An Ethics of Bullshit: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Bullshit has proven difficult to define. For instance, Frankfurt claims that bullshit is not so much about lying as it is a complete dismissal of truth or falsity. Alternatively, Ball claims that "bullshit" may "cover misrepresentation, half-truths, and outrageous lies alike" (3). Just as difficult to pin down as bullshit's definition is bullshit's ethics. Some follow Frankfurt's lead, casting bullshit as a damaging phenomenon (e.g. Eubanks and Schaffer, 382); however, others suggest that bullshitting may be productive and useful in certain situations (e.g. Perla and Carifio; Smagorinsky et al.). Given the fact that we are surrounded by "fake news" and we occupy an era that has been labelled "post-truth"(e.g. Ball; Davis; McComiskey; McIntyre; Skinnell)—an era defined by its bullshit— it may be prudent to land on a definition of bullshit and determine, once and for all, how we should orient ourselves toward this phenomenon.

To define bullshit, I argue that we need to look at its rhetorical aims rather than the nature of the phenomenon itself. If that is the case, it is prudent to ask what a bullshitter is trying to accomplish when bullshitting. The literature provides us a tentative consensus: Eubanks and Schaffer refer to bullshitters as constructing a "false ethos" (383), and Frankfurt himself suggests that bullshitters "try out various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels…" (35). Perla and Carifio echo this sentiment, suggesting that we try on different personalities, often that of an expert, to grow as individuals. In these cases, bullshitting is a playing at being something that one is not. This provides an aim for bullshitters: to convey a certain kind of character that is, in some way, outside of one's commonly adopted identity. Bullshit is the material that they use to do this. This does not necessarily make bullshit ethically suspect. Instead, we need to consider why they may want to convey such a character. The rest of this paper is designed to think through the potential ethical implications of bullshit: the good, the bad, and the ugly. For the sake of simplicity, I adopt a utilitarian standpoint, considering the different degrees of harm vs. benefit that may arise from bullshitting.

The Good

Perla and Carifio suggest that as we adopt new roles in life, we must perform those roles to incorporate them into our identities. In general, when we take on a new role, we have a schema for what it looks like to be such and such a person, and that schema provides us a script for certain behaviors. We are not

yet the person that we want to be; by modeling these scripts, we get there. This is perhaps why bullshit is so often associated with pretending to know more than one does about a specific topic (Pennycook et al. 552). When individuals bullshit in this way, they try to convey a self that they wish they had. In a similar vein, I believe this is often what happens when students resort to bullshitting an academic essay; the difference is that students are not pretending to have knowledge so much as they may be pretending to care about a particular subject or pretending to support a specific stance, as suggested by Smagorinsky et al. or Roberts-Miller in this volume. Say we ask a student to write an analysis on a piece of assigned literature: how can we know that the student feels one way or the other, or cares to analyze the literature at all? In some cases, I suspect, the student must pretend to care, and the essay they turn in must have the patina of caring. This kind of bullshit, I argue, is not harmful. Indeed, those who pretend to know more than they do may be self-conscious enough to educate themselves in the future on certain topics; or students may find that they do, in fact, support an argument through their attempt at bullshitting one. Through the act of bullshitting, we can push our ideas farther than we anticipated (Zavattaro) and become selves that we could only pretend at being beforehand. At worst, this bullshit does no harm.

The Bad

However, one can use a false ethos for darker purposes. Certainly, Donald Trump is a prime example of instances when bullshit can cause harm. *The Washington Post* recently reported that he has uttered over 20,000 misrepresentations of truth during his four-year term in the Whitehouse (Cilliza). But do these alleged misrepresentations constitute bullshit? Well, let's consider his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider, for instance, the fact that on March 2nd, Trump stated that we would see a vaccine "relatively soon," despite the fact that experts suggest no vaccine would be available until much later; or his statement that 99% of cases are totally harmless; or that children are "almost" immune; the list goes on. These are admittedly vague claims (what constitutes "harmless," what are the limitations on "almost"?), but the point is that Trump presents himself as a kind of medical expert when he is not. Making confident, hope-filled claims (true, false, or vague) about this virus creates the image of one who knows how to handle such a medical emergency. Such politics is, as Cramer acknowledges, about identities rather than facts (as cited in Guo). This bullshit persona positions Trump so that he seems more competent, knowledgeable, and powerful than he really is. The problem occurs when we believe and are loyal to Trump's persona to the point where he "could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" without ramification. Allowing any one person this type of power based on a per-

ceived character—based on bullshit—undermines democracy, legality, and decency. It further creates docility when we should be taking action against a global threat that has taken over a million lives.

The Ugly

Finally, some forms of bullshit do not hold millions of lives in the balance, but its uses are still questionable. One example of such ugly bullshit exists in Daniel Whitney, better known by his stage name, Larry the Cable Guy. Whitney conveys a convincing character for his standup: a blue collar, salt-of-the-Earth redneck. The degree to which the character Larry is "real" is where we begin to see the question of bullshit emerging. On the surface, Larry is simply a character played by an actor. However, in his book, Whitney claims that regardless of his fame, he is very much Larry, and this is why his fans relate to him so well (90). It seems that Whitney wants to convince us that he and Larry are one and the same; indeed, the book itself is written *by* Larry, not Whitney, which may simply be a marketing ploy, but I suggest it is also about presentation. We develop a sense that if Whitney were not his character Larry (or vice versa), Larry would no longer be valid in the eyes of his fans. However, Whitney, in actuality, does not have a southern accent, and refers to himself as a "linguistic chameleon"—a phrase markedly un-Larry-like (Bensinger)— who is able to jump into roles easily. And Whitney is college educated (albeit he dropped out in his junior year), a stark contrast to the anti-intellectual he typically conveys. To be fair, all actors adopt a role; the question is how much he wants us to believe that he is Larry. This is ugly bullshit because it is not harmful, but it does, at least to a degree, take advantage of some group of people; it is also ugly because it is so hard to determine the degree to which it is untrue. After all, Whitney believes that he is Larry, even if we have so many signs that suggest the contrary. Like Tuco from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, there isn't anything evil happening here, but we may not like it all the same. How might fans react to learning that he does not have a southern accent? How do they feel about the fact that he is college educated? Would they be willing to pay hundreds of dollars for his shows or shell out money for his book cognizant of the fact that Larry is, in many ways, a fabrication? Is Whitney willing to admit (to his fans, to himself) that Larry is a fabrication? Here, Whitney sells a personality that his fans enjoy, but as he cashes in on his character Larry by blurring the lines between character and reality, one must wonder to what degree Larry the Cable Guy is a bullshit persona—one that helps Whitney take advantage of the redneck fans with whom he supposedly identifies.

Where Do We Go from Here?

There is no way to know the degree to which Whitney identifies with his character Larry, although we know that Larry is an exaggeration (Bensinger). It is difficult to prove the degree to which Trump believes his own medical expertise, or even whether a student is being genuine when attempting to argue a specific point for a literary analysis. We must also consider the fact that people maintain different identities at different times, and we perform those identities based on the company we keep. Who can say with certainty whether one identity is bullshit? Still, Sunstein tells us that when we attempt to forge an identity in such a way, there is always a mark of the forgery (7). This is perhaps where research on bullshit could advance; while not all bullshit is harmful, it may be beneficial to get better at sniffing it out, especially if lives are on the line. Perhaps, for instance, theories of identity or cognition could help us understand when someone is producing a bullshit persona. Discourse analysis is especially useful for determining the ways that people attempt to construct an identity for themselves, and it may be useful as we conceptualize bullshit as a fake self. We may even look to theories of embodiment to describe when individuals truly believe that they have adopted a particular identity and when their statements are commensurate with the selves they believe that they are. As we develop these theories and methods, it will behoove us to consider what exactly individuals are trying to get away with—indeed, keeping this in mind may inform such theories and methods—and we must also consider whether or not this "getting away with" may ultimately be beneficial to those bullshitting, detrimental to recipients of the bullshit, or just shitty in general.

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