Bullshit Questions

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‘Bullshit is everywhere.’

- Carlin (2001: 26)

Abstract. This paper argues that questions can be bullshit. First it explores some shallowly interrogative ways in which that can happen. Then it shows how questions can also be bullshit in a way that’s more deeply interrogative.

0. Introduction

Frankfurt (1986/2005) influentially highlighted a certain sense of the term ‘bullshit’. He offered both a general gloss on that sense, and a more specific analysis of it. The general gloss is that bullshit is a kind of lack of concern with the truth. The more specific analysis predicates bullshit of assertions; it tells us that an assertion is bullshit just if the asserter doesn’t care whether it is true. I’m going to broadcast Frankfurt’s fertile general idea more widely by arguing that *questions* can also be bullshit.

By ‘questions’ I mean to refer to the *speech acts* that, characteristically, we do by uttering interrogative sentences (as opposed to the sentences themselves, or their informational contents). If a person engages in one of these acts, and their act is bullshit in the same general sense Frankfurt highlighted, then it’s what I’ll call a *bullshit question*.

My main claim is that bullshit questions are possible. First I'll explain how certain theories in the literature allow for certain sorts of them. Then I'll argue that other sorts of questions are also bullshit, and that their status as such is (in a sense) more deeply interrogative.

1. Shallowly Interrogative Bullshit

Frankfurt's more specific analysis leaves no place for bullshit questions, since questions are not assertions. But certain other analyses do leave a place for them, for instance the one on offer from Stokke and Fallis (2017). Following many theorists, they think conversations feature common grounds (propositions the speakers jointly accept) and questions under discussion ('QUDs', questions the speakers jointly try to answer). Simplifying a bit, their analysis is this: to bullshit is to try to add propositions to the common ground, without caring whether they are true answers to the QUD.

We can add propositions to the common ground not only by asserting them but also by *implying* them. Hence, Stokke and Fallis' analysis – unlike Frankfurt's – lets speech acts be bullshit 'by implication'. With these speech acts, the speaker doesn't care whether some proposition they *imply* is true. For example, suppose that you assert that Billy is a good philosophy student; and that after a long pause I utter 'His writings for me have had good penmanship'. Here I would *assert* that Billy's writings for me have had good penmanship, and I might even care whether that is true. But I would *imply* that he's bad at philosophy. If I didn't care whether *that* was true, then my assertion would be bullshit by implication. Since in asserting we try to add to the common ground the propositions we imply (as well as the propositions we assert), Stokke and Fallis' analysis lets assertions be bullshit either way.

Just as we can bullshit by implication we can also bullshit by *presupposition*. For, just as we might not care whether *what we imply* is true (or is a true answer to the QUD), we might also not care whether *what we presuppose* is. And, of course, we presuppose things when we ask questions. Imagine that we are discussing whether the queen stole the tarts, and that I don't care

whether she stole them, but I'm just enjoying the banter. Trying to be entertaining, I utter 'How come the tarts aren't stolen after all?'. Here I presuppose that the tarts aren't stolen. But I don't care whether that presupposition is true, or whether it is a true answer to the QUD. I'm just trying to be entertaining. So I try (via presupposition) to add a proposition to the common ground, while not caring whether that proposition is true (or a true answer to the QUD). Stokke and Fallis' theory tells us that this kind of question is bullshit.[1] It thus allows for bullshit questions.

So do *all* the theories that countenance bullshit by implication (e.g. Douglas 2006 and Webber 2013). That's because questions can enter propositions into the common ground, not only via presupposition, but also via implication (see Braun 2011). To illustrate this, reconsider Billy. Suppose that I utter, not 'His writings for me have had good penmanship', but 'Have you seen how good his penmanship is?'. Here as before, I imply that he's bad at philosophy. Assuming I don't care whether that's true, theories countenancing bullshit by implication deem my question bullshit.

In sum, certain theories allow that questions are bullshit when the people who ask them don't care whether their presuppositions, or their implications, are true. But the status as bullshit of these questions is only shallowly interrogative. That's because what makes them bullshit is not unique to questions. Their bullshit-making feature is very general: it's that they relay (via presupposition or implication or any other mechanism) content for addition to the common ground, while the speaker doesn't care whether that content is true. *Any* speech act can have this feature.[2]

2. Deeply Interrogative Bullshit

Now we'll dig deeper. Consider four cases:

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[1] After my utterance is the QUD still what it used to be, *whether the queen stole the tarts*? Or has it changed to e.g. *how come the tarts aren't stolen*? Or does it depend on further details of the case? These issues don't matter here. Caring only about entertainment, I don't care whether my presuppositions are true answers to *whatever* the QUD is.

[2] Corollary: any speech act can be bullshit.

- A jaded attorney's clients have lied to him so many times about whether they are innocent, that he no longer cares whether their claims about that matter are true. A new client comes to his office for an intake and, as always, he asks them whether they are innocent.

- A grade-obsessed student asks you whether Descartes was a sceptic. They plan to memorize what you say and repeat it on the exam. Whether your answer is correct is inconsequential to them, nowhere on their radar. If you gave them an incorrect answer and they found out about that fact, then they would not give a shit.

- A conversational narcissist asks you what you do for a living, merely as a means to facilitate their next turn to talk. They don't care whether what you say is true, or even very much process its content.

- A one-upping philosopher asks you a question after your presentation, with the sole aim of appearing smart. They don't care whether your answer is true, or really even what it is; those things are beside the point, which is to bolster their apparent acumen.

These questions are bullshit. This seems plausible on its face. More importantly, there are at least two substantive reasons to believe it.

The first reason is that they share certain important features with bullshit assertions. For example, they are insincere in a way that connects to whether the speakers care about the truth. Recall Frankfurt's bullshitting orator, who

> …goes on bombastically about 'our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind'. (Frankfurt 1986/2005: 16)

This pile of bullshit is insincere in a way that is tied to a lack of alethic concern on the part of the orator. Similarly with our question-askers: they too are being insincere in a way that's tied to a lack of alethic concern. The contours of this lack of concern differ across the cases, as is to be expected since assertions differ from questions. While the orator is being insincere on account of not caring whether the things *he says* are true, our question-askers are being insincere on account of not caring whether the things *that get said to them* (in response to their questions) are true. But it's a lack of alethic concern nonetheless.

Theorists widely associate truth-connected insincerity with bullshit assertions. It is apparent in all their examples. The fact that the questions in our four cases are insincere in a truth-connected way too, then, gives us some reason to think that they too are bullshit.

Now to a second shared feature: aptness to attenuate our habits of attending to how things really are. Here's Frankfurt again:

> Through excessive indulgence in [bullshitting]… a person's normal habit of attending to the ways things are may become attenuated or lost…[this is because] The bullshitter ignores [the demand to attend to the truth] altogether. (Frankfurt 1986/2005: 60-61)

Just as asserting things without attending to whether they are true is apt (when engaged excessively) to attenuate one's habit in general of attending to the truth, so too is asking things without attending to whether the answers one is given are true. Bullshit assertions, and the sort of questions featured in our main cases, share this feature.

A third shared feature: there's a way in which bullshit assertions, and the kinds of questions in our cases, can both belie Frankfurt's views. He writes that

> 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. (Frankfurt 1986/2005: 54)

Now, we can tell *baldfaced lies*. Here, we lie without attempting to deceive our hearers about the facts -- because we know they know we are lying. Several theorists argue that we can also make *baldfaced bullshit assertions* (Fallis 2015, Kenyon and Saul 2022). Here, our assertions are bullshit even though we aren't attempting to deceive our hearers about our enterprise - because we know they know we are bullshitting. Kenyon and Saul (2022: 184) write

> The bald-faced liar does not care to hide that they are lying, and might even parade the fact…A bald-faced bullshitter…make[s] no effort to hide that they are bullshitting...This is something Frankfurt himself would not have allowed…we simply disagree with Frankfurt.

These points hold for questions as well as assertions. If we were in a bull session, throwing out utterances without meaning them 'for real', I might ask you what's the biggest fish you've ever caught -- without trying to deceive you about whether I cared whether your answer was true. This question would be baldfaced bullshit. Such questions, like baldfaced bullshit assertions, belie the claim that bullshitters always *try to deceive*.

They *don't* belie the claim that bullshitters always *misrepresent*. Misrepresentation is present in cases where the bullshit's baldfaced. It's natural, even, to say those cases feature 'baldfaced misrepresentation'. This may be difficult, but try to imagine that a former president often misrepresents himself as caring whether what he says is true, while knowing that his listeners know he doesn't. His misrepresentations would be baldfaced -- but misrepresentations nonetheless.

What's important here is the alignment of how Frankfurt's views go astray with (a) certain assertions, and (b) certain instances of the kinds of questions in our cases. On both sides of the divide, and in the same way, those views go astray when the speakers, misrepresenting things in a

baldfaced way, aren't trying to deceive. This is a third shared important feature of bullshit assertions on the one hand, and the kinds of questions in our four main cases on the other.

I'll now move on to the second reason to think the questions in our four main cases are bullshit. This reason consists in an argument involving hypocrisy.

Here's a made-up story. After his speech, Frankfurt's orator took questions from the crowd. One of those questions exhibited conversational narcissism (its asker cared only about setting up their next turn to speak); another featured one-upmanship (its asker cared only about sounding well-informed); another was from a student writing a report about the speech for extra credit (and for whom the truth of the orator's answers was neither here nor there); and another still was from a jaded reporter (who, much like our jaded attorney, was metaphorically 'just phoning it in', having been burned by his sources far too many times to care anymore whether they answered his questions truthfully). The next day, the orator found out (somehow) that none of those questioners cared whether the answers he gave were true. This made him very upset. He felt manipulated and disrespected, so he personally searched out all four questioners and berated them with criticism.

In this story, the orator's acts of criticism count as hypocritical. It seems clear that this judgement is correct. But *why* is it correct? One explanation is this: the orator had (during the speech) been bullshitting, and the thing he (later) criticized the askers for doing was also a kind of bullshitting. Thus, he was criticizing them for doing something of which he himself was guilty; and that's hypocritical. This explanation (of why the orator's criticisms are hypocritical) is not the only possible one, but it *is* a plausible one. Let's take it on board via an explanatory inference.

Since our now-on-board explanation has it that the askers in the story were bullshitting, we can appeal to the (intentionally close) similarity between their questions and our four main questions. The questions in the story are bullshit, and our main questions are very similar to them. Hence we conclude, by analogy, that the main questions are bullshit too.

Since this argument is nondeductive (making both explanatory and analogical inferences), it is disputable. For instance, you might dispute it by offering alternative explanations of why the

orator's acts of criticism count as hypocritical. But disputable arguments can still be helpful. That's how this argument is. Think of it as saying: questions can be bullshit because your own bullshit can make it hypocritical for you to criticize them.

I'll now argue the status as bullshit of the questions in our four main cases is more deeply interrogative than the status as bullshit of the questions in §1. Those questions are bullshit owing to the feature that they relay content for the common ground while the speaker doesn't care whether that content is true. Any speech act can have that feature. In contrast, the questions in our four main cases are bullshit owing to features that *only questions* can have. This is because the status as bullshit of those questions owes to the ways in which the speakers' mental states relate to *answers* they might be given in response to their speech acts. And the only speech acts that can be given answers (in the relevant sense) are questions. Thus, the bullshit-making feature of the questions in our four main cases is *essentially* interrogative. In that sense its status as interrogative is deep, and renders deeply interrogative the status as bullshit of the questions at issue.[3]

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