

Bullshitters and Ordinary Liars

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One reason Harry Frankfurt's essay *On Bullshit* has had such a rich afterlife is its success in highlighting the phenomenon of bullshitting as a way of speaking (or writing) non-truthfully to be studied in its own right.¹ What Frankfurt noticed was the phenomenon of speaking with a particular kind of *indifference* toward truth and falsity, or as we might say, *alethic* indifference. In particular, Frankfurt was adamant that the phenomenon he was interested in was to be distinguished from the (perhaps) more mundane category of *lying*. As he famously wrote about the bullshitter,

Her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit.²

There has been much debate about how to understand the idea that bullshitting is disconnected from the truth.³ Yet it is not difficult to see, at least intuitively, what the idea was.

Ordinary, honest, truthful talk involves saying what you believe to be true. On the other hand, a lie is necessarily something you believe to be false: if you're not saying something you believe to be false, you're not lying.⁴ Bullshitting, as Frankfurt thought of it, is more detached from the truth: the bullshitter doesn't care what the truth value of what she's saying is.

Subsequently, Frankfurt nevertheless came to recognize that the two categories overlap in the sense that someone might be telling lies while still being indifferent to the truth of what is said in the way that is relevant for bullshitting:

My presumption is that advertisers generally decide what they are going to say in their advertisements without caring what the truth is. Therefore, what they say in their advertisements is bullshit. Of course, they may also happen to know [...] disadvantageous truths about their product. In that case what they choose to convey is something that they know to be false, and so they end up not merely bullshitting but telling lies as well.⁵

In other words, about two decades on, Frankfurt acknowledged that lying and bullshitting are not incompatible: some lies are also bullshit. Roughly, then, you might be chiefly motivated in the bullshitting way: you don't really care whether you're saying something true. But at the

same time, you might know that what you're saying is false—so you're lying, too. Knowing that something is the case does not preclude not caring whether it is the case or not.

But what more precisely is the relation between lying and bullshitting? Do most liars exhibit a distinctive kind of alethic indifference? Or should we think that while some liars don't care about truth or falsity, most liars are not bullshitting in a Frankfurtian sense? Of course, ultimately, these questions have (perhaps intractable) empirical components. How *many* lies of a particular kind are told is probably very hard to answer. What we are after here is not so much numerical accuracy but rather a conceptual demarcation of an intuitive idea of what we will call *ordinary* lies.

Here is a paradigm case of what we mean by an ordinary lie:⁶

Dinner Invitation

Ben invites Jerry to his house for dinner. Jerry has nothing planned for the evening. But since he would rather stay home and watch TV, he makes up the story that he is having dinner with his mother that night, and he tells Ben that in order to make him think that he is unable to accept the invitation.

Clearly, Jerry is lying to Ben. This is the kind of lying we have all engaged in, and will all eventually engage in again, at some point in our lives—barring unforeseen, saintly readers. Moreover, we think it's fairly clear that Jerry is not bullshitting in a Frankfurtian sense: he is not speaking with alethic indifference.

To a first approximation, what we mean by ordinary lying, as in the Dinner Invitation example, are lies where the speaker says something they believe to be false with the aim that the hearer believe what they say. In other words, the aim is to get someone to believe a certain proposition, which the speaker happens to believe or know is false—such as the proposition “I'm having dinner with my mother.” They may have further aims that go beyond this, such as not making someone feel bad or selling a product. But getting someone to believe this proposition is a means to those ends.

But, as we will see, there are other kinds of lying, even other kinds of ordinary lying. And while some writers have concluded that most liars are also bullshitting,⁷ others have thought that lying usually does not involve alethic indifference,⁸ and indeed some extant views of bullshitting imply that few, if any, lies are instances of bullshitting.⁹

2

It is standard to distinguish ordinary lies, like Jerry's, from what has become known as Augustinian *real* lies: “the lie which is told purely for the pleasure of lying and deceiving.”¹⁰ Here is an example:

Directions

You are in an unfamiliar neighborhood, looking for the local library. You ask some kids on the street where the library is. They tell you it's “two blocks that way.” You walk on, but you don't find

the library. First you think that they did not actually know where it was. Then you realize this is implausible, and in fact you realize that they deliberately gave you false directions simply for the hell of it.¹¹

Augustinian real lies are arguably quite uncommon. Frankfurt certainly thought so: “Everyone lies from time to time, but there are very few people to whom it would often (or even ever) occur to lie exclusively from a love of falsity or of deception.”¹² Real lies and ordinary lies share some characteristics. That is unsurprising, since they are all lies. What they have in common is that both types of liars say something they believe to be false with the aim that the hearer come to believe it. But, as we said, the ordinary liar has the aim of getting someone to believe a particular proposition—like “I’m having dinner with my mother”—despite being aware that this proposition is false. The real liar, by contrast, has falsity itself within the scope of their aims, as we might say. That is, their aim is not so much to communicate a particular proposition, but to communicate a *false* proposition.

It is uncontroversial that real lies are even more clearly distinct from bullshitting than ordinary lies. Indeed, the Frankfurt notion of being concerned with truth and falsity applies straightforwardly to the real liar. Indeed, cases of people who are both bullshitting and lying do not involve real lies. How could you be indifferent toward the truth value of what you say and at the same time be a real liar?

While it is not possible to bullshit by telling a real lie, it is possible to bullshit by telling a lie. Here is an example—extending a famous case from Frankfurt¹³—of someone who (relatively uncontroversially) is both bullshitting and lying:

Storytelling Orator

Consider a Fourth of July orator who goes on bombastically about “our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.”¹⁴ During her speech, she tells the story of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree. But the orator has done extensive biographical research and firmly believes the story to be false.

The orator is bullshitting. The aim of her utterance is not to get her audience to believe its content. (So, she doesn’t care whether it’s true or not.) She only wants to present herself in a certain light (viz., that she is a patriot). In addition, although she is not a real liar, she is clearly lying because she is asserting something she believes to be false. Of course, since her intention is not to be believed, she is not an ordinary liar either.

The last point bears underscoring. To lie is to say something one believes to be false, or as many philosophers would put it, to *assert* something one believes to be false. All liars do that: ordinary liars like the dinner invitee, real liars like the pranking kids, and indeed the lying orator. Both the ordinary liar and the real liar also want to be believed, but with different aims. By contrast, the orator is simply indifferent to whether people believe what she says.¹⁵ That’s at least one sense in which she exhibits the Frankfurtian “lack of concern with truth.”

So far, then, you might have the following judgments:

	Bullshitting	Lying
Dinner Invitation	X	✓
Directions	X	✓
Storytelling Orator	✓	✓

If you do have these judgments, you are tracking standard views among philosophers in this area. What we want to discuss here are some instances of ordinary lying that challenge this picture of the relation between bullshitting and lying. In particular, these are cases in which, like the Dinner Invitation example, the liar both wants to be believed and says something she thinks is false.

In particular, there may be reasons to distinguish between cases like the Dinner Invitation and other cases of lying, which are clearly not real lies, but may look relevantly similar to the Storytelling Orator. Consider this story:¹⁶

Umbrella

Louise wants to sell Tom an umbrella. She knows that Tom is going to Chicago. Even though Louise believes the opposite, she invents the story that it is always raining in Chicago at that time of year, and she tells Tom that in order to make him buy the umbrella.

Ask yourself whether you think Louise is more like Jerry, the Dinner Invitee, or whether Louise is somehow more akin to the Storytelling Orator. Is Louise guilty of a kind of alethic indifference that Jerry cannot be accused of?

Suppose you think “yes.” Call this the

Overlap Intuition

Some ordinary liars, such as Louise, are both bullshitting and lying.

At the same time, as we hinted at above, you might also have the

Difference Intuition

Some ordinary liars, such as Jerry, are lying but not bullshitting.

If you share both the Overlap and the Difference Intuition, what are your options? In what follows, we first discuss two possible reactions, which have been defended in the literature, before suggesting an alternative view of these cases.

3

The first option is to simply reject the Difference Intuition: to admit upon reflection that even ordinary liars like Jerry are also bullshitting. After all, neither Louise nor Jerry are Augustinian real liars. Both

are saying things they know or believe to be false, but not *because* they are false. Each has an aim with saying what they say beyond the mere desire to deceive and mislead, unlike the pranksters giving false directions to the library. So they are not concerned with the truth value of what they say, at least in this sense.

Moreover, one can try to argue that both share a relevant kind of carelessness in handling the truth, namely because they both have other goals than trying to be truthful. And since they are not real liars, one can say they even have other goals than lying. It's not as if they *really want* to lie. Nor do they *really want* to be truthful, of course. If so, they could have just admitted the truth. Rather, what drives their speech, plausibly, is another set of objectives. Louise is after the money. Jerry is after getting out of the dinner without upsetting Ben.

At the same time, one can grant that there *are* certain differences. While Louise wants to benefit herself by making a profit, Jerry is trying to avoid hurting Ben's feelings. Perhaps this difference in their motives creates intuitive noise by suggesting a moral difference that influences our judgments? Perhaps that's why some feel the pull of the Difference Intuition, even though, so goes this line of thought, it is ultimately to be rejected? Indeed, you can agree that there's a moral difference between them and still reject that there's a linguistic difference.

To reject the Difference Intuition while accepting the Overlap Intuition is to conclude that ordinary lying is also bullshitting.¹⁷ While the Augustinian real liar is genuinely not alethically indifferent, ordinary liars are: they are careless with the truth. By extension, what Frankfurt originally discovered was not so much a phenomenon distinct from everyday lying and misleading, but an aspect of it. To be sure, this aspect of lying—alethic indifference—can also be found in its pure form: pure bullshitting exists, but it does not exclude lying.

4

Option two is to reject the Overlap Intuition and accept the Difference Intuition. That is, to judge that ordinary liars like Jerry are not alethically indifferent in the sense relevant for Frankfurtian bullshitting, but stop short of judging that Louise is indifferent when she's trying to sell the umbrella: she's not bullshitting either. This route ends in the conclusion that most ordinary lying is not bullshitting.

Indeed, while few writers on bullshitting have discussed the issue of overlap with lying, many views of bullshitting are committed to rejecting that liars like Louise are both bullshitting and lying. For instance, Easwaran argues that there are "two ways a speaker can bullshit," the first of these being "if their primary goal does not involve the hearer coming to believe what they say, by means of trusting their honesty"; and the second, "if their primary goal involves the hearer coming to believe what they say, by means of trusting their honesty, but the speaker does not believe what they say to be true or believe it to be false."¹⁸

More briefly, you're bullshitting if either you do not primarily intend to be believed or you have no belief either way about the truth value of what you say. Clearly, what we have called "ordinary liars" all fall

outside this category: they both want to be believed and they believe that what they are saying is false.

To be sure, many philosophers think that one can lie even if one does not intend to be believed, namely in cases of so-called *bald-faced lies*. And there are many other situations in which people lie even though it is not the case that their *primary* aim is to be believed.¹⁹ Such lies seem to count as bullshit on Easwaran's account. Yet, as we said above, the kind of ordinary lying we find interesting here are cases where the speaker both aims to be believed and says something false.

Stokke and Fallis took the option of rejecting Overlap while accepting Difference, and gave a particular kind of motivation for it, which is worth reiterating briefly here (since it will be called into question by the third option to be discussed below).²⁰ Roughly, the view was that lies and bullshitting can be distinguished by how they are directed at *inquiry*, the cooperative project of sharing true information through communication. This was specifically understood as addressing so-called *questions under discussion* (QUDs), which can be thought of as sub-inquiries.

Take Louise. Her statement that it's always raining in Chicago can be seen as addressing a simple QUD like, "Is it always raining in Chicago this time of year?" Now consider this description of Louise:

Louise wants to answer the QUD with something she believes to be false.

There is a false reading of this. That's the reading on which it describes Louise as a real liar, in the sense that what she wants is for a false answer to be given. But there is also a true reading, which can be glossed as

There is a proposition *p* such that Louise believes that *p* is false and she wants to answer the QUD with *p*.

The thought is that, since she wants to sell the umbrella, she engages herself and Tom in a mini-inquiry about the weather in Chicago. But she is not aiming to resolve this mini-inquiry, the QUD(s), by establishing the truth of the matter. She wants to move the inquiry in a specific direction, namely the one where they both accept that it's always raining this time of year in Chicago.

Stokke and Fallis argued that this is substantially different from cases where liars are also bullshitting. The Storytelling Orator—when telling the story of the cherry tree—is not correctly described as wanting to answer a QUD with something she believes to be false. Why not? Because, in the imagined scenario, she is not interested in answering QUDs at all, but in presenting herself in a certain light. She is not setting up a mini-inquiry about Washington and then trying to make sure it ends up with everyone believing the cherry tree story. What she is trying to do is to say something—anything—that will make her look like a patriot.

5

The final option we want to carve out takes seriously the suggestion that Louise is like the lying orator in both bullshitting and lying, but tries to hold on to the idea that most ordinary liars, like Jerry the dinner invitee, are not bullshitting. This means accepting both the Difference and the Overlap intuitions: some ordinary liars also bullshit, but others (perhaps most) do not.

The central challenge for this view is to explain why ordinary liars like Jerry the dinner invitee are relevantly different from ordinary liars like Louise. Even though they are both asserting things they believe to be false to achieve certain goals, is there a way of arguing that liars like Louise should be classified along with the Storytelling Orator as bullshitting liars, while Jerry is merely lying?

The intuitive idea we want to explore here is that bullshitting is a failure to be *guided by the truth* in the sense that one's reasons for saying what one does are *insensitive* to one's beliefs about the truth value of what one says. Take the orator. She says what she says in order to make herself out to be a patriot. What she says happens to be something she believes to be false—the cherry tree story. So she's lying, as well. But had she believed it to be true, she would still have said it *for the same reason*, namely, to look patriotic.

Let's spell this out a bit more precisely:

S is *not guided by the truth* if the following two counterfactuals hold:

if S were to believe that p is true, S would say p for reasons R, and
if S were to believe that p is false, S would say p for reasons R.

If you like, think of it this way: S fails to be guided by the truth when, in all nearby possible worlds (including the actual world) where S believes p, S says that p for reason R, and in all nearby possible worlds (including the actual world) where S believes not-p, S says that p for reasons R.²¹

For instance, suppose the orator actually believes the cherry tree story. Even so, had she believed it to be false, she would still have said it for the same reason: looking patriotic. We can say that, in this case, it was only *accidental* that she said something true. Her statement was only *accidentally* truthful.

So one might try to argue that Louise would say “it's always raining” because she wants to sell the umbrella regardless of whether she thinks it's true or false. If she thought it was true, she would not say it *because* it is true, but because she wants to sell the umbrella.

On the other hand, Jerry the dinner invitee says, “I'm having dinner with my mother” even though it's false because he wants to avoid hurting feelings, but if it had been true he would have said it because it was true. In other words, the most plausible way to fill out the story of the Dinner Invitee is that he would have a different motivation for saying it if it were true that he had a prior commitment.²² He might also be happy that he could avoid the invitation without hurting feelings, but that's not *why* he says it in this case.

Ultimately, we'll need to be more careful here. It's too simple to say that being guided by the truth just means saying what's true *because* it's true. We rarely speak for that reason alone—we have many other goals such as to persuade, comfort, or advise.²³ What matters is *sensitivity* to the truth: being guided by the truth means that one's reasons for saying that *p* differ between nearby situations where one believes *p* and where one doesn't.

Can this argument be sustained? One challenge is to motivate why one shouldn't just say that if Louise thought it was true, she would say "It's always raining" because it was true? Admittedly, she might also be happy that this would let her sell the umbrella. But why is she really any different from the dinner invitee?

A potential response is that, even if she had believed it, she would not say "it's always raining" to be at all informative about the weather, but just to sell the umbrella. If her state of mind is as we are assuming (like the orator's) you could rebuke her by saying, "Yeah, but even if you did think it was always raining, you would still have said that it was always raining in order to sell the umbrella. You're just saying that it's always raining to sell the umbrella!"

By contrast, in the case where it's true that he's having dinner with his mother, the dinner invitee is being truthful and cooperative. In that case, you can't rebuke him by saying, "Yeah, but if you weren't having dinner with your mother, you'd have lied to get out of the invitation. You're just saying you're having dinner with your mother to get out of the invitation!" This looks clearly infelicitous.

Moreover, even if you think that you perhaps *could* say this to Jerry, you would not be calling him out as a bullshitter, you'd be saying that he would lie if he needed to in order to get out of the invitation, and therefore you can't trust him in general.²⁴

If this is on the right track, we can accept both the Overlap and the Difference intuitions: some liars are also bullshitting, namely those who are not guided by the truth—they'd have said what they say for the same reason had they believed it. But most ordinary lying is not bullshitting because in such cases, the liar's motivation for saying what she says would not have applied had she believed it to be true.

¹ The essay first appeared in *Raritan* 6, no. 2 in 1986. It was reprinted in Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818172>; and later as the monograph, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 33–34.

³ Gerald A. Cohen, *Deeper into Bullshit*, in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002): 321–39; Scott Kimbrough, *On Letting It Slide*, in Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Resich, eds., *Bullshit and Philosophy* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 2006), 3–18; Thomas Carson, *Lying and Deception* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010),

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577415.001.0001>; Michael Wreen, “A P.S. on B.S.: Some Remarks on Humbug and Bullshit,” *Metaphilosophy* 44, nos. 1–2 (2013): 105–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12021>; Don Fallis, “Frankfurt Wasn’t Bullshitting!,” *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 37 (2015): 11–20; Andreas Stokke and Don Fallis, “Bullshitting, Lying, and Indifference toward Truth,” *Ergo* 4, no. 10 (2017): 277–309; Kenny Easwaran, “Bullshit Activities,” *Analytic Philosophy* 66, no. 1 (2025): 306–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12328>.

⁴ A few philosophers (e.g., Carson, *Lying and Deception*, 17–18) think that you can be lying even if you do not believe that you are saying something false. They think that lying just requires *not believing* that you are saying something true. But in this paper, we follow Frankfurt and stick with the more conventional view of lying.

⁵ Harry Frankfurt, “Reply to G. A. Cohen,” in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 340–44, at 341.

⁶ From Andreas Stokke, *Lying and Insincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 1.

⁷ Fallis, “Frankfurt Wasn’t Bullshitting!”

⁸ Stokke and Fallis, “Bullshitting, Lying, and Indifference toward Truth.”

⁹ Easwaran, “Bullshit Activities.”

¹⁰ Augustine, “Lying,” in Roy Joseph Deferari, ed., *Treatises on Various Subjects* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1952), 53–120, at 87.

¹¹ Some liars who need their utterance to be false have goals other than the pleasure of lying and deceiving. For example, they might want an adversary to have a false belief so that they can be discredited (see Don Fallis and Kay Mathiesen, “Fake News is Counterfeit News,” *Inquiry* (2019): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2019.1688179>). We should probably also count these liars as real liars.

¹² Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 59.

¹³ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 16–18.

¹⁴ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 16.

¹⁵ To be sure, the orator does not achieve her goals unless people *understand* what she says: that’s how she will make them think she’s a patriot. But as far as that goal is concerned, she is indifferent to whether or not they believe what she literally says.

¹⁶ From Fallis and Mathiesen, “Fake News is Counterfeit News,” 304. This case is analogous to Frankfurt’s advertisers.

¹⁷ This was the conclusion of Fallis, “Frankfurt Wasn’t Bullshitting!”

¹⁸ Easwaran, “Bullshit Activities,” 3.

¹⁹ For discussion, see e.g. Andrew Sneddon, “Alternative Motivation and Lies,” *Analysis* 81, no. 1 (2021): 46–52.

²⁰ Stokke and Fallis, “Bullshitting, Lying, and Indifference toward Truth.”

²¹ The formulation of the principle should be refined so that it will not allow that one is guided by the truth simply because R is some reason for which one would say that p (in either case), but rather to make sure that one is guided by the truth just in case one’s reason for saying that p differs between cases where one believes that p and cases where one believes not-p.

²² Of course, there are other ways to fill out the story. For example, if Jerry's overriding aim is to avoid going to dinner at Ben's house, Jerry arguably would be bullshitting.

²³ Thanks to an anonymous reader for this point.

²⁴ Thanks to Kay Mathiesen for suggesting this point to us.