

# Our Vision and our Mission: Bullshit, Assertion and Belief<sup>1</sup>

Ben Kotzee

Department of Philosophy  
University of Cape Town  
Private Bag  
Rondebosch  
7701  
ben.kotzee@gmail.com

## Abstract

“Bullshit”, as Harry Frankfurt writes in his recent book, *On Bullshit*, is a communication that pretends to be genuinely informative, but really is not. The person who talks bullshit, Frankfurt holds, is unconcerned with whether what he says is true, but is very concerned with how he is thought of by the listener. In this paper, I discuss Frankfurt's theory of bullshit, making specific reference to the requirement for deceptive intent on the part of the bullshitter, and to whether bullshitting must involve conscious dishonesty. Some choice examples of bullshit are nosed and the question of whether Frankfurt really has it in for postmodernism is addressed.

## Bullshit

According to the (South African) Department of Home Affairs,<sup>2</sup>

The vision of the Department of Home Affairs is rendering a world-class service. The Department strives to become the leading state department in South Africa in terms of service delivery. Through successful stakeholder relationships, collective and collaborative solution finding, empowerment, flexibility and creativity, the Department will transform itself from a reactive to a proactive organisation recognised for successful service delivery and effective and committed staff members.

The department also has a ‘mission’ and commits itself, *inter alia*, to

...effectively [balance] the immediate need for information to guide the management of resources with the need for long-range, strategic information.

To a recent ‘customer’ of the department at their Wynberg branch, this appears to be empty rhetoric at best: no such striving, nor any such management *nous* was evi-

- 1 © 2007 Ben Kotzee; licensee South African Journal of Philosophy.  
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
- 2 See their website at [http://www.home-affairs.gov.za/vision\\_mission.asp](http://www.home-affairs.gov.za/vision_mission.asp). Information retrieved 18 September 2006.

dent in his dealings with the department (quite the opposite). As a communication of the values of the department, the statement of its 'vision' and 'mission' is mangled and inept, veering from too vague ('proactive organisation') to overly specific (compare the talk of balancing the requirements for information needed on the long and short term). But more interesting than the jargon (and partly explanatory of it), is the motivation behind the department's publicising its vision and mission. Stated reasons may include a wish to be open regarding the organisation's values, inspiring confidence in the public, or encouraging loyalty in its employees, but that this is the real motive is belied by the smugness of the language in which it is couched, as much as the actual service offered by the department. Rather, propounding a 'vision' and 'mission' is a fad indulged in by South African organisations since the early 1990s at the latest: organisations from universities and schools to state departments and private companies plaster similar vacuous phrases – dreamed up at 'team-building sessions' – over walls and websites in order to appear effective and smart, but definitely not because they really care about values. What offends about this and other forms of 'management-speak' is both its emptiness and the cynicism with which it is trotted out: it is bad organisations pretending to be good because they have to be seen to be (even though they care little that an intelligent public and workforce sees through the trick).

### **Frankfurt on Bullshit**

First writing on the topic in 1986, Harry Frankfurt bemoans what he sees as a significant feature of our culture: that there is so much bullshit in it. The bullshit (in advertising, politics, the media and the academy) that he mentions is, of course, not confined to South Africa; bullshit is found worldwide and has been around for some time. But there is reason to worry about the volume of bullshit that is about these days, and in the Western culture specifically: Frankfurt attributes the quantity of bullshit out there to such cornerstones of Western democracies as the mass (and now rolling, 24-hour) media, advertising, the party political system, and some features of contemporary academic thought. In an article first published in 1986, Frankfurt develops a theoretical understanding of what bullshit is and attempts to provide a definition. Recently published as a small book, *On Bullshit* (Frankfurt, 2005) became something of a surprise bestseller – bullshit in public life clearly strikes a chord.

#### *Black on bullshit*

What does 'bullshit' mean? Rather than write about 'bullshit', Max Black (in an earlier essay ('The Prevalence of Humbug')) calls Frankfurt's subject 'humbug', although the two authors are concerned with the same phenomenon. Synonyms for 'bullshit', besides 'humbug', include 'balderdash', 'claptrap', 'hokum' and 'imposture'.<sup>3</sup> Black defines 'humbug' as

deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes (Frankfurt 2005: 6).

Like Black, Frankfurt holds that bullshit involves a 'deliberate misrepresentation'; like lying, bullshitting amounts to someone trying to deceive another. But there are crucial differences: bullshitting someone, while deceiving them, does not involve an outright

<sup>3</sup> 'Imposture' is especially apt. It calls to mind the book called *Intellectual Impostures* (Sokal and Bricmont 1998), accusing a number of postmodern philosophers of bullshitting when they write about science. The American edition of that book was called *Fashionable Nonsense*, but 'nonsense' is different from imposture; what the difference is will become clear below.

lie... wherein lies the difference between the two, and is bullshitting better or worse than lying?

In attempting an answer, Black distinguishes between two matters that a speaker may mislead a listener about: the speaker may mislead the listener about his own feelings or attitudes, or about what is the case in the world, *and* about his own feelings and attitudes. Take the example of the murderer Smith, on trial, unrepentant and intent on deceiving the court. Smith may admit in a mournful voice to having killed the victim, pleading for forgiveness; if his ruse is successful, he will have deceived the court not about who committed the crime, but about his own attitudes and feelings: the court will think that Smith is contrite, whereas he is not. Alternatively, Smith may lie to the court (with *pathos* or not), saying that Jones committed the murder and thereby deceive the court twice over, firstly into believing that it is Jones who committed the murder, and secondly into believing that he (Smith) *believes* that it is Jones who committed the murder. If Smith is successful in this second deception, he will have deceived the court both about what actually happened and about what he thinks and feels about it.

Black holds that the primary intention in humbug is not to deceive the listener about what is the case in the world (as in Smith's second deception), but to deceive the listener about some matter regarding himself or his own qualities. Take the case of the social theorist who writes that

...the anthropomorphic cult, with its code of devout observances, suffers a progressive disintegration through the stress of economic exigencies and the decay of the system of status (Black 1983: 10).

On this view, the theorist cares little about what the reader comes to believe about his topic (the 'leisure class'), but is rather most interested in impressing on the reader that he really is a very brilliant and sensitive fellow.

*Frankfurt on bullshit and truth*

Distinguishing his account from Black's, a great part of Frankfurt's effort is directed at capturing the particular dishonesty involved in talking bullshit, and in saying how bullshit differs from lying. Although Frankfurt thinks it correct that the bullshitter misrepresents himself in the way that Black describes, he holds that it is entirely unhelpful to say that bullshit is 'short of lying' or is like a lie, but not quite. He points out that any use of language at all shares some features with lying – taken in the broadest sense, just by virtue of being a use of language. Any assertion one makes is *like* a lie, although somewhat different. Just saying that bullshit is like a lie does not go far to describe what bullshit is.

Frankfurt points out that bullshit is often just shoddy or careless communication (even though it is often couched in high-falutin terms). Consider this as an example of bullshit: the student does not study for his exam, and the next day writes pages of whatever he can remember from the course, whether relating to the question or not, using every item of remembered or misremembered technical vocabulary. This is called 'bullshitting an exam'. One can also bullshit a class if one is a teacher, or a job interview or sales presentation – in this sense, bullshit involves a scantiness of preparation coupled with a delivery confident that this deficiency will not be noticed. When bullshitting, the content of what is said is unimportant, as long as the communication sounds right.

Frankfurt points out, however, that bullshit is not always just careless talk. Sometimes bullshit is very carefully crafted: he notes that, in enterprises like advertising, public relations and politics (amongst others) people take great care in ensuring that they will mislead others about their own feelings and attitudes, without quite lying: much thought and preparation – rather than very little – is the hallmark of this smooth-talking bullshit. The exceptional people capable of fooling others in this way without their noticing or caring, are called bullshit artists. Frankfurt (2005: 22) thinks that there is some tension between the idea that bullshit is typically a shoddy or careless communication, but can also be something prepared with great care. He concludes, though, that there is always something substandard even to such carefully crafted bullshit, because even the bullshit artist is trying to ‘get away with something’ (or is selling the listener short) in some respect. The bullshit artist may be careful about how he portrays himself and his message, but he is not careful about the *truth* of what he says.

#### *Bullshit and meaning*

The concern with truth forms the central plank of Frankfurt's argument. It captures his disagreement with Black and is the reason why Frankfurt's little article on bullshit makes a not insignificant contribution to the philosophy of language: by distinguishing bullshit from lying, it helps us understand better what goes on when someone lies and, more importantly, by saying what good speech is *not*, it helps to make clear what it is to speak at all.

At its most basic, the activity of speaking is one of sharing truths; what people do in speaking is provide each other with handy information about where to find what they want – food, water, shelter and the like at the most basic level – and avoid what they fear. When we speak about engineering, computer science or economics today we are still communicating information that is of interest to other people, although admittedly of a type less concerned with direct, basic needs. Be that as it may, in order to be an efficient participant in this activity of ‘speaking to each other’ one needs to speak the truth – if you say something false (for whatever reason), you are transmitting potentially damaging information to the listener. Naturally, all of us say things that are false sometimes and mostly this is just due to honest mistake. Most people do not try (at least most of the time) to say what is false. Of course, everyone lies at some point: whether it be a white lie or a bare-faced lie does not matter – lying is saying something that is untrue, knowing that it is untrue and knowing that the listener takes one to be speaking the truth. Morally speaking, we disapprove of lying, but lying is not just wrong for moral reasons: it is wrong for a semantic reason as well: there would *be* nothing like communication of handy truths to others – there would *be no speech* – if everyone lied all of the time. If everyone lied all of the time, speaking to each other would have no point, firstly but, more strikingly, words could have no meanings at all if they were not used to communicate truth in the first instance. If no-one *ever* used a sentence like ‘the cat is on the mat’ when there is clearly a cat on the mat, that sentence would not mean that the cat is on the mat. If it was consistently used to describe another situation (say the dog standing in the door) ‘the cat is on the mat’ would mean the dog is standing in the door; and if ‘the cat is on the mat’ were not used consistently to describe one kind of situation at all – if it were simply voiced at random, not taking into account what is actually going on in the world when one says it – it would simply mean nothing. The point is that speaking is *for* describing situations in the world and if

one *ignores* how the world is in speaking, what one produces is not language, but just noise. This insight is captured most strikingly in Davidson's (1984a) theory of 'radical interpretation', and is the most compelling reason why one's theory of meaning should be what we philosophers of language call 'truth-conditional'.

In writing about bullshit and lying, Frankfurt relies on this insight. He notes that, without the activity of speaking the truth, there could *be* no lying at all. One reason is this: the (successful) liar is someone who knows that others will take him to be speaking the truth, and derives benefit from the fact that what he says is false; he could not derive this benefit if people did not have the expectation that what he says is true. But the best reason for holding lying to depend on speaking the truth is the conceptual one mentioned above: no-one could tell a lie if there were no practice of communicating information about how the world is to each other in the first place. Lying is just asserting something as true that one knows is false – to be in a position to do *this* there has to exist, firstly, the custom between people of asserting and interpreting utterances as true. Think of counterfeiting money: if there were no real money, it would be impossible to make *fake* or counterfeit money. Lying depends on speaking the truth in the same way: we might say that lying is transacting in fake truth.

Seen against this background, it becomes possible to state the difference between bullshit and lying. In lying, Frankfurt holds, the liar is engaged in the *practice* of telling the truth just as the speaker who is speaking the truth is. By this, he means that the liar is transmitting to the hearer a discreet piece of information that is of interest to the hearer and that is portrayed as true. The information the liar transmits is, of course, false<sup>4</sup> – the point is that it pretends to be true and that it is straightforwardly and verifiably true or false. Furthermore, in saying what he says the liar is *guided* by the truth. The liar could not lie if he did not have definite opinions about what is true and false, and consciously avoided telling the truth: he cares about what is true and is guided in what he says *by* what is true in as much as he *avoids* saying what is true (Frankfurt 2005: 56-61) In bullshitting, the situation is different. The bullshitter does not make a straightforward communication of something that he believes is false. In reality, the bullshitter does not care much about what he actually says – his aim is not to lead the listener into believing something that is not true,<sup>5</sup> but to confuse the listener into believing that he is communicating something *at all*, when he is doing nothing of the sort. Whereas the liar *informs* the listener (but wrongly), the bullshitter fakes taking part in the transmission of information. The liar contributes to the cooperative effort that is communication, but he contributes something bad, while the bullshitter pretends to contribute, but contributes nothing at all. The difference between the two, one might

4 More accurately, the information is believed to be false by the liar.

5 Cohen (2002: 327 – 8) disagrees. He holds that bullshit is often designed to lead to a misapprehension on the part of the listener. This is true especially in politics and advertising, where bullshit is exactly used to mislead people into believing that, say, conservatism is the compassionate way or that Omo washes whiter. In holding that some lying may also be bullshitting, Cohen misses the precise distinction: advertisers may of course lie; the point is that, insofar as they are merely bullshitting, there is no *specific* thing that they want to mislead the listener about. What bullshitters in advertising or politics *want* is not for the public to believe something specific, but rather that they believe whatever will make them vote for the politician or buy the company's goods. Say the politician tells the voters that Senator John was a friend of the North-Vietnamese, knowing that this is not true, and in order to make the public believe that Senator John was a friend of the North-Vietnamese. This is lying. But say the same politician says that Senator John 'flip-flops around on the left bank of public opinion', meaning not for the public to believe anything specific about John's policy ideas, but in order to create a range of negative impressions of John that might vary from voter to voter. In such a case the politician is bullshitting.

say, is like that between a thief and a freeloader – the liar diminishes the stock of truth that his listener holds, while the bullshitter as freeloader pretends to share something with the listener, but shares nothing at all.

Frankfurt's main addition about bullshit (and also what his account offers over that of Black) concerns the relationship between bullshitting and truth talking. The bullshitter not only portrays himself as believing or feeling what he does not (as Black suggests); in speaking, he also shows a disregard for what is true. This makes the bullshitter, for Frankfurt, 'a greater enemy of the truth than [the liar]' (2005: 61).

#### **'Frankfurt-bullshitters' and 'Cohen-bullshit'**

An interesting consequence of Frankfurt's view is that bullshit need not actually be false: it is not the truth or falsity (or even meaninglessness) of a sentence that makes it bullshit; it is that it is uttered without concern for what is true. Given Frankfurt's view, it is possible to make a *true* utterance without concern for the truth, and still utter bullshit. Take the example of the student bullshitting his essay: say that he, accidentally – and without really caring, writes something that is true. Due to his not caring about the truth of what he writes, this will be bullshit even though it is true.

In reality, the minds of people who bullshit may be a lot more murky than Frankfurt suggests. Sometimes bullshitters *are* guided by the truth, if only after a fashion. Take the following example: at the time of the first power cuts in the Western Cape at the beginning of last year, minister responsible Alec Erwin suggested that the bolt found in the Koeberg turbine shaft, which partly caused the power cuts (together with dust and bird-doo on power lines from Mpumalanga), was placed there as an act of sabotage. What was going through Erwin's mind is unclear: did he *know* that the act was not sabotage, but said that it was? Then he was lying. Did he not care whether it was sabotage or not, but just wanted to fool the public into thinking that Eskom and by extension he were really very efficient and pro-active service providers when they were not? Then he was bullshitting. Or might he – clutching at straws – have believed that it really was sabotage? Then, one might say that he was simply gullible. The case becomes more complex when Erwin later denies that he ever called the bolt in the turbine 'sabotage', and starts to refer to the event as one of 'human instrumentality'. Most would agree, I think, that this was an attempt to bullshit himself out of trouble. But does this case fit Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit? Was it said not caring about the truth? Funnily, in this case, I think Erwin cared very much about the truth in what he said. Inasmuch as 'human instrumentality' simply means 'a person was involved in the bolt getting there', it is of course true that the bolts ending up there was human instrumentality; the bolt could not have arrived there by itself; someone left or placed it. What was going on is this: on his second appearance about this issue, Erwin *had* to speak the truth – the media would have his skin if he did not – he just tried to speak the truth in such a way that he would emerge looking sharp, businesslike and in control; hence the phrase 'human instrumentality'. One thinks of truths uttered in the same way by any organisation trying to excuse itself: think of the American military's calling civilian deaths 'collateral damage'; *they* even refer to a bolt as a 'hexagonal fastening device' – both phrases being quite precise, but overblown in a very specific way. Despite speaking the truth, what these people say is still bullshit, suggesting that Frankfurt's account does not work as neatly as it stands.

Concerned about something like this, Cohen (2002) distinguishes between the producer of bullshit's intention (that is bullshitting someone) – and the product that the

bullshitter produces (the bullshit that he utters). For Frankfurt, bullshit is produced when one has a bullshitting intention, or the essence of bullshit is that behind it lies the intention to bullshit someone. Cohen, however, holds that not all bullshit is bullshit, because it was produced with a bullshitting intention: some of it is bullshit simply by virtue of the features of the utterance itself, independently of the speaker's intention (2002: 324). What makes Erwin's 'human instrumentality' bullshit, on Cohen's account, is not his intention in saying it; it is simply the very phrase 'human instrumentality' itself. Likewise, I think that what irritates many people about business speak is the very phraseology people use, as much as their intentions: 'stakeholders', 'pro-active', 'value added', 'outside the box', and so on.

Cohen himself is concerned with the bullshit that pervades academia; as an example he mentions the writings of the Althusserian Marxists,<sup>6</sup> but he holds that French philosophy quite generally is full of bullshit (2002: 322, 333). He describes a situation that many academics are all too familiar with: reading pages of impenetrable jargonised text by some writer known for the complexity of his work, one sometimes gives up on the piece, brow-beaten by the academic's style into thinking that, as one cannot understand the deep point he is striving to make, the author must be cleverer than oneself. Rather than being simply too deep to understand, Cohen thinks such work is often bullshit: when one digs through the jargon to discover the heart of what is asserted, one finds the piece either (1) makes no real sense, (2) states something more obvious than it pretends, or (3) is a patent absurdity.

Cohen holds that Frankfurt's analysis works quite badly for this sort of bullshit, and that there are two things wrong with it: Firstly, entirely honest people often repeat on trust what other seemingly trustworthy people say; if these people talk bullshit, this is liable to be repeated, but, on Frankfurt's view, according to which bullshit requires dishonesty, as soon as the honest person repeats it, the utterance will stop being bullshit. Secondly, it is possible that an honest person may simply have a bullshit idea and voice it; especially if this is repeated by others, this person may even be encouraged to spout more similar bullshit and others may begin to produce such bullshit of their own under the spell of the original. Because of this possible disconnect between the shittiness of what is said and the utterer's state of mind, Cohen holds that dishonesty is neither sufficient nor necessary for bullshit (2002: 331-2).

Cohen attempts to explain the features that an utterance must, as it were, 'have in itself' if it is to count as bullshit. In the sense that Cohen is interested in, bullshit is a species of nonsense: specifically, he defines bullshit as 'unclarifiable nonsense'<sup>7</sup> (2002: 332-3). To say, as Baudrillard does, that 'the space of the event has become a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean' is so obscure that it does not really *say anything*: non-Euclidean geometries, involving the possibility that there can be more than one line parallel to a first passing through the same point (or none!), is so unlike armed conflict that one cannot usefully compare the two, while 'hyperspace with multiple refractivity' just means nothing, mathematically speaking (Sokal and Bricmont 1998: 137-8).

<sup>6</sup> Cohen is a Marx scholar.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen leaves the possibility open that there can be even more sorts of bullshit, such as 'rubbish' (arguments grossly deficient in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence) or 'irretrievably speculative comment' (2002: 332-3).

### Believing ones own Bullshit

Cohen's dispute with Frankfurt revolves around whether bullshit should be characterised firstly in terms of the dishonest intent behind someone saying something, or in terms of some features of an utterance independent of the intent with which it is uttered.<sup>8</sup> To resolve the dispute, let us consider the type of bullshit that Cohen is clearly worried about. Take what is called 'postmodernism' in the humanities. While the movement is on the wane, many analytic philosophers worry that much bullshit masquerades as serious academic thought in postmodernism. What has always disturbed me about this movement (and what seems to puzzle Cohen), is the absolute earnestness and preachy air with which postmodernists attempt to convince scientists and analytic philosophers that the pursuit of truth in the whole of science is misguided, or worse: politically repressive. Frankfurt, also, seems to worry about this, although he does not mention postmodernism by name, but talks of '...various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are' (2005: 64). Following Frankfurt then (and in order to avoid tarring all postmodernists with the same brush), let us take as our example the sort of bullshit Cohen worries about: the popular relativism about truth, according to which no one person may claim to have found the truth, because 'nothing is ever really true or false anyway'. The puzzlement (and for pop relativists, as far as Cohen is concerned, their essential honesty) lies in the fact that many people seem to *believe* that there is no truth, and in exactly those terms: they repeat quite often enough that truth and science, quite generally, is bunk. If what they say is indeed bullshit, as Cohen suspects, the problem is that the seriousness and honesty with which it is said, precludes it from being called bullshit on Frankfurt's analysis.

Quite apart from Cohen's point, we also often say of people that they *believe* their own bullshit: by this, we mean that they have become so caught up by the grand but empty things that they say, that they repeat it whenever opportunity presents, and even attempt to act in ways bearing out this belief. Another problem for Frankfurt's account then, is that, if bullshit involves one person attempting to deceive another, it seems difficult to explain how someone may believe his/her own bullshit, as we so often say they do.

Which account works best for this sort of bullshit? I think Frankfurt's does. The reason lies with Cohen's defining bullshit as nonsense. Nonsense, in the philosophical sense, is a sentence that, while it may appear meaningful, is in fact not. Here is an example: 'green ideas sleep furiously'. While this sentence pretends to say something about how the world is, it in fact says nothing: it is un-understandable gibberish, or something of which we cannot say what would be the case if it were true. If this is nonsense, the problem for Cohen is that no-one can truly believe it: as no-one can have any idea of what it would be for green ideas to sleep furiously, no-one can genuinely believe that the world is *like* this, that green ideas sleep furiously. (If you do not believe me, try it for yourself: try to believe that green ideas sleep furiously. If it appears that you succeed, ask yourself 'what do I believe?' Then compare this 'belief'

<sup>8</sup> In fairness to Cohen, it must be made clear that he contemplates the possibility that bullshit can be characterised in *both* these terms. Doing so, however, takes away much of the precision that Frankfurt brings to his definition. I think that a fair question is: 'What is bullshit *really*?' Someone deceiving another, or just nonsense phraseology?'



with the belief that the cat is on the mat.) But in order to explain what he seeks to explain (essentially *honest* academics telling us that the space of war is non-Euclidean or that this is the space the Gulf War took place in), Cohen has to assume that these people actually *do* believe that the space of war is non-Euclidean; something they cannot do if bullshit is nonsense. To say something *honestly*, one has to believe what one says; if bullshit is pure contentless nonsense, it cannot be believed and, therefore, also cannot be said honestly.

Another problem with Cohen's account is identified by Frankfurt: Cohen does not define what it is for an utterance to be unclear, in fact, he refuses to do so.<sup>9</sup> This, Frankfurt holds, may amount to Cohen '...hoisting [his] account of bullshit by its own petard...' Not being able to define clarity, Cohen's own account is unclear, and therefore bullshit by its own standards (Frankfurt 2002: 341 – 2). Cohen's concern, however, is serious and definitely not bullshit – this is the sort of bullshit that I think we should worry about, so it is a shortcoming of his theory that it is lumped in with bullshit by its own test.

Cohen's attempt to define bullshit as 'unclarifiable nonsense', in summary, flounders for two reasons: firstly nonsense is not something that anyone can honestly believe or say and secondly nonsense is not something that Cohen has usefully defined. This leaves only Frankfurt's account as a plausible explanation of bullshit. However, the *phenomenon* that Cohen identifies (seemingly honest theorists of all sorts talking bullshit), not to mention the possibility that someone may believe their own bullshit, still poses problems for Frankfurt's account of bullshit. The challenges for Frankfurt's account are (1) explaining how people may seem to talk bullshit even when entirely honest and (2) explaining how it may sometimes seem to us that people 'believe their own bullshit'.

Let me deal firstly with the second challenge. For Frankfurt, bullshit involves deception. Were one to believe one's own bullshit, then this would require one's deceiving oneself, and on the face of it, it is hard to see how this may be possible. After all, deception requires that the deceived will not know that he is being deceived and if deceiver and deceived is the same person, this appears impossible. The barest knowledge of practical psychology, though, tells us that people do deceive themselves, and more often than they would admit. *Prima facie*, believing one's own bullshit can be explained, on Frankfurt's account, as a case of self-deception, perhaps as follows: Take someone who bullshits people repeatedly with great success. Say the bullshitting behaviour becomes more or less automatic (to the point where this person repeats his own bullshit 'without a second thought'). Now, were the memory of the original deception to begin to fade in this bullshitter's mind and were he encouraged by others to admire what he himself has said in the past, this person becomes like someone who repeats the bullshit of another (and becomes less of an original bullshitter). We would say that he has started to believe his own bullshit, but that what he believes is still bullshit due to the fact that, when he originally said it, it was bullshit. On this view, bullshit is something said (or believed!) by someone who does not care about the truth of what they say, and say what they say to impress others *or* repeat something first said with that intention. In either case, what is actually said may be (trivially) true or

<sup>9</sup> Cohen holds that one cannot define clarity (2002: 332). Cohen's hesitation may be due to his knowing that it is difficult to provide a theory of nonsense or (even) memory of the failure of the verificationist project, that, in a sense, also sought to define bullshit as nonsense. In providing an account of bullshit, it would be better for Cohen not to hitch his (political) wagon to the 'theory of nonsense' train, as there is no telling where that train might go (if anywhere).

simply false, or it may be nonsense – which it is does not matter to whether what is said (and possibly believed) is bullshit.

As to the first challenge, the solution might be simply to hold that one *cannot* straightforwardly identify unclarifiable nonsense with bullshit and/or hold an entire branch of academic thought to be bullshit. Take again the case of Alec Erwin's utterance that he never called the accident at Koeberg sabotage, but only ever meant that it amounted to 'human instrumentality'. What should we say of Alec Erwin – was he bullshitting or not? What we should answer is not quite clear. If he cared about the truth in saying it was 'human instrumentality', he is at best guilty of obfuscation, or crimes against the English language rather than dishonesty. If he said what he did not caring about what was true, but only to make himself appear smart or get the media off his back, he was bullshitting, but we cannot say for sure that this was the case without more evidence. It is the same with accusing someone of lying; one has to be sure that there was dishonest intent in the saying for it to be called bullshitting, and this can only be deduced from circumstantial clues, like what information he was privy to or whether he ever contradicted himself. For Cohen, anyone uttering a certain common unclear phrase can be said quite straightforwardly to be talking bullshit, but before this epithet is warranted on a Frankfurt reading of the phenomenon, one has to be sure that there was dishonesty behind the saying...in a word, it is much harder to make an accusation of Frankfurt bullshit stick. And I think this is the right outcome. Accusing someone of bullshitting, on Frankfurt's account, is accusing someone of dishonesty and, like with all accusations of dishonesty, it should not be made lightly. I think we should reserve our use of this loaded word – it is a profanity, after all – for cases of provable dishonesty, making Cohen's identification of more or less all fashionable French philosophy as bullshit injudicious.

### Conclusion

The way forward for bullshit research, or for those interested in the phenomenon, lies in deciding whether bullshit involves an attempt at dishonesty on the bullshitter's part, or whether something can be bullshit due to some autonomous feature of the utterance. This leaves a question I am so sure of being asked that I'll answer it now: isn't this attempt to define bullshit or the choice between bullshit-as-autonomous or bullshit-as-deception *itself* an example of academic bullshit of the 'angels on the head of a pin' variety? The accusation is old hat. At least one commentator has held that what Frankfurt writes is itself bullshit or a clever parody on analytic philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Frankfurt and all of us interested in the phenomenon have a serious intent in writing about bullshit: in addition to explaining why there is so much of it about, Frankfurt aims to capture the particular form of dishonesty involved in bullshitting people and, in so doing, provides conceptual weaponry for those who deplore bullshit: part of the effort in defining bullshit is to convince that some communications are worthy of the disapproval involved in calling something 'shit' and to show which ones they are.

Allow me an illustration of the usefulness of the concept. I have already held it foolish to call all fashionable French philosophy (or all postmodernism, for that matter) bullshit. However, having Frankfurt's concept of bullshit at our disposal, another accusation *is* warranted: holding that there is no truth fatally blurs the lines between speaking honestly, lying and talking bullshit, suggesting that postmodernists may want to be

<sup>10</sup> See Baggini's (2005) review of *On Bullshit*.

far more careful in their thought about truth. This idea is already present in Frankfurt's article. Recall that a central question for Frankfurt is that of why there is so much bullshit in our culture. He gives two reasons, although he hints that there may be many. Frankfurt writes that, firstly, bullshit is 'unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about' (2005: 63). Quite clearly, this sort of situation – found often in situations where people feel they must appear expert – will lead to people resorting to bullshit. The other reason for the proliferation of bullshit in our time that Frankfurt mentions has to do with today's philosophical climate. Specifically, Frankfurt blames '...various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are' (2005: 64).

Holding that skepticism about truth and objectivity will *lead to* much bullshit, Frankfurt hits the mark squarely. *Of course* if it is part of one's world-view that one cannot say how things truly are (or worse, if one believes that there *is* no 'how things truly are'), this will lead to a proliferation of bullshit. For if there is no fact of the matter as to how anything really is, there can also be no better or worse descriptions of how things are, because nothing one says or thinks can reflect how things are in the world anyway. One might go so far as to say that, on this view, there can be no genuine assertion and consequently no lying at all: if we cannot think or say how things truly are, this means that we cannot aim at reflecting the truth in what we think and say (thinking and speaking honestly), nor could one aim to say what is *not* true – one could not lie, because by assumption one cannot know what is true and false in the first place. Due to the absence of the possibility that anyone is guided by the truth in such a world, everything that we say or think in such a world would be bullshit by Frankfurt's lights; there would only be fake speech and fake thought in such a world. Of course, that there can ever *only* be fake speech and thought without real speech and thought, is as impossible as that there can only be fake money or fake art. In order to fashion a pretend *anything*, the real thing first has to exist, which is why the very existence of bullshit (fake assertion) all but proves that language users really are in the business of making assertions that purport to reflect reality. But that all speech and thought is a sort of fake is precisely what postmodern philosophy often tells us quite explicitly, in advancing the view that no-one can *ever* say or think something true. In the absence of a truth that anyone can firmly hit or miss with what they say, all that remains is blather, or Frankfurtian bullshit.

At this point, it may well be thought that I am unfair to the postmodernist. Many academics who like to describe themselves as postmodernists might not think that there is no truth at all that can be reflected or not in what we say, but might instead support some variety of alethic relativism: According to this view, there is indeed no one truth, but rather many different truths – perhaps we each have our own individual truth or perhaps different cultures have different truths.<sup>11</sup> This thought is depressingly common in today's South Africa and finds expression in a health minister insisting that a diet of African potatoes is as effective in the treatment of AIDS as Western medicine. This, she takes, it seems, as *a priori* true, because there is no one truth, but many different truths, one per culture.

While many efforts to defend this view have been made in the last four or five decades, simple alethic relativism, in its cultural and solipsistic forms, is a non-starter.

<sup>11</sup> Sometimes they hold that 'Truth with a capital-T' does not exist, though 'truth with a little-t' exists, as if all that metaphysics is in need of is a bit of corrective typography.

Firstly, saying that there are many different truths for different individuals to aim at in speaking will not work. Most obviously, it cannot be the case that each of us aims to believe and say something that is 'true-for-me', even though it is not 'true-for-you'. The problem with aiming at 'truth-for-me' is that this is a target that no-one can fail to hit. Simply anything I believe right then is 'true-for-me' and this deprives calling anything 'true' of its point. The word 'true', that is, only makes sense assuming that the beliefs or assertions it applies to *could have been wrong* and holding that 'true' means no more than 'true-for-me' as much as guarantees that no one can ever be wrong in what they say. This is an application of Wittgenstein's ideas about private language: thinking that each of us aims to believe and say what is 'truth-for-me' makes the game of believing and saying things so simple to win that there is no real point playing it.

Nor does it help thinking that each culture has a culturally specific truth that it aims for. If believing for Frenchmen is 'aiming at truth-for-Frenchmen' and believing for the Indian is 'aiming at truth-for-Indians' and these two types of truths are radically different, the Frenchman and Indian would not both be *believing*, but only in their different ways, then they would have completely different cognitive attitudes. Calling what they both do *believing* requires that they are doing something similar when they believe; something similar enough that is best made sense of by holding that they are both aiming to represent the same external reality to themselves as honestly and accurately as possible. When people from different cultures *believe* things, they are indeed engaged in the same cognitive activity – we would not be able to make sense of people from other cultures as thinking beings at all, if we did not see them as believers or if we could not see them as hitting (or missing) a truth that we might take ourselves also to hit or miss. Thus, for the Frenchman to make sense of the Indian as a thinking being, the Indian needs, in believing, to aim at the same cognitive target as the Frenchman (or at least at a cognitive target that the Frenchman can *understand*, which amounts to the same thing) and *vice versa*. The point is that, rather than being very different, cultures must at least be similar enough so that we can call the members of those cultures all *believers*. This requires enough of an overlap between what they all actually believe that we can no longer talk usefully of 'truth-for-a-culture'. (This is an application of what Davidson (1984b) holds about the possibility of people with radically different conceptual schemes.)

Alethic relativism cannot provide postmodernism with a viable account of truth. However, an account of truth is exactly what the postmodernism needs if it is going to be able to draw a distinction between speaking honestly, lying and talking bullshit. And this distinction must be drawn: presumably, the postmodernist is as interested in being able to say of himself, or of other academics, that (s)he advanced a certain position *honestly* and one can only say that one did this by saying 'I said what I did, genuinely believing that it is true'. The idea of honesty, in as well as outside of academia, requires mention of aiming at the truth in what one says. Cohen holds that, if bullshit involves 'expressly disparaging truth', postmodernism is 'bullshit risen to consciousness of itself' (2002: 333). That is nicely put, even though I have to disagree. What postmodernism asserts about truth – that there is none – is not bullshit; it is false and *gives rise to* much bullshit by undermining the very idea that anyone may speak honestly. Anyone can see this by taking what I shall call the 'bullshit' challenge to postmodernism: 'Explain how it is not a consequence of your view on truth that all that everyone – including you – ever says is bullshit, reducing your position to absurdity. If you are happy to believe that everyone bullshits all the time and has always

done so, explain further how there may exist what we call communication or how we may say that others genuinely believe something definite. Take as long as you like, but be very clear.'

### **Bibliography**

- Baggini, J., 2005. 'On Bullshit: A Review'. *New Statesman*, Vol. 134, November 28, 2005
- Black, M. 1983. 'The Prevalence of Humbug'. In: *The Presence of Humbug and Other Essays*. Retrieved from <http://www.ditext.com/black/humbug> on 18 September 2006.
- Cohen, G.A. 2002. 'Deeper into Bullshit'. In: Buss, S. and Overton, L. (eds.) *Contours of Agency*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Davidson, D. 1984a. 'Radical Interpretation'. In: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Davidson, D. 1984b. 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. In: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Frankfurt, H.G. 2002. 'Reply to G.A. Cohen'. In: Buss, S. and Overton, L. (eds.) *Contours of Agency*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Frankfurt, H.G., 2005. *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sokal, A. and Bricmont, J. 1998. *Intellectual Impostures*. London: Profile.