**Bullshit Advertising: What It Is, and Why It’s Wrong[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Abstract: The publication of Harry Frankfurt’s 1986 essay “On Bullshit,” and especially its republication as a book in 2005, have sparked a great deal of interest in the philosophical analysis of the concept of bullshit. The present essay seeks to contribute to the ever-widening discussion of the concept by applying it to the realm of advertising. First, it is argued that Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit is too narrow, and an alternative definition is defended that accommodates both Frankfurt’s truth-indifferent bullshit and what is here termed “culpably confused bullshit.” Second, it is explained why a great deal of advertising constitutes bullshit so defined. The essay concludes by making the case that bullshitting in general is clearly unethical on both Utilitarian and Kantian grounds.

[I]n America … if you don’t immediately kill errant bullshit, no matter how ridiculous, it can grow and thrive and eventually take over, like crabgrass or Cirque du Soleil.

—Bill Maher, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, HBO, July 31, 2009

# Introduction

The application of the concept *bullshit* to a whole host of phenomena has struck a chord with Americans in recent years. The cable television network Showtime is now into its eighth season of *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!*, a series in which the famous prestidigitators (attempt to) expose a wide range of sacrosanct beliefs as unwarranted. In 2005, a rather dry essay by Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt called “On Bullshit,” originally published in 1986,[[2]](#endnote-2) was repackaged as a small book of the same title and improbably rose to the No. 1 slot on the *New York Times* bestseller list for one week, spending a total of 27 weeks on the list.[[3]](#endnote-3) Later in 2005 appeared Laura Penny’s popular cultural critique *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit*.[[4]](#endnote-4) The anthology *Bullshit and Philosophy*, a collection of meditations on Frankfurt’s essay, was published in 2006.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the introductory essay, editors Gary Hardcastle and George Reisch dub the public interest in Frankfurt’s subject matter “bullshitmania.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The late George Carlin’s 2008 HBO comedy special, *It’s Bad for Ya*, featured the refrain “It’s bullshit, and it’s bad for ya.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

There’s a good reason the concept *bullshit* has acquired such resonance: our culture is steeped in morally objectionable bullshit, and there’s no better label that captures the objectionable features of these phenomena than the label ‘bullshit.’ A comprehensive analysis of bullshit would be a book-length endeavor (as Laura Penny’s treatise illustrates), ranging over a wide variety of cultural phenomena. The focus here (which is one of Penny’s foci, though her treatment is long on examples and short on philosophical analysis) is bullshit advertising.

This paper advances the argument that a great deal of advertising (though far from all advertising), even advertising that is perfectly legal, is bullshit and therefore unethical.[[8]](#endnote-8) Of course, ethical critiques of even legal advertising are nothing new. It is often argued that much advertising commits an ethical wrong against its target audience by manipulating or deceiving them, or undermining their autonomy or rationality. Defenders of advertising characteristically respond that the nature of autonomy or rationality has not been adequately delineated,[[9]](#endnote-9) or that only false advertising is manipulative in an objectionable way, or that when nonfalse[[10]](#endnote-10) advertising deceives, the deception is to be blamed on the irrationality of the consumer.[[11]](#endnote-11) Moral critiques of advertising that turn on such contentious concepts are bound to remain inconclusive as long as the concepts remain contentious.

Such traditional criticisms of advertising are not necessarily without merit. But an exploration of the case for regarding much advertising as bullshit is still worthwhile, for at least three reasons. First of all, it could prove rhetorically more effective than traditional criticisms. If much advertising is in fact unethical, then we have an ethical reason to block or reform it, and we should take the most efficient means to do so. This likely includes critiquing unethical advertising in the rhetorically most effective way possible. In the second place, even if the fact that advertising is bullshit is just one reason among many that it is unethical, it is still important to examine and understand that reason. A third reason to examine the case for seeing a great deal of advertising as bullshit is that this critique may not be coextensive with any of the more familiar objections; it may thus point us to certain instances of unethical advertising that wouldn’t fall in the crosshairs of more traditional criticisms.

But isn’t the concept of bullshit, like the concepts of autonomy, manipulation, and deception, itself irredeemably complex and contentious? Isn’t the only thing that can be said about bullshit what Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said about pornography: “I know it when I see it”? This paper makes the case, firstly, that more than this can be said, that in fact a satisfactory definition of ‘bullshit’ can be given; secondly, that a very significant proportion of advertising constitutes bullshitting; and, thirdly, that the immorality of bullshitting, once a satisfactory definition is in hand, is relatively uncontroversial.

# Frankfurt’s Conception of Bullshit

How *should* ‘bullshit’ be defined? The obligatory starting point for any philosophical discussion of the concept is now Harry Frankfurt’s groundbreaking analysis. Frankfurt makes a gallant effort to define ‘bullshit,’ even if, in the end, something crucial is missing from his definition. He spares himself a quixotic quest by recognizing at the outset that, as noted above, “the expression *bullshit* is often employed … simply as a generic term of abuse.”[[12]](#endnote-12) He acknowledges, moreover, that “the phenomenon [of bullshit] itself is so vast and amorphous that no crisp and perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean.”[[13]](#endnote-13) What, then, is Frankfurt’s objective in *On Bullshit*? “[T]o say something helpful, even though it is not likely to be decisive.”[[14]](#endnote-14) This is unduly modest. For Frankfurt aims to identify the “central characteristics of bullshit,”[[15]](#endnote-15) though just insofar as the term ‘bullshit’ has a certain univocal core meaning. His first approach at these central characteristics is by means of an anecdote involving Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The anecdote comes from Fania Pascal, an acquaintance of Wittgenstein’s in Cambridge, England, in the 1930s. Pascal relates:

I had my tonsils out and was in the Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself. Wittgenstein called. I croaked: “I feel just like a dog that has been run over.” He was disgusted: “You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Unsure whether Pascal’s account should be taken at face value, Frankfurt acknowledges how absurdly inappropriate a reaction of disgust would be on Wittgenstein’s part. Obviously Pascal was using the simile loosely, to get across in a humorous way that she was feeling wretched. Nevertheless, Frankfurt proposes that Wittgenstein’s disgust and admonition be taken seriously for the sake of argument, and asks what precisely it was about Pascal’s simile that provoked Wittgenstein’s ire.

His answer is that Wittgenstein

construes [Pascal] as engaged in an activity to which the distinction between what is true and what is false is crucial, and yet as taking no interest in whether what she says is true or false. It is in this sense that Pascal’s statement is unconnected to a concern with truth: she is not concerned with the truth-value of what she says. That is why she cannot be regarded as lying; for she does not presume that she knows the truth, and therefore she cannot be deliberately promulgating a proposition that she presumes to be false: Her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Frankfurt here draws a clear and useful boundary between bullshitting and lying. To be sure, the boundary is not always clear in everyday speech; many people use the designations ‘bullshitter’ and ‘bullshit’ where ‘liar’ and ‘lie’ would be equally apposite. But Frankfurt’s characterization captures the fact that there is also a species of bullshitting that is distinct from lying, and it is the nature of this species of bullshitting that is the focus of Frankfurt’s essay and the present essay. The present essay takes issue, however, with another feature of Frankfurt’s characterization: his contention that “indifference to how things really are” is the best way to characterize the *essence* of bullshit (again, in a sense of ‘bullshitting’ that is distinct from ‘lying’).

Despite this, Frankfurt is no doubt correct that, in many cases, the bullshitter is indeed unconcerned with the truth of his or her statement. Frankfurt provides the example of an ingratiating Fourth-of-July orator who exalts “our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Though Frankfurt cites this as an instance of *humbug* in his examination of Max Black’s analysis of this related concept, he clearly thinks it qualifies as bullshit too. What makes it bullshit in Frankfurt’s view is not that the orator believes his words to be false—this would make him a liar—but that he doesn’t *care* whether they are true or false, his purpose being merely to convey to his audience the impression that he is a patriot.

There are plenty of other instances—real-life instances—of bullshit that fit this description. Laura Penny’s book *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit* catalogs a number of them from the realms of advertising, public relations, financial markets, politics, pharmaceuticals, insurance, and the media.[[19]](#endnote-19) The title of Penny’s book furnishes one clear-cut example of Frankfurtian bullshit. The company that puts you on hold is not *lying* when a recording tells you “your call is important to us”—no one at the company is thinking, “let’s tell them we care even though we don’t give a damn.” Rather, the bullshit-generating factor appears to be that, in giving you the message “your call is important to us,” the company’s sole concern is the impression the message makes on you; the company is for all intents and purposes indifferent to the *truth* of the message. If your call were truly important to the company, it wouldn’t keep you waiting on hold for twenty minutes. Analogously, to borrow another example mentioned by Penny, the advertising executives behind McDonald’s “You deserve a break today” slogan couldn’t care less whether you really do deserve a break today, although they presumably don’t regard the slogan as false.[[20]](#endnote-20) The slogan is presumably bullshit because its creators presumably didn’t care about whether it was true. What they cared about is making consumers *believe* that they deserve a break today and that patronizing a McDonald’s restaurant is the best way to give themselves one.

# A Non-Frankfurtian Species of Bullshit

Any satisfactory account of the term ‘bullshit’ will accommodate its paradigmatic uses, and one paradigmatic use occurs in an academic context. Most teachers have encountered their fair share of examples of bullshit in the work of their students. Such work seems extremely confused, and the confusion is viewed as culpable insofar as the pejorative designation ‘bullshit’ fits. Students who produce genuine bullshit could have done better if only they had applied themselves more diligently; if we come to believe that a student’s extremely confused disquisition actually represents the best work she is capable of, we withdraw the pejorative descriptor ‘bullshit.’ Although student bullshit is an archetypical instance of the general phenomenon, it does not conform to Frankfurt’s definition. The student bullshitter wants a good grade, and she knows she cannot get it unless what she says is true or can reasonably be thought to be true. In writing her paper or exam, she does care about truth. Hence, the indifference to truth that Frankfurt claims is essential to bullshit is missing. Let us refer to this species of the phenomenon as ‘culpably confused bullshit.’

Now it may be said that such a student is not *genuinely* concerned with expressing truth, that her *real* concern is just to get a good grade—that she would be just as happy to spew falsehoods if this would produce the desired result. While this contention may be true, it has the effect of setting the bar for bullshit too low. There are many bullshit-free true statements whose truth is of merely instrumental concern. A scientist might publish research that he correctly believes to be sound but that has his own fame as a more final end than the truth. Game-show contestants strive to give true answers not because they value the truth as such, but because they want to win as much prize money as possible. In neither of these cases, however, would we say that the statements made are bullshit because they are valued only as a means. By analogy, we cannot say the bullshitting student’s statements count as bullshit because there is no concern for truth for its own sake. The properties constituting such statements as bullshit must lie elsewhere.

Nor does the student bullshit-artist constitute an isolated example of truth-concerned bullshitting. There are countless statements and views that qualify as bullshit even though the purveyors of them very much hope, and often genuinely believe, they are propounding truths. One prominent current example is advocacy of teaching “Intelligent Design” (ID) in public schools as an equally valid competitor to evolutionary theory. If you happen to be sympathetic to ID, consider instead the practice of astrology by those who sincerely believe in it. Or declarations that global warming is a hoax. Or claims that Barack Obama is not an American citizen. Or the characteristic affirmations of the Scientologist.

If it is correct that culpably confused bullshit is a species of bullshit that no satisfactory account of the phenomenon can dispense with, this is an important result in itself. But it would be compatible with a disjunctive account of bullshit, such as, roughly, ‘a statement is bullshit if and only if *either* it is produced with a lack of concern for truth *or* it is culpably confused. Now, it could in principle be that our use of the term ‘bullshit’ is fundamentally equivocal—even setting aside the use of the term to denote lying. If, however, a definition can be provided according to which both truth-indifferent bullshit and culpably confused bullshit qualify equally as bullshit on account of a more fundamental common feature, this definition will be all the more intellectually satisfying, just as a single, unifying scientific theory is more intellectually satisfying than two separate theories. But the present account will be more compelling if we first take a critical look at another dissent from Frankfurt’s conception.

# Lessons from Cohen’s Proposal

The contention that truth-indifferent, or insincere, bullshit is not the only variety of bullshit is not new. G. A. Cohen has criticized Frankfurt’s account on the grounds that there is a variety of bullshit that is not Frankfurtian bullshit but is “equally interesting, and academically more significant”:[[21]](#endnote-21) namely, statements that are “by nature *unclarifiable*.”[[22]](#endnote-22) As examples Cohen cites the writings of certain French Marxists who were the source of endless intellectual frustration to him in his twenties. The problem, Cohen eventually concluded, was that some of their statements could not in principle be made sense of because they lacked a determinate meaning. Surely such statements are bullshit, Cohen avers. Whether or not this is so, part of Frankfurt’s rejoinder to Cohen’s critique seems exactly on the mark:

I do not consider that phenomenon [of unclarifiable discourse] to be as important a threat to our culture as the species of bullshit with which I have been concerned. For one thing, while what goes on in the academic world may sometimes have considerable influence elsewhere, it very often does not. For another, it is difficult to suppose that an author is likely to do very drastic harm when no one can understand what he is talking about.[[23]](#endnote-23)

One key respect in which the present critique of Frankfurt’s account of bullshit differs from Cohen’s is that culpably confused bullshit arguably poses just as grave a threat to our culture—think again of the ID movement and denials that human activities are warming the planet—as truth-indifferent bullshit. Nevertheless, it is not obvious that bullshit as such must be culture-threatening. Even if Frankfurt is correct in regarding unclarifiable discourse as less insidious than truth-indifferent discourse, the former could still just as much count as *bullshit* as the latter.

As evidence for his proposal, Cohen cites the OED definition of ‘bullshit’:

**bullshit** n. & v. *coarse sl.*—*n.* **1** (Often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. **2** trivial or insincere talk or writing.—*v. intr.* (**-shitted, -shitting**) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** *n*.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Cohen notes that his sense of ‘bullshit’ corresponds to definition 1, whereas Frankfurt’s sense of ‘bullshit’ aligns with definition 2—insincerity rather than triviality being the operative descriptor.[[25]](#endnote-25) The two OED meanings of ‘bullshit’ point up a key flaw in Frankfurt’s analysis, Cohen contends. As he colorfully puts it, for Frankfurt, “the bull, conceptually speaking, wears the trousers”:[[26]](#endnote-26) bullshit is essentially connected to insincerity, which is conveyed by the ‘bull’ in ‘bullshit.’ But for Cohen’s unclarifiable bullshit, “the shit wears the trousers”:[[27]](#endnote-27) whether the producer of unclarifiable assertions is sincere or not—whether what he is saying is bull or not—is immaterial to the qualification of such assertions as bullshit. As Cohen sees it, unclarifiable assertions are bullshit because they are nonsense, and their being nonsense has nothing to do with the state of mind involved in their production.

Aside from the fact that Cohen’s unclarifiable bullshit does not represent anywhere near the threat to our culture that Frankfurt’s truth-indifferent, insincere bullshit does, there are grounds for questioning whether unclarifiable statements deserve to be deemed bullshit regardless of the intent of their originator. Consider the logically disconnected ravings of a lunatic, statements, let us suppose, that even an *omniscient* interpreter could not clarify, because they are not even in principle amenable to a correct clarification. Do they count as bullshit? By Cohen’s criterion, they seem to. They are essentially unclarifiable, and, in agreement with the first OED meaning of ‘bullshit,’ they are nonsense. Yet it would be semantically strained to remark to a companion, on walking by such a raving lunatic, “What he just said is bullshit.” What seems to be missing is something like the disrespectful attitude toward truth—an attitude that presupposes an ability to discern truth—that Frankfurt’s analysis fixes on. The case suggests a slight revision of Frankfurt’s characterization. In saying what he says, the lunatic may indeed lack a concern for the truth, but on account of his cognitive disability he is not capable of having a concern for the truth. He is *involuntarily*—or, more precisely, *non*voluntarily—indifferent to the truth. So what really makes Frankfurt’s bullshitter a bullshitter is not just lack of concern for truth; it is lack of concern for truth even though it is within the bullshitter’s cognitive wherewithal to have such a concern. This feature of bullshitting is incorporated into the definition of ‘bullshit’ put forward here.

If it is correct that whether nonsense counts as bullshit has something to do with the nonsense-producer’s attitude toward truth, then whether unclarifiable discourse from academics counts as bullshit depends on their intentions. Frankfurt makes a persuasive case that it does:

People who intend to say something meaningful, and who make conscientious efforts to do so, may nonetheless fail because of deep conceptual problems that do not reflect any reprehensible intellectual negligence or confusion on their part. The problems may not be due to them at all, but rather to the inadequacies of a system of thought that is currently standard and that is confidently assumed by everyone to be entirely reliable. These inadequacies may be hidden and unsuspected even by the best thinkers. Thus it may one day be discovered that statements accepted for generations by all responsible authorities actually involve obscurities or logical flaws that vitiate their intelligibility, that cannot be repaired, and that are therefore unclarifiable. It seems inappropriate to insist that those statements were always bullshit. Characterizing something as bullshit is naturally construed as seriously pejorative, and in the kind of case I have imagined, the opprobrium is not warranted.[[28]](#endnote-28)

So to the extent that the unclarifiable discourse of French Marxists does qualify as bullshit, it is because they are guilty, in Frankfurt’s words, of “reprehensible intellectual negligence.” It appears, therefore, that, *pace* Cohen, when it comes to bullshit the shit alone never wears the trousers.

# The Essence of Bullshit

In observing that unclarifiable discourse does not necessarily issue from “reprehensible intellectual negligence,” Frankfurt unwittingly has come close to identifying, in a shorthand way, the true essence of bullshit. The irony is that, in explaining why unclarifiable discourse does not necessarily warrant the appellation ‘bullshit,’ Frankfurt has inadvertently exposed the inadequacy of his own account. The virtue of identifying the essence of bullshit as the rotten communicative fruit of reprehensible intellectual negligence—or better, and less harshly, *culpable* intellectual negligence, since some bullshit falls short of being downright reprehensible—is the semantically explanatory power of such an identification: it accommodates both truth-indifferent bullshit and culpably confused bullshit. As alluded to above, just as one scientific theory supplants another when, *ceteris paribus*, it explains a certain set of empirical data more parsimoniously than the other theory, one definition—which can be viewed as a kind of linguistic theory of a single term—should supplant another when it accommodates a certain set of linguistic data more parsimoniously.

But the idea of bullshit as the communicative fruit of culpable intellectual negligence is still rather vague. The following definition provides greater clarity:

*A person is guilty of bullshitting when, and only when:*

1. *the person implicitly or explicitly asserts a proposition;*
2. *in the assertion of the proposition, or in the prior process of coming to accept the proposition, any impartial interest in what is true is subordinated to or supplanted by a competing interest;*
3. *there is no exculpatory reason for such subordination or supplantation; and*
4. *if the proposition is explicitly asserted, it is not believed to be false.*

Yet the elements of this definition still call for explanation and justification.

*Element (i): “the person implicitly or explicitly asserts a proposition.”* If the characteristic activity of the bullshitter is the assertion of bullshit, and if an assertion is the affirmation of a proposition, then bullshitting involves the assertion of a proposition. Sometimes the bullshit proposition is asserted explicitly, as in Frankfurt’s example of the insincerely patriotic politician. The bullshit propositions asserted by advertising, we will see, are often asserted only implicitly. ‘Proposition’ is meant to include both atomic propositions and sets of propositions such as may be combined in a theory. Typically, the assertion of a proposition takes place through the spoken or written word, but there are other possibilities as well. A wordless cartoon, for example, may assert a proposition (such as the proposition that a particular politician is a hypocrite). When a proposition is asserted implicitly, it is sometimes difficult to know what exactly it is. And this will make it more difficult than it otherwise would be to know whether the asserter is bullshitting.

*Element (ii): “in the assertion of the proposition, or in the prior process of coming to accept the proposition, any impartial interest in what is true is subordinated to or supplanted by a competing interest.”* It should be uncontroversial that the defining problem with the bullshitter has something to do with his relationship to truth. Frankfurt’s characterization of this problem, as suggested above, goes too far: the bullshitter need not be *indifferent* to truth. Rather, he lacks an appropriate respect for the truth, whether in asserting a proposition or in a preceding investigation into the proposition’s truth. Either way, he exhibits culpable intellectual negligence. It is intellectually negligent both to present a proposition as true when one is paying no heed to its truth or falsity and to accept a proposition as true under the influence of an epistemically impure interest, one that competes with an impartial search for facts. And the negligence is culpable insofar as it is appropriate to apply the pejorative appellation ‘bullshit.’

It may be wondered why the definition presented refers to a subordination of an interest in the truth to, or a supplanting of an interest in the truth by, a *competing* interest, rather than simply *any* distinct interest. This is to honor the intuition that the product of an endeavor in which an interest in truth figures as a necessary means is not bullshit merely because the ultimate interest behind the endeavor is something besides the truth. For example, the egotistical scientist who publishes his research in an effort to achieve fame has not necessarily published bullshit. Though fame is his ultimate interest, it need not competewith an interest in truth, and it will not have so competed if his research was conducted and published according to truth-respecting canons of scientific integrity and rigor. If only his ultimate or final goal mattered, then he *would* be a bullshitter, since his ultimate goal would be self-aggrandizement. But the fact that he instrumentally values genuine truth reveals a respect for it sufficient to exonerate him of the charge of bullshitting.

The qualification in Element (ii) regarding the “prior process of coming to accept the proposition” is necessary because, *pace* Frankfurt, the property of an instance of bullshit that qualifies it as such is not always found in the implicit or explicit assertion of a proposition. Sometimes the assertion itself involves no intellectual negligence whatsoever, but is given with a sincere desire to represent the facts as one sees them. This is probably true of many advocates of ID, for example. What is typically not true of them, however, is that they are more interested in adopting true views about Darwinian evolution than they are in holding on to what they perceive to be religiously orthodox views about human origins. To be sure, they *believe* that their views about Darwinian evolution are true, but they haven’t arrived at those views by an open-minded search for truth, an impartial following of the evidence wherever it might lead.

*Element (iii): “there is no exculpatory reason for such subordination or supplantation.”* Because of the pejorative connotations of the label ‘bullshit,’ the bullshitter must be guilty of some sort of wrong.[[29]](#endnote-29) The present proposal is that he is guilty of culpable intellectual negligence. This means there can be no exculpatory reason for the production of what, in the absence of such reason, counts as bullshit. If a raving lunatic exclaims that the end of the world is nigh, but is doing his level best, such as it is, to discover and propound the truth, he is not guilty of producing bullshit, since he is not a fit subject of criticism. His mental disability is an exculpatory reason. If, by contrast, a mentally unimpaired preacher proclaims the same message, he *is* guilty of bullshitting. He has no exculpatory excuse for subordinating any interest he might have in the truth to his irrational religious zeal, or whatever it is that motivates him.

There are other imaginable cases besides ones involving mental disability, in which an exculpatory reason for producing what would otherwise be bullshit is present. In August of 2006, two Fox News journalists were kidnapped by militants in Gaza. The men were released only after declaring in a video that they had converted to Islam, but the declaration was coerced at gunpoint.[[30]](#endnote-30) Now, given that the declaration was no doubt false and believed by the Fox News journalists to be false, this appears to be a lie rather than bullshit, albeit a morally excusable lie. But suppose the men had been coerced at gunpoint to state, “sura 23:80 is true,” and suppose they had no inkling that sura 23:80 says that Allah “is He who ordains life and death and He who controls the night and the day.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Clearly, in making this statement the men would be subordinating any interest in the truth to an interest in survival; hence according to Elements (i) and (ii) of the above definition of ‘bullshit’ the statement would be bullshit. Just as clearly, however, the statement would not be bullshit in the final analysis. Perhaps this is because the moral value of preserving their lives outweighed the moral disvalue of saying something they didn’t believe to be true (or false). Or perhaps this is the sort of case about which Aristotle remarked, “the action, though not commended, is pardoned: viz. when a man acts wrongly because the alternative is too much for human nature, and nobody could endure it.”[[32]](#endnote-32) What seems clear is that, owing to the terrible situation in which the men found themselves, the Fox News journalists did not fit Element (iii) of the definition: they had a fully exculpatory reason for not making the truth their chief interest.

*Element (iv): “if the proposition is explicitly asserted, it is not believed to be false.”* If a proposition is explicitly asserted that *is* believed to be false, the result will be a *lie*. While in common parlance the term ‘bullshit’ is often used to refer to lies, this meaning, as previously stated, is being bracketed for purposes of the present discussion, since the present aim is to analyze the nature of bullshitting insofar as it is a moral phenomenon distinct from lying.

With this characterization of bullshit in hand, the case for its superiority over Frankfurt’s identification of the essence of bullshit as “lack of connection to concern with truth” or “indifference to how things really are”[[33]](#endnote-33) is straightforward. In short, the criterion proposed covers both types of bullshit surveyed—truth-indifferent bullshit and culpably confused bullshit—whereas Frankfurt’s does not.

It has already been indicated, with the examples of the student bullshitter and the ID theorist, how the criterion of bullshit defended here handles culpably confused bullshit. For an example of truth-indifferent bullshit, consider again the Fourth-of-July oration Frankfurt imagines. It qualifies as bullshit by Frankfurt’s criterion because, in prattling on about “our great and blessed country” and the “divine guidance” enjoyed by the “Founding Fathers,”[[34]](#endnote-34) the ingratiating orator is indifferent to whether these descriptions truly apply; he wants only to convince his audience that he is a patriot. The criterion defended here also accommodates this case. Indeed, it *has* to accommodate *any* case that Frankfurt’s criterion accommodates. For when truth is not a concern at all, either as an end or as a means, it is *a fortiori* less of a concern than whatever competing interest one has in producing what qualifies as bullshit. And any interest that is indifferent to truth can, under certain circumstances, clearly compete with an interest in discovering and communicating truth; we need only imagine circumstances in which the interests dictate conflicting beliefs or utterances. According to the account presented here, the orator is a bullshitter because any interest he has in saying something true (which may be no interest at all) is subordinated to a competing interest in being seen as a patriot. The latter interest is a competing interest because a policy of saying what will convey the impression that one is a patriot does not necessarily conform with a policy of saying what is true.

# Why So Much Advertising Is Bullshit

Given that the purpose of advertising is usually to generate as much of some desired result as possible, whether it be sales or votes or something else, it should come as no surprise that so much advertising is bullshit. Consider product advertisers. They typically aim to sell us products we don’t need (clearly the vast majority of products for which we see or hear advertisements are products we don’t need), and they hope that we will soon grow tired of them and buy new products we don’t need. The sales-obsessed mindset is nicely illustrated by a statement made in an advertising executive’s speech to a gathering of admen in the late ’50s. “Take electric refrigerators,” he said. “Millions of them are ten to fifteen years obsolete. But their owners don’t know it. No one has bothered to tell them.”[[35]](#endnote-35) The speaker is such a true believer in his cause that he doesn’t notice the irony in deeming millions of refrigerators obsolete when their owners are content with them. Today the products in question could be, again, refrigerators, or cars, televisions, computers, clothes, or cell phones. The hamster-wheel of mindless consumption is the business advertiser’s holy grail. Advertisements often constitute bullshit because advertisers often explicitly or implicitly assert some proposition or propositions as true, while subordinating any concern they may have about the truth of those propositions to the competing goal of generating as much of some desired result as possible.

Bullshit advertising is sometimes false advertising, but bullshit advertising, on the present conception of bullshit, is distinct from *lying* advertising. One can say something false without lying. A car salesman might tell a prospective customer that he’s got the best deals in town. In saying this, he is not lying unless he believes it is false that he has the best deals in town. If he genuinely believes he has the best deals in town, or if he is actually agnostic on the question, then he is not lying to the prospective customer (although in the latter case he *is* bullshitting). Recall that, as with Frankfurt, the term ‘bullshitting’ is here used to identify a communicative act distinct from lying. When advertisers attempt to generate beliefs in their target audience by making statements that the advertisers take to be false, the advertisers are guilty of *lying* advertising rather than *bullshit* advertising. The position that lying advertising is unethical needs no argument.

Bullshit advertising, then, does not involve making deliberately false explicit statements. While Frankfurt is correct that the liar is necessarily concerned about the truth value of his statements in a way the bullshitter is not, he errs in claiming that the bullshitter per se is *indifferent* to the truth. As the cases of the student bullshitter and the ID theorist illustrate, the bullshitter might have *some* concern for the truth. It’s just that the concern takes a back seat to a potentially competing concern. For business advertisers who employ bullshit ads the potentially competing concern is maximizing sales. This concern potentially competes with a concern for truth because a concern for conveying a true message to a target audience is generally not isomorphic with the goal of generating as many sales or votes as possible among the target audience.

Examination of the advertisements with which we are bombarded every day reveals that advertising pitches commonly rely on fallacious argumentation. Presumably the following syllogism is generally sound: Either the designers of fallacious advertisements are too ignorant to perceive, on some level, the fallaciousness of these advertisements (which they can do without being able to name the fallacies in question) or they are subordinating their concern for making true claims to a concern for maximizing sales or votes; the designers of fallacious advertisements are not too ignorant to perceive, on some level, the fallaciousness of these advertisements; therefore, the designers of fallacious advertisements are subordinating their concern for making true claims to a concern for maximizing sales or votes. If this is correct, then fallacious advertisements are generally bullshit.

What sorts of fallacies do advertisements commonly commit? Based on the author’s own observations, a few fallacies occur very frequently. These include, among others, false analogy, false dichotomy, and appeal to emotion. Examples of advertisements committing these fallacies should call to mind in the reader many other examples employing the same basic persuasive techniques.

Fallacious argumentation in advertising is rarely explicit. Were it made explicit, the fallaciousness would become obvious and the advertisements would lose their insidious efficacy. Still, sometimes the fallaciousness is pretty clear despite the fact that the argument is only implicit. Consider an example of an advertisement that trades on a false analogy: a particularly controversial commercial that the McCain campaign ran against Obama in the summer of 2008. The commercial begins with a panoramic view of the 200,000-strong crowd that turned out to hear Obama speak in Berlin in July of 2008, and then cuts to fleeting images of Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and camera flashes, accompanied by a hushed, disapproving voice declaring Barack Obama to be “the biggest celebrity in the world.”[[36]](#endnote-36) One argument implicit in the ad is the following: because of his celebrity, Obama is analogous to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, and hence unfit for the presidency. The creators of the commercial subordinated any interest they had in implying a true claim about the relationship between celebrity and political qualifications (clearly celebrity as such is not a political disqualification) to a competing interest in dissuading the electorate from voting for Obama. Consequently, the advertisement they produced constitutes an example of bullshit.

Many advertising pitches utilize false dichotomies. The advertiser’s good or service is contrasted with that of “the other guy,” whose good or service is clearly defective. Or consumers are told that they can use product *A* and get a certain desirable result or not use *A* and get an undesirable result. Old Spice Body Wash recently made a splash with a humorous commercial featuring former NFL player Isaiah Mustafa. The commercial begins with Mustafa standing in front of a shower, wrapped in a towel but displaying his muscular torso. “Hello, ladies,” he says. “Look at your man. Now back to me. Now back at your man. Now back to me. Sadly, he isn’t me. But if he stopped using lady-scented body wash and switched to Old Spice, he could smell like he’s me.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The false dichotomy lies in the supposition that every body wash other than Old Spice’s is “lady-scented.”

Appeals to emotion are yet another ploy on which advertisers rely to swoop in below consumers’ logical radar. Appeals to emotion are fallacious when they attempt to forge a spurious link between the use of a product or service and the enjoyment of a pleasant emotion or the avoidance of an unpleasant emotion. Advertisers often invite consumers to think, if only subconsciously, that they should buy a product or service because its use is associated with the presence of a positive emotion or the absence of a negative emotion. In his book *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*, Kevin Roberts, the CEO of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi, offers marketers advice on how to secure “loyalty beyond reason” by inducing customers to *love* their brands.[[38]](#endnote-38) While advertisers make fallacious appeals to a range of emotions, two particularly common types of appeal are appeals to fear and sexual appeals.

It must be acknowledged, though, that not every appeal to fear is fallacious. For instance, there is nothing fallacious in a public-service announcement that attempts to convince its audience to avoid meth by appealing to the fear of the consequences of a meth-addiction. However, many advertisements appeal to fears that would be irrational. A commercial for Prevacid, a heartburn medication, shows a man in the audience at a comedy club who begins to suffer heartburn during a stand-up routine. When he gets up to leave, the comedian ridicules him, to the great amusement of the audience. Reflecting on the incident, the unfortunate man vows, “I will never make that mistake again. That’s when I’d had it with frequent heartburn. And that’s when I got Prevacid 24-Hour.”[[39]](#endnote-39) The trouble with the commercial is not that being made an object of public ridicule would not be horribly embarrassing to most people. The trouble is that the odds of being made an object of mass ridicule, or landing in an equally embarrassing situation, as a result of heartburn, are next to nil. The Prevacid commercial doesn’t make any explicitly false statements. But the appeal to fear is intended to work by conveying the message to heartburn-sufferers that using Prevacid will spare them from terrible embarrassment. Therein lies the bullshit.

Sexual appeals in advertising are notorious. Scantily clad young women and sexual innuendo are used to sell everything from beer to riding mowers to Web hosting services. That “sex sells” has long been a veritable truism in the advertising industry (although research suggests that sexual appeals in advertising are in certain contexts counterproductive[[40]](#endnote-40)). Sometimes sexual appeals are employed for no other purpose than to capture the audience’s attention, or to make a product, service, or brand more memorable. Frequently, though, advertisers associate a product with sex in the hope that the desire for sex will spawn a desire for the product. In the more academic prose of Tom Reichert, a leading researcher on sex in advertising, “[m]essages that evoke positively valenced arousal (e.g., sexual information) may affect purchase intention by motivating the consumer toward the stimulus and the associated product.”[[41]](#endnote-41) When advertisers subordinate any concern for the truth of the advertised association between sex and a product or service to a concern for generating sales, the advertisements they produce contain bullshit.

Bullshit advertising techniques are hardly limited to the use of implicit or explicit arguments that commit textbook fallacies. An exhaustive list of other bullshit advertising methods is beyond the scope of this paper, but two ubiquitous types of advertising are worth brief consideration: advertising using puffery and advertising featuring digitally altered images.

Puffery consists of “puffed up” or exaggerated claims that are so far-fetched, vague, or subjective that they would (supposedly) not fool a reasonable consumer. Puffery is perfectly legal and is a very popular technique among advertisers.

TAG Body Spray commercials are well-known for their creative use of puffery. In one memorable advertisement, a high-school boy walks by a group of female cheerleaders practicing a pyramid. When the cheerleaders catch a whiff of his TAG Body Spray, they lustfully pounce on him. The voice-over rapidly intones the following words, which are also boldly displayed on the screen: “WARNING: Use caution when wearing TAG Body Spray in the vicinity of a multi-hottie pep pyramid. Cuz, cheerleaders can be aggressive, b-e aggressive.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Clearly this commercial is trying to persuade its target audience, teenage boys, that they should buy TAG Body Spray. What implied argument is supposed to do the persuading?

Since the advertiser presumably *intends* the depictions in the commercial to be recognized as puffery, it can safely be assumed that the implied argument is *not* the following argument, which takes the commercial at face value: “You should do whatever will cause cheerleaders to mob you. Using TAG Body Spray will cause cheerleaders to mob you. Therefore, you should use TAG Body Spray.” But it is highly doubtful that the advertiser is using puffery merely for its comical value, merely to help imprint the brand name in the customer’s mind; were that the case, there would be no reason to use puffery involving exaggerated claims of physical attractiveness rather than exaggerated claims that are equally funny but unrelated to physical attractiveness. Presumably, the advertiser wants teenage boys to think that use of TAG Body Spray will provide *some* significant enhancement of their desirability to pretty girls, even if not enough to trigger the collapse of “multi-hottie pep pyramid[s].”

So the actual implied argument must go something like this: “TAG Body Spray will enhance your physical attractiveness to pretty girls. If TAG Body Spray will enhance your physical attractiveness to pretty girls, then you should buy TAG Body Spray. Therefore, you should buy TAG Body Spray.” Notice that the implied argument contains an objective, factual claim: “TAG Body Spray will enhance your physical attractiveness to pretty girls.”[[43]](#endnote-43) If the commercial had made this claim explicitly, the TAG Fragrance Company’s competitors would surely have filed false-advertising lawsuits. The Federal Trade Commission requires that factual claims in advertisements be adequately substantiated, and it is doubtful that the TAG Fragrance Company had any adequate substantiation for the claim that TAG Body Spray enhances boys’ physical attractiveness to cheerleader-types. Once again, then, the commercial is guilty of bullshitting, as the aim of generating sales has been subordinated to any concern to convey a true message (though there is no doubt an egoistic concern to avoid lawsuits under false-advertising statutes).

Programs like Adobe’s Photoshop have opened up a whole new dimension of bullshit advertising by allowing advertisers to blur the lines between representation and reality. To mention one infamous example, Ralph Lauren provoked a torrent of criticism by the use of a catalog cover photo featuring an impossibly skinny model in a pair of Blue Label jeans. Many Web sites published the cover photo along with an undoctored photo of the model, Filippa Hamilton, on a catwalk. The difference between the two images was striking: the thin but healthy-looking Hamilton on the catwalk had been given an unnaturally emaciated figure in the Ralph Lauren image. Britain’s *Mail Online* observed that, in the catalog cover photo, “her head actually seems wider than her waist.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Why would Ralph Lauren’s catalog designers attempt to sell jeans by displaying them on a skeletal model? The tacit message seems to be, “If you want to look strikingly thin, like the model on our catalog cover, wear our jeans.” In conveying this message, any concern for truth has taken a back seat to a concern for generating sales. Therein lies the advertisement’s bullshit character. (The fact that Ralph Lauren’s use of the retouched image may have backfired is beside the point.) The same bullshit character is inherent in any advertisement that surreptiously distorts visual reality in an attempt to persuade consumers that a product or service can deliver results beyond what is really possible. Politicians have begun to take notice of the dubious moral status of digitally altered images of advertising models. Some parliamen­tarians in Britain and France have called for warning labels on such advertising images, to alert consumers that the represented body they see is not a reality they could ever hope to match.[[45]](#endnote-45)

These examples of bullshit advertising represent but a small specimen from a much larger lagoon. A more complete cataloging of types of bullshit advertising would include inappropriate appeals to authority, bandwagon arguments (“everybody’s using *X*”), self-image ads, fine-print ads, ads utilizing weasel words, and fake-news-report advertisements. The advertising techniques surveyed generate bullshit because those who employ them in explicitly, or more typically implicitly, asserting propositions subordinate any concern for the actual truth of the propositions to pursuit of a goal the attainment of which is at best incidentally related to and at worst directly opposed to the assertion of true propositions.

# The Ethics of Bullshitting

Not only is much advertising guilty of bullshitting, but all instances of bullshitting are unethical. What, exactly, is wrong with bullshitting? It has been characterized above as manifesting “culpable intellectual negligence.” But why is it culpable? Bullshit has its defenders: not only in the form of unapologetic, clear-conscienced advertisers, politicians, lawyers, PR people, and the like, but also within academic philosophy.

To take one example, Scott Kimbrough, in his essay “On Letting It Slide,” draws on William Ian Miller’s book *Faking It* to argue that a significant portion of bullshit is morally justifiable, including that in public relations and advertising.[[46]](#endnote-46) Kimbrough’s argument is at its strongest with respect to the utility of bullshit in maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships. In Kimbrough’s view, sometimes a bullshit apology—one given for the purpose of soothing hurt feelings and reestablishing peaceable relations, in the absence of any concern for whether the apology is sincere—is morally preferable to no apology at all. Kimbrough pithily asserts that “bullshit constitutes the greater part of civility.”[[47]](#endnote-47) It is doubtful, however, that bullshitting is *necessary* for civility; one can preserve civil relations with a person of whom one doesn’t think highly simply by keeping potentially injurious or offensive thoughts to oneself. In any case, the “civility justification” for bullshitting is clearly not available to advertisers.

Kimbrough does not claim otherwise; he makes a different case for the legitimacy of bullshitting in advertising. The “explanation of our tolerance for bullshit in advertising and public relations,” he claims, “is our respect for the ends they serve. We understand the importance of making a buck, and don’t begrudge the professional the most effective means to do so.”[[48]](#endnote-48) But this goes too far. We don’t tolerate lying, even if it is the most effective means to make a buck. Kimbrough acknowledges the objection and attempts to justify drawing a moral line between bullshitting and lying:

Why do we sympathize with the liar’s victim, but not the bullshitter’s? Look at it this way: we can either sympathize with bullshitters or their victims. The bullshitters have a job to do and skillfully apply the most effective means to do so. The victims, in contrast, allow themselves to be mentally lazy and blinded by desire. They’re suckers. We may pity suckers, but we certainly don’t respect them. Our contempt for suckers reflects the judgment that anyone taken in by a line of bullshit deserves their fate.[[49]](#endnote-49)

This argument is flawed logically, factually, and theoretically.

By its logic, the difference Kimbrough claims to find between victims of liars and victims of bullshitters disappears. For liars may also “have a job to do and skillfully apply the most effective means to do so,” and the victims of liars may be no less guilty of being “mentally lazy and blinded by desire” than are the victims of bullshitters.

The factual flaw with the argument is that we don’t think all victims of bullshitters are suckers. As an examination of the realms of advertising, politics, litigation, and public relations should reveal, there is such a thing as a “bullshit *artist*” who is adept at constructing subtle bullshit. Children—and even adults, if they have, through no fault of their own, lacked access to a quality education—cannot legitimately be disparaged as “suckers” for being duped by it. And even if they could—here the factual flaw is connected with a logical flaw—it is a separate question whether the bullshitters are morally justified. There is no contradiction in saying it was wrong for *A* to dupe *B*, and *B* was a sucker for being duped. For example, people who become victims of identity theft by responding to phishing e-mails by providing their personal information are suckers for being duped, but it is nevertheless wrong for the identity thieves to dupe them.

Finally, on a theoretical level, Kimbrough’s argument relies on an objectionable form of ethical egoism. This is suggested by his observation that “bullshitters have a job to do and skillfully apply the most effective means to do so.” It is confirmed by his further observation about the permissibility of using bullshit to sell:

when faced with competition, to insist on truth when it doesn’t sell is not just naïve, it’s a losing strategy. To forego the use of bullshit is thus to settle for being a loser. We prefer winners to losers. And we don’t want to be losers ourselves by forbidding ourselves a winning gameplan.[[50]](#endnote-50)

The underlying principle is that whatever works for the seller is morally permissible. But in a society in which tactics like murder, extortion, and blackmail worked for sellers as the most effective means to their ends, only a perverse morality would deem them morally permissible. Of course, in civilized societies, these tactics are illegal, whereas bullshit, or at least a great deal of it, is not. Yet legality by itself is a dubious moral defense. When slavery was legal, running a farming business without free slave labor was a losing strategy. Nevertheless, it was clearly morally superior to the alternative.

But what is the positive argument for the immorality of bullshitting? As it happens, reflecting on the ethics of lying provides a useful vehicle for considering the ethics of bullshitting. The ethics of lying, of course, is a very complex topic. A definitive examination of it, if such could be achieved, would consider it from the perspectives of a variety of leading ethical theories and argue for the soundness of one of these theories. Here a more manageable task must suffice: a succinct explanation of how the immorality of bullshitting and of typical cases of lying follows from both Utilitarianism and Kantianism.[[51]](#endnote-51)

From either one of these theoretical perspectives, bullshitting bears a significant analogy to lying. For the typical Utilitarian, the morality of an action depends on whether its expected consequences are optimific. Utilitarians consider lying generallywrong, because generally the expected consequences of lying are less than optimific; generally, liars seek only to bring about some consequence that they perceive as good for *them*, and the false information they dispense does not conduce to impartially optimific ends. More indirectly, particular instances of lying for expedience cumulatively shape what we might call “the culture of communication,” which John Stuart Mill addressed with characteristic eloquence:

But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth does that much toward weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilization, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends—we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other’s words, acts the part of one of their worst enemies.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Bullshit is not, from a Utilitarian point of view, *as* bad as lying, since the information provided by bullshitters is not *as* likely to be false, and hence suboptimific, as the information provided by liars. Nevertheless, the only good consequences that can generally be expected from bullshitting are good consequences for the bullshitter. There is no reason to expect any reliable correlation between bullshitting and promotion of general happiness. Of course, there is such a thing as benevolent lies; parents tell them to their children all the time. Perhaps there is such a thing as benevolent bullshit as well, which we dispense when we don’t lie although we do subordinate any concern for speaking the truth to a concern for making others feel good, while lacking an exculpatory reason for this ordering of concerns. But even if benevolent bullshit does exist, it’s doubtful that it ever comes from advertisers. And Mill’s warning about the deleterious effects of expedient lying on the culture of communication applies to expedient bullshit—the sort dispensed in bullshit advertising—as well. For bullshit, like lying, has a palpable effect on “the greater or less reliance which [humankind] can place in each other’s words.”

Kantians disdain lying not because of its causal consequences but because it uses people as mere means to ends they either (depending on the exegete) do not or cannot share. It is part of the very nature of a lie that the person being lied to does not consent to be lied to. For Kant, rational agency is to be respected as an end in itself, and it can be exercised only on the basis of true information. The deliberate misinformer disrespects rational agency by intentionally feeding a rational agent false information. As is the case from a Utilitarian point of view, the bullshitter, from a Kantian point of view, is not *as* vicious as the liar. Still, the bullshitter disrespects rational agency by valuing some competing objective, such as the sale of a product, over the necessary conditions for others’ exercise of rational agency. One need not go so far as to say that any self-respecting Kantian, like Kant himself in his infamous essay “On the Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropic Motives,” must consider it wrong to lie even to prevent a murder. In such cases, the Kantian can, without inconsistency, reject a prohibition against lying on the grounds that the person being lied to is clearly an *ir*rationalagent. Perhaps it also acceptable to *bullshit* clearly irrational agents. But this excuse is not available to advertisers.

It is important to notice, finally, that from a Utilitarian point of view bullshit possesses an insidiousness that lying lacks. Because lies and their deleterious consequences are generally easier to recognize than bullshit and its effects, it is easier for individuals, cultures, and legal systems to sensitize themselves to and fortify themselves against the liar than the bullshitter. As Bill Maher observed, bullshit *is* like crabgrass: It is virtually impossible to eradicate, and, when not actively combatted, it quickly engulfs us, whether in advertising, politics, public relations, talk radio, marketing, or religion. The consequences of becoming anesthetized to bullshit can be devastating, as the human race’s history of justifying war, persecution, discrimination, and terrorism on the basis of bullshit arguments tragically illustrates.

# Conclusion

The essence of bullshit is not, as Frankfurt would have it, indifference to truth but a blamably insufficient deference to truth, a kind of intellectual sloppiness, a ‘culpable intellectual negligence.’ Frankfurt’s criterion sets the bar too low, absolving the sincere bullshit-spouter of the charge of bullshitting. Mere concern for truth in one’s utterances is not enough if in arriving at one’s beliefs any impartial interest in adopting true beliefs is subordinated to a competing interest. The account given here honors this point, while also explaining why Frankfurtian insincere bullshit is genuine bullshit. It furnishes the conceptual groundwork needed for exposing bullshitters of both stripes. And it provides a lens for seeing that bullshit advertising is a serious problem in terms of both its volume and its immorality.[[53]](#endnote-53)

1. This paper is a contribution to a philosophical discussion of the nature of bullshit, a discussion that began with Harry Frankfurt’s 1986 essay “On Bullshit” (*Raritan Quarterly Review* 6, no. 2 [Fall 1986]) and has gathered momentum especially since the essay was republished in 2005 as a diminutive book (*On Bullshit* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005]) that found its way onto the *New York Times* best-seller list. The use of the term ‘bullshit’ is often considered offensive, sometimes with good reason; for when used emotively the term is often intended to cause offense. Here, however, the term and its cognates are meant only descriptively. It is because these terms are the ones in which the important philosophical discussion has unfolded that they are used instead of other semantically similar but less offensive terms, such as “hogwash,” “baloney,” or “malarkey.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Laura Penny, *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, eds., *Bullshit and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hardcastle and Reisch, *Bullshit and Philosophy*, vii–xxiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. George Carlin, *It’s Bad for Ya*, DVD (MPI Home Video, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The concepts *ethical* and *moral*, along with their cognates, are used interchangeably. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, e.g., Robert L. Arrington, Robert L., “Advertising and Behavior Control,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 1 (1982): 3–12. The famous disagreement between Hayek (Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Non Sequitur of the ‘Dependence Effect,’” *Southern Economic Journal* 27 [April 1961]) and Galbraith (John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958]) over the “dependence effect” of advertising is in part a disagreement over what is to count as an autonomous desire. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I say “nonfalse” rather than true because it can be truly said of advertising that asserts no (truth-apt) propositions (e.g., the advertising slogan “Coke is the real thing”) that it is nonfalse but not that it is true. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For one defense of advertising against charges of deceiving consumers and manipulating or controlling them, see Charles Collins, “In Defense of Advertising,” in *Business Ethics*, ed. Milton Snoeyenbos, Robert Almeder, and James Humber (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 499–509. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 24. Quotation taken from Fania Pascal, “Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir,” in R. Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), 28–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 33-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Laura Penny, *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Penny, *Your Call Is Important to Us*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. G. A. Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2002), 325. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” 332. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Harry Frankfurt, “Reply to G. A. Cohen,” in Buss and Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency*, 343. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Quoted in Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” 324. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Surely, *pace* the OED, trivial talk or writing is not *per se* bullshit. Calling a piece of discourse “bullshit” is far more condemnatory than calling it “trivial.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” 324*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” 324. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Frankfurt, “Reply to G. A. Cohen,” 343. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Here I dissent from Scott Kimbrough’s view (“On Letting It Slide,” in *Bullshit and Philosophy*, ed. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch [Chicago: Open Court, 2006], 3–18). He avers that “[s]ometimes, through no fault of our own, we unintentionally end up with bullshit beliefs” (15). “Frankfurt’s ear,” he acknowledges, “cannot tolerate this conclusion because he finds the accusation of bullshit necessarily pejorative” (15). Clearly I share the same sensibility as Frankfurt. Kimbrough believes that although calling someone a bullshitter is usually pejorative, it isn’t necessarily so. He draws an analogy with the word ‘killer’ (15). Calling someone a killer is usually pejorative, but sometimes people kill blamelessly, and they are nevertheless killers. Likewise, according to Kimbrough, anyone who has bullshit beliefs (we need not enter into the details of Kimbrough’s analysis of the defining features of such beliefs) is a bullshitter. Against this, suppose that a 5-year-old has adopted the bullshit beliefs of her parents, and that she espouses the beliefs in front of her kindergarten class. Do we really want to say that she is therefore a bullshitter? I realize that I’m begging the question against Kimbrough here, but this sort of case will perhaps, in the minds most readers, support the soundness of Frankfurt’s and my semantic intuition. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See, e.g., CNN.com, “Kidnapped Fox Journalists Released,” Aug. 27, 2006, http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/08/27/fox.journalists/index.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 224. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 33–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Roy Bongartz, “Madison Avenue Scrambles for Honor,” *The Nation*, February 20, 1960, 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See YouTube, “John McCain Celebrity Ad,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOrmOvHysdU. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See YouTube, “Old Spice Advertisement,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZOm2YhOI4c. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Kevin Roberts, *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See YouTube, “Prevacid 24hr Commercial,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_LGlvfddw0A. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Tom Reichert, “Sex in Advertising Research: A Review of Content, Effects, and Functions of Sexual Information in Consumer Advertising,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Reichert, “Sex in Advertising Research,” 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See YouTube, “TAG Commercial,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws87MmTlIz8. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. This claim is fallacious in the sense of being unwarranted or false, but it does not, so far as I can tell, commit a textbook fallacy. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Mail Online*, “Ralph Lauren apologises for digitally retouching slender model to make her head look bigger than her waist,” October 10, 2009, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1219046/Ralph-Lauren-digitally-retouches-slender-model-make-look-THINNER.html?ITO=1490. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Randy Cohen, “Should Photos Come with Warning Labels?,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2009, http://ethicist.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/should-photos-come-with-warning-labels/. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. William Ian Miller, *Faking It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide.” [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide,” 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide,” 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide,” 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide,” 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. I do not presume that such an approach will satisfy all readers. Not everyone is a Utilitarian or Kantian. In this part of the paper, I restrict myself for two reasons to the relatively modest goal of showing that bullshitting is wrong on Utilitarian and Kantian grounds. Firstly, an exploration of other moral perspectives would render the paper inordinately long. Nonetheless, readers who are neither Utilitarians nor Kantians may be able to envision how a case for the immorality of bullshitting could be made along the lines of their preferred moral theory—e.g., Humeanism or Aristotelianism. Secondly, given the popularity of Utilitarianism and Kantianism as moral theories, a demonstration that both theories entail the immorality of bullshitting (when combined with certain assumptions about bullshitting) should be of interest in its own right. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. I wish to thank Jon Tresan and Pam Sailors for helpful feedback on earlier versions of the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)