

The Value of Bullshit

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0. Introduction

Harry Frankfurt observed some time ago that one of the most obvious facts about our culture is that there is so much bullshit. “Everyone knows this,” Frankfurt says, “and each of us contributes his share.”¹ It is tempting to think of this as a bad thing indeed. After all, bullshit is antithetical to the aims of intellectual honesty, inquiry, good policy decision, and a general appreciation for the truth and respect for the practice of asserting it. Frankfurt was acutely aware that sometimes bullshit serves a function worth serving: we bullshit sometimes when we try on views for size.² This observation of Frankfurt’s is interesting. I want to argue that this is not the only worthwhile service bullshit has to offer.

Bullshit seems bad. That there is so much of it seems doubly so. What good, then, can one think bullshit produces? My argument is roughly this: bullshit motivates in a way arguments and reasons sometimes cannot. This is an empirical claim and is therefore amenable to empirical confirmation or refutation. I do not have the empirical data sufficient to confute or refute this claim. So, my main premise should be read as a tentative hypothesis put forward in advance of the empirical data. I await the data that will exonerate or condemn this hypothesis. The argument then follows this empirical

¹ Harry G. Frankfurt (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press.

² *Op cit.*

conjecture accordingly: bullshit motivates where arguments sometimes cannot; it is (sometimes) a good thing to motivate; bullshit is therefore (sometimes) good.

1. Descartes and Bullshit

Before I advance my main argument, I want to say something about a case study in bullshit doing some good. Descartes' hypothesis that there is an evil demon deceiving him is bullshit. This is not quite fair, for Descartes' was up front about what he was doing with this hypothesis, and the bullshitter essentially "misrepresents what (s)he is up to" by pretending to aim at the truth while she "does not care whether the things (s)he says describe reality correctly."³ Anecdotal evidence culled from numerous introductory courses in philosophy, however, leads me to believe that Descartes' purpose with the demon hypothesis escapes most people upon a first reading. So, it might be instructive to think of the hypothesis as bullshit and see where this leads us.

The evil demon is bullshit. What do I mean by this? Descartes does not believe there is a demon deceiving him. He is not aiming to describe reality correctly with this hypothesis. What, then, is he up to? Precisely this: he is trying to produce a behavioral result.

Toward the end of the First Meditation, Descartes concludes that even the beliefs he was antecedently very certain of are doubtful. This is an old story. We all know the arguments. But Descartes was worried. Despite the clearness with which he apprehends

³ *Op cit.* Of course, in light of this, my claim that Descartes' demon hypothesis is bullshit might itself be taken for bullshit. I'm acutely aware of this; but I think it is still instructive to think of the demon as bullshit and see where it leads.

the reasons for doubt, he just cannot be moved to doubt that, say, he has a head or that $2+3=5$. He says,

I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. So, in the future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty.⁴

This is significant. All the reasons are there, and Descartes apprehends them clearly and distinctly. So, for the purpose for which the *Meditations* were designed, these beliefs have to go.

But this is hard; it is painfully hard. Descartes was aware of the difficulty:

But it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions—opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny.⁵

⁴ Rene Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press 1996.

⁵ *Op cit.*

I have quoted Descartes at such length because I think this is important. Several observations are worth making here. First, Descartes, in his calm moments of reflection, feels the force of his arguments. He knows, when he's attending to them, that they militate in favor of doubt. Second, Descartes' knows his beliefs for what they are: highly probable opinions. This is a fact.

Now we are prepared to see the point of the bullshit story about the demon. Descartes knows his opinions are highly probable, so that there is a demon deceiving him is patent bullshit. Why then, the bullshit story? To motivate behavior. Descartes feels it is vital to keep the doubt ever before his mind. The arguments may work to accomplish this during moments of reflection and attention, but they lose their force once his mind goes elsewhere. What he needs here is a concern that will motivate the behavior he wants to cultivate, namely a global doubt about all he took to be certain. What sort of concern will accomplish this? Not another argument, to be sure. Instead he fabricates a story so far removed from what he knows to be true that it is almost comic: an evil demon of the utmost power and cunning doing everything in its power to deceive him.

For Descartes to keep this story in his mind is for him to reap the benefits of his arguments that they could not produce in his behavior. The Method of Doubt now gets off the ground, and he can proceed to the aim of his *Meditations*.

From this we learn a valuable lesson about bullshit. Despite his bullshit story about the demon, Descartes is not intellectually dishonest, quite the reverse.⁶ He deploys carefully constructed bullshit to achieve what he took to be an intellectually valuable end:

⁶ Some take the view of Descartes as bullshitter a bit further; they maintain a Dissimulation Hypothesis about his Third Meditation argument for the existence of God. I am not a Descartes scholar and therefore am unable to assess the evidence for the Dissimulation Hypothesis. I leave this work to others. For more on the Dissimulation Hypothesis, see Louis Loeb, "Is There Radical Dissimulation in Descartes' Meditations?", *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, 243-270, University of California Press, 1986.

the doubt of all he formerly believed for the purpose of establishing a foundation for science.⁷

2. Bullshit in Politics and Daily Life

Arguments do not always motivate voting behavior. It is not that the majority of people cannot feel the force of them; they can. It is rather that the force of an argument often dissipates once it is no longer before one's mind. Bullshit lingers in a way reasons do not. Take the case of Tea Party advocates who oppose Obama Care. They have arguments. Some of these arguments are careful and thoughtful. But these arguments do not get people heated up and motivated to protest the legislation. What does? Bullshit. That the government is advocating the establishment of medical death squads, rationing health care, and grooming the elderly for 'early retirement' are all bullshit.⁸ But they motivate. That Obama is a Socialist is bullshit. But it gets people off the bench in a way that the arguments behind the thoughtful and intelligent opposition to his policies do not.

Perhaps this is a bad thing. Bullshit shapes our thought about the world in an arguably defective way. Motivating the behaviors we want might be good, but is bullshit the best way to do it? I do not think so. It would be preferable if voters could always hold the relevant arguments in mind. But to expect them to do this when they go to the polls is unrealistic and perhaps even irresponsible. My argument does not maintain, however, that bullshit is the *best* way to motivate, merely that it is *a* way to motivate.

⁷ Perhaps Tamar Szabó Gendler's work on 'alief' can be pressed into service here to explain the usefulness of bullshit. See Gendler 2008, "Alief and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10):634-663.

⁸ I'm not singling out Tea Partiers here; this is just a particularly salient example of bullshit.

We bullshit our children. We make up all kinds of stories we know to be false in order to motivate their behavior. Why do we do this? Why do we tell kids of a jolly old anti-Semitic elf who resides at the North Pole? Just to amuse ourselves? No. It serves a two-fold purpose. First, it encourages good behavior all year round. Second, it takes the burden of lavishing gifts on our children off us; they expect it on one day, not all year. We invent bogey men, saintly but somewhat racially and religiously insensitive elves, and giants living atop beanstalks to motivate social behavior in young people. These are not lies; they are bullshit. But they are good bullshit.

Some may think I've missed an important distinction between bullshitting and fiction. I have not. The Santa Claus tale *is* bullshit. We know this because we were burned by it as youngsters. It is represented as the God's honest truth. It is perpetrated by a raft of adults (newscasters and meteorologists plot Santa's path on Doppler radar; mail delivery personnel accept letters to him; parents put out cookies). Read as fiction, the story is pretty bad fiction. Understood as bullshit is makes sense. It makes sense out of a whole raft of our practices.

In these cases we bullshit not out of a motivation to deceive, but instead out of a motivation to motivate behavior. Voters can't keep all the arguments in mind; there are too many, and they are too complicated. Children can't appreciate the force of the argument; they lack the sophistication to pull this off. Instead we bullshit.

3. The Upshot

Bullshit can be good. A lot of bullshit is bad. It weakens our appreciation for honest, hard intellectual work; it demeans the goals of inquiry; and it stymies fruitful discussion. Bullshit also makes a mockery of the practice of assertion. But some bullshit is good. It motivates good behavior; it stimulates the imagination; it produces results. The trick is to sort the good from the bad bullshit.

Aristotle tells us that no emotion is by nature good or bad, but good or bad only insofar as it is deployed in actions that are the maximalization of the right emotion at the right time in the right degree felt towards the right objects. Bullshit is no different. Bullshit is not by nature good or bad; it is good or bad insofar as it is cunningly crafted to achieve motivation of behavior that is worthwhile. It turns out that there is such a thing as honest bullshit. Descartes' story about the demon is a case in point; he's not taken in by the bullshit and, if we pay attention, neither are we. But we reap the benefits.

4. Conclusion

I am not advocating a program of widespread bullshitting. This would be a mistake. Instead I advocate appreciation of the importance, significance, and use of artfully crafted bullshit. As Frankfurt observes, there is a reason why we call some people bullshit artists. Deploying bullshit effectively is a useful skill. We can't all do it, no more than we can all paint like Renoir. But some of us can, and their bullshit has value.

Bullshit is also dangerous. I advocate deploying it, therefore, with extreme care. The behaviors motivated by bullshit are often negative and destructive. Persecution of

Jews, minorities, and women are motivated by bullshit about their nature (their psychology, cognitive abilities, and physiology). This is bad. But sometimes the behaviors motivated by bullshit are positive and advantageous to the community. Children behaving well, people turning out to vote, these are positive things. The bullshit that motivates them, however, must be crafted so that it doesn't leave people feeling too burned once they come to appreciate the truth and feel the force of the arguments that make sense out of the behaviors the bullshit was meant to motivate.

If I have been successful, I have cleared the way to a morally acceptable and honest use of bullshit. Bullshit need not be antithetical to our shared goals of understanding the world and getting the truth about it. Rather, it can foster these goals (see Descartes) and inculcate useful and valuable behaviors.

My main premise is an empirical conjecture. As such, I maintain it tentatively in advance of the evidence for it. If I am right, empirical research on the usefulness of bullshit will bear me out. I think I am right.

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