

## On Bullshit and the Necessity of Balance

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Asking where we are in terms of bullshit necessitates—for me at least—a discussion of where we are in terms of public discourse. And that, in turn, raises the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset of the pandemic, I remember telling a friend that I was rather concerned about our country's ability to handle it. When he asked me why, I replied, "You can't bullshit your way out of a pandemic!" A virus is not concerned with what you believe to be correct; it operates in a cold, calculating reality immune to the oscillations of human perspectives and beliefs. Yet, while the current situation may be dire, there are valuable lessons to be learned. A pandemic puts a strain on public discourse in intriguing ways because—while there may not be any definitive, objectively correct answers about how to handle a pandemic—there are surely better and worse solutions. Bullshit might help mitigate negative perceptions or allow people to feel safer in the short-term; nevertheless, the consequences are real regardless of what you choose to believe is true. These consequences tend to accentuate the repercussions of bullshit, making its danger quite apparent.

This is why it is vital to be able to call bullshit, to point out when rhetoric is unconcerned with reality, arguing from inconsistent epistemological rules that favor its own point of view. No matter how reassuring, such bullshit inhibits discourse from generating effective solutions. However, calling bullshit can itself become a defense mechanism, a method of maintaining a particular belief at any cost—a form of bullshit itself! (After all, we rarely call bullshit on an argument with which we agree.) Calling bullshit too often can be just as damaging as not calling it at all. There needs to be a compromise, then, between calling bullshit whenever discourse digresses from our own sensibilities and calling bullshit too sparingly.

Balance, in an epistemological sense, is crucial. Discussions of bullshit tend to succumb to either a) calling bullshit on everything that does not agree with a certain "absolute" truth or b) avoiding calling bullshit at all because—it is believed—there is no true standard by which any discourse can be judged. Yet, as Joshua Wakeham contends, "Some aspects of reality lend themselves to be known and understood more easily, others resist scrutiny altogether, and many fall somewhere in between" (18). Although Wakeham is leery of settling on these epistemic discrepancies as a final solution to bullshit, I believe they are quite valuable and offer a useful heuristic. In essence, discourse concerning certain topics may never be able to obtain any degree of certainty, while rather

precise facts and knowledge can be determined in other arenas. Epistemic certainty oscillates contingent upon the nature of the discourse.

These distinctions may not always be apparent, and we need to have debates about making such distinctions. This is all part of the process. But to insist that no such distinctions can be made is problematic and threatens the health of public discourse. When dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing about whether it is more productive to invest in research on treatments or research on vaccines is fair territory. Valid arguments can be made for both sides, even if one approach may appear more conducive to success than the other. There is no definitive, concrete answer. Additionally, we need to have debates about the best ways to provide economic relief for citizens and businesses; being open to a multitude of options and discussing their merits increases the chances of finding a successful solution. However, using Andrew Wakefield's debunked research as evidence that vaccines cause autism and are unsafe—while dismissing the litany of peer-reviewed research that demonstrates no causation between vaccines and autism and shows vaccines carry minimal risk—is absolute bullshit. Furthermore, arguing that no one should take a COVID-19 vaccine when a safe one (which has passed phase III testing) is ready to be distributed is outright dangerous, especially to vulnerable populations. Our knowledge of this issue possesses a rather high level of epistemic certainty that makes it fair territory to call bullshit.

In the first two instances, productive debates can be had as long as the interlocutors are willing to agree to apply norms of discourse fairly, as long as the arguments are logically consistent, and as long as positions are represented accurately (Roberts-Miller 26). On the other hand, if someone persists in holding up Andrew Wakefield's discredited research on vaccines but deems all of the peer-reviewed research contradicting Wakefield's findings as biased, it is probably not beneficial to engage that person any longer. They are probably not interested in advancing knowledge and truth but merely in maintaining their own personal truth at any cost. Being willing to empathize with others, listen carefully, and understand their position improves public discourse immensely. Nevertheless, these practices need to be reciprocal.

People tend to engage in anti-intellectual bullshit—the employment of bullshit solely to maintain but not advance knowledge and truth—when they sense their beliefs are vulnerable and they are unsure how to defend them, when they are not entirely certain why they hold beliefs, or when they have never fully thought through the values and assumptions underlying their personal truths. This is one of the biggest critiques I have of Harry Frankfurt's definition. Bullshit is not always unconcerned with truth; rather, I would argue, it can become unconcerned with certain truths. George Reisch summarizes this phenomenon well, noting that “bullshitters conceal not some indifference

to truth but instead a commitment to *other* truths and, usually, an agenda or enterprise that they take to be inspired or justified by those *other* truths” (38, emphasis original). In these instances, the preservation of certain beliefs becomes paramount and leads to bullshit; paradoxically, the facts and premises upon which these beliefs are built are of little concern or importance and can be substituted or eliminated on a whim. The rhetor demonstrates a “lack of connection to a concern with truth,” but only in relation to the facts and premises underlying their argument (Frankfurt 33). The truth of their beliefs, on the other hand, is a matter of the utmost importance.

It can be easy, as rhetoricians, to assume that people hold their beliefs for good reasons, that they have spent time examining them intricately. But people tend to hold beliefs for a variety of reasons not directly linked to evidence and reason. Maybe their parents believed this way. Maybe their underlying values coincide well with certain beliefs, making those beliefs welcoming, reassuring, and easy to adopt. Maybe the beliefs are embraced on the basis of group identity. Maybe the beliefs have shielded the person from having to deal with fear, protecting them from not only feeling vulnerable in regard to their beliefs but also in regard to the safety of their loved ones and themselves. In times of anxiety and fear, this vulnerability can be further exasperated; false notions about safety and the extent of the danger faced can have reassuring qualities. In all of these instances, there is a high likelihood that the belief was formed without much critical reflection.

If we offer compassion and understanding, we are more likely—but not guaranteed—to receive them in kind. In instances where fear and vulnerability may be the source of bullshit, compassion can be a powerful weapon and help to persuade people away from bullshitting to support ill-founded but comforting views. Yet, when our interlocutors are not willing to reciprocate, continuing to engage them politely exhausts resources that are better served in persuading those who are willing to debate ethically and honestly. As Jenny Rice surmises, bullshit creates blockage, which prevents productive discourse from emerging, making disgust the most pragmatic “response that exploits blockage as fundamentally unacceptable” (471). Continuing to engage bullshit only feeds it and promotes it.

Similar to the epistemic balance that must be struck, a compassionate balance must be achieved as well. Showing no compassion to those who engage in bullshit fails to account for the myriad reasons why they may be clinging to their beliefs and ignoring particular truths; furthermore, it risks alienating someone permanently. Showing boundless compassion, though, allows bullshit to permeate public discourse and to poison discussions of the utmost importance by preying on norms of respect and civility. This may appear as a promotion of cancel culture at first glance, but it is far from it. There is a dif-

ference between denying someone a platform because they hold a controversial opinion and denying someone a platform because they hold an uninformed opinion and refuse to engage honestly. The former is intellectual cowardice; the latter is intellectual honesty. What is needed is the wisdom—and self-reflection—to know the difference.

In spite of the devastation COVID-19 has wrought, it has provided us with a moment for reflection, an opportunity to learn a valuable lesson from our failures regarding public discourse. Bullshit has consequences, even if they are not always apparent. Frankfurt himself warns of this, observing how “The contemporary proliferation of bullshit also has deeper sources, in various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are” (64). Although I tend to disagree with Frankfurt in regard to bullshit being a complete and utter disregard for all truth, I am prone to defend him in regard to his views on the necessity of discourse being connected to reality. Truth may not always be as objective and stable as Frankfurt desires it to be, and we may not have unfiltered access to reality, but reality still exists nonetheless.

When we engage in bullshit in order to maintain certain “truths,” when we resort to contorting facts and logic to see what we wish, we disengage from reality. Although it can be convenient and reassuring to see reality as conforming to our own perspectives, nature has a tendency to remind us this is not the case, that reality comes calling whether we understand it or not. Interpreting the COVID-19 pandemic via statistics and narratives can be bullshitted. Measuring the success or failure of certain policies in response to the pandemic can be bullshitted. The actual health and economic consequences cannot. We can only bullshit reality for so long. And, when we choose to bullshit, the damage it does may not be visible at first but will slowly start to build. Eventually, though, reality breaks through the blockage. In the end, the debt comes due—with interest.

## Works Cited

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