

On Not Bullshitting Yourself, or Your Teaching

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I have said elsewhere that Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* is, well, bullshit. That was unfair. His work doesn't actually fit his definition of bullshit because his definition is one that would never apply to a member of the in-group—to us, or people with whom we identify. It isn't just a useless way to think about what makes some form of communication damaging, but a harmful way. The way that Frankfurt suggests we think about bullshit enables the derationalizing (if not actual demonizing) of out-group members while helping us hurt our shoulder patting ourselves on the back.

For Frankfurt, the important criterion is intention. A bullshitter doesn't care about what's true or false, but only about gaining compliance from the audience—it's all about the *motives* of the speaker. There are several problems with Frankfurt's argument that I'll run through quickly before talking more about what these problems mean for teaching in a culture of demagoguery.

In the first place, there are people who are engaged in the salesman's stance that we would consider ethical, even necessary. A defense attorney is supposed to be primarily concerned about persuading the jury, not to the point of violating legal and ethical principles, but because the agonistic premise of the courtroom requires that commitment to the defendant. None of us wants to be in a situation in which we could be convicted because our attorney doesn't believe us.

Second, while an author of fiction doesn't care whether what they're saying is true or false (that there might be or have been someone somewhere with this name who performed the actions in the plot doesn't matter), they do want to persuade the reader that it *could* happen. Fiction isn't true, but it has to be truthful to be effective. Similarly, the best acting persuades the audience that it's authentic, even though it's untrue. Audiences *really* believe that actors are, if not the person portrayed, then that kind of person. It's always puzzling to me that audience members think they know the inner lives and true identities of celebrities.

And that fact of (not) knowing the inner world of others is the third, and most important, problem, partially because it's a problem we are primed to deny exists. One of the most important cognitive biases is called "the fundamental attribution error" because it is fundamental to other biases. Briefly, it is the tendency to attribute different motives to in- vs. out-group members. We reason deductively from in- or out-group membership, unconsciously (but perfectly sincerely) attributing good motives to in-group members and bad motives to out-group members. Thus, if an in-group member says something false, we say they were mistaken, they misspoke—they didn't *really* lie (what

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca call “dissociation”). If we have to admit it was a lie, then we tell ourselves (and sincerely believe) that they were forced into it (attribute external causes), or they had good reasons (internal attribution of blame).

It’s the opposite when it comes to out-group members. For instance, an out-group political figure who says something untrue gets the least charitable interpretation possible—they were deliberately lying as part of a villainous plot. Or they are engaged in bullshit, and don’t care about the truth.

Thus, because the we are *extremely* unlikely, unless prompted, to see ourselves or in-group members we admire as engaged in actions with bad intent (which is the major criterion for bullshit), but we’re equally prone to attributing bad intent to out-group members, Frankfurt’s project is all about hating on the out-group. Certainly, there are times when I’m not sure a lot is to be gained by trying to imagine good motives on the part of some out-groups or out-group political figures. I’m not especially interested in trying to attribute good motives to Hitler, for example, although it is worth pointing out that he was perfectly sincere and believed himself to care a lot about the truth.

What’s useful in Frankfurt’s kind of project is in using criteria to determine if it’s worth trying to engage someone rhetorically, but I think there are better criteria than whether we think they care if they’re telling the truth or lying. Are they open to persuasion? Can they name the conditions under which they would change their mind on this point? Do their arguments work together (or do the premises of one argument contradict the premises of another)? Are they willing to define terms and use them consistently? Are they willing to cite their sources?

More important, can *we* answer those questions?

What I’m saying is that Frankfurt helps us think about what jerks *they* are, but what if we’re the ones being jerks? Because it’s extremely unlikely that we would see ourselves as people who don’t care about the truth (and if we do see ourselves that way, then we won’t care that Frankfurt is calling bullshit on us), then he doesn’t help us see when we aren’t worth arguing with—or, more accurately, when we aren’t open to deliberation. Because maybe we’re full of shit.

And that point—that perhaps we’re the problem—brings me to what concerns me most about teaching practices grounded in any theory that is ultimately about us (good people with good intentions) vs. them (bad people with bad intentions). We’re already in a world in which people equate partisan demagoguery and political discourse. Demagoguery says there are two sides, and they map onto us vs. them. But we don’t have two sides (and I don’t mean that there is the option of third party voting). I mean that there are issues like criminal justice reform, decriminalizing various drugs, immigration, civil forfeiture, and others that don’t break neatly into two positions (let alone two

positions that map perfectly onto Democrat vs. Republican). That people might disagree on some things, but be able to work together on some policies, is how democratic deliberation is supposed to work. A culture of demagogic partisanship means that we demonize such cross-cutting policy deliberation.

I'm not saying that we need to be nice to everyone or that we should all get along. Some people are unreasonable. But not every single person who disagrees with us is unreasonable, and we're in a world in which far too many people operate on the assumption that they are. My concern is that Frankfurt doesn't help us out of this world, and in fact could easily make it worse.

For instance, were a teacher to assign the book and then ask students to identify some pundit, writer, or political figure who was engaged in bullshit, the papers would just consist of students ranting about out-group figures. Or, worse yet, the papers would be rants about figures that students believe are out-group for the teacher. I don't think students learn anything valuable out of either activity (although they might learn to bullshit pretty well if they took the second option). What I learned from teaching about demagoguery and propaganda (which have similar problems and missteps) is that the papers are more interesting and engaging if students are required to criticize an in-group member or organization. And students are more willing to do that work if the teacher criticizes in-group members or organizations and shares sample papers that do so.

As a final point, I should clarify something on which I'm often misunderstood. I do *not* think that "both sides are just as bad" or that all political positions are equally valid. I think some are unethical to the core and logically indefensible—those topics are off the table. But that still leaves a lot of positions with which I don't agree, and yet are defensible. Not all the good arguments are on my side. If we want a world in which people handle disagreement well, we have to show that disagreement (within reason) is valued in the class. And encouraging students to perceive those who disagree as people with bad motives and no reasons doesn't help.