

The Ethics of Deception: A Forum on Harry Frankfurt's "On Bullshit"

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It is the very rare literary journal article that, around twenty years after its publication, is republished as a book that goes on to become an international bestseller, with more than one million copies sold. Indeed, it seems very likely that only one such article has ever had that fortune befall it: namely, Harry Frankfurt's "On Bullshit," which is the subject of this forum.¹

Frankfurt (1929-2023) wrote many well-received books and articles over his long career as an academic philosopher, but it was "On Bullshit" that gained him a measure of fame. He became, as the title of a 2016 *Time* magazine article of his put it, an "expert in BS."²

On Frankfurt's account, the bullshitter is indifferent to the "truth value" of what she says: she doesn't care if it's true or false.³ Frankfurt also claims that bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are. A liar at least needs to track the truth—needs to pay attention to it—in order to craft a lie. By contrast, the bullshitter can develop a habit of indifference to the truth. Therein lies the danger, by Frankfurt's lights.

This forum is the first in *Zeal's* four years to fall under the heading "Reappraisals," dedicated to reconsideration of settled scholarship. Frankfurt's account of bullshit is as "settled" as scholarship comes; it even has its own Wikipedia page.⁴ The three contributions to this forum seek to clarify Frankfurt's insights, identify the limitations of his account, and show its relevance today in our brave new world of corrosive social media and runaway "artificial intelligence."⁵ Indifference to truth often seems to have run amok; sensitivity to truth feels vulnerable and precious. The premise of this forum is that greater expertise on bullshit surely couldn't hurt and might help.

¹ Harry G. Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," *Raritan* 6, no. 2 (1986): 81–100, republished as *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), now available in a 2025 "anniversary edition." The number of copies sold is taken from the press's website, <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691276786/on-bullshit>.

² Frankfurt, "Donald Trump Is BS, Says Expert in BS," *Time*, May 12, 2016, <https://time.com/4321036/donald-trump-bs/>.

³ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 97. Ironically, for such a short article (and an even shorter book!), the analysis of bullshit is concentrated in the last ten pages, 91–100.

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Bullshit.

⁵ The science fiction writer Ted Chiang suggests that a more accurate term for programs like ChatGPT is "applied statistics." See Madhumita Murgia, "Sci-Fi

Writer Ted Chiang: ‘The Machines We Have Now Are Not Conscious,’” *Financial Times*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/c1f6d948-3dde-405f-924c-09cc0dcf8c84>.