



**HAL**  
open science

# POST TRUTH IS AN ASSERTION CRISIS

Pascal Engel

► **To cite this version:**

Pascal Engel. POST TRUTH IS AN ASSERTION CRISIS. *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 2021, Post truth, 297 (3), pp.27-41. hal-03923272

**HAL Id: hal-03923272**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03923272>**

Submitted on 4 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## POST TRUTH IS AN ASSERTION CRISIS

Pascal Engel, EHESS

Pascal.engel@ehess.fr

*Penultimate draft*

*Revue internationale de philosophie, 2021/3 (No 297) , p. 27-41*

*Summary: the hypothesis put forward in this essay is that bullshitting is in large part, perhaps at the core, of what we call post-truth. Bullshitting is essentially the attitude of ignoring the norms of assertion. The consequences of the widespread character of this attitude can explain why contempt for truth and knowledge are so widespread in our societies, even though they are supposed to be “knowledge societies”*

*Résumé : On essaie ici de défendre l'idée que la production de foutaise est responsable en grande partie, et peut être centrale pour ce que nous appelons la post-vérité. La production de foutaise est basée sur l'attitude qui consiste à ignorer les normes de l'assertion. Les conséquences de l'extension de cette attitude peuvent expliquer le défiance et le mépris pour la vérité et a connaissance qui envahissent nos sociétés, quand bien même on les appelle des « sociétés de connaissance.*

Key words

Truth, Post-truth, bullshit, assertion, indifference to truth, vice epistemology,

### *1. Post truth as an assertion crisis*

The idea that we now live in a post-truth world is misleading and fallacious. It is misleading because “post-truth” is more the name of a syndrome rather than of a symptom. It covers a variety of phenomena - fake news, tribalism and informational bubbles, the decline of traditional media, distrust for facts, conspiracy theories, skepticism about experts, post-modernism, relativism, fear

of knowledge - which have something in common, namely information pollution and a loss of the sense of the notion of objective truth, although it is unclear how these phenomena are related. The notion of post-truth is fallacious if it is supposed to mean that truth no longer exists, that our ordinary concept of truth is in jeopardy and that we have become convinced that truth is but a fiction invented by those in power in order to maintain their influence. For the fact – if it is a fact – that a number, or even a majority of people, do not “believe in truth” (the thing, and its value) or that large groups of people manipulate information in no way entails that truth is dead and that it has lost its value<sup>1</sup>. Not even the skepticism expressed by those who pretend that truth does not exist any more and that we have come to an age of complete relativism can establish that the so-called post-truth era is the one we inhabit. Compare: a number of people might realize that kitsch art is now all over the place, and they might argue that beauty is not any more a value or that there is only fake beauty, but this would not entail that a number of works of art do not instantiate the property of being beautiful. Whatever can be our attitudes of distrust or indifference towards truth, the humdrum notion of truth is still with us. Saying that truth is an objective property of which it is impossible to get rid of does not betray any kind of Platonism: it is just a simple fact. Even in post truth world, our concept of truth would still be in order: it would still be the case that “ $p$  is true if and only if  $p$ .” When Rudy Giuliani told us that “truth is not truth” or when Kellyanne Conway said that there are “alternative facts”, they were just confused.

The post-truth problem is not a problem about the existence of truth or about the loss of it – but a problem about our *attitudes* towards it. It is not even a problem about the value of truth, such as the one which Plato’s *Meno* formulates: is there more value in knowing something than in having true beliefs about it? <sup>2</sup> It is, as Harry Frankfurt (1986) has forcefully argued, a problem about the now widespread attitude of indifference and contempt towards truth. It is not a problem about the objective nature of truth, but a problem about our subjective stance towards it: our concern, interest in, and respect for truth. By “subjective” I do not mean “individual”, for many kinds of individuals (possibly those who are in the grip of the various biases and crazy beliefs that the use of social media reveals today) may manifest this stance, but a form of collective illness which I propose to diagnose as a *crisis of assertion*.

---

<sup>1</sup> McIntyre 2018, Haack 1993 ( see also her 2019) calls this “the passes for” fallacy. Kakutani 2018 ‘s title’s suggests it. But she argues that the fact that truth is endangered does not mean that it is dead.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Kvanvig 2002, Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2016

The problem with post-truth is that we do not know any more what it is to assert a proposition or a thought. We are encouraged to suspend judgment and to withdraw responsibility for our assertions. This in the first place due to the way information is transmitted and calibrated. It is full of bluff and pseudo-assertions.

Here are just a few examples to indicate what I have in mind when I talk of a crisis of assertion.

- (i) When one asserts something, one is usually prepared to retract one's assertion, when someone proves that it is false. But a number of politicians, officials or spokesmen of various institutions, when they are proved wrong, do not withdraw their initial statement. They maintain it, without blinking an eye.
- (ii) A few years ago many universities in the US, and shortly later in Europe, have announced that the MOOCS (*massive online open courses*) would be a huge "revolution in education" which would create a "world virtual campus". But the miracle did not happen. The MOOCS have not revolutionized the university. Announcements are made on extremely slight or misleading bases. No wonder that in the end nobody believes them.
- (iii) The social media, in particular *facebook*, work on the basis of groups of "friends" who "like" some posts. But what is it to "like" a post? It is not to approve it, and when one likes one is not obliged to give a reason. Is "liking" an assertion? Or the mere expression of an emotion? Are those who like people who approve? No. they might just later dislike.
- (iv) Many headlines about scientific innovations are announced: we are told that artificial intelligence will solve such and such problems, but when we read the paper it is said that *maybe*, *possibly*, *some day*, *perhaps not*, it will do so.
- (v) In many talk shows and conversations pieces in the media, there is a lot of talking, but nothing is said or argued.<sup>3</sup>

There is indeed a close connection between truth and assertion: to say that a proposition is true is to say that one can assert it, and to assert a proposition is to say that it is true, and to represent oneself as believing or knowing that it is true.

---

<sup>3</sup> It may be mostly due to my French experience, but I would not be surprised that the same could be said of other countries. In France in particular many so-called "intellectual debates" on TV are neither intellectual nor debates.

Truth is not reducible to assertion: it is not the case that a proposition is true because it is assertible. But one could not understand what truth is unless one could think of truth as a possible object of assertion. What we call “post-truth” is an attitude, or a set of attitudes which result in a loosening, and actually a threatening, of this conceptual tie.

A crisis of assertion is not the same thing as a crisis of trust or of sincerity, although it can coexist with such a crisis. The widespread practice of lying, in a given field (politics, journalism, diplomacy, spying) soon produces distrust in the testimony of those who are supposed to have a certain amount of authority in the transmission of information and in putting forward certain facts. These people are not believed any more. The phenomenon is well known and has been pervasive within dictatorships, such as fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Russia. These illustrate typically a practice of lying not only on the part of government and public officials but within the society as a whole, as described paradigmatically in Orwell’s *1984* and by Viktor Klemperer’s *LTI*<sup>4</sup>. In such a situation, not only the members of the party lie, but also the people, who pretend to believe their lies, for fear of showing their dissent: everyone lies and knows that the others lie. The practice of bullshit is different. As described by Frankfurt, a bullshitter is not a liar. Liars care for truth and for what they assert. They need the rules of assertion and the normal attitudes of speakers and hearers: they need to present themselves as believing what they say and asserting things which are true, and they need their audiences to believe that what they say is true. Bullshitters, on the contrary, do not care for truth, and most often make explicit that they are not concerned by the truth of what they say<sup>5</sup>. And this lack of concern for truth is manifest in a lack of concern for judgment and assertion. So my hypothesis is that what is called “post-truth” is essentially the practice of bullshitting and that this practice is based on a specific attitude, both individual and collective, of distrust and contempt for making assertions. It is all the more problematic that this practice occurs within what is supposed to be a democratic world. There is no room for bullshit in dictatorships.

---

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Klemperer, *LTI, The language of the third Reich*, Althone Press, London, 2000, C.S. Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, Knopf, 1953

<sup>5</sup> The claim that lying and bullshitting are exclusive has been contested. Stokke and Fallis (2017) and Stokke 2018 have argued that one can bullshit while caring for truth. Bullshitting is a certain form of deceptive attitude, and there are a number of borderline cases of lying. But this does not, in my view, threaten Frankfurt’s basic point that the attitude of bullshitting is not the same as lying.

## 2. *Bullshit violates the norm of assertion*

The official definition of bullshit in Frankfurt's initial characterization is that someone who bullshits is indifferent and unconcerned about the truth of what he asserts, and about truth in general. This seems to locate bullshitting in an attitude towards truth, or a specific kind of intent – not caring about it. But, as Cohen (2012) has claimed this covers only one side of the coin: one must not simply attend to the state of mind or attitude of the producer of bullshit, but also to the product, bullshit itself. The problem is that, understood in his second way, the phenomenon is very widespread and hard to characterize. Cohen claims that bullshit statements are those which are so unclear that the contrary could well be asserted. The problem, with Cohen's proposal to define bullshit as a certain kind of unclarity is that the standards of clarity and obscurity are hard to assess. One may call bullshit all kinds of productions, from fake news and political humbug to nonsensical claims made by preachers, charlatans, gurus and abstruse statement of post-modern thinkers. If we want to diagnose a recent phenomenon, and relate it to what has been called post-truth, it will not help, since the production of nonsense is an age old practice. Moreover, a number of productions of bullshit are made by people who actually care for truth, but who, for all kinds of reasons, fail to produce any significant truths, or produce falsehoods. For instance people who produce or accept pseudo-science do apparently care for truth although they fail to achieve any knowledge. Even people with a scientific turn of mind, who care for truth and evidence might produce bullshit in the form of what Jon Elster (2010) has called "hard obscurantism": their over confidence in mathematical models gives them the illusion of understanding but they things more obscure. To define bullshit as any kind of absurd, vague, misleading or nonsensical talk or writing does not help. So Frankfurt's definition of bullshit as a certain kind of attitude, on the part of the speaker and not only of its production, is more promising. But how to characterize it?

My proposal, which is inspired by Olav Gjelsvik's (2017) recent analysis, is that bullshit is not only the attitude of being unconcerned by truth but also of being unconcerned by assertion, and ultimately by knowledge. Each of the terms of this definition counts. First bullshitting is manifested in a certain practice – or rather of malpractice- of assertion. Asserting is, on most analyses, a speech act, whereby a speaker presents himself as uttering something true, as believing that it is true, and as intending to convey to his audience that he has this belief. There

is a debate, within the philosophy of language, over whether there are norms of assertion, or possibly a norm of assertion. Some argue that there are no such norms: people just *say* certain things, in various contexts, and with various intentions, but here is no unique norm, or set of norms, regulating these practices. But if one takes this line, any kind of affirmative utterance, including ironical or metaphorical ones, count as an assertion: one must be able to differentiate genuine assertions from pseudo-assertions or non-assertions. For instance one must be able to distinguish “selfless” assertions where the agent does not believe what he says from serious ones in which the speaker does believe what he says (Lackey 2007). The usual view is that the difference between genuine assertion and pseudo-assertion consists in the fact is that truth is the norm of assertion: one must assert only what is true. The norm is violated simply when Grice’s maxim of quality is violated: do not say what you believe to be false<sup>6</sup>. This has the advantage of explaining how liars can exploit this norm by presenting themselves as asserting something while believing the contrary and intending to induce their audience into believing what they say. It also explains easily the violation of the norm by those who speak ironically, or metaphorically. But the view that truth is the norm of assertion does not fully account for what we do when we assert a given proposition. In asserting we do not merely say that the proposition is true. We also say that we are in a certain favorable *epistemic position* to assert it. There are debates about how to formulate exactly the norm, and debates whether this epistemic position is a high degree of rational belief or a stronger one, namely knowledge. Here I shall assume that the epistemic position which is required is knowledge in the sense of a certain kind of warrant for what one asserts.<sup>7</sup> This knowledge norm actually entails that the truth norm and connects readily with the kind of attitude towards truth which the bullshitter exemplifies: given that knowledge is factive, *i.e.* entails the truth of what one knows, being unconcerned with knowledge entails being unconcerned with truth.

Some who bullshit – for instance Frankfurt’s Fourth of July orator who “goes bombastically” on “our great and blessed country whose founding fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind” -- is someone who pretends to make assertions, but asserts nothing at all.<sup>8</sup> As Frankfurt says

---

<sup>6</sup> Grice 1975, in Grice 1989

<sup>7</sup> This is Williamson’s 2000 view. For a review, see Engel 2008

<sup>8</sup> An essential element in bullshit is exaggeration, hyperbole, bragging and boasting. Rather than always quoting characters such as Trump or Barnum, one should rather take as a model of bullshit the song of the Major general

illuminatingly, he “fakes” things. He masquerades assertion but makes no assertion at all. Here Cohen is closer to the target, when he says that the bullshitter is so unclear that he could have asserted the contrary. This is part of what the crisis of assertion consists in: when one asserts that  $p$ , one commits oneself to  $p$ , and rejects *not p*. If one asserts  $p$  while being prepared to assert the contrary one does not assert.<sup>9</sup> The bullshitter systematically violates the knowledge norm of assertion. It is at this point that the idea of a crisis of assertion relates to a claim which has often been made about post-truth : post-truth involves a crisis of *deference*.<sup>10</sup> As David Lewis (1975) has argued a long time ago, communication is based on a general convention of truthfulness and trust: we trust other people to be telling the truth most of the time, we believe ourselves to be telling the truth most of the time, and we believe that other people share such trust and beliefs. But our contemporary system of communication and sharing of information has undergone drastic changes with the internet and social media. There are no gatekeepers: everyone can speak. There is no accountability: the contributions are anonymous. The messages, in particular on twitter, are so short that there is no room for giving reasons or justifications, and no need to give them. People do not feel responsible for what they say or for their messages. This lack of justification goes with a distrust for experts: why should we need experts if there is no need to justify one’s assertions? The only reasons that we accept for our assertions is that they are *our own*. In fact the social media of today exemplify the definition of truth favored by Rorty: what we are prepared to defend against all new comers.

Indeed these systematic failures of the system of assertion in communication are nothing new. They have been with us for a long time in the domains of advertising, of marketing, in political speech, in diplomacy and in journalism, where bullshitting has been more or less the rule. Diplomats systematically avoid making statements, because they do not want things to be said in the open. It now also pervades academic writing and academic projects. Think for instance of the rhetoric of grant submission: the rule of the game in such circumstances is that one depicts the achievements that one expects from a project in excessively favorable light, without taking responsibility for what one says. Many projects

---

in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *The pirates of Penzance* (“I am the very model of a modern Major-General./ I’ve information vegetable, animal, and mineral.”)

<sup>9 9</sup> Sydney Morgenbesser has famously said of George Santayana: “he asserted  $p$  and *not p*, and then proceeded to draw *all the consequences*. “The same could be said of the kind of nonsense produced by post-modernist authors

<sup>10</sup> See Marconi 2019



for grants, for instance, recommend themselves for their “interdisciplinarity”, an aim which, as anyone doing serious academic work, knows to be out of reach. Very often the best way to denounce bullshitting in a given domain is by devising a hoax which reveals, like a litmus test, the grotesque character of a certain kind of speech or writing<sup>11</sup>. The social networks have elevated these failures of the communication system to an unprecedented level. Another good example of the breakdown of assertion is the practice, on twitter, of the “retweet”: a tweeted message is received about a certain piece of information, say about some scandalous behaviour on the part of a politician, and one retweets it. In so doing, one transfers the message, without taking responsibility for it: one has just reproduced the claim and bracketed one’s assent. If one had produced a “like” on a given statement, this would have been a way (although still an ambiguous one) of approving it. By retweeting one only attracts the attention of one’s friends and virtual public to a certain fact. There is no commitment, no responsibility taken, no assertion made. This is indeed not very different from insinuating without telling, and from the traditional practice of gossiping which gives birth to rumors, but it is nevertheless significant because it reveals how the practice of assertion systematically fails in such cases. What the internet and social media have brought us are not these mechanisms of suspension of assertion, but their massive character, which is in large part the cause of the crisis of deference: because “knowledge” is so cheap and so accessible, internet users have the illusion that it comes for free, and that assertions are also for free. There is no difference between asserting and saying. It is interesting that when a bullshitter encounters criticisms for what he affirms, he cancels immediately his commitment : “I was just talking”.

To describe these practices of bullshitting and of assertion failure in terms of their effects on our institutions devoted to the production of knowledge is to adopt what Cohen calls the producer perspective on bullshit. It has the obvious advantage of relating the phenomenon of bullshitting to another phenomenon associated to the post-truth syndrome: the massive production of fake news. If bullshitting becomes pervasive in a society, to the point that people lose the normal rules of assertion and do not feel committed to the information that they convey, it becomes much easier, for those who devise fake news, to spread them and make them viral. But, as I suggested above, this is only one part of the story,

---

<sup>11</sup> Besides the notorious Sokal hoax which denounces a certain kind of academic bullshitting, my favorite example is H.L. Mencken ‘s hoax , “A neglected anniversary” where he announced, tongue in cheek, that the bath tub was invented in Cincinatti (in *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY 1949).

for bullshit is not simply a certain kind of production, but also a certain kind of attitude or stance. Frankfurt characterizes it as the attitude of “not caring for truth” or of “being unconcerned by truth” or “indifferent to truth”. But what kind of attitude is this? And what is it to be indifferent to truth?

### 3. *A vice epistemological framework*

One can have different kinds of attitudes towards truth: one can look for it, inquire about it, ignore it, value it, disvalue it, respect it, worship it, neglect it, hide it, etc. These are all attitudes towards truth as a goal, or as a means to a certain end (for instance it maybe sometimes better to willfully ignore certain truths). But there is a more basic attitude than these, which is simply belief. In order to be able to consider truth as a goal or as a value, one must in the first place be able to understand what Bernard Williams (2002) calls the “basic triangle” on which all human communication rests: belief, truth, and assertion. Truths are the potential objects of beliefs, and we express our beliefs through assertion. Belief is an attitude which is correct if and only if its content is true. Assertion is a speech act which is correct if and only if it is true – and if what I said above is right –if it is the object of a potential knowledge. The bullshitter is someone who *seems* to respect these correctness conditions - otherwise he would not be able to pretend to make assertions - but instead willfully ignores them. He is in a way insensitive to the proper reasons of belief and assertion. The reasons to believe and to assert something are *epistemic reasons*, which relate to truth and to evidence. Most of the time, he asserts something for reasons which are other than epistemic. For instance he has practical reasons to assert (his assertion will please or impress his audience). But he asserts for the wrong kind of reasons. His attitude is not different from the attitude of someone who says something for strategic reasons but does not believe it (for instance who compliments his boss’s tie, when he finds it ugly, in the hope that he will get a promotion).<sup>12</sup> Again, he is not a liar, but a fake. He is, as Frankfurt says *phony*.

The bullshitter is someone who does not play the rules of the game of assertion. But there are many ways in which this can be done, and many ways in which one can be indifferent to truth. As Stokke (2018: 141) and others have

---

<sup>12</sup> My notion of the right and wrong kind of reason is modelled here after the discussion of these issues in meta-ethics, and I assume, contrary to most Humeans that there are indeed right kinds of reasons for belief and for assertion. See e.g Parfit 2011, vol. 1 appendix

remarked, one can bullshit while actually attending to the truth of what one says. For instance an ad for a toothpaste might say: “Used by dentists”, and this may be true, and the author of the ad may care about its truth, say because he is concerned by the law which prohibits false advertising. But the ad also has the implicature that the tooth paste is good, since it is used by dentists, something the advertiser does not care about whether it is true. Bullshitting in advertising is familiar. It is familiar too in politics, as in the practice, illustrated by Donald Trump and his associates at the beginning of his mandate, of bald-faced lies: when Trump’s spokesman Sean Spicer claimed that the crowd at Trump’s inauguration was bigger than the crowd at Obama’s inauguration, he knew he was lying, and knew that people knew he was lying, but he did not care, for it was more important for the administration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the US to issue a bullshit claim which would impress his voters than to accept the truth. This episode shows that one can at the same time lie and bullshit. This is what happens when one bluffs: the important thing is not what one says, but effect that one produces. There is a certain character, in American culture, the *confidence man*, made famous par Melville’s novel, who tries to catch our confidence (in general to abuse your trust)<sup>13</sup>. He relies on sympathy, on emotion, not on honest assertions. Other cases of bullshitting are less easy to detect because they involve complex contents, such as the kind of statements made by some post-modernist authors. Take for instance the following description of Julia Kristeva’s achievements as a literary critic:

“Kristeva recognizes that there is a carnivalesque aspect to the novel, by which she means that it is not reducible to the law of contradiction. Its logic, or principle of operation, is not that of the “either/or” of non-contradiction, but of the “both/and” – of “one *and* the other”, thus defying contradiction as traditionally understood. In short, its “logic” is equivalent to “ambivalence”: for example, Dostoyevsky’s novels, as “dialogical” (to use Bakhtin’s term favoured by Kristeva), contain multiple points of view, some of which are clearly contradictory; it is thus neither one thing nor the other, but can be both simultaneously, something that implies that it cannot be explained by an either/or logic”<sup>14</sup>

This is bullshitting because it makes no sense to say that because different points of view coexist in a novel the law of non-contradiction (which the author

---

<sup>13</sup> Melville, *The Confidence man, his masquerade* (1857)

<sup>14</sup> John Lechte, « Julia Kristeva and thought in revolt », *Times literary supplement*, Footnotes to Plato <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/julia-kristeva-thought-revolt/>

conflates with the principle of the excluded middle) is under threat. Here the lack of interest for truth comes from the fact that the author does not even try to understand what Kristeva's claim could possibly mean.

How can we sort out the different forms of bullshitting and of indifference to truth ? The task seems elusive, because there are so many ways of being indifferent to truth for various purposes that the notion becomes more or less trivial. The bullshitter's indifference is not simply the neglect or ignorance of truth for the sake of a certain practical aim, such as when one buys a house one ignores certain facts about its neighbourhood because one finds these facts less important than the quality of the house itself. It is a certain kind of deviancy not only in communication but also in the epistemic realm in general. Here it seems to me that we can use the framework of virtue epistemology, as an account of intellectual virtues, and of what is now called vice epistemology, as an account of intellectual vices.<sup>15</sup> Prominent Intellectual virtues, in this Aristotelian framework, are wisdom, open mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual honesty, studiosity. Major intellectual vices are folly, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, intellectual laziness, intellectual dishonesty, idle curiosity. The lists may vary. But all these virtues and vices involve a certain set of attitudes and dispositions related to truth and to inquiry. They are not, however, all forms of indifference to truth. Someone who is narrow-minded may be someone who cares for truth, but does not care for truth in the proper way, by being open to contrary opinions. Someone who is intellectually dishonest (for instance by not giving proper due to others' contributions), or someone who is arrogant may care a lot for truth but is too confident in his own contribution. Other vices, such as idle curiosity, and intellectual laziness, are more easily described as forms of intellectual negligence and as indifference to truth. Someone who is idly curious, that is who attends to anything whatsoever, without selecting the proper objects of his attention and with no aim, is closer to the attitude of the bullshitter. Indeed a lot of the ads and "news" that one finds on the internet are devised especially to attract an attention which is by definition floating to idle things. The search engines which track the record of your navigation on the web are there to prompt your curiosity by multiplying the occasions to distract your attention. A number of studies have shown that internet addicts have an attention deficit. Intellectual laziness, as the attitude of not caring for truth and evidence, seems even closer to the attitude of

---

<sup>15</sup> For this tradition, see in particular Zagzebski 1996, Baehr 2011, Cassam 2018, Engel 2019

bullshitting : it involves, as Cassam (2018) argues, a form of “epistemic insouciance”, a refusal , on a given subject, to engage in serious inquiry.

But at this point a problem arises: are bullshitting, and the family of attitudes which result in forms of indifference towards truth and knowledge conscious and voluntary attitudes, or are they stances and postures which are involuntary and the product of a certain kind of psychological make up that people are not responsible for? Some cases which I have mentioned suggest the second answer: politicians or advertisers who willfully ignore evidence and truth adopt bullshitting as a stance, and possibly they follow a certain strategy. This is less clear with post-modernist bullshitting: on the one hand those asserting a statement which they do not understand and which they refuse to clarify is a product of a certain choice – the choice to blindfold oneself - but on the other hand it may be that they sincerely believe that what they say is true and understandable. The other cases, those which are induced by the use of social media or of the internet, seem to fall squarely on the involuntary side. Those who devise search engines, social media and their protocols actually intend to force certain choices upon their users, unbeknownst to them. And the various psychological effects of the use of internet, such as attention deficits, are clearly unconscious in their users. They are on a par with the various biases and cognitive illusions which are so pervasive in our cyberworld: confirmation biases, such as the tendency to accept as true statements which reinforce one’s previous beliefs, or the “illusion of knowledge” which Sloman and Fernbach (2017) have studied. We actually may not be very interested in knowledge and truth because we have the illusion, through the internet, that knowledge is *out there* and that there is no need to search for it or to care for it.<sup>16</sup>

Here the choice of calling bullshitting an epistemic vice depends on the perspectives which I have already distinguished: if, on the one hand, we take the perspective of the consumer, or bullshit production, bullshitting is a vice in the consequentialist sense since it hinders our access to knowledge by removing the need to attend to our assertions and it “obstructs” the production of truth; if, on the other hand, we take the perspective of the attitude or the stance, bullshitting is a conscious attitude, which is voluntarily adopted by certain individuals in certain circumstances. These individuals not only are indifferent to truth and unconcerned by knowledge, but they chose to do so. This is not the place to study all these varieties of attitudes of disregard of truth, but I suspect

---

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of how our “google knowledge” is pseudo-knowledge, see Lynch 2017

that they fall on a scale: at the lower level are biases are other subintentional or unconscious processes which impede our evaluations, at a higher level are more or conscious attitudes that we take of ignoring the truth because we pursue a certain aim (for instance wishful thinking, in order to avoid painful experiences), and at an even higher level a conscious, reflective, and determined choice of not respecting the truth. Each of these levels can be called a form of bullshitting and a variety of this epistemic vice. Take, for instance, snobbery. The snob is someone who gives his assent (in taste, or in opinion) to people whom he believes to be in some sense “upper class” in a given domain. He gives his assent not because he has good reasons or wants to assert what is true, but because he wants to assert what he believes it is desirable to assert in relation to some social status. Or take the dandy: he has only scorn for truth, because he pursues only beauty. These are complex attitudes, with a high degree of reflectivity. Should one call them bullshitting? No, if one takes bullshitting to be only a certain kind of talk. But if one attends to the attitude, they are all variants of the disrespect and contempt for truth.<sup>17</sup>

#### *4. Conclusion: bullshit all over the place?*

I have tried to identify, within the variety of phenomena which have been said to belong to the post-truth syndrome, a common core, which I take to be the attitude of bullshitting as a form of disrespect for truth. To this, one may address two objections, which I do not have space to examine within the limits of this article.

The first one is: is it right to assume that truth and epistemic properties, such as rational belief and knowledge, are the yardstick through which we have to analyse all forms of speech productions and communication? My analysis presupposes that truth is a norm, or at least a good thing, which leads to deviant speech and attitudes when it is violated, as in bullshit. But a number of people, especially those inspired by evolutionary biology and psychology, might argue that truth is not the cornerstone of our communication and reasoning system. They might even argue that bullshitting is actually a good communicative strategy, which might produce a lot of benefits to those using it, and not an epistemic vice. I cannot here give an answer to this line of argument, but one

---

<sup>17</sup> I have studied these varieties of contempt for truth in Engel 2019 a

thing needs to be said.<sup>18</sup> I do not deny that bullshitting can produce a lot of benefits, and it may be part of the reason which the syndrome of post-truth puts it at the center of the stage. But it is certain that if disregarding truth were the proper strategy for survival of the human species post-truth would be an excellent adaptive ploy. I doubt that it is.

The second objection is that I may be guilty of overgeneralization: bullshitting speech and attitudes, in particular those that are exemplified in our cyber-practices, may be part of what the post-truth syndrome consist in, but the phenomena concerned are much wider. They pertain to the contemporary uses of public speech, to trust in institutions and the way we conceived democracy. This is undeniable. But they seem to me to be deeply related to the deficit of assertion of which bullshitting is attached. If one does not what it is to assert, argument and reason collapse too. Some may not feel sorry for it. But I do.

## REFERENCES

Cassam, Q 2018 *Vices of the mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Cohen, G. Cohen, G. A. (2002), ‘Deeper into Bullshit’, in S. Ross and L. Overton (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (MIT Press), 321–39.

Elster, J. 2011. ”Hard and Soft Obscurantism in the Humanities and Social Sciences”. *Diogenes*, 58(1–2)

Engel, P. 2008 , In what sense is knowledge the norm of assertion ?, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 77(1), 45–59

2019, « Foucault, politique de la vérité et politique de la foutaise », *Diogène* 260-1

2019 a *Les vices du savoir*, Marseille , Agone

2019 b « Peut il y a voir des raisons d’état ? », *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*

( engl translation)

---

<sup>18</sup> See the important remarks on this kind of view in McIntyre2018, ch. 2

Frankfurt, H. (1986) “On bullshit”, *Raritan* VI, repr. In *The Importance of what we are about*, Cambridge 1988, and in *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press 2005.

Gjelsvik O/ 2017 Bullshit production, in A. Stokke and E. Michelson, eds. *Lying : language; knowledge, ethics* , Oxford: Oxford University Press

Grice, H.P. 1975 “Logic and conversation” , repr. In *Studies in the ways of words*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1989

Haack , S. 2019 “Post-truth , are we there yet? *Theoria* , 85, 258–275

Haddock,A. Millar A.and Pritchard D. 2016 *The nature and value of knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University press

Kakutami, M. 2018 *The Death of Truth*, New York, Collins

Kvanvig , J. 2003 *The value of knowledge and the pursuit of understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lackey, J 2007 "Norms of Assertion." *Noûs* 41 (2007): 594-626.

Lewis, D. 1975 “Language and languages” In K. Gunderson, Ed., *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-35

Lynch , M. P. 2017 *The internet of us*, New York, Norton

Marconi , D. 2019 “Post truth as a crisis of deference” I Angela Condello, Tiziana Andina eds– 2019, *Post-Truth, Philosophy and Law*, pp.86-92

Mc Intyre, L. 2015 *Respect for truth*, London:Routledge

2018 *Post-truth* , MIT Press

Olsson, E. 2008 “Knowledge, Truth, and Bullshit: Reflections on Frankfurt “ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXII

Parfit, D. 2011 *On what matters*, vol. Oxford, Oxford University Press

Slooman , S. and Fernbach, P 2017 *The knowledge illusion*, New York Pan books , NY,

Stokke, A. and D. Fallis 2017. “Bullshitting, lying, and indifference toward truth. *Ergo* 4(10), 277–309.



Williams, B. 2002 *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton, Princeton University Press

Williamson , T. 2000 *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Zagzebski , L. 1996 *Virtues of the Mind* , Cambridge, Cambridge university Press