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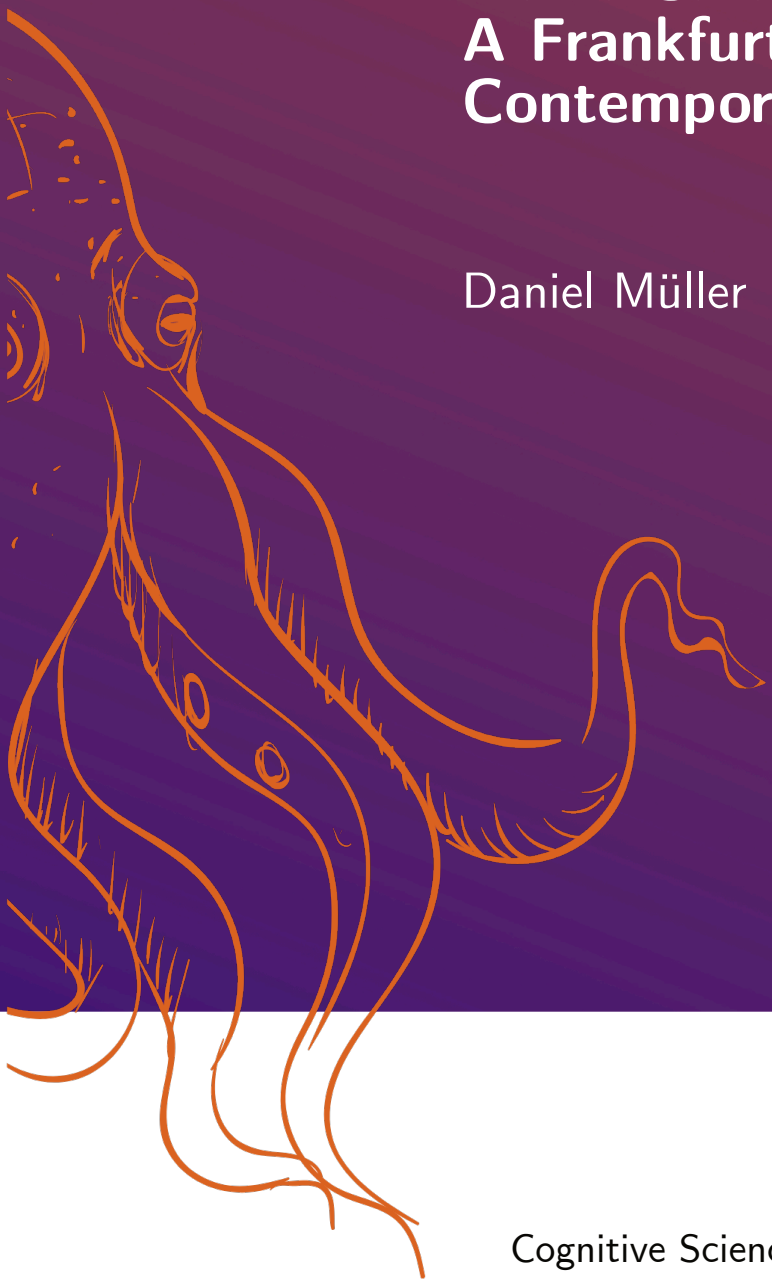
Don't Care about Bullshit! - A Frankfurtian Analysis of a Contemporary Problem

Daniel Müller



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Institut für Kognitionswissenschaft
Universität Osnabrück
49069 Osnabrück
Germany
https://www.ikw.uni-osnabrueck.de

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1 Introduction

Harry Frankfurt kicked off the modern debate about the autonomy of persons in 1971 with his seminal paper "The freedom of the will and the concept of a person" (H. G. Frankfurt, 1988)[1]. Within the debate about free will, he is known for his position of compatibilism, the idea that the world is deterministic, yet certain creatures, especially humans, are still capable of possessing free will. Many philosophy students were also introduced to the so-called Frankfurt cases, which are situations in which a person would possess freedom of will, although they could not do otherwise, because their brain was constrained by an evil neuroscientist (these are just thought experiments, so no worries). Outside of the bubble of academic philosophy, he is more renowned for publishing a book about bullshit. Both, his work on autonomy and his work on defining bullshit will play a role in this essay. In the book, he defined and explained the notion of bullshit as precisely and thoroughly as we would expect an analytic philosopher of good reputation to do. If we are interested in speaking the truth, Frankfurt says, we need to do two things: We need to know the truth and we need to care about communicating it properly. If we want to lie, we would still need to know the truth and have an interest in communicating the opposite of it. If we do not even care about the truth, Frankfurt asserts, what comes out of our mouths is bullshit. I am sure each of us has encountered bullshit at least once in our life. But bullshit is more prevalent than one might think. Maybe you thought back to your school days when some teens would talk gibberish. That, I would assume, is still one of the rather harmless versions of bullshit, meant mostly for entertainment. Bullshit gets weaponized, however, when it takes the form of what has more recently been called fake news. The purpose of bullshit that has taken this form is not to convince you, but to cast doubt on what you previously believed until you end up in a relativist position, where you think that anything goes. In what follows, I am going to first give a deeper account of bullshit, then I am going to sketch Frankfurt's ideas about autonomy and particularly about values and deep cares, which are at the core of what makes a person autonomous for Frankfurt. Subsequently, I am going to show how bullshit can be detrimental to autonomy and lastly, I am going to attempt to offer a solution to this important contemporary problem.

2 "Bullshit"

Bullshit is prevalent, not just where we would expect it, but virtually in all aspects of life. From a corporate point of view, as data is the new currency and all sorts of information are accessible to users, not just true facts, what matters in spreading information is neither truth nor relevancy, but increasing a user's screen time. For users, on the other hand, it might become ever more difficult to find true facts. Furthermore, in a couple of media outlets, the good journalistic practice seems to be in danger, insofar, as opinion articles are no longer explicitly marked as such and distinguished from reports, which should be expected to keep more to the point (Harms, 2019). Of course, bullshit has been around for a very long time, potentially since shortly after human languages started to develop, but the wide availability of information on the internet has probably drastically increased the net weight of bullshit in the world, although there are surprisingly few scientific investigations of the prevalence of bullshit or fake news thus far (Lazer et al., 2018).

2.1 Earlier ideas about "bullshit"

In his essay "On bullshit", H. G. Frankfurt (2005) gives an account of his observation that we are surrounded by bullshit in advertisement, press releases and politics (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, p.

[1]Original work published 1971.

1). Since the book dates back to 2005 (the original essay date even back to the 1980s), with the development of the internet in the past 17 years, matters likely got worse. Bullshit, according to Frankfurt is inevitably produced whenever people are forced or get the opportunity to talk about things that they do not understand enough. The second root of the rise of bullshit according to Frankfurt is the conviction that in a democratic society, every citizen is supposed to have an opinion on every topic (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, p. 62). The first text that Frankfurt turns to in his quest for a proper definition of bullshit is Max Black's essay *The Prevalence of Humbug* (Black, 1983). While the notion of humbug is a bit milder in tone than that of bullshit, Black finds some characteristics that apply to bullshit as well. The deceptive intention, the misrepresentation of the facts is still not identical to lying. And finally, the pretentious arrogation which is often (but not necessarily) the motif for producing bullshit. A person who talks bullshit misrepresents something, but not the thing she is talking about, rather she misrepresents herself since she wants to evoke certain impressions in the listener (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 4-6). While Black captures many important aspects, as we have seen, humbug and bullshit are not fully identical.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, according to Frankfurt, has unraveled another aspect of bullshit which Black missed, namely sloppiness: A person who talks bullshit usually does this without care and awareness for and of the details, without any attempt at objectivity (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 19-22). Sloppiness, however, is not a necessary criterion for bullshit, since there are very elaborate forms of bullshit, which are used in press releases and politics and which use findings from Cognitive Psychology for detailed and concise bullshitting (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 22-29). We will concern ourselves particularly with these types of bullshit later on.

In de mendacio (Augustine et al., 1952), Augustine of Hippo distinguishes eight types of lies. Seven thereof are not lies in the strictest sense, because it is not the liar's intention to speak the untrue. The last type of lie is the one where the liar takes joy from deceiving the listener. Only this, according to Augustine is a genuine lie (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, pp.56-58).

Building on these ideas, Frankfurt defines bullshit as utterances by someone who does not care about the truth, but rather about presenting herself in a certain way. Hence, the real threat to truth is not the lie, since the liar at least needs to know the truth and intend not to speak it, but bullshit, where truth plays no role anymore (H. G. Frankfurt, 2005, p. 61).

2.2 Weaponized "bullshit"

A trend since the early 2010s is that internet users, particularly those with a political agenda, have started to weaponize bullshit. That is to say that they spread disinformation in such a manner that it became hard for parts of the lay public to tell the truth apart from the lie. Meanwhile, certain areas of politics are so infested with bullshit that majorities believe in conspiracy narratives and follow political figures who try to make their mark by making use of bullshit. One example is that one-third of adult US-Americans believe in the far-right white nationalist narrative of the Great Replacement, which claims that a political elite is purposefully trying to increase the number of people from racial minorities in order to replace the white American population (Mancini, 2022). Oftentimes this claim is coupled with the claim that said elite would politically profit from this replacement. Another example of the usage of weaponized bullshit was the Brazilian electoral campaigns before the presidential elections in 2022, where both candidates made extensive use of disinformation.

Generally, it appears that the rise of right-populist and fascist politics in recent years might have a correlation with the spread of weaponized bullshit on the internet and certain media outlets. Clearly, I am not claiming that this phenomenon is completely new and unprecedented. After all, one might be tempted to argue that propaganda in general is not that different from what I describe. But I must beg to differ; propaganda is distinct from bullshit and one could argue that propaganda is the

second step that might follow weaponized bullshitting: The latter disorients the audience and tries to nudge them into an alethic (=truth-) relativism à la "I do not know what to believe anymore". In a second step, propaganda would reorient the audience and give them something to dogmatically believe in, such as a particular conspiracy narrative. This is a threat to democracy since an existential and vital part of democracy is to have discourses among informed rational citizens. Furthermore, it is a threat that can take lives, as is exemplified in far-right mass murders in the USA as well as New Zealand, where the murderers explicitly alluded to the conspiracy narrative of the Great Replacement in their manifests as one of their motivations (Popli, 2022).

3 Autonomy

I hope I have made it clear that bullshit is not just annoying. It can also be weaponized and lead to detrimental consequences. These consequences may not only affect a person's set of beliefs but also their personal autonomy, which I will be discussing in the following.

Personal autonomy is the ability of an agent to be self-governing. This is a definition that makes matters seem clear, however just how the agent can attain autonomy is heatedly debated among philosophers with positions in the debate ranging from accounts that put emphasis on the role of reflective judgment, reason-giving, social relations and a hierarchy of volition among many more. In what follows, we are going to concern ourselves particularly with the latter.

3.1 Frankfurt's account of autonomy

According to Frankfurt, our whole status as a person is dependent on whether we acting out of our own free will or not. He emphasizes that freedom of will is distinct from freedom of action in his approach. However, autonomy is roughly equal to acting out of one's own free will. An agent is an autonomous agent if and only if said person has second-order volitions of a certain type. We are going to see what that means in just a second. Frankfurt distinguishes between first-order desires and second-order desires. The former are desires, which are akin to inclinations and which are desires for certain actions (e.g. I want to take the drug, eat the apple, do not park in the forbidden parking lot etc.; wanting to act). The latter on the other hand are desires for desires (e.g. I want to not want to sleep; wanting to want). These are much more reflective in nature (H. G. Frankfurt, 1988, p. 7).

However, this is only one possible way to spell out second-order desires. The other way is that someone wants a certain desire to be her will. Frankfurt calls this a second-order volition. Only a being that possesses second-order volitions can rightfully be said to be a person according to him (H. G. Frankfurt, 1988, p. 10). A being which only possesses first-order desires would be called a wanton, and a being that possesses second-order desires which are not second-order volitions would also not be autonomous in Frankfurt's approach. Another possibility in which we lose our autonomy would be that we have two equally strong but mutually exclusive second-order desires. If these are not resolved on the third-order desire level, we would also be heteronomous.

We have seen that in Frankfurt's approach, we are only truly autonomous if we identify ourselves with our second-order desires and want to make them effective for action through our first-order desires. But where do we get these second-order desires from? The answer, given by Frankfurt in another article, is that there are certain things which we deeply care about that define us as a person. Only this wholehearted endorsement of our deepest cares lends us second-order desires and makes us autonomous (H. Frankfurt, 1982, p. 268). Frankfurt is very liberal with regard to what someone could care about. If we follow this thought to its final consequences, it would not destroy the autonomy of an agent if said agent would wholeheartedly care about being enslaved and

giving up every decision she could make as long as she would indeed wholeheartedly care about it, in Frankfurt's theory of autonomy.

Frankfurt even goes a bit further and advises us to actively shield ourselves from people who could convince us that we care about the wrong things (H. G. Frankfurt, 2006, p. 181). This particular part of Frankfurt's theory has been criticized by Jelinek (2013) since she thinks that it is exactly in situations, in which our deepest cares change, in which we can feel the most autonomous. She gives the account of the Scholl siblings, who after initially endorsing national socialism and being in the Hitler youth, found out what the national socialists wanted to do to Jews, political opponents and other groups and decided to oppose the regime and drop leaflets trying to convince others that the Nazis were a threat to Germany. After they were caught, and sentenced to death, they were murdered by the regime. We would not say that it was non-autonomous for them to stop caring about national socialism and to start caring about humanism and their Christian belief (Jelinek, 2013, p. 90). Although I think that parts of Jelinek's argument have their problems, I definitely agree with her that there is no reason we should shield our cares from people who try to convince us otherwise. On the opposite, entering a discourse is among the best ways to find out whether our cares make sense or not. This is what Socrates called the touchstone, which helps us weigh the worth of our belief[2] (Platon, 2018).

3.2 The threat to autonomy called "bullshit"

Reasonably one could ask, how exactly bullshit is threatening autonomy. After all, Frankfurt is an internalist, therefore he does not make any constraints on the content of the cares, as we have seen in the previous section, therefore it is not at all clear, how bullshit could threaten a Frankfurtian perspective of autonomy. That is the reason why from here on, we will leave the Frankfurtian analysis and after settling the exact nature of the problem in this section, we are going to attempt to propose some solutions in the remaining sections.

I would argue that holding on to internalistic abstinence of anything external when talking about autonomy is rather indicative of a lack of philosophical commitment to truth. Truth, of course, is a notion that needs explanation and I am going to explicate how I would like to define it briefly in the section after next. I think that while the Frankfurtian approach to autonomy is very valuable, particularly with regard to his hierarchy of volitions, it is incomplete since Frankfurt shies away from telling us, where cares are supposed to originate. It even seems like he does not care, where our cares originate. I would argue that only if they originate in proper discourse and only if the agent is open enough to revision in the light of reflection and sufficient counter-evidence, she can be said to be truly acting autonomously. This openness to rational discourse, which Meyer (2014)[3] emphasizes is at the heart of autonomy in my opinion. As long as we are not at least in principle open to revising our cares, we are losing the status as persons, where persons are defined as people who take part in the give-and-take of reasons in rational discourse. For autonomy is not an anything-goes-concept; the agent can only be said to be truly autonomous if they orient themselves with regards to discursive truth. In my opinion, deeply caring about bullshit will eventually lead people into inevitably losing their autonomy, for once they have lost their orientation with regard to the truth, they will be open to deception and brainwashing. In extreme cases, where the bullshit has taken a place at the heart of the deepest cares, it might be even more severe than deception, since there is nothing such an

[2] In the original Platonic dialogue Gorgias, Socrates is referring to the soul instead of a belief, but for our purpose, a belief is a better-suited notion and I believe that it comes close to what Socrates has in mind, just without the metaphysical baggage which a soul has to carry - metaphorically speaking (Platon, 2018).

[3] Meyer's view highlights that meta-linguistic discourses about the meaning of terms is open and never finished, which is an argument against a full empirical explanation of the mind. I give his idea of openness a slightly different turn by applying it not just to notions, but also to beliefs, cares and maxims.

agent could be deceived about, as they do not care about the truth.

Many philosophers in the past (e.g. Benson, 1991; Oshana, 2006) have criticized the hierarchical internalist approach of Frankfurt for not including cases of deception or manipulative socialization, a point particularly highlighted by feminist philosophers, but to the best of my knowledge, this criticism has never been tied to Frankfurt's notion of bullshit until now. Wrapping up what I have said so far, my position is that not caring about the truth is a consequence of the prolonged consumption of bullshit and that this is indeed detrimental to autonomy.

4 Proposed solutions

Just to reiterate why we really need a solution to this problem: The human world is oversaturated with information, which makes it hard to find out the actual truth. Some protagonists use this situation for their self-presentation and make use of bullshit in order to confuse people and make them oblivious to the truth, which is found in rational discourse. This leads to more and more people caring about bullshit to an alarming extent. Once people care enough about bullshit, they close their ears to discourse and start screaming at each other instead of talking to each other. This might cause social ruptures, the downfall of democracies, violence and war. And although this might sound like an exaggeration, I actually do not think it is one.

After having motivated the importance of solutions, I am going to try to find solutions to two aspects of the problem, namely firstly how can we avoid falling for bullshit in the first place and secondly how can we help someone, who seemingly cares about bullshit, to stop caring about bullshit and to enter into discourse again. Lastly, I am going to briefly reflect on the proposed solutions.

4.1 How to avoid caring about "bullshit"

How to avoid bullshit is a fundamentally epistemological (epistemology = theory of knowledge) question which ties in with the expert-layman problem: How could a layman ever know who is an expert in the field, particularly if there are conflicting opinions among self-proclaimed experts (Scholz, 2014). The most thorough solution to the expert-layman problem is to see whether predictions one expert makes in her proclaimed field of expertise, hold true over longer periods of time (in the case of empirical questions), which is sort of a "track-record" method. Or in case of a non-empirical problem, one could listen to several self-proclaimed experts, who try to explain an issue and see where their opinions deviate and what reasons they give for their positions. The more common way of solving the problem is public status. Some people are deemed experts by either a majority of people or by medial amplifiers (e.g. media outlets or influencers), which might correlate with actual expertise at times but not always.

The question of how to avoid caring about bullshit, luckily, is answered more easily and more readily than the question concerning the layman-expert problem, for it suffices to stay open to discourse in order to avoid caring about bullshit too much. The openness condition mentioned in Section 3.2 about bullshit as a threat to autonomy, is sufficient because in a sense openness is all we need to make clear that we care about the truth. Now let us settle on what I mean by this and what I mean by truth. I am convinced that truth is found discursively, i.e. treating one another with respect in discourse and weighing one's own position with the touchstone that is the discourse partner's position. Although I take over Socrates' metaphor of the touchstone from Gorgias (Platon, 2018)[4], it should be clear that this notion of truth is very different from the ideas by Plato that we already knew the truth before this life started and have to excavate it like mental archaeologists using discourse as a mean to get to these actual truths. I do not subscribe to such a notion, because

[4]Original work published 387 B.C.

I neither believe in platonic ideas nor in an immortal soul. Neither ontologically nor metaphysically could we ever simply "look up" the truth. All we have is reason(s), empirical investigation and discourse, where reason and discourse go hand in hand, both in their onto- and their phylogenesis. The elegance of this notion is that we can circumvent Agrippa's trilemma when it comes to the question of final justification: Such a thing does not exist, since the discourse is never finished as long as persons exist.

So now we know how we can avoid caring about bullshit, but is there also a way to detect bullshit directly and avoid it on the spot? One way to detect bullshit would be to investigate, on a meta-level, the discursive style of one's discourse partner: Do they listen to your reasons or is it rather that they are trying to convince you without even listening to what you have to say? If the latter is the case, it is likely that their interest in discourse is low and it is more about bullshit for them, which is equivalent to not being open to participating in discourse in a serious way, i.e. to not take the reasons of others seriously. Of course discourse in real life is different from the conditions in the philosophical lab (which is where thought experiments are conducted and theories are created): It is not always easy to discern rhetorical tricks from real bullshit. But one can train to detect it and develop an intuition about it. Moreover, there are some empirically established facts, which are of course disputable and we should still be at least in principle open to reasons against these facts. But if some propositions have been established by the scientific community in a thorough, transparent and plausible way, we have good reason to believe that they do care about the truth and that we should take the reasons behind them seriously. Positions orthogonal to the scientific consensus need not be bullshit by necessity. Early science was wrong on a lot of things. But it makes sense to at least be reasonably skeptical when approaching such positions.

4.2 How to get someone out of the "bullshit trap"

While Frankfurt does not think that we can change what we care about (and that we should actively shield ourselves from people who might try to change these cares), I am convinced that we can. And we can help others to change their cares too. I am aware that this sounds somewhat paradoxical, but I am certain that there are beliefs which hurt one's autonomy and that getting rid of them is necessary for regaining it.

Theorizing about the Bayesian brain, notably by scholars like Andy Clark, Karl Friston and Anil Seth, led to the theory of predictive processing (Clark, 2015). The quintessential idea of the Bayesian brain and predictive processing alike is that our brain tries to predict its inputs. Having this theory in mind, it becomes quite natural to think that the input hugely shapes our beliefs and cares. This is exemplified by the fact that people can be driven to extreme positions solely by being exposed to the same type of information over and over again[5]. It is also worth mentioning that bullshit is most frequently found at points where populist and extreme positions meet. Since there are psychological effects like the backfire effect, simply exposing someone to conflicting evidence or dissenting reasons might make matters worse for the person who is in the bullshit trap (Swire-Thompson et al., 2020).

What is needed for making someone open for discourse again, is epistemic trust. And this can only be built through the affective component of trust. Only if there is sufficient emotional common ground and shared experience besides the issue in question, there is a chance of helping someone out of the bullshit trap. Only if there are still other deep cares involved which are not about particular opinions, there is a real chance. Opening someone who cares about bullshit for discourse can be harder than opening an oyster with bare hands. Once it is done, however, the Bayesian brain hypothesis can be used to reinforce this openness by exposing people to epistemic diversity and all

[5]An example for this would be an elderly person who spends all day in front of a TV watching a certain far-right news channel. Said person would be likely to develop racist beliefs in the process.s

sorts of positions within a debate.

5 Concluding thoughts

Clearly the proposed solutions afford very effortful, slow and annoying measures. After all, it is not easy to tell truth from the untruth and to help another person to regain her autonomy. But if my hypothesis is correct, it is worth the effort, not only in potentially saving another person's autonomy, but in a grand effort, to help make democracy more bulletproof, as democracy is a joint project by all its citizens, which is not found in a state's institutions, but in the efforts of millions to keep up discourse and to keep open for changing their position. Although it might sound pathetic: The death of democracy lies not simply in extremist positions, it lies in sufficiently many people caring about bullshit.

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