitting. I am primarily concerned with the former activity.

anything very precise here, but a good rule of thumb is to keep an eye out for classical fallacies such as *ad hominem*, *straw man*, *false dilemma* and *cherry picking*. Such fallacies occur in all kinds of contexts, but what signifies bullshit is that they occur more systematically.

The term "bullshit" is, however, ambiguous, in that it can refer either to an *activity* or to its *results*. We can, for example, say that proponents of homeopathy engage in bullshit, referring to the activity that goes on when homeopaths form and communicate their beliefs. But we can also say that these beliefs themselves are bullshit, referring to the tenets of homeopathy.

The activity-sense of bullshit is primary.[3] Whether a certain thesis is bullshit does not depend on its *content*, but on the circumstances of its acceptance and communication. Thus, one and the same proposition can be bullshit relative to one context of inquiry, but non-bullshit relative to another, either synchronically or diachronically. For example, the belief that the Earth is flat is bullshit today, but for prehistoric humans it was presumably a rational belief (false as it was). Similarly, members of a self-help cult might dogmatically accept certain claims about human health and psychology which, unbeknownst to them, are accepted on rational grounds by professionals. That a belief's status as bullshit is in this way independent of its content and truth-value will become important later (in sections 3 and 4).[4]

2. Pseudoscience and Pseudophilosophy

In this section I analyse pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy in terms of bullshit. By "pseudoscience" I have in mind the typical examples, such as astrology,

3 I defend this claim in section 4.1.

4 For two other accounts of bullshit, also building on Frankfurt's account, see Stokke and Fallis (2017) and Gjelsvik (2018).

Stokke and Fallis (2017) suggest that bullshitting is not marked by indifference toward the truth of one's statements, but rather by indifference toward the relation between those statements and one's *evidence*. Stokke and Fallis thus depart from Frankfurt with respect to the *object* of indifference, but maintain the indifference part. This seems too narrow, however, since one can produce bullshit without being indifferent to whether one's statements are supported by one's evidence. Astrology, for example, is bullshit even if its proponents do care about the evidential value of cherry-picked anecdotes.

Gjelsvik (2018) instead suggests that the defining characteristic of bullshit is unconcern with the knowledge requirement on assertion embedded in the *institution* of assertion. Importantly, Gjelsvik construes this unconcern widely, to encompass not just indifference but also something like unconscientiousness. In this respect his account is thus similar to mine. What I take issue with, however, is Gjelsvik's focus on the institution of assertion. Which epistemic standards are embedded in the institution of assertion is a contingent matter that seems arbitrary with respect to the issue of characterizing bullshit. Astrology would be bullshit even if the institution of assertion placed less stringent conditions on permissible assertion. Thus, Gjelsvik's account does not seem to get to the heart of the matter.

homeopathy, young earth creationism, dowsing, flat-earthism, ufology, anti-vaccination, etc. The term "pseudophilosophy" is, however, less familiar. Let me give some examples of what I have in mind.

First and foremost, I have in mind a seemingly profound type of academic discourse that is pursued primarily within the humanities and social sciences. I do not mean to suggest that the disciplines in question are inherently pseudophilosophical, only that, for some reason, a whole lot of pseudophilosophy goes on within them. Often philosophical issues are raised concerning knowledge, truth, objectivity and scientific methodology, but without awareness of relevant distinctions and arguments. Let us call this familiar phenomenon *obscurantist pseudophilosophy*.[5]

A different and perhaps less familiar kind of pseudophilosophy is usually found in popular scientific contexts, where writers, typically with a background in the natural sciences, tend to wander into philosophical territory without realizing it, and again without awareness of relevant distinctions and arguments. Often implicit empiricist assumptions in epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of language are relied upon as if they were self-evident. Let us call this phenomenon *scientistic pseudophilosophy*.[6]

These examples provide adequacy conditions for an analysis of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy, in that any plausible analysis should imply that astrology, homeopathy, etc. count as pseudoscience and that obscurantism and the above kind of scientism count as pseudophilosophy.

I suggest that we understand pseudoscience as *bullshit with scientific pretensions*. Bullshit consists in epistemic unconscientiousness, but what do scientific pretensions involve? Here we can distinguish between a wide and a narrow sense. In the wide sense, to make a claim with scientific pretensions is simply to take a stand, in the sense of asserting a proposition, on a *scientific issue*. In the narrow sense, scientific pretensions also involve a certain mode of presentation – an *aura of scientificness*. We can thus distinguish between bullshit that takes a stand on scientific issues, and bullshit that does so while wearing a lab coat, as it were. We

5 See Shackel (2005), Elster (2011) and Buekens and Boudry (2015) for discussion of several illustrative examples of obscurantist pseudophilosophy. See also Sokal and Bricmont (1998) and Wikforss (2017). Cf. Frankfurt (1988, p. 133; 2007, ch. I).

6 Cf. Van Inwagen (2010, p. 184): "[M]uch of what appears under the rubric 'popular science' is, to all intents and purposes, philosophy. And this philosophy, the philosophy that infuses many works of popular science, is, I make bold to say, *radically amateur* philosophy, the philosophy of writers who do not know that there is such a thing as philosophy". A typical example is Richard Dawkins's discussion of philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God in *The God Delusion* Dawkins (2006). See Plantinga (2007) for details. Another typical example is Sam Harris's *The Moral Landscape* (2010), in which the straw men are lined up due to Harris's failure to grasp the content of many of the philosophical claims and arguments that he criticizes, such as *Hume's law* and the *open question argument*.

can call them wide and narrow pseudoscience, respectively (cf. Hansson, 2017, sections 3.2–3.4).

Analogously, I suggest that we understand pseudophilosophy as *bullshit with philosophical pretensions*. Again we can distinguish between a wide and a narrow sense. Wide pseudophilosophy takes a stand on philosophical issues, while narrow pseudophilosophy in addition poses as philosophy.

This analysis of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy is admittedly vague. What does it mean more precisely to take a stand on scientific or philosophical issues, and what does it mean to pose as science or philosophy? I will return to these issues in section 4.

3. Implications

Vague as it is, the proposed analysis has several attractive implications. In this section I spell them out.

3.1 Deficiency

The analysis captures and explains perhaps the most obvious feature of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy, namely their *epistemic deficiency* (cf. Hansson, 2017, section 2). This normative or evaluative aspect is captured since the analysis is made in terms of bullshit, which in turn is analysed in terms of a culpable lack of epistemic conscientiousness. To ascribe such culpability is clearly to make a normative or evaluative judgement.

3.2 Extensional adequacy

The analysis is extensionally accurate in that what we on independent grounds would regard as typical cases of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy are counted as such by the analysis. A lack of epistemic conscientiousness, manifested in the form of systematic occurrence of classical errors of reasoning, is characteristic of typical pseudosciences such as astrology, homeopathy, young earth creationism, etc., and also of obscurantist and scientistic pseudophilosophy. Pseudoscience is particularly prone to causal fallacies and cherry picking of data, whereas equivocation due to conceptual impressionism, whereby plausible but trivial propositions lend apparent credibility to interesting but implausible ones, seems especially common in pseudophilosophy.[7]

Note that the account would not be extensionally adequate if we took bullshit to be a matter of *indifference* toward truth, since pseudoscientists and

7 See Shackel (2005) for discussion of some striking examples of the latter. Cf. Cohen (2002, p. 322).

pseudophilosophers might care a great deal about the truth of their claims. What they characteristically lack is rather epistemic conscientiousness.

3.3 Unification

The analysis provides a unified picture of bullshit, pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy. It would be surprising if these phenomena were not intimately related. The analysis explains why this is so. Pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy are intimately related to bullshit in that they *are* bullshit.

3.4 Pseudoscience/scientific fraud

The idea that pseudoscience is a special case of bullshit has the attractive implication that we get a clear and intuitively appropriate distinction between pseudoscience and *fraud in science*, where fraud is understood in terms of fabrication of evidence.[8] Fraud in this sense is a form of *lying*, which makes it conceptually distinct from bullshit. As Frankfurt notes, telling a lie:

> is an act with a sharp focus. It is designed to insert a particular falsehood at a specific point in a set or system of beliefs, in order to avoid the consequences of having that point occupied by the truth. This requires a degree of craftsmanship, in which the teller of the lie submits to objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth. (Frankfurt, 1988, pp. 129–130)

The discerning craftsmanship that Frankfurt points to here describes the fraudster well. The fraudster is trying to insert a particular falsehood into a particular system of beliefs, in order to modify that system to suit a specific purpose (usually to make some scientific claim appear more plausible than it otherwise would). Such a deliberate scheme presupposes that the fraudster *takes* the fabricated evidence to be false. Otherwise the charge of fraud would be misplaced. Pseudoscientists, by contrast, can and often do take their claims to be *true*. There is nothing in the concept of pseudoscience to rule this out.

This contrast is explained if we take pseudoscience to be a special case of bullshit, since bullshitters can and often do take their claims to be true. In some cases they might have no opinion on the matter. This might be the case when, as Frankfurt (1988, p. 130) puts it, "the truth-values of [the bullshitter's] statements are of no central interest to him". But as I have argued above, the essence of bullshit is not exactly indifference to truth but rather unconscientiousness with respect to truth. And being epistemically unconscientious is quite congenial with taking one's statements to be true.

8 Cf. Hansson (2017), section 3.3. Insofar as it is possible to fabricate evidence in philosophy, the analysis gives us the analogous distinction there as well.

One might object here that epistemic conscientiousness requires intellectual *humility* and *honesty*, which surely cannot be attributed to fraudsters. Thus, fraudsters seem to lack precisely what bullshitters lack. How, then, can the contrast be upheld?[9]

There is of course *a* sense in which the fraudster is being unconscientious. But this is more accurately characterized as a *moral* failing rather than an *epistemic* one. Intellectual humility and honesty in the epistemic sense are a matter of being responsive to reasons and argument and being resistant to self-deception and wishful thinking. Intellectual humility and honesty in the moral sense is a matter of not granting oneself permission to deceive *others*. While these failings may be correlated as a matter of psychological fact, they are nonetheless conceptually distinct. And the fraudster need only display the moral one.

3.5 Truth

Bullshit consists in a lack of epistemic conscientiousness, not a lack of truth.[10] The analysis thus implies that pseudoscientific and pseudophilosophical claims can be true (or at least that their status as pseudoscientific or pseudophilosophical does not rule out their being true). This is an attractive implication, since we do not want to say that pseudoscientific or pseudophilosophical claims cannot be true. Many or most of them are clearly not true, but the point is that their status as pseudoscientific or pseudophilosophical cannot plausibly hinge on that. Flat-earthism is a pseudoscience even if its tenets should happen to be true (as unlikely as that is). And Sam Harris's discussion in *The Moral Landscape* is pseudophilosophical even if he should happen to be right that there are objective moral facts of the kind that he envisions.

3.6 Demarcation

The analysis sheds light on the classical philosophical issue concerning the demarcation of science. The analysis implies that this issue really consists of two completely separate issues. One issue is to distinguish bullshit from non-bullshit. Another issue is to distinguish pseudoscience from other kinds of bullshit (such as pseudophilosophy), and, in parallel, to distinguish science from other kinds of non-bullshit (such as philosophy). The first issue is normative and consists in giving criteria for epistemic unconscientiousness. The second issue is not normative, but consists in clarifying what it means for a claim to involve specifically

9 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

10 Cf. Frankfurt (1988, p. 129): "[A]lthough [bullshit] is produced without concern with the truth, it need not be false."

scientific pretensions, rather than, for example, philosophical ones. Here is a schematic presentation:

	Bullshit	Non-bullshit
Scientific pretensions	Pseudoscience	Science
No scientific pretensions	Pseudophilosophy and other kinds of bullshit	Philosophy and other kinds of non-bullshit

As this presentation makes clear, there are two different kinds of non-science: the bullshit kind to the left and the non-bullshit kind to the lower right. Put another way, there are two different, orthogonal dimensions along which one can deviate from science, and only one of these deviations merits criticism. (I will return to this point in section 5.)

3.7 Falsifiability

The analysis of pseudoscience in terms of bullshit captures a plausible version of the well-known idea that pseudoscience is characteristically *unfalsifiable*. Let me first draw some distinctions.

On a wide interpretation, a statement being falsifiable is just a matter of it having genuine propositional *content*, as opposed to merely being a seemingly well-composed string of words (perhaps expressing some emotional state). On a more narrow and natural interpretation, falsifiability is a matter of having *empirical* content. For example, the claim that Jupiter has planet-sized moons is falsifiable in this sense, since it has implications for what our telescopes will register. The thesis that there are – or that there are not – abstract objects such as numbers and sets has no such implications, however, and so it is not falsifiable in this sense. On a yet more narrow interpretation, falsifiability is a matter of having *accessible* empirical content. On this interpretation the claim about Jupiter's moons remains falsifiable, but not, for example, the claim that Churchill smoked an even number of cigars in his lifetime.

None of these notions of falsifiability captures the sense in which pseudoscience is characteristically unfalsifiable, however. This is because several paradigmatic pseudosciences such as astrology and homeopathy *are* falsifiable in all of these ways, since they do have accessible empirical implications (which have turned out to be false, by the way) (cf. Hansson, 2017, section 4.2). And as I mentioned in section 2, it is an adequacy condition for an analysis of pseudoscience that astrology, homeopathy and other typical examples are included.

There is, however, another and more promising notion of falsifiability in the vicinity. A characteristic feature of pseudoscience is that its practitioners happily appeal to evidence which lines up with their claims, but ignore or arbitrarily explain away evidence which does not. Pseudoscientific claims are thus unfalsifiable in the sense that their proponents are characteristically unwilling to *recognize* falsifying evidence.[11] The point is thus not that the claims themselves do not have empirical implications, but rather that their proponents do not take responsibility for these implications. Lack of falsifiability in this sense thus coincides with epistemic unconscientiousness (specifically in the form of cherry picking of data) and is thus captured by the analysis of pseudoscience as a special case of bullshit.

Falsifiability in terms of empirical implications does have a role to play here, however. According to the proposed analysis, pseudoscience is bullshit with *scientific pretensions*, and to involve scientific pretensions must at least partly consist in having empirical implications. In this way, then, falsifiability rather than lack of falsifiability is a characteristic of pseudoscience. (I will return to this claim in section 4.5.)

4. Objections and Replies

In this section I address a number of possible objections to the proposed analysis. This will also serve to further clarify the analysis and its implications.

4.1 Frankfurt-bullshit vs. Cohen-bullshit

G. A. Cohen (2002) suggests that there is an important kind of bullshit that is not captured by Frankfurt's analysis. As Cohen notes, Frankfurt's analysis defines the shit in terms of the bull, and I have followed Frankfurt in this regard. As I explained in section 1, the activity-sense of bullshit is primary – whether a specific proposition is bullshit depends on the context of its acceptance and communication. Cohen suggests, however, that there is a kind of bullshit that is not defined in terms of the bull:

> [Frankfurt] focused on one kind of bullshit only, and he did not address another, equally interesting, and academically more significant, kind. Bullshit as insincere talk or writing is indeed what it is because it is the product of something like bluffing, but talking nonsense is what it is because of the character of its output, and nonsense is not nonsense because of features of the nonsense-talker's mental state. (Cohen, 2002, p. 325)

11 Unfalsifiability in this sense is central to Sven Ove Hansson's "multicriterial" approach to the demarcation issue (Hansson, 2017, section 4.6; see also Hansson, 1983). The seven criteria proposed by Hansson are, however, not sufficiently sensitive to the distinction between pseudoscience and other kinds of bullshit.

Cohen's point is thus that there is a kind of bullshit which can be appropriately labelled *nonsense*, and whose nature does not depend on the context of its acceptance and communication. The kind of nonsense he primarily has in mind is:

> that which is found in discourse that is by nature *unclarifiable*, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscure creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what was said. (Cohen, 2002, p. 332)

Cohen suggests that this kind of unclarifiable nonsense is characteristic of the phenomenon that I have labelled *obscurantist pseudophilosophy*. If this is right, then there is an important kind of pseudophilosophy which is not defined in terms of the bull. If so, my analysis of pseudophilosophy is incomplete.

I do not think Cohen's objection works, however, at least not against the wide interpretation of Frankfurt's account. Indeed, talking nonsense seems to be a paradigm of epistemic unconscientiousness, especially if the nonsense in question is unclarifiable. Let us look at an example for illustration. Suppose someone utters an apparent profundity, such as "Truth is a social construct". We might be puzzled by such a claim and ask for clarification:

> What exactly is it that is a social construct? Do you have in mind the *concept*, or perhaps *property*, of truth itself? Or the *bearers* of truth, such as sentences, propositions or beliefs? Or do you mean that *facts* are socially constructed? Or do you rather have *knowledge* or *justification* in mind, the point being that what we have reason to believe is heavily dependent on the testimony of others, or perhaps that certain beliefs are somehow thrown into doubt due to being socially constructed? Furthermore, is social construction a *causal* notion, or perhaps a *conceptual* or *metaphysical* notion? For example, if what is socially constructed is what we take to be true, then presumably the notion of social construction is a causal notion, the point being that what we take to be true is somehow influenced by social pressures. If, on the other hand, it is the concept or property of truth that is socially constructed, then presumably the notion of social construction is a conceptual or metaphysical notion, the point being that what it is for a proposition to be true is somehow conceptually or metaphysically mind-dependent.

If the person refuses to cooperate with such inquiries, perhaps rejecting them as philosophically naïve, or perhaps by producing further, equally unclear statements, then clearly the person is lacking in epistemic conscientiousness. Thus, at least the wide interpretation of Frankfurt's analysis can accommodate the kind of bullshit that Cohen has in mind. By contrast, if the person were to cooperate, perhaps giving an empirically informed account of how our beliefs are influenced by social pressures in various contexts, then we should not say that the apparent profundity was nonsense. Rather, we should say that it was just an unfortunate way of glossing what was in fact a substantive empirical claim. This goes to show that, *pace* Cohen, we cannot determine whether a statement is nonsense independently of the nonsense-talker.

4.2 Pseudoscience/bad science

Intuitively there is a difference between pseudoscience and *bad* science. But how can this distinction be upheld if pseudoscience is bullshit with scientific pretensions? Isn't the same true of bad science?

That depends on what we mean by "bad science". The distinction can be upheld if we have scientific *fraud* in mind, since fraud in science is a form of lying and not bullshit (cf. section 3.4). The distinction between pseudoscience and bad science can also be upheld if we have *erroneous* science in mind, since false theses need not be bullshit – we can be wrong even when we have done our utmost to avoid it, especially if we are bad scientists (cf. section 3.5). The distinction can be upheld even if we have *epistemically unconscientious* science in mind, since bullshit requires a certain degree of unconscientiousness (cf. section 1). If, however, we have in mind something that is just as epistemically unconscientious as astrology, homeopathy, etc., then it is true that the proposed analysis will collapse the distinction between pseudoscience and bad science. But why would we want to uphold such a distinction in the first place?

A possible answer is that bad science, unlike pseudoscience, is conducted within scientific institutions, such as renowned universities and research institutes. This answer is unconvincing, however. As I mentioned in section 2, pseudophilosophy is primarily an academic enterprise. Although this is probably not the case with pseudoscience, I do not see why pseudoscience could not be conducted within established scientific institutions. If anything, the institutional framework should enhance the aura of scientificness.

4.3 Timeless demarcation

Some philosophers have maintained that the demarcation between science and pseudoscience should be *timeless* (see references in Hansson, 2017, section 3.6). But how can this idea be accommodated if pseudoscience is a special case of bullshit? As I explained in section 1, bullshit is primarily a form of *activity.* Thus, whether a specific *thesis* is bullshit does not depend on its content or truth-value, but on contextual factors which are not timeless.

This problem dissipates, however, once we realize that the distinction between activity and results applies to science and pseudoscience as well (cf. Bergström, 1972, p. 15). The demand for timelessness is thus ambiguous. On the one hand we might demand timelessness with respect to the distinction between scientific and pseudoscientific activity. On the other hand we might demand timelessness with respect to the distinction between scientific and pseudoscientific theses (where this is understood in terms of their content).

I see no conflict between the proposed analysis and the first requirement. What timelessly distinguishes scientific from pseudoscientific activity is precisely that

the latter is bullshit. The second requirement cannot be accommodated, however. But that is as it should be, since the requirement is clearly implausible. Which specific propositions should be counted as scientific or pseudoscientific cannot be a timeless matter. For example, phlogiston theory was once a scientific theory, but if it were put forward today it would be pseudoscientific. Conversely, it is easy to imagine movie-like scenarios where some ufological or cryptozoological claim quickly ceases to be pseudoscientific.

4.4 Conflict with science

Another idea is that pseudoscience essentially involves a *conflict* with established science, where this conflict is not merely methodological, but also involves a conflict of views within the relevant subject matter (see Hansson, 2017, section 3.3). This idea is, however, difficult to accommodate if pseudoscience is bullshit with scientific pretensions. There is no guarantee that bullshit will conflict with non-bullshit, since a proposition's status as bullshit is independent of its content. (As I mentioned in section 1, one and the same proposition can be both bullshit and non-bullshit relative to different contexts of inquiry.)

The idea that pseudoscience must involve a deviant doctrine is, however, implausible. Suppose a self-help book contains a number of assertions concerning various psychological matters, and suppose also that the book argues for these assertions by appealing to cherry-picked anecdotes and by criticizing caricatures of competing views. Such a book is pseudoscientific even if its theses should happen to line up with ones that are accepted within established science. The fact that pseudoscientific claims often or usually conflict with scientific claims is a *symptom* of their pseudoscientificness – more precisely a symptom of epistemic unconscientiousness – not what *makes* them pseudoscientific.

4.5 Freud and falsifiability

According to my suggestion, pseudoscience is bullshit with scientific pretensions. As I explained in section 3.7, this implies that pseudoscience is falsifiable in one sense but not in another. Pseudoscience is falsifiable in that it involves scientific pretensions, which at least partly involves having empirical implications. It is, however, unfalsifiable in that its proponents do not take responsibility for these implications. But perhaps there is a kind of pseudoscience which does not have any empirical implications. For example, Popper (1963, ch. 1) claimed that Freudian psychoanalysis is pseudoscientific for precisely that reason. If this is right, then we cannot understand pseudoscience as bullshit with scientific pretensions, at least not if scientific pretensions involve empirical implications.

There is, however, a weighty reason to include empirical implications in the characterization of pseudoscience, namely that the distinction between

pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy should run parallel to the distinction between science and philosophy (cf. section 3.6 above). It is plausible to understand the distinction between science and philosophy at least partly in terms of empirical implications. Philosophical questions are characteristically unanswerable by the methods of empirical science.[12] Thus, the distinction between pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy should also be understood in terms of empirical implications. (I do not mean to suggest that these distinctions are sharp, however. Empirical content is a matter of degree, and many philosophical and scientific issues overlap.)

Thus, insofar as Freudian psychoanalysis lacks empirical content we should say that it is pseudophilosophical rather than pseudoscientific. Since it is controversial whether the theory displays the relevant epistemic defects (or, more accurately, whether its proponents do), it is also possible that the theory is neither pseudoscientific nor pseudophilosophical, but simply philosophical.[13] If so, the theory will be in good company, since many philosophical theories make claims about psychological matters. A well-known example is the *Humean theory of motivation*, according to which motivation consists in having both a desire and a means-ends belief, where these states are constitutively as well as modally independent of each other.[14]

It is, however, hard to believe that Freudian psychoanalysis lacks empirical implications. At least its *therapeutic* component should be amenable to empirical testing, since it presumably implies that psychoanalytically oriented therapies are beneficial overall. (Whether Freud's followers take responsibility for these implications is another matter.)

4.6 Vagueness

Yet another possible objection is that the proposed analysis is just too *vague*. I have analysed pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy as bullshit with scientific/philosophical pretensions, where bullshit is understood in terms of a lack of epistemic conscientiousness, manifested in the form of systematic occurrence of classical errors of reasoning (*ad hominem*, straw man, cherry picking, etc.). I also distinguished between wide and narrow versions of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy, where the former make scientific/philosophical claims, while

12 If philosophical questions cannot be answered by the methods of empirical science, then why, one might wonder, isn't *all* philosophy bullshit? I will not try to answer this intriguing question here. Note, however, that the claim that all philosophy is bullshit is itself a philosophical claim which can hardly be substantiated by the methods of empirical science.

13 It is also possible that the theory falls into one of the two categories that I labelled "other kinds of bullshit" and "other kinds of non-bullshit", respectively. See section 3.6 above.

14 For discussion of the Humean theory of motivation, see, for example, Smith (1994, ch. 4).

the latter in addition pose as science/philosophy. This analysis involves several imprecise distinctions. Let me begin with the distinction between bullshit and non-bullshit.

What makes the difference between bullshit and non-bullshit is a certain *degree* of epistemic unconscientiousness. As I mentioned in section 1, I do not think that this degree can be captured in precise terms. But this is as it should be. The point is not that there is a sharp boundary between bullshit and non-bullshit that is hard to pin down, but rather that the boundary as such is imprecise. The phenomenon of bullshit, like so many other things, has fuzzy contours. Thus, more precision with respect to this distinction would be artificial.

I have not said much about what it means for a claim to involve scientific or philosophical pretensions, except that it at least involves taking a stand on scientific/philosophical issues, where scientific issues unlike philosophical ones are empirical. This arguably captures the central difference between science and philosophy, but it does not suffice to characterize the distinction fully. If I claim that it is raining I obviously take a stand on an empirical issue, but it sounds wrong to say that the issue is scientific. To count as scientific, an issue must also involve some sort of explanatory framework. I cannot discuss this issue further here, however. I will simply leave it to philosophers of science.

Correspondingly, philosophical issues are genuine issues which have little or no empirical content, but I am not sure that this characterization is sufficient. One worry is that *mathematical* issues would count as philosophical, which sounds wrong. On the other hand, *logic* is often thought of as a part of philosophy, so why not also mathematics? I leave this issue to philosophers of philosophy.

I thus concede that the proposed analysis is sketchy with respect to these issues. However, this does not threaten my main contention that pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy are special cases of bullshit.

Finally, what does it mean to *pose* as science or philosophy? Pseudoscience often poses as science by appealing to academic titles of varying authenticity. Another common theme is to appeal to individual scientists as authorities, but without recognizing that their opinions do not reflect scientific consensus. Obscurantist pseudophilosophy often poses as philosophy by using arcane and quasi-technical terminology and jargon, which can easily make the most trivial claims appear profound. (Scientistic pseudophilosophy tends not to pose as philosophy, however, since it often involves a hostile attitude toward the subject.)

These examples give at least a feel for what it means to pose as science/philosophy. The distinction between wide and narrow pseudoscience/pseudophilosophy is not very interesting, however, at least not from a philosophical point of view (cf. Hansson, 2017, section 3.2). But the distinction does have *practical* importance. There is certainly a risk that legitimate criticism of pseudoscientific and

pseudophilosophical claims is brushed aside with reference to the claims not having been *presented* as scientific or philosophical. This type of red-herring response can be forestalled by drawing attention to the distinction in question.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this article I have argued that pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy should be seen as special cases of bullshit, where bullshit is understood in terms of a culpable lack of epistemic conscientiousness. Apart from providing conceptual unification, the analysis also explains what is defective about all three phenomena. This matters not just philosophically but also practically, in that the analysis puts certain constraints on the important task of criticizing and exposing pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy. Let me end by briefly highlighting three such constraints.

First, the analysis shows us that the defining feature of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy is not *falsity*. Since their practitioners might on occasion get things right, focusing on the falsity of the claims may backfire. Instead, our focus should be on the epistemic unconscientiousness that is always present.

Second, the analysis shows us that what is bad about pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy is not that they are *unscientific*. Since there are non-bullshit forms of non-science, such as philosophy, we need to make sure that our critique of pseudoscience and pseudophilosophy does not indiscriminately apply to anything that is not scientific.

Third, and relatedly, the analysis shows us that what is characteristic of pseudoscience is not *lack of empirical content*. Thus, if we focus on the unfalsifiability of pseudoscientific claims, we need to make sure that we have the right kind of unfalsifiability in mind. As I have emphasized, pseudoscience is indeed unfalsifiable in the sense that its practitioners tend to bullshit their way around falsifying evidence. But if we put our critique in terms of empirical vacuity, our case against pseudoscience will not only miss its target, but will also rest on far-reaching and highly unpersuasive empiricist assumptions.

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