

Bullshitting as Deceptive Insinuation: A Procrustean Interpretation of “On Bullshit”

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“It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit *requires no* such conviction.”

“It is just this lack of connection with the truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as *of the essence* of bullshit.”—Harry Frankfurt¹

Is there a difference, do you think, between lying and bullshitting? The highly esteemed philosopher Harry Frankfurt thinks there is.² Even more, Frankfurt regards bullshitting as “more dangerous” and a “greater enemy of the truth” than lying.³ What, you might wonder, is so *bad*, even so *especially* bad, about bullshitting?

Here’s a quick sketch of Frankfurt’s much-trumpeted answer. Frankfurt takes both lying and bullshitting to be forms of deception; the liar and the bullshitter are each “trying to get away with something.”⁴ But unlike the liar, who is by necessity “in the truth game,” the bullshitter, Frankfurt argues, evinces a special, and especially troubling, lack of intellectual discipline: a “laxity,” “irresponsibility,” or “carelessness” about truth-values (about, that is, whether what he explicitly says is *true or false*).⁵ It is this, bullshitting’s quintessential “indifference to how things really are,” that—in Frankfurt’s judgment—both distinguishes bullshitting from lying and makes bullshitting the more troubling behavior, morally speaking.⁶

Frankfurt argues for these broad definitional and normative claims in *On Bullshit*, which—after twenty years as an essay—became a surprise best-selling book in 2005.⁷ Frankfurt, who describes the prevalence of bullshitting as “one of the most salient features” of contemporary society, proposes a “tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis” of bullshitting, a term that, despite the ubiquity of its referent, had received very little sustained inquiry—until “On Bullshit” rolled onto the cultural scene. Frankfurt hoped to begin a big conversation, and he very much did: the book has elicited considerable commentary from academics, journalists, bloggers, and podcasters (and created a new industry: books about vulgar words).⁸

So, Frankfurt has fully succeeded at sparking a wide-ranging colloquy. How well, though, has his own central analysis of the nature and ethics of bullshitting stood up to scrutiny?

In at least one sense, not especially well. Notably, twenty years after the publication of *On Bullshit*, scholarly debate trundles along, even in this very *Zeal* forum, about what Frankfurt's all-things-considered definition of "bullshitting" truly is. (I recall one 2005 journalist who became so frustrated by his earnest and repeated attempts to discern what Frankfurt-style bullshitting is that he came to wonder whether *On Bullshit* is a tongue-in-cheek, wool-over-the-reader's-eyes example of the very act the book ostensibly condemns.⁹) To speak bluntly, when it takes several decades to make out how an exceedingly gifted analytical philosopher himself answers the principal question within his much-discussed essay, it's time to suss out an explanation for that very fact.

And so, the question I'd like to explore is: why has Frankfurt's definition of "bullshitting" proven to be so elusive?

A New Starting Point for Thinking about *On Bullshit*

I will propose an answer, one which could sound foolishly audacious.

In brief, it's manifestly clear that Frankfurt himself is committed to (what I will call) the "careless thesis": the much-trumpeted claim that *the very trait* that makes a bullshitter a bullshitter is that he evinces a "certain laxity" about the truth-values of the claims he explicitly asserts.¹⁰ Of course, readers attempting to identify an author's all-things-considered definition will naturally take their strongest cues from the author himself and strive to build the relevant definition around the idea the author himself calls the *crux* of the matter.¹¹ But I won't. In my view, the careless thesis creates significant tensions with many other highly insightful things Frankfurt says about the nature of bullshitting and its particular relationship to lying. And so, taking enormous license, I will attempt to clarify Frankfurt's discussion by significantly reframing and rearranging the chain of reasoning at the heart of *On Bullshit*.

No doubt, there is much to praise in Frankfurt's exceedingly brief book. It has wit: with dry-as-Ezekiel's-bones humor, an esteemed Princeton professor wryly seeks the necessary and sufficient conditions for a barnyard term. It has incisive observational power: the British philosopher Simon Blackburn remarks that Frankfurt says something both utterly novel and seemingly commonsensical—a Herculean feat, really.¹²

That said, my proposal is that we can capture much of what's philosophically and ethically astute in *On Bullshit* if we choose—at least

initially—to *ignore* Frankfurt’s careless thesis, instead of treating it as the very centerpiece of our theorizing. There is, lurking in *On Bullshit*, a simple gloss of “bullshitting” that, once identified, sharply sets one truly rampant variety of bullshitting apart from lying and provides a better foundation for a clear-eyed evaluation of the nature and ethics of talking shit.¹³

My Procrustean Hermeneutic

To make my argument, I will take up a tactic similar, at least in structure, to one of Frankfurt’s own exploratory strategies.

Frankfurt openly and accurately admits that “bullshitting” and its cognates, such as “bull” and “shooting the bull,” have a variety of meanings. As Frankfurt recognizes, “bullshit” is sometimes employed as nothing more than an expression of frustration, with no specific type of referent in mind. As my students often remark, the word is also employed to refer to (often harmless) “I-caught-the-biggest-fish-ever” exaggerations. Accordingly, any attempt to smush and smash all of the sundry connotations of “bullshitting” into a single, all-encompassing definition would be unduly “procrustean”; it would be an act of “enforcing uniformity or conformity without regard to natural variation.”¹⁴

Recognizing this, Frankfurt sets out—very sensibly—to isolate *one* important meaning of the word “bullshitting.” This is, of course, the standard first step taken up by a competent dictionary author. If she pins down one definition of the relevant word, she or her colleagues can subsequently go on to develop others. In precisely this vein, Frankfurt endorses G. A. Cohen’s suggestion that, alongside certain deceptive acts that might properly be called “bullshitting,” there is also a form of bullshit that is a “product,” not an action. In Cohen’s view, some speech and prose is not merely unclear, but “unclarifiably unclear” and thereby warrants the name “bullshit” because it has, like lumpy, plopped-out excrement, no integral structure.¹⁵

My basic hermeneutical strategy is analogous to Frankfurt’s. I intend to provide a procrustean *interpretation* of Frankfurt’s rich, suggestive, and often deeply insightful discussion in *On Bullshit*. In my view, Frankfurt’s book is tensive; a reader, however sharp and earnest, cannot render everything Frankfurt says about bullshitting into a unified account. And so, like Procrustes himself, I’m going to lop off a bit of the body of his work to help make much of what he says fit into a single, identifiable, coherent, and theoretically useful definition. We can always go on, after this initial task of clarification is put to rest, to identify further meanings of bullshitting, some inspired by Frankfurt’s careless thesis.

It just so happens that, in my right-sizing undertaking, I'm going to cut out *On Bullshit's* cherished heart, its crux: the careless thesis.

Bullshit as Deceptive Insinuation

"So," you might be wondering, "what's this simpler, loitering, skulking notion of bullshitting, Reitsma?" One important theme in *On Bullshit* is that what separates lying and bullshitting is that the liar operates by *explicit assertion*, the bullshitter by *insinuation*.¹⁶ This is the distinction I will treat as foundational within my reframing act; and it is, I submit, a distinction Frankfurt is often operating with.

For example, when distinguishing between lying and bullshitting, Frankfurt points out that the liar's behavior has a "sharp focus." He attempts to implant a claim he takes to be false into his listener's head, by *explicitly stating* it.¹⁷ (This operates as Frankfurt's gloss of "lying.") The bullshitter, by contrast, operates *indirectly*. To illustrate, Frankfurt has us imagine a person—let's call him Ritchie—who lies about how much money is in his empty pocket. When Ritchie explicitly and deceptively says, "I have \$20 in my pocket," he is telling a lie.

As Frankfurt asks us to notice, if Ritchie's listener, Gully, accepts what he says, she is likely to be "twice deceived." Once Gully has trustingly accepted Ritchie's lie about the contents of his pocket, it is natural for her to adopt, equally trustingly, another claim, a claim about the "contents of Ritchie's mind," namely, that Ritchie himself sincerely believes what he says. (Note: we are to *presume* that Ritchie at no time explicitly says anything such as, "Gully, I am being sincere.") If Ritchie happens to be *aiming* by means of his lie, perhaps said in an ingratiating tone, to lead Gully to a second false belief about his level of sincerity, then he is *not only* lying, but *also* bullshitting. He's deceptively insinuating that he's speaking in good faith.

Frankfurt uses this example to make a general point. According to him, the bullshitter takes advantage of people's general (Gully-like) tendency to attribute to a speaker both a sincere commitment to the views that he explicitly expresses and—here's the salient point—to the various claims that are more or less cogently implied by these purportedly sincere statements.¹⁸

This idea—that bullshitting is an act of insinuating, wittingly and deceptively—also emerges from Frankfurt's canonical example of bullshitting: the bombastic speech of a 4th of July orator who explicitly makes assertions that (she judges) will predictably lead her audience to draw certain unstated conclusions about her beliefs and convictions, for instance, that she is "a

great patriot” who has “deep thoughts” about the divine origins of America. These are claims she intentionally and deceptively insinuates, without ever stating them overtly.¹⁹

And so, at this point in our (procrustean, license-taking, reconstructing) analysis, Frankfurt is operating with a distinction—a sharp, concise distinction—between “deceptive explicit asserting” and “deceptive insinuating.” This distinction makes sense of his examples and the lessons he draws from them.

This same mode of thought can be seen to persist. Once this crucial distinction is clear, Frankfurt emphasizes that, by definition, a liar has a view about what is true and false; he can’t state what he takes to be false without having a belief about what is true. The act of bullshitting, though, “requires no such conviction.”²⁰ The bullshitter *is able to* practice her insinuating art without having any belief whatsoever about the truth-values of the claims she explicitly states. When it comes to these claims, she perhaps “just picks them out, *or* makes them up, to suit [her deceptive] purpose.”²¹ Accordingly, the liar “respects” the relevant (purported) truths at least in the sense that he believes those (purported) truths. At least with respect to the topic he’s presently speaking about, he is mentally, as it was put earlier, “in the truth game.”

Note, to say that a deceptive insinuator *can* construct her deceptions even if she happens to be utterly unaware of the truth or falsity of what she explicitly says—that is, that she *can* choose to “make up” claims out of thin air that would, in her judgment, aid her deceptive cause—implies that it’s also *possible* for a deceptive insinuator to “pick out” claims he takes to be true, to use within his trickery. In such a case, he’s not mentally uncommitted when it comes to the truth-values of his assertions. Keep this point in mind.

A Useful Example

As this reframing project proceeds, it’ll be helpful to have a vivid example to work with. Let me pose a stereotypical case, similar to one Frankfurt himself alludes to, in which three people—Ed, Winnie, and Edwina—are members of a team at an ad agency. Let us suppose they are jointly constructing a television commercial for a weight loss pill. This tablet has not been proven safe and effective. Their television spot doesn’t explicitly assert that the pill has been successfully vetted by the scientific community. Nevertheless, it insinuates as much. This ad is an instance of “bullshit as deceptive insinuation.”

Now, let's consider three scenarios. First, both Ed and Winnie consciously recognize the dishonesty manifest in the commercial; they recognize that the overt claims made in the ad—whether “picked out” or “made up” out of thin air—do not track reality. Ed, and only Ed, is subsequently asked whether the ad is accurate. Feeling backed into a corner, he says, “Oh, yes, the pill has met the most rigorous scientific standards.” In this particular speech act, Ed makes an explicit assertion he takes to be false. He tells a lie. (In other words, he *adds* a lie to his initial act of bullshitting.) Winnie, who also recognizes the ad's dishonesty, is—as it turns out—never asked about the commercial. So, she isn't forced either to confess, to add new deceptive insinuation to old, or to tell a lie. Winnie is guilty of deceptive-insinuation-bullshitting without, in the run of events, lying.

Edwina has a different mindset. Rather surprisingly, Edwina has never given a single thought to the questions, “Has the scientific community adequately vetted the pill?” and “Is the pill safe and effective?” She has played a central role in insinuating that the answers are yes and yes. She has, “with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing,” dedicated herself “tirelessly to getting every word and image...exactly right” in terms of enhancing the ad's persuasive power.²² Edwina certainly participates in Ed and Winnie's bullshit process. But she is so fixated upon what will maximize sales that she has ignored—entirely—whether the explicit claims in the television spot and its two major insinuations (“safe and effective”) are true or false.

Edwina is—note—a particularly vivid spectre in Frankfurt's philosophical nightmare: she is one of the “exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen” who insinuates “without [any] conscientious attention to the relevant facts.”²³ She lacks, at least with respect to the claims made and insinuated in the ad, “the meticulously attentive concern” with truth-values that a thorough-going truth-seeker exemplifies.²⁴

As it turns out, Edwina is not the *single most nightmarish* nightmare Frankfurt has dreamt up. We'll soon be forced to consider a ghastly spirit even more detached from concrete, tangible reality, a person characterized by a more rampant, less context-dependent, more “global” intellectual laxity than (even) Edwina's. More on that veritable ghoul later.

We've Learned a Lot

The distinction I've highlighted, and which I've construed as skulking about in *On Bullshit*, has considerable explanatory power.

Conceptually, there's no denying the distinction between lying and deceptive insinuation. Intentional misrepresentation by means of explicit assertion and by means of insinuation are different action-types. Ed's lie is distinct from the ad's insinuation.

Even more, there are prominent *pragmatic* differences between lying and deceptive insinuation, several of which Frankfurt himself astutely identifies. I'll describe four. Let's take them one at a time, identifying whatever ethical insights we can, as we proceed.

First, the deceptive insinuator has, in one sense, *more freedom* than the liar.²⁵ Though it sounds odd to put it this way, if someone means to tell a lie, he has—"unadventurously"—one and only one option: to assert the opposite of what he takes to be true. The deceptive insinuator generally has myriad options for insinuating dishonestly, as there are many possible assertions she could "pick out" or "make up" to suit her deceptive purpose. For instance, Ed, Winnie, and Edwina can script many lines, and choose many visual images, that insinuate that their weight loss pill is safe, as well as many more to insinuate that it's effective.

This first point—bullshitting's greater freedom—explains a second Frankfurtian insight. It indicates why Frankfurt construes bullshitting as, other things being equal, a *more creative* process, best exemplified by the "bullshit artist,"²⁶ whose characteristic skill is to practice the relevant freedom with shrewd intelligence. If you think about it, when a person such as a bullshit artist sets out to bullshit, she treats the false claim she intends to plant in her listener's mind as though it's on a "forbidden words and phrases" list, like in the games of charades and taboo. When it comes to the relevant false claim, mum's the word; it can't be used—on pains, as it were, of becoming a liar, instead.

One can see how both playing charades and engaging in deceptive insinuation can make for a fun intellectual and interpersonal challenge. One can also see why deceptively insinuating is at least *sometimes* morally wrongful. In many contexts, duping people, which is a manipulative act, fails to treat them with the dignity human beings, as "ends in themselves," deserve (a moral point Frankfurt discusses more overtly in his 2006 sequel, *On Truth*). That said, an act of deceptive insinuation is not *always* morally problematic. For example, would Frankfurt deny us, in the name of an overbearing ideal of complete honesty, all the joy that comes with bluffing in poker or joshing with our friends?

The answer is no. Frankfurt notices that bluffing in poker is a form of deceptive insinuation: to bluff is to behave, for competitive reasons, as though one has a hand better or worse than it really is.²⁷ However, Frankfurt wouldn't condemn this well-recognized and much-loved aspect of poker,

largely because the card players implicitly agree to what we might call a “momentary suspension of the moral.” Here’s what I mean. Frankfurt talks about the “legitimizing motive” of everyday speech.²⁸ Much everyday speech is aimed at conveying information. Earlier we saw that the bullshitter takes advantage of her listener’s tendency to presume that in the normal run of life, a speaker’s words are animated by a sincere concern to get across accurate information (about the world and about herself). Many people also come to everyday conversations with a *moral* expectation, namely, that speakers generally are truthful. But in poker, this quotidian moral expectation is suspended for the duration of the game, and pretty much everybody knows it. In the context of a poker game, bluffing is an accepted and so an acceptable strategy, and having the chance to act deceptively inside of a game in which some of the moral demands of everyday life are suspended is presumably part of the pleasure. At the table, players are free to bluff about their hands to their heart’s content. Not to mention, joshing friends—and, as Frankfurt discusses, participants in bull sessions²⁹—are completely aware that their back and forth is not to be taken in earnest; there’s no intent to deceive, or danger of deceiving, in their winking remarks.

For our purposes, the relevant philosophical lesson is that, in many social contexts, the “legitimizing motive” of speech and the standard moral expectations derived from it are not, and are not seen by most participants as being, suspended.³⁰ Accordingly, Frankfurt is presumably morally troubled (mostly) by bullshitting in ostensibly truth-purveying contexts, in which the relevant rules of intellectual discipline and truthfulness do properly obtain. Poker players can rest easy. But not, Frankfurt would insist, the bullshitters who take advantage of the trust people bring, maybe even *need* to bring, to quotidian contexts in which a significant level of sincerity is rightly demanded.

Let’s get back to enumerating Frankfurt’s pragmatic insights.

At this point, a third lesson—about relative detectability—can be identified. We can conceivably catch a liar but not a deceptive insinuator red-handed. Imagine two accusations of dishonesty, one against a liar, one against a bullshitter. Whereas the liar has publicly uttered the truth-offending remark, a bullshitter can defend herself by saying—accurately—“I never actually said that!” One way to conceptualize this point: it would take someone *prosecuting* a charge of dishonesty against a liar and against a bullshitter an extra step to indict the bullshitter. After pointing to the historical record and saying to the liar, “you *said* such and such, which is false,” the prosecutor would have to reveal—for his indictment to hold up—that the bullshitter *intended* to communicate the relevant unstated falsehood. In general, even when you and I immediately recognize an instance of

bullshitting for what it is, it takes work to spell out—to argue for—what we’ve quickly and incisively intuited. And so, any such “prosecutor” would be forced to go through the tricky process of pinning the relevant implicatures on the bullshitter.

This basic point about detectability explains at least two ethical truths. First, in some cases “flooding the media with shit” is a highly shrewd strategy for, say, a politician who aims to avert public and legal accountability for his conduct. Lies take work to prosecute; bullshittings take even more; and piles of bullshit, piles more.

Second, if we aim to deter bad behavior, it is generally judicious to assess stiffer penalties for wrongful acts that are harder to detect or prosecute. No doubt, the presence of *both* liars *and* bullshitters in our social environment makes it necessary for us all to be wary, if we hope to avoid the costs of being socially naïve. A liar and a bullshitter are thus equally morally responsible, it seems to me, for forcing us—unhappily—to be somewhat distrustful of each other. But—at least in the scenarios in which we have a vested interest in getting at the truth—bullshitters give us even more work to sufficiently indict them for their trickery. For this reason, they bear an even deeper moral responsibility for forcing us to expend—really, to waste—extra time and energy. In this respect, bullshitting can sensibly be seen, as Frankfurt supposes, as morally worse than lying.

A fourth insight is that there are, Frankfurt plausibly claims, *often* lower social costs for bullshitting. Whereas people very commonly feel personally offended when they think they’ve been lied to—“How dare you lie to me”—many people punish the suspected bullshitter with no more than an annoyed shrug: “Oh bother, not more shit talk.”

Of the four insights, this one is, I think, the most tenuous and debatable. Contextual factors will naturally play a role in determining precisely how indignant a sharp-eared, near victim of deception becomes. For example, I myself would not get as angry at a well-intentioned white lie about my sartorial choices as I would at a sustained attempt to dupe me into buying an unvetted weight loss pill. That said, I happen to think that Frankfurt’s fourth insight does gesture at an important truth, even if this truth is in need of fining tuning and qualification (which I won’t pursue in this essay).

Adding these four claims together, Frankfurt defends the shrewdness of a principle of bullshitting preference, “Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through”: bullshitting is (i) freer, (ii) more creative, (iii) harder to catch, and (iv) somewhat less likely to incite serious indignation. Let’s call these claims, (i)-(iv), the “four platitudes” about deceptive insinuation.³¹

To summarize this section, in my view we've made serious intellectual progress. Isolating one species of "bullshitting"—bullshitting as deceptive insinuation—has helped us to capture many of Frankfurt's insights, both conceptual and pragmatic. Various ethical and moral insights have emerged quite naturally from our procrustean reframing project, helping us to see more clearly precisely what, as Frankfurt puts it, bullshitting should "mean to us."³² In the very least, we have good grounds to claim that a contribution to "bullshitology" is in the offing: along with Cohen's "bullshit as an unclarifiably unclear *product*," we ought to add "bullshitting as an *act* of deceptive insinuation."

To this point, I've construed my discussion as an attempt to identify what's good and true and insightful in *On Bullshit*. It's time, though, to turn more critical. Why has it proven so difficult to pin down the concept of Frankfurt-style bullshitting, which treats the careless thesis as its crux?

Of course, if the answer to this long-standing question were very, very simple—if the explanation were, say, single-pronged—then it would have been discovered long ago. Predictably, then, the explanation is multifaceted. So, please bear with me.

One Important Distinction: Local vs. Global Indifference

Here is an initial clarifying remark: there is a difference between (what we might call) "local" and "global" indifference to the truth.

As highlighted earlier, to say that a bullshitter, in the act of bullshitting, "need not" have a belief about the truth-value of what she says is consistent with thinking that sometimes a bullshitter does have such a belief. A bullshitting advertiser might recognize that the content of his ad includes "made up" false claims. And the 4th of July orator might idly believe that God instituted the United States to be a beacon on a hill. But if America's status within providential history doesn't in any way matter to her—say, because neither God nor America particularly matter to her—she's using a claim she takes to be true to insinuate, falsely, that she's a deep-thinking patriot.

Now, compare Edwina. In one sense, she certainly reveals a "wider" indifference to truth than Ed and Winnie. She doesn't have any opinion about whether or not the television ad's explicit claims and its insinuations are true, and—over the course of the commercial-making project—she shows absolutely no interest in learning the relevant truths about the weight loss pill. All that said, this particular stretch of indifference is fairly "local." It's important to recognize that nothing much follows about Edwina's general attitude to the truth from her indifference to pill truths. Edwina might

care deeply about baseball trivia or the history of Dutch football or what her children think of her. She might even be a constitutional law buff and an expert in German Romantic poetry. In other words, Edwina need not suffer, because of her lack of interest in the science of the relevant weight loss pill, from an *endemic* indifference to “how things really are” that ramifies throughout her epistemic, belief-forming life.³³ Her indifference need not be, as I’m putting it, all that “global.”

Does this (rather obvious) distinction—between local and global indifference—get lost in *On Bullshit*? There are textual grounds for thinking so. I will mention two.

First, Frankfurt’s own language could easily mislead on this point. The careless thesis claims that the quintessential feature of a bullshitter is his “indifference to how things really are,” which very much sounds global. Second, and more significantly, Frankfurt’s *most overt* ethical argument for the claim that bullshitting is, in comparison to lying, more dangerous and a “greater enemy of the truth” directs our readerly attention to a highly global form of truth indifference. Let me explain.

Frankfurt’s (very brief) argument that bullshitting is “the greater enemy” goes like this. The French philosopher Alain once said, “The truth is not obedient”: the truth, that is, doesn’t generally come running, like an eager puppy dog, when we call for it. Instead, we often need to pursue it doggedly.³⁴ Frankfurt worries that, in ignoring Alain-style wisdom, deceptive insinulators—who “need not” have any view about the truth-values of what they say—might come to lack the “austere discipline” it commonly takes to pursue the truth and get things spot on (with at least a respectable level of regularity). If such indiscipline becomes habitual, the bullshitter’s very skill at discerning the facts might become, Frankfurt vexes, “attenuated or lost.”³⁵

In this argument, we can see that Frankfurt is making a psychological prediction: a persistent lack of “meticulous attentive concern” for truth-values threatens to eventuate in a general lack of truth-discerning skill and a corresponding altogether too-frequent alienation from reality. Or, put more bluntly, habitual bullshitting threatens to make a person stupider.

What to think of this “makes stupider” argument? First, it’s a bit surprising, at least to me. As I see things, a reader might naturally have anticipated—given Frankfurt’s explicit claim that bullshitting is “worse” than lying—that his *most overt* ethical argument against bullshitting would be a *moral* argument. But this “habitual bullshitting makes stupider” argument concerns—at least initially—the *imprudence* of chronic bullshitting. Frankfurt worries that being a bad truth-discerner is likely to harm the bullshitter. If a person, because of his habitual indifference to the truth-values of what

he communicates, becomes less adept at discerning truths, he himself is likely to suffer from this inability: false beliefs can lead to personally harmful behavior. But in fairness, perhaps Frankfurt is supposing that this type of person's growing set of false beliefs will also frequently harm other people. In brief, habitual indifference to truth can lead to a self-induced alienation from reality that, given the "protean utility of truth," is personally *and* socially dangerous.³⁶

Now, let's connect these reflections to the point I'm making in this section: Frankfurt's overt "makes stupider" argument is predicated on conceiving of this stupider person as characterized by an endemic or highly global indifference towards the truth. A truth-blinkered spirit such as this is (what I called earlier) "the most nightmarish ghoul" haunting Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*. And this ghoul's presence, not only in *On Bullshit*, but in Frankfurt's most overt ethical argument in *On Bullshit*, might naturally cue us to associate bullshitting itself, the type of shit talk that is supposed to be "rampant" in our society, with a highly global form of truth-indifference.

Should we accept this association? I don't think we should.

This Overt Argument is Far-Fetched and Limited in Scope

In my view, Frankfurt's "habitual bullshitting makes stupider" argument does have explanatory and philosophical value, but it's notably limited. I'm going to mention two of its weaknesses.³⁷

First, this "makes stupider" argument *lacks scope*. Frankfurt's argument simply doesn't apply to some deceptive insinulators. There are plenty of clear examples of (even egregious) deceptive insinuation by people who don't lack either a general belief in the truth or the "austere discipline" to discover it with above average frequency. Without much effort, Ed and Winnie notice the relevant truths: the pill hasn't been vetted and so isn't proven safe. And even Edwina, who doesn't notice these particular morally consequential truths, manages to bamboozle the viewing public only because she has so assiduously worked to discern the truth about what her target audience is willing to believe. No doubt, this callous ad team is highly selective about which truths they publicly promulgate; they are willingly dishonest.³⁸ But whatever moral weaknesses Edwina suffers from, she does not suffer from a (burgeoning) disregard for truth-values or (increasingly) attenuated truth-seeking skills. She's intellectually sharp when she wants to be. Given that Frankfurt presumably means to critique the truth-offending behavior of smart Edwinas, he'll need something else to say to—or about—her ilk, as well as about the bad behavior of the Eds and Winnies of the world.

Second, Frankfurt's "might become unfit for truth" prediction is rather *far-fetched*. As a practical matter, bullshitters—even rampant, marketing-career-focused, Edwina-style bullshitters—have a *strong incentive* not to permit themselves to suffer from a general self-induced alienation from reality. For bullshitting to be rhetorically effective, it will generally need to be accompanied by a sufficiently firm grasp of the truth-values of some claims, even if not the particular claims being said. If Edwina is prudent enough not to rely purely on luck, she will need to pursue a fairly clear sense of what her audience will find plausible. She can't be "indifferent" to truths relevant to succeeding at her deceptive goal, and neither can any would-be bullshit artist. Accordingly, Edwina's desire to gain her audience's trust will serve as a *persistent counterpoise* to whatever temptation she feels, if any, to become generally inattentive to the truth. Contrary to what Frankfurt's prediction intimates, persistent bullshitting doesn't always and only press us to become (more and more) alienated from facts. By its own internal logic, the art of bullshitting also calls its practitioners to attend to some aspects of the way things truly are.

To be clear, I am not arguing that absolutely no one exemplifies Frankfurt's most ghastly spectre, the exceedingly foolish bullshitter whose very connection to reality has substantially frayed. I know people who are somewhat like this. (Forgive me if I don't name names.) Such spirits are so quick to lie and bullshit their way through life that, one suspects, they're "under-practiced" at discerning the truth. These "missed opportunities" have mounted up over time, and they're less sharp for chronically skipping past them. Even more, some corners of internet culture seem endemically untethered to the truth (even as they wield significant social and political influence). It's certainly worth theorizing about these phenomena (as Rachel Robison-Greene does in her *Zeal* essay in this forum).

But as an ethical analysis of the form of bullshitting that is most rampant, Frankfurt's "makes stupider" argument misses the mark. Nightmarish bullshitting is less common than (morally problematic instances of) garden-variety deceptive insinuation. And so, this aspect of *On Bullshit*—Frankfurt's spotlighting and centering of highly truth-blinkered souls—puts any more general discussion of the nature and ethics of bullshitting seriously out of focus.

A Diagnosis

Where does Frankfurt's "bullshitting is more dangerous than lying" analysis go wrong? Here's a partial answer. For the purpose of constructing definitions, it's useful to imagine a "pure bullshitter," a person who deceives

only by means of insinuation, never lying, and a “pure liar,” a person who deceives only by means of explicit assertion, never insinuating. As suggested earlier, this is a substantive and useful distinction: without it, we couldn’t make sense of, among other things, the four platitudes that compare deceptive insinuation and lying.

But as helpful as this sort of thought experiment is for definitional purposes, it’s hard to imagine a flesh-and-blood person, under relatively normal social conditions, who is a pure bullshitter and who is thereby becoming (i) more and more indifferent to truth-values, as such, and (ii) more and more dangerous than any liar. Think of Edwina who, to this point in our story, has been construed as a pure bullshitter (with respect to the television ad). What will Edwina do when in the ordinary run of life someone presses her, “Have you really made sure the pill is safe?” There’s a decent chance this question will prompt Edwina to become an Ed and tell a lie. Or she will at least become a Winnie: once asked, won’t Edwina likely notice the rather obvious fact that she hasn’t read any relevant medical studies? Even if Edwina, instead of lying, merely adds new deceptive insinuations to old, at this point she’ll presumably possess a belief about the relevant truth, and no longer be a truth-blinkered spectre in Frankfurt’s bad dream.

Extrapolating, in typical social contexts, effective deceivers will often need to combine habits of bullshitting and lying. In such cases, if we isolate the question “which action has caused more harm: the deceptive insinuations or the lies?” it will often be impossible to justify the answer “the insinuations, not the lies.” Given that Ed, Winnie, and Edwina, our three-headed monster, each participated in the construction of the television ad, how can we tell which type of person, or which type of act, is “most responsible” for duping consumers into wasting their money (or worse)? They all seem equally culpable; each type of act played its role. Not to mention, in typical social contexts, given the complexity and nuance of speech acts, which include tone, facial expression, and body language, more than one “thing” is generally being communicated. Accordingly, many episodes of deception are complex admixtures of true remarks, lyings, and bullshittings. Accordingly, it very often makes little sense to try to suss out which type of deception is the bigger proximate cause of social harm.

One More Big Question for Us

So far, I’ve argued that one notion of bullshitting—bullshitting as deceptive insinuation—is highly valuable. It helps us to understand many aspects of the piles and piles of bullshit we confront, as well as produce, in our lives. If that thesis is correct, it’s natural to ask whether there is any *need* to

add anything to the gloss ‘bullshitting is deceptive insinuation,’ as Frankfurt seems inclined to do.

In this section, I am going to interpret Frankfurt as treating this gloss as the foundation of his preferred all-things-considered definition of “bullshitting,” a foundation to which he’d like to add two additional elements, including the careless thesis. Whether or not this is an accurate interpretation of Frankfurt’s intentions in *On Bullshit* is debatable. But I’m going to set aside this interpretative question in order to argue that this particular path—trying to add two elements to the foundational gloss—would lead to unhappy conceptual troubles.

One possible augmentation, to which Frankfurt briefly alludes, is that a deceptive insinuator is properly described as bullshitting only if she is being deceptive about herself, in particular, about “her enterprise.”³⁹ This could be interpreted as the idea that the false claim that a bullshitter is aiming to plant in her listener’s mind is invariably a false claim about herself.⁴⁰

This idea does apply to the 4th of July orator, who is insincere when she poses as a great patriot: she is certainly bullshitting *about* her own character and convictions. Also, this idea fits with other obvious instances of bullshitting. For example, a student plagiarist standardly insinuates that *he himself* has written an essay he has copied verbatim (or “AI-ed”) without acknowledgement. In many cases, the student doesn’t explicitly state, “I wrote this essay.” Instead, he simply hopes the professor will infer this claim from, among other things, his empty works cited page.

These examples aside, it’s also possible to bullshit—it seems clear to me—*about* things other than oneself. A person can bullshit by acting as though an unserious policy proposal is serious, by acting as though her rather disappointing children are highly accomplished, or by acting—in her unremittingly peevish ex’s presence—as though her parents truly desire his attendance at Thanksgiving dinner. In other words, people can insinuate deceptively *about* any number of objects. (To give one more example, isn’t the poker player bluffing both about himself, that is, about how he himself feels about his hand, *as well as* about the quality of his hand?)

In effect, if Frankfurt means to suggest that we add the thesis “the primary object of bullshitting is invariably to plant a false belief about oneself in one’s audience’s mind” to our foundational gloss, I think we should reject it. This proposal threatens to produce an unduly narrow conception of bullshitting: isn’t Winnie bullshitting, not only about her own level of scientific knowledge and intellectual seriousness, but also about the pill’s effectiveness? What theoretical benefit would come from narrowing the definition of bullshitting in this particular way? (In addition, doing so would, in effect, make bullshitting “less rampant” than Frankfurt suggests it is.)

Frankfurt's second (more insistent, "much-trumpeted") suggested augmentation would be to add the careless thesis: the claim that evincing indifference to truth-values—whether local or global indifference—is the very essence of bullshitting.

There are at least two explanations for why it would be infelicitous to add the careless thesis to our foundational gloss. First, doing so threatens, same as the first proposal, to unduly narrow the definition of "bullshitting." Ed is guilty of bullshit as deceptive insinuation, but he's not indifferent to the truth-values of what his commercial says and insinuates. Presumably, given that he knows the insinuations are false, he is quite unwilling to take the pill himself or to let his beloved children take it. And so, if we add the careless thesis, we'd have to say Ed, and many other garden-variety deceptive insinuators, aren't bullshitting. What's the motivation for doing that?

Second—and this is the big issue—Frankfurt speaks in diametrically opposed directions, which threatens to confuse his reader. As I've highlighted several times, Frankfurt sometimes describes bullshitting as "requiring no" conviction about the truth, which suggests that indifference to truth-values is a *possible, but not a necessary* feature of an act of bullshitting. But the careless thesis makes a stronger and logically inconsistent claim: it says "indifference to truth-values" is the very essence of bullshitting, which implies that it is a *necessary, even defining* condition.

Accordingly, thoughtful readers, however appreciative they are of Frankfurt's seminal and momentous contributions to bullshitology, might naturally ask, "Which is it, Frankfurt? Is it that a bullshitter *need not* have a view about the truth-values of what she explicitly says to bullshit? Or is it that, to count as bullshitting, the person *must* be indifferent to the truth-values of these claims?" The "requires no" claim permits us to make the seemingly very sensible judgment that Ed is bullshitting; the "of the essence" claim doesn't.

Where to from Here?

In all likelihood, when myriad intelligent readers struggle—for two to four decades—to isolate an exceedingly accomplished philosopher's all-things-considered definition (when the topic isn't as philosophically vexing as, say, the nature of free will), there are likely several distinct factors. What I've suggested is that we're able to discern several reasons why interpreting *On Bullshit* has taken so much effort. It's crucial for Frankfurt's readers to keep in mind several distinctions, for instance, between more "local" and "global" forms of indifference to truth-values, and between whether the

relevant “laxity” about truth-values is a possible, or even common, feature of bullshitting, or its quintessence.

Let’s say we were to choose to operate with a distinction between “garden-variety” bullshitting, bullshitting as deceptive insinuation, and “Frankfurt-style” bullshitting, which is type of deceptive insinuation deeply characterized by whatever forms of (endemic) truth indifference Frankfurt is imagining.

With this distinction in mind, we could point out that it’s absolutely clear that garden-variety bullshitting is absolutely rampant, and has been so ever since humanity was, as it were, driven out of the garden of Eden. It makes sense, then, for us to theorize about this particular ubiquitous phenomenon: “What’s *so bad* about garden-variety deceptive insinuation? *Under what conditions* is it morally wrong? What *makes* it morally wrong when it is? Are our common reactions to such deceptive acts—our annoyed shrugs—*apt*, or should we regularly be more perturbed about being played for a dupe?” These are all great questions; and in this essay, I hope I’ve made some progress, with massive help from Frankfurt, in sketching the beginnings of answers to them.

All that said, whereas most everyone contributes (“generously”) to the piles of deceptive insinuation in our world, only some bullshitters count as deeply truth-blinkered Frankfurt-style bullshitters.

We needn’t deny, of course, that there might be something especially pernicious—especially inimical to society’s best attempts to grasp reality—about the attitudes evinced by a phantasmagoria of spirits whose indifference to the truth veers more “global” than (not only Ed and Winnie’s, but) Edwina’s. Some Frankfurt-style bullshitters, with their chronic indifference to truth, are shooting themselves in the head, one BB at a time; and they frequently make social life more precarious for the people they bump into on the road to Jericho. Even more, some dastardly characters seem to revel—whether mostly stupidly or mostly nihilistically⁴¹—in undoing the various institutions and social practices necessary for the maintenance of an intellectually and morally healthy society. We should certainly theorize about these sundry souls, too.

What I’m hoping is that this essay helps to frame our future discussions of these foolish spectres better. In the final analysis, I’d propose that we forego building the careless thesis into our general gloss of “bullshitting.” Instead, let’s see Frankfurt’s most nightmarish souls as possible, and especially interesting and troubling, forms bullshitting *can* take. A variation—or two or three—on a broader theme.⁴²

¹ Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 1988), 130–31, at 125. Also, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press: 2005). For citations, I will use “On Bullshit.”

² Frankfurt’s scholarly work on (i) free will and responsibility, as well as on (ii) the special roles played by caring about and loving in normative practical reasoning, is top notch. Here’s one place to learn about topic (ii): Regan Lance Reitsma, “How a Modern-Day Hume Can Categorically Reject a Desire: A Perplexity and a Theoretically Modest Proposal,” *European Journal of Analytical Philosophy* 9, no. 2, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/en/125800>.

³ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 132.

⁴ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 122.

⁵ Though bullshitting can be done either through speech or writing, I will generally construe—merely for the sake of ease of expression—a bullshitter as speaking bullshit.

⁶ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 122, 124–26, 132.

⁷ Recently, Princeton University Press has released a 20th anniversary edition.

⁸ For example, Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

⁹ Consider this footnote a “tribute to the unknown journalist.” My own most earnest and repeated attempts to find the relevant review—from a major newspaper, I think—have been an abject failure. In any case, I think Simon Blackburn captures—better than the relevant journalist—the form of humor operating in *On Bullshit*. See “Up From Bullshit,” *The New Republic*, 2 November 2006, <https://newrepublic.com/article/65029/truth-bullshit-harry-franklin-foucault-nietzsche>.

¹⁰ It is possible that Frankfurt would not limit the bullshitter’s indifference to truth-values to his indifference to what he explicitly says. But for the sake of clarity, I will operate under the assumption, for the time being, that he would.

¹¹ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 125.

¹² Blackburn, “Up From Bullshit.”

¹³ If you think about it, *On Bullshit* is an essay in Montaigne’s sense: a lively and enjoyable “try.” (See Clancy W. Martin’s book review in the University of Chicago Press Journal, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/498546>.) Perhaps it could be seen, then, as nitpicky and churlish to harp on any failure to provide a sharp, easily identified definition in such a work. There are at least two ways to answer to this “churlish” charge responsibly. First, presumably Frankfurt himself, wanting to start a conversation, would approve of more “tries” when it comes to advancing bullshitology. Second, to hesitate to challenge Frankfurt’s essay would itself threaten to reveal a form of epistemic laxity of which Frankfurt himself would most certainly and most ardently disapprove.

¹⁴ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 117. The definition is from the OED.

¹⁵ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 117. G. A. Cohen, in “Deeper into Bullshit,” *Contours of Agency*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 321–39.

¹⁶ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 120, 129–30.

¹⁷ Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” 129.

¹⁸ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 120, 130.

¹⁹ The presence of this footnote in my essay implies that I have more to say about this point. I don't.

²⁰ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 130, emphasis mine.

²¹ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 131, emphasis mine.

²² Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 122.

²³ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 122.

²⁴ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 124–25.

²⁵ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 130.

²⁶ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 130.

²⁷ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 128.

²⁸ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 126–27.

²⁹ See Frankfurt's discussion of bull sessions, "On Bullshit," 125–27.

³⁰ What to think of the worlds of advertising and of car sales? It would take a shocking level of naïveté for someone to enter those realms without realizing that deceptive insinuations are preponderant. And yet, are they realms where the moral expectation of sincerity is mostly or completely suspended? A blunt "yes" seem too strong a claim to me.

³¹ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 129.

³² Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 117.

³³ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 125.

³⁴ Alain is quoted but not cited in André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise of the Great Virtues*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Metropolitan, 1996), 159.

³⁵ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 132.

³⁶ Harry Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

³⁷ For example, isn't it odd that the worst offender in Frankfurt's nightmare scenario, the person who completely gives up on the very notions of "true" and "false," wouldn't be capable of deception and so wouldn't be capable of Frankfurt-style bullshitting? If bullshitting is, as Frankfurt believes, a form of intentional misrepresentation, a person needs to *know* (or think she knows) what she's up to, what her "enterprise" is, if she is to misrepresent it. Any act of deception implies, it seems, the agent has a belief in at least one truth, the one she is trying to trick the listener into believing.

³⁸ Of course, we might not be surprised if we were to discover that Edwina does evince one or another fine-grained inability. Perhaps, due to her fixation on ramping up sales, she has developed a habitual inattention to any moral considerations that might make her marketing career discomfiting to her. This could lead to her being a poor *moral* reasoner. (How, it's natural to wonder, can someone be so blithely callous to the dangers of selling an unvetted pill?)

³⁹ Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 130.

⁴⁰ Now, perhaps Frankfurt means—in the relevant passage—only to say that a bullshitter is invariably insincere, that is, that what she's "up to" is to pull the wool over her audience's eyes. Well, that claim follows *trivially* from the claim that bullshitting is an act of deception and so does not add anything new to the definition. All that said, one truth does emerge from this idea, namely, that it's quite impossible to

engage in an act of bullshitting if you truly are “globally” indifferent to truth. To deceive—to aim to place a false belief in a person’s mind—a communicator, whether a liar or a bullshitter, must have beliefs. If Edwina is to count as a deceptive insinuator, she must, at some level of consciousness, be aware that she is being insincere, perhaps that she is feigning a form of intellectual seriousness that she is not living up to. And so, even if she is blind to the falsity of her ad’s claims and its insinuations—she does not *know*, or have any “positive belief,” that these particular claims are mistaken—it would be hard to imagine that she has not recognized, given her desire to sell pills, that she needs to *seem as though* she knows what she’s talking about. Otherwise put, if the act of bullshitting is, by definition, an attempt to “get away with something,” the bullshitter’s disinterest in truth simply cannot be categorical.

⁴¹ Nihilistic varieties of this ghoul would be, I would think, people who are not so much indifferent to truth-values as willfully focused upon undermining our society’s truth-seeking practices and institutions.

⁴² If you’re interested in broadening your taxonomy of bullshitters, consider reading about a species of bullshitting cheat—the “first-strike strategic ticky tacker”—who systematically makes cheap calls in pickup basketball games: Regan Lance Reitsma, “What Would Machiavelli Do? Confronting the Phantom-Foul-Caller in Pickup Basketball,” *Philosophy and Basketball: Thinking Outside the Paint*, eds. Greg Bassham and Jerry Walls (University of Kentucky Press: 2007), 57–71.