On Bullshit

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When the editorial assistant for *Dialogue* informed me of this book, I was immediately intrigued: How was a booklength philosophical treatment of bullshit even conscionable? Who would do such a thing? And how could one trump Frankfurt's 1986 essay [*Raritan* 6 (1986) 81-100], which I remember having read with delight, if not complete agreement? But then she told me the author was Harry Frankfurt and the book was "short, about the size of a prayer book", and I *knew*. Frankfurt has reformatted his twenty-page essay, once free for the xeroxing, by the single copy, for personal use, by dedicated scholars, into a sixty-some-odd-page hardcovered stocking-stuffer (Bah! Humbug! — of which more below), word-count unaltered, now for only ten dollars US! What kind of bullshit is that? But seriously folks, Frankfurt's essay is ever thought-provoking and apropos, especially now, with George W. & Co. in charge south of the border and with the antics of our own minority government and its loyal opposition here at home. It's definitely suited to the times and deserves to be promoted by any means.

Frankfurt proposes "to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit." He won't consider "the rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit" and acknowledges that any "suggestion about what conditions are logically both necessary and sufficient for the constitution of bullshit is bound to be somewhat arbitrary" (pp. 1-2). His main sources are the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Max Black's *The Prevalence of Humbug* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1983). Black's definition of "humbug" provides a useful foil for Frankfurt, inasmuch as Frankfurt assumes that differences in use between "bullshit" and "humbug" have more to do with gentility and other rhetorical parameters than with "strictly literal modes of significance" (pp. 4-5). Black defines "humbug" as "deceptive misrepresenation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes" (p. 6; quoted from Black, p. 143), and Frankfurt proceeds to address these characteristics one

by one.

Although he regards Black's definition as capturing certain paradigms of humbug, he does not believe it captures "the essential character of bullshit". In particular, although he regards it as correct to say that bullshit is short of lying and that those who perpetrate bullshit misrepresent themselves in a certain way, he disagrees with Black's account of these features (pp. 18-19). Contra Black, Frankfurt contends that what "bullshit essentially misrepresents is neither the state of affairs to which it refers nor the beliefs of the speaker concerning that state of affairs" (p. 53). Since bullshit, being "short of lying", need not be false, the "bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to" (p. 54). Whereas the liar hides the fact that he is trying to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality, what the bullshitter hides is that "his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it" (p. 55).

"It is impossible for someone to lie," adds Frankfurt, "unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction." I think this is true. Moreover, it seems to fall out of the position reported in the last paragraph. However, I think that that position is too strong. Requiring no such conviction is not the same as requiring the absence of such conviction.

Let's begin again. At the onset Frankfurt acknowledges the arbitrariness of his enterprise of suggesting necessary and sufficient conditions, and later, to make a different point, discusses an anecdote about Wittgenstein. So one wonders, with Wittgenstein already in his sights, why is an account of bullshit à la Wittgenstein on games not considered as a possibility? Frankfurt does set aside what he calls the "rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit"; but unfortunately he provides no examples or characterizations of such uses, so this methodological move is too vague for proper assessment.

What is Dickens's Scrooge suggesting about Christmas with the invective, "Bah! Humbug" that a present-day Scrooge not bound by Victorian decorum might express

instead with the cruder expression here under discussion? Perhaps he wants to suggest that celebrating Christmas is nonsense — frivolous, profligate, and therefore not a sensible thing to do. Perhaps he wants also to suggest that those who see Christmas as merry, as does his nephew Fred, are deluded about its nature; are laboring under a "deceptive representation", let us say. Frankfurt attributes to Black the view that humbug is *deliberate* misrepresentation, but there is no indication that Scrooge believes this of Fred in particular, or that Scrooge is a conspiracy theorist in general. Scrooge might be wrong about Christmas being humbug, but he is not misusing the term, and would not be misusing the cruder term, if it came to that. If Fred is bullshitting Scrooge about the merriness of Christmas, he himself seems singularly unaware of it. Black, pace Frankfurt, actually does leave room for nondeliberate deceptive misrepresentation; he explicitly states that his definition covers only "first-degree humbug" and would need some revision to cover the "second-degree humbug" produced by self-deluded individuals (Black, p. 143). However, Fred is not bullshitting or humbugging Scrooge, consciously or otherwise, even if his words, deeds, and ideas about Christmas do ultimately turn out to be bullshit.

In a sense, of course, Fred is not directly concerned with truth in wishing his uncle a merry Christmas; he is merely uttering a conventional greeting that has no truth value in itself, although it suggests or presupposes putative truths that Uncle Scrooge rejects. But it would be absurd to suggest that the truth-values of these putative background truths are of no interest to Fred, given the way their conversation continues.

According to Frankfurt's analysis, bullshitting and lying necessarily differ in intention (pp. 54-55), but the invective "lying bullshitter" is not an oxymoron and belies that contention. There are fish stories *and* there are fish stories: Some are good-natured bullshitting, told in a spirit of fun and conviviality, with no intention to convince of the truth or falsity of anything, and no intention to deceive about motives either. But some tellers of fish stories *want* to be believed — they want to conceal the truth of what they really did or didn't catch and accordingly their bullshitting must constitute lying. Frankfurt's analysis only allows for bullshitting fish stories that somehow fall between

these two extremes.

Frankfurt draws on a passage from Eric Ambler's novel *Dirty Story* that mentions some fatherly advice given to one of the characters, namely "never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through" (cited in the *OED*). Does this establish that there is an important difference between lying and bullshitting, as Frankfurt claims? Certainly not tout court. It merely evinces a difference between lying and a particular sense or paradigm of bullshitting. The considerations I have been advancing suggest that there is more than one paradigm of bullshit or bullshitting. (Recall: It is not incoherent to suggest that what Fred says is bullshit and yet deny that he is bullshitting.) Frankfurt also claims that we "tend to be more tolerant of bullshit than of lies" (p.50). However (recalling Fred again), one reason might be that we can say things that are correctly regarded as bullshit without thereby bullshitting, but we can't say things that are correctly regarded as lies without thereby lying. So there are more opportunities for blamelessly uttering what is bullshit than there are for blamelessly uttering what is a lie.

In fact, even if one is bullshitting, culpability may not attach to it. There can be unintentional bullshitting. Think of the nerdish expositor, who holds forth on this or that topic and just goes on and on in unselfconsciousness sincerity (so there is no attempt to misrepresent or "get away with something"), telling us more than we need or want to know. Such a person may indeed be speaking whereof he knows, and with complete regard for the truth. But something about him is just not sensible: he is going beyond what the situation calls for and much of what he says, relative to the context, is just so much hot air. The relevant truths he has to contribute may even get lost in a wealth of details. The sheer bulk of information may serve to confuse rather than inform. As the saying goes, "Bullshit baffles brains."

The Germans have a word for this sort of bullshitter: *Klugscheißer* (literally, one who shits wisdom, cleverness, or the like). And, as with English uses of the term "bullshitter" applied to wiseacres, it is almost always deflationary in intent, but can nevertheless be used with more-or-less irony, depending on what is presumed about the individual's motives (e.g. helpful concern or self-aggrandizement) or state of knowledge

(e.g. real, imagined, or feigned).

Where does this leave us? I think our discussion has shown this much: Someone can utter what is considered bullshit without being considered a bullshitter, and without being viewed as bullshitting (whether the verb is transitive or intransitive). Bullshitting can be lying, and qua bullshitter someone can be a liar. Bullshitting need involve neither misrepresentation (whether intentional or unintentional) nor intention otherwise to deceive (e.g. by baffling with a wealth of detail). And, even if guilty of intentionally misrepresenting, a bullshitter need not be trying to deceive about anything, not even his enterprise.

All these observations run contrary to Frankfurt's characterization of bullshit. This suggests that bullshit is not capturable by a simple formula; if there are necessary and sufficient conditions to be had, their specification will surely require much ungainly disjunction. But I think it's a better bet that bullshit doesn't constitute a unified domain and that the various paradigms of bullshit or bullshitting are related, not by having a common essence, but by family resemblances. Nevertheless, I do think Frankfurt has provided a useful and illuminating analysis. It's just that it's limited to one paradigm.

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