



# On Bullshit

By Harry G. Frankfurt

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**On Bullshit** By Harry G. Frankfurt

## A #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern. We have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, as Harry Frankfurt writes, "we have no theory."

Frankfurt, one of the world's most influential moral philosophers, attempts to build such a theory here. With his characteristic combination of philosophical acuity, psychological insight, and wry humor, Frankfurt proceeds by exploring how bullshit and the related concept of humbug are distinct from lying. He argues that bullshitters misrepresent themselves to their audience not as liars do, that is, by deliberately making false claims about what is true. In fact, bullshit need not be untrue at all.

Rather, bullshitters seek to convey a certain impression of themselves without being concerned about whether anything at all is true. They quietly change the rules governing their end of the conversation so that claims about truth and falsity are irrelevant. Frankfurt concludes that although bullshit can take many innocent forms, excessive indulgence in it can eventually undermine the practitioner's capacity to tell the truth in a way that lying does not. Liars at least acknowledge that it matters what is true. By virtue of this, Frankfurt writes, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

"One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit," Harry G. Frankfurt writes, in what must surely be the most eyebrow-raising opener in modern philosophical prose. "Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted." This compact little book, as pungent as the phenomenon it explores, attempts to articulate a theory of this contemporary scourge--what it is, what it does, and why there's so much of it. The result is entertaining and enlightening in almost equal measure. It can't be denied; part of the book's charm is the puerile pleasure of reading classic academic discourse punctuated at regular intervals by the word "bullshit." More pertinent is Frankfurt's focus on intentions--the *practice* of bullshit, rather than its end result. Bullshitting, as he notes, is not exactly lying, and bullshit remains bullshit whether it's true or false. The difference lies in the bullshitter's complete disregard for whether what he's saying corresponds to facts in the physical world: he "does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are."

This may sound all too familiar to those of us who still live in the "reality-based community" and must deal with a world convulsed by those who do not. But Frankfurt leaves such political implications to his readers. Instead, he points to one source of bullshit's unprecedented expansion in recent years, the postmodern skepticism of objective truth in favor of sincerity, or as he defines it, staying true to subjective experience. But what makes us think that anything in our nature is more stable or inherent than what lies outside it? Thus, Frankfurt concludes, with an observation as tiny and perfect as the rest of this exquisite book, "sincerity itself is bullshit." --*Mary Park*

#### Review

**A #1 New York Times Bestseller**

**Winner of the 2005 Bestseller Award in Philosophy, *The Book Standard***

"[Frankfurt] tries, with the help of Wittgenstein, Pound, St. Augustine and the spy novelist Eric Ambler, among others, to ask some of the preliminary questions--to define the nature of a thing recognized by all but understood by none. . . . What is bullshit, after all? Mr. Frankfurt points out it is neither fish nor fowl. Those who produce it certainly aren't honest, but neither are they liars, given that the liar and the honest man are linked in their common, if not identical, regard for the truth."--**Peter Edidin, New York Times**

"The scholar who answers the question, 'What is bullshit?' bids boldly to define the spirit of the present age. . . . Frankfurt's conclusion . . . is that bullshit is defined not so much by the end product as by the process by which it is created. Eureka! Frankfurt's definition is one of those not-at-all-obvious insights that become blindingly obvious the moment they are expressed."--**Timothy Noah, Slate**

"Immediately, I must say: read it. Beautifully written, lucid, ironic and profound, it is a model of what philosophy can and should do. It is a small and highly provocative masterpiece, and I really don't think I am bullshitting you here."--**Bryan Appleyard, The Sunday Times (London)**

"This is what the world has long needed. . . . Bullshit is now such a dominant feature of our culture that most of us are confident we can recognize and rebuff it. But Frankfurt shows the reader just how insidious (and destructive) it can be. . . . This book will change your life."--**Leopold Froehlich, Playboy**

"Frankfurt's book should be required reading for anyone whose speech or writing are intended for public consumption. Despite his subject, he is definitely not full of it."--**Kevin Wood, *The Daily Yomiuri***

"*On Bullshit* offers a tightly focused, telling critique of a political and cultural climate that seems positively humid with mendacity, obfuscation, evasion and illusion."--**Steven Winn, *San Francisco Chronicle***

"There is an interesting problem sketched at the end of the book, wherein sincerity is described as an ideal for those who do not believe that there is any (objective) truth, thus departing from the ideal correctness. . . . Needless to say, there are numerous problems which may be expanded, looked into and analyzed concerning bullshit. And I dare say that Frankfurt's little book is a nice starting point."--**Petter A. Naessan, *Philosophy Now***

"[*On Bullshit's*] calm, clearheaded deconstruction of everyday deceit is without parallel."--**Gordon Phinn, *Books in Canada***

"With its relevance to contemporary issues and culture, *On Bullshit* is well worth the read. . . . The analysis is strict and philosophical with the clear intention of seeking the truth."--**Karen Boore, *The Michigan Review***

"Harry Frankfurt, a Princeton philosophy professor, presents a scholarly and formal essay on inflated truth, purposeful obfuscation, and pretentious duplicity. . . . I'm sure he had a blast writing it, and the droll prose is a tasty treat."--**Richard Pachter, *The Boston Globe***

"Professor Frankfurt concludes that bullshit is a process rather than an end product. . . . If you are fed up with hype, spin and bullshit this book will provide insight - and therapy."--**Australian Doctor**

"Terrific. . . . Has anything truer ever been written?"--**William Watson, *Montreal Gazette***

"If you want to read a succinct, stylish piece of argument that will make you think far beyond the points it makes, you could do no better than invest ten dollars on Professor Frankfurt's handsomely bound essay."--**Christopher Jary, *British Army Review***

#### From the Inside Flap

"A gem of psychological insight, social commentary, philosophical analysis, and good humor. This is the work of an extraordinarily acute, attentive, and versatile philosopher who has succeeded in addressing an audience comprised of both other philosophers and the general public on a topic of considerable human interest in a characteristically wry and engaging way. It is one of the most enjoyable and humanly illuminating short pieces of philosophy produced in the past fifty years."--Raymond Geuss, University of Cambridge

"The most audacious of the ancient alchemists desired to transmute lead into gold. They never succeeded. Who would have known that they should have started not with a base metal, but with bullshit? Harry Frankfurt offers a philosophical analysis of bullshit that is golden. The prose by turns employs irony, broad humor, and tongue-in-cheek high seriousness while at the same time manages to have a rigorous logical coherence that is always impressive. One leaves the essay not merely thinking it was a delight. One leaves it realizing that one has engaged the accomplishment of a great analyst and thinker."--William Chester Jordan, Professor of History, Princeton University

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#### **David Chambers:**

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#### **Daniel Downey:**

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