ABSTRACT. This essay highlights the phenomenological dimension of analytic moral psychologist Harry Frankfurt’s account of “bullshit”. Frankfurt’s focus on the indifference to truth – the agent’s (the bullshitter’s) intentional relation to truth – suggests that bullshit is an absence of truthfulness taken in the sense Robert Sokolowski understands truthfulness. What “appears” to us when we “see” bullshit is an absence, an emptiness “in” or “behind” the bullshitter’s presentation. And as “the essence of bullshit is … that it is phony”, bullshit presents an absence of truthfulness, reveals the very faintest of passions. After highlighting the subjective dimension of bullshit and its phenomenological character in Frankfurt’s article, I try to clarify (i) the intentional structure of bullshit by sketching several different senses – some implicit in Frankfurt’s account – of how an agent may be indifferent to truthfulness and (ii) whether or not those modes of indifference qualify one as a bullshitter.

«We cannot be truthful without at least some implicit thought about being truthful. We cannot be truthful indeliberately. […] To think about being truthful […] is to do phenomenology».
Robert Sokolowski, Husserlian Meditations

«[…] [truthfulness] does not occur without our “wanting” it. […] Wanting to be truthful, veracity, is praiseworthy, and not wanting it, or not wanting to be truthful, is blameworthy».
Robert Sokolowski, Phenomenology of the Human Person

«[…] there is a passion that is even fainter than our love of truth. Surely the very faintest passion – both the least salient and the least robust – is our love of truth about ourselves».
Harry Frankfurt, The Faintest Passion
Analytic moral psychologists and phenomenologists alike may scoff at the suggestion that Harry Frankfurt was doing phenomenology. But insofar as the faintest and the very faintest passion address types of untruthfulness, we can say Frankfurt was doing phenomenology – in the broad sense Robert Sokolowski articulates – when he examines the ways agents fail to think about truth, fail to bring to life confirmed reasons for, and careful accounts of, their beliefs, actions, etc. i.e., fail to exercise their capacity for truthfulness.\(^1\) As Frankfurt the moral psychologist at least worked in the spirit of phenomenology, I would like to develop the phenomenological dimensions of his 1986 essay, *On Bullshit*, and phenomenologically develop some of his observations about «the essence of bullshit», the «indifference to truth».\(^2\) After highlighting the subjective dimension of bullshit and this phenomenological dimension of Frankfurt’s article, I attempt to phenomenologically clarify the intentional structure of bullshit by sketching several different senses – some implicit in Frankfurt’s account – of how an agent may be indifferent to truthfulness and whether or not those modes of indifference qualify one as a bullshitter.

What I hope to bring out of a phenomenological reading of Frankfurt’s account is that bullshit stems from the bullshitter’s “cares”. The bullshitter differs from both the person who “unintentionally” produces “bullshit” and the liar not according to the object these agents intend (truth) but the manner in which they intend it, namely, without or with some sense that – some care for the importance of – truth about the world and/or about oneself makes a difference (truthfulness). Focused on an *indifference* to truth, *On Bullshit* really reveals an absence of truthfulness because Frankfurt’s theory is about the self’s, the agent’s (the bullshitter’s) intentional relation to truth. When we call bullshit, suspect someone is bullshitting, or label someone a bullshitter, we are noting that what appears to us is really an absence, an emptiness, a kind of phoniness in the communication from an agent who knows what his audience is willing to let him get away with and what they are not willing to let him get

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\(^1\) Drummond 2013, pp. 101-2.

\(^2\) Frankfurt 2005, pp. 33-4. I wish to apologize in advance for drawing Fr. Sokolowski’s work into this way of conversing about truthfulness. Even if he might find this issue important, I don’t think he would approve of the language.

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away with. As «the essence of bullshit is [...] that it is phony», bullshit presents an absence of truthfulness, reveals the very faintest of passions.

1. The Subject of Bullshit: Truthfulness and The Very Faintest Passion

Few short essays in recent academic philosophy have generated a more sizable literature than Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit*. No one has more accurately and efficiently summarized Frankfurt’s theory than Jonathan Lear’s review, *Whatever*:

Frankfurt’s theory is easy to state. Both the truth-teller and the liar have it in common that they care about the truth. The person who aims at the truth tries to figure out what the world is like and to communicate that to others the liar attempts to deceive. But by his very attempt to mislead others, the liar betrays his own concern, however perverse, with how things are. […] [The] truth teller and the liar are playing opposite sides of the same game. The bullshitter is in a different game altogether. He simply does not care about the truth or falsity of what he is saying.

Lear’s rehearsal captures Frankfurt’s view of the «essence of bullshit» – the lack of «a concern with truth», «this indifference to how things are» – and the helpful distinction between the liar and the bullshitter. What makes Lear’s concise review more remarkable is that instead of losing sight of bullshit as the «indifference to truth» he highlights that oft-overlooked dimension of Frankfurt’s account, i.e., the cares of the bullshitter.

Even if the liar/bullshitter distinction is heuristically valuable as a marker for conceptually clarifying bullshit, it is a distinction that I believe is built upon and that reveals the centrality of the bullshit – the subjective correlate of bullshitting – in Frankfurt’s account. Whenever Frankfurt discusses this «indifference to truth» that he deems «the essence of bullshit», the reader finds him referring interchangeably to (the) bullshit (produced) and the bullshitter

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3 *Sokolowski* 2000, p. 36-8. Bullshit is always about what is *not* there in the presentation and thus is like many other absences that pervade our lives, e.g., memory, pictures, secrets, and especially vague speech, etc.
4 *Frankfurt* 2005, p. 47.
5 That the phoniness of bullshit has been underexplored one can see in the index to the *Philosophy and Bullshit* where phony appears only once: *Hardcastle & Resh* 2006.
6 *Lear* 2005, p. 2.
(who produces it).\textsuperscript{7} Even when we turn to Frankfurt’s descriptions of the truth to which bullshit is indifferent – «reality», «how things really are», «the relevant facts», or «correctness»\textsuperscript{8} – we find the bullshitter turning up, unsurprisingly, for it is his indifference to truth, his lack of desire to pursue and express the truth,\textsuperscript{9} i.e., the absence of truthfulness in his self-presentation, that is at stake.

That Frankfurt’s theory of bullshit is best interpreted as an absence of truthfulness more than just the agent’s indifference to truth recurs throughout the text. This feature first appears in what is the most notable section of the essay – and perhaps too its most central – his gloss on Wittgenstein’s attitude toward his ailing friend, Pascal, who claims after an operation to feel «like a dog that has been run over»:\textsuperscript{10}

The point is […] that, so far as Wittgenstein can see, Pascal offers a description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes. Her fault is not that she fails to get things right, but that she is not even trying.\textsuperscript{11}

I will return to this passage below to discuss Pascal’s indifference in more detail.\textsuperscript{12} For the moment, notice that Frankfurt’s presentation of truth as that which «constrains» the one committed to the endeavor to be truthful supports my claim that the essence of bullshit is an absence of truthfulness.

The converse of Frankfurt’s description of Pascal’s intentional act would hold that a truthful way of being would be one in which one genuinely submits oneself to truth, makes oneself answerable to, subordinates oneself to «reality», «how things really are», «the relevant facts», or «correctness». Wittgenstein’s Pascal is said to be bullshitting because she is not engaged in the «endeavor» – does not have, as the word, “endeavor”, implies, the basic desire\textsuperscript{13} – to register and report accurately how she feels. Since Frankfurt contrasts bullshit to the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality – truth or how things are – we can say that bullshit is the absence of truthfulness. And since

\textsuperscript{8} Frankfurt 2005, pp. 30-1, 65.
\textsuperscript{9} Sokolowski 2008, pp. 20-1.
\textsuperscript{10} Frankfurt 2005, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{11} Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{12} Whether or not it is right to say at this point that bullshit results from this «not even trying» to accurately «describe reality» or «paying no attention at all», Frankfurt 2005, pp. 32, 30, 62, we shall have to examine further.
\textsuperscript{13} This is so even if we assume a Hobbesian definition of endeavor (as put forward in chapter six of his Leviathan).
truthfulness entails the self’s or agent’s desire to subordinate himself to that endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality – to cultivate the virtue associated with that desire – it is no surprise that Frankfurt notes that “it is [...] selflessness that, in connection with bullshit, strikes us a inapposite”.¹⁴ We thus can set as an essential feature of bullshitters self-interest as a feature driving this absence of truthfulness.

One may note, however, that this feature seems to make the bullshitter indistinguishable from the liar, who also appears self-interested and indifferent to truth. But these are not essential features of the liar even if one of them sometimes fits. Recall that the liar and the bullshitter will be distinguished not by the object they intend – for they intend the same object – but by the manner in which they intend the object. The liar is never indifferent to the truth because the liar remains in some way – however defiant – answerable to truth. The liar will not bring truth but he keeps truth precisely in view so that he may mislead about it precisely; not bringing truth he cannot be truthful, but he remains answerable to truth, guarding against it or dancing around it. Though liars are untruthful, it is also the case that that antagonistic relation to truth is not really an absence of truthfulness or an absence of cares about truth.

As Frankfurt puts the matter, the bullshitter is in no way answerable to truth because he does not register truth at all. The bullshitter

[…]

does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. […] [The liar’s] interest in telling the truth or in lying presupposes that there is a difference between getting things wrong and getting them right, and that it is at least occasionally possible to tell the difference.¹⁵

The liar may have confirmed the truth but speaks precisely its opposite. He does not believe what he says but he wants you to believe it. The bullshitter may or not believe what he says but he wants you to believe it – or at least let him get away with it. An absence of truthfulness characterizes the bullshitter so profoundly that he is not interested (as the liar is) in making you believe what he says; that is great if he can, but it is also fine if his audience just indulges him and lets him get away with what he says.

The bullshitter lacks the desire to say what he means and mean what he says, as well as the desire to ensure that if he means what he says he has confirmed

¹⁴ FRANKFURT 2005, p. 22. To make hypothetical Bernard Williams’ remark about the historian, if one “comes before the public as one who tells the truth, […] he needs its virtues”, WILLIAMS 2002, p. 251, cited in SOKOLOWSKI 2008, p. 92.
that the matter is as he says it. It is not that he does not believe that one could
tell the difference between what is right and what is wrong, what is accurate
and what is inaccurate. It is that it does not make a difference to him – it means
nothing to him – if one does identify the difference; hence, he will say whatever
he wishes, especially about matters about which it is difficult to tell the
difference (between what he says about how things are and how things really
are). Bullshit cannot be indifference to truth, then, because one could speak the
truth and still be bullshitting. One can accidentally hit the truth, as Aristotle
notes of the person who executes a virtuous act but is not virtuous or has not
done it virtuously. One also can intentionally express the truth but not speak it
meaningfully (truthfully). If we assume (for the sake of example) the truth of
Christianity, Billy Graham preaches the truth (of the risen Christ) but not
truthfully, for he does not do it in the right way even if he does it in the right
place at the right time, (purportedly) toward the right object, and with
knowledge, i.e., he cares about how appearing to care about truth achieves his
purpose.

So, bullshit must be the absence of truthfulness, the absence of the sense of
the importance of truth and that it matters to get it right. Bullshit entails an
indifference to truth to be sure, but the essence of bullshit is found in its
attitude toward the object, which attitude reflects and is rooted in the
bullshitter’s lack of care, the absence of truthfulness (just as we might say the
intemperate person is really indifferent toward – does not really care about – a
right relation to pleasure and pain). The bullshitter is not opposed to truth or
indifferent to truth but lacks truthfulness, the virtue that cultivates the desire
for and sense of importance about getting things right.

It can go either way for the bullshitter (or the bullshitter can go either way)
but it cannot go either way for the liar as the truth for the liar must remain
concealed. That the liar must have it his way, however, does not make the liar
always and necessarily self-interested in the way that self-interest always
characterizes the bullshitter. It is not, for example, in my self-interest to lie for
the homeless stranger whom the store clerk asks if I saw shoplift some snacks.
But I do not bullshit for another even if I may (be) bullshit(ing) about another.
When I am bullshitting about another, I am really bullshitting for myself. For
example, I want to set my friend up with someone and I present that someone’s
traits with fervor and a tinge of exaggeration because I want to be the match-
maker; or I brag to my friend about this said someone with fervor and a tinge
of exaggeration because I want to be the one affiliated with accomplished and
interesting and indisputably cool folks. Hence, self-interestedness is a
necessary condition for – essential feature of – the bullshitter but not the liar on
my interpretation of bullshit as the absence of truthfulness.

This unconstrained self-interestedness of the bullshitter that I have tried to draw out of Frankfurt’s account of bullshit as the unwillingness to submit to truth – the absence of truthfulness – appears in his essay’s conclusion. Alluding to Nietzsche and post-modern positions, Frankfurt locates the «deeper sources» of bullshit in the «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».\(^{16}\) For Frankfurt, in this type of culture, «the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to the topic».\(^{17}\) It is not that someone gets something wrong or speaks vaguely about some topic that makes someone a bullshitter; what makes someone a bullshitter is how and why he presents the issue as he does. This is confirmed, I think, by the fact that we only take the one who takes the chance to speak beyond his knowledge of the relevant facts or theories as a bullshitter if he does not confess to the limits of his understanding but prefers to proceed on the assumption of all involved – to let everyone continue to believe – that he is not out of his element. If this is so, then bullshit is, indeed, found when one speaks «extensively about matters of which [one is] to some degree ignorant».\(^{18}\)

Frankfurt’s observation recalls Plato’s Socrates interrogating his fellow Athenians, especially his accuser, Meletus, in the *Apology*. But then Frankfurt’s claim would suggest that bullshit is something like what Plato calls the highest and most blameworthy form of ignorance, or thinking you know when you really do not. But bullshit is not equivalent to (functionally or otherwise) ignorance and ignorance is neither necessary nor sufficient criterion for bullshit, a point that comes clear from Frankfurt’s mention of “Snog” from Pound’s Canto LXXIV. Pound’s Snog is «called out» to name the books of the Bible and Frankfurt interprets this episode as a challenge brought to a person who «is evidently regarded as having in some way claimed to know the bible or as having claimed to care about it».\(^{19}\) If both possibilities (the over-extended knowledge claim or the inaccurate presentation of cares) are to be rightly called bullshit, something of the agent’s care must motivate his presentation.\(^{20}\) Some

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16 Frankfurt 2005, p. 64.
18 Frankfurt 2005, p. 63.
19 Frankfurt 2005, pp. 44-5.
20 Frankfurt’s own explanation of what drives the challenge to Snog betrays the privileged place of care in his account, for his observation regarding the knowledge claim is qualified, while his observation regarding the care claim is not.
care must be guiding Snog’s presentation of himself as knowing more than he does if we are to rightly call his over-extended knowledge claim bullshit.

Snog having been called-out, we can sketch two broad responses: (1) Either he will relent and concede that he does not know, or (2) he will continue to spew bullshit. If he relents, he (1a) may admit his claim was exaggerated and now he is motivated to qualify his claims or maybe even learn. If he relents, he (1b) may concede that he really does not know and just did not care that much in the first place, ultimately saying, ‘whatever’. If he does not relent, he (2a) may be in denial, truly believing he knows when he really does not. If he does not relent, he (2b) may try to defend his presentation, persisting in purporting to convey as accurate a knowledge base he knows to be questionable. It seems that in (1a) and (2a) we have significant difference in degrees of ignorance but not bullshit, whereas in (1b) and (2b) we have different types of bullshit rather than mere ignorance.\(^{21}\)

In (1a) we might not wish to call this bullshit because the agent sketched moves from untruthfulness to truthfulness. However uncultivated the virtue of truthfulness, this agent still endeavors toward truth, still is possessed of «veracity [...] the impulse toward truth»; this person may lack «the proper cultivation» of truthfulness but has not fully lost his way to properly cultivating truthfulness.\(^{22}\) In (2a) we might not wish to call this bullshit because such a criterion for bullshit would require us to catalogue too many instances in life as bullshit, for this looks more like self-deception and the highest form of ignorance that most concerned Socrates. This (2a) Snog might say stupid or pitiable shit, but it is not bullshit; it is just that the agent is wrong about the truth but believes he is right, and we have seen that it is not because someone gets something wrong that they are bullshitters who have produced bullshit.

In (1b) we might wish to call this bullshit because the agent is just simply indifferent to truth in a careless way; he tried to get away with a claim (maybe one that made him look smarter or more pious than he is) but failed – and he does not even care about that. In (2b) we have a bona fide case of bullshit because the agent is knowingly indifferent to the truth, knowingly (intentionally) trying to get away with a claim to more than he has (maybe one that makes him look smarter or more pious than he is). Our hypothetical (1b) Snog who relents is comfortable being a bullshitter in the negligent and annoying sense, for he is just rambling about and pays no attention to his error or the correction, etc. Our hypothetical (2b) Snog who continues to spew bullshit seems concerned not with the (books of the) Bible but with his

\(^{21}\) Thanks to Chris Arroyo for helping me more clearly formulate this sketch.

\(^{22}\) SOKOLOWSKI 2008, p. 20.
appearance or reputation. What interests me about Frankfurt’s example and what I shall have to develop in the concluding section is that (2b) Snog is not only untruthful in the sense that he does not care enough about truth to confirm it or bring it to evidence for himself before he speaks it to other, but also that (2b) Snog lacks truthfulness regarding himself (less a self-deception and more “subconscious” refusal to report what he is or refusal to not report what he is not) and not about the books of the Bible. Snog could take a stab at it and get it right – get the truth or hit «correctness» as Frankfurt called it above – but he would still be bullshitting. This type of good fortune is the stuff of undergraduate myths – successfully bullshitting one’s way through that exam.

Snog is called out because his listener has rendered the “verdict” that the things he expresses do not measure up to what he claims them to be – and he did not measure this correctly in light of what his audience would be willing to let him get away with. What does not measure up is Snog to what Snog claims to others about himself, what tells others he knows and/or cares about, i.e., purports to take seriously, but does not. Snog is called out for bullshitting because his claim does not appear – to borrow a phrase Sokolowski borrows from Michael Oakeshott – to be «vere dictum, “something truly stated”».

It is not that the facts themselves are incorrect (necessarily) but the way in which they are stated that seems at least phony but perhaps also incorrect; there is a difference between a guy who goes on a fishing trip to Maine and says he caught a fish when he did not (a liar) and a guy who goes on a fishing trip to Maine and describes a fish quite different than the one he caught (the bullshitter). Bullshit is called here because the listener senses the speaker’s misrepresentation of himself. And so what Frankfurt’s gloss on Snog implies is that bullshit stems less from what one claims to know or be and more from how and why one claims it – perhaps too strongly or weakly, too thoroughly or incompletely, too precisely or vaguely, too confidently or mildly – as he does.

Here is why the Socrates of the Apology can help us understand what Frankfurt vaguely presents as the cause of that indifference to truth that we will call bullshit as the absence of truthfulness. The figures in Plato’s Apology – Meletus, the poets, and the craftsmen – are not merely characters along for the Socrates’s pious ride. Rather, Socrates challenges these members of society who are thought to occupy the role of making young Athenians excellent, teaching them the distinctively human type of arête – or at least not corrupting them as Socrates is accused of having done. These accusers are folks thought to be – and indeed in his accusations against Socrates as one who corrupts Meletus presents himself as or purports to be – «expert in this kind of excellence, the

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human and social kind». Although Socrates disrupts the status quo of Athenian culture and does so in a way that captures the attention of its youth, Meletus’ accusation that he is corrupting the youth is neither an accurate presentation of the facts nor of his apprehension of the facts but a ploy to protect his status or reputation as the status quo enables it. Indeed, Plato chides him and all who are like them because they are «not ashamed of [their] eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while [they] do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth». They’re untruthful.

These folks all have a care or concern different from the one they purport to have, namely, a care or concern for reputation, etc., over a care for wisdom and truth. But Meletus is not unaware of, or not paying attention to, truth; he is not indifferent to truth in this sense. Meletus is quite aware of, and quite attentive to, what his culture considers true and good. Indeed, he can successfully bring his case against Socrates because of his purported thoughtfulness about a purported truth. But he has not genuinely submitted to truth. He demonstrates an absence of truthfulness, i.e., he lacks the care, the virtue that «is the proper cultivation» of «veracity […] the impulse toward truth». Even if Meletus were sincere in his accusations against Socrates and really honestly said what he believed to be the case, he still could fail to be truthful because, like the Athenian jury members who voted against Socrates, he has not, as Sokolowski puts it, taken «appropriate steps to determine the truth in question”, not «resist[ed] the temptations of indolence, bias, partisanship, and wishful thinking». Indeed, Plato shows Meletus to be a bullshitter (in the Snog (1b) sense) by portraying his silence in response to Socrate’s dismantling of the charge Meletus brought – a silence that alone could capture the vapidity of Meletus’ presentation.

These characters lack this «tendency toward truth as such», are not engaged in the «endeavor», do not posses or have not activated the human «desire to posses truth» that Sokolwoski calls “veracity” and I think Frankfurt calls the very faintest passion. To say that bullshit is the absence of truthfulness – the failure perhaps to submit to the veracity born in us – is to say that it fails at

28 In various ways of developing these scenes in Plato’s Apology, one could make a case that it is the poets and craftsmen who are bullshitters but not the politicians, since the politicians’ scheming seems more insidious. My thanks to Christopher Arroyo for reminding me to qualify this interpretation.
what Sokolowski calls the «double moral claim: that I am telling you what I think is the truth and that I am responsible enough to have carefully determined the truth». To put matters charitably, these characters may be doing the former but certainly have not done the latter. Both failures reflect the very faintest passion.

It is just this selflessness demanded by the virtue of truthfulness – the cultivation of the desire to know and represent the truth about oneself in word and deed, «to genuinely submit to the constraints that the endeavor to provide an accurate description of reality imposes» – that is inapposite in bullshit; or, it is just this self-interestedness driving the indifferent to truthfulness that is inapposite in bullshit. bullshit according to my reading of Frankfurt’s theory is an absence of truthfulness, the «very faintest passion», our lack of desire for «love of truth about ourselves». To put it most succinctly, bullshit is not captured by a focus on the “indifference to truth” but instead by a focus on the “indifference to truth”, an absence of truthfulness.

2. Differentiating the Indifference to Truthfulness

Bullshit is about the agent, the bullshitter, and his mindful or intentional absence of truthfulness. And a self-interest necessarily accompanies this absence of truthfulness. Bullshit is less (necessarily) about the correctness of, and more (necessarily) about how the agent presents his view of the world and/or his place in the world in light of that «double moral claim», to use Sokolowski’s phrase once more. Two issues surrounding Frankfurt’s theory require may underscore the benefit of shifting to a view of bullshit as the absence of truthfulness. First, the indifference to truth can be said in many

31 Williams 2002, p. 126. To put it differently, bullshitters lack one of the features of truthfulness identified by Bernard Williams as accuracy, which «consists in the desire for truth “for its own sake” – the passion for getting it right» that seems to support sincerity. As sincerity rests on accuracy, we shall have to say that bullshit as the absence of truthfulness will rests on the absence of this dimension of truthfulness, namely, the passion for getting things about oneself right. For what phenomenology has to say about the issue of sincerity as it relates to both the issue of truth and truthfulness and contemporary analytic literature on the same topic, see Anne Ozar’s good and helpful essay, Ozar 2013.
32 Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.
33 Frankfurt 1992, p. 5. It is perhaps for such reasons that Frankfurt claims that sincerity is bullshit, see Frankfurt 2005, p. 67. For a culture of postmodern skepticism that denies reliable access to an objective reality to which one might submit oneself precludes accuracy, and where there is no accuracy, there is no sincerity.
ways; second, there seem to be some discourses so constitutionally divorced from truth as to call into question our subjective, intentional criterion.

Since agents manifest an indifference to truthfulness from very different concerns, motives, or attitudes, not all indifference to truthfulness amounts to bullshit. All bullshit, we should say, will be an “indifference to truth” (absence of truthfulness), but not all “indifference to truth” will be bullshit. When Frankfurt articulates the essence of bullshit as an indifference to truth, he notes two different ways of being indifferent to truth, namely, mindlessly or mindfully, thoughtlessly or thoughtfully. I draw this distinction out of Frankfurt’s description of the aforementioned Pascal’s intentional state or state of mind in contrast to another example of a bullshitter in Frankfurt’s article.

When discussing Wittgenstein’s Pascal, Frankfurt concludes that she cannot be said to be lying because she does not «presume that she knows the truth» and is not trying to bring about in Wittgenstein the belief that X is true when in fact she knows or believes X to be false.34 Hence, Pascal’s shortcoming or bullshitting is found in her lack of a connection to a concern with the truth – this indifference to «how things really are» – an indifference Frankfurt describes as «not even trying», or «mindless» or «thoughtless».35 On the other hand, Frankfurt later describes the bullshitter as one who essentially «does not care whether the things he says describe reality. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose».36

This bullshitter’s purposive indifference to the truth, unlike Pascal’s, is intentional, self-interested, and seems guided by a competing care or concern that trumps truth. Frankfurt remains cryptic about this bullshitter’s purpose, offering only various functionally equivalent expressions: the bullshitter «misrepresents himself in a certain way»,37 «necessarily attempt[s] to deceive us about […] his enterprise», «is trying to get away with something»,38 «misrepresents what he is up to»,39 and has an «interest in getting away with what he says».40 This bullshitter, like the liar, «represents himself falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth», but unlike the liar this bullshitter «hides» the very fact of his indifference to truth – he hides the absence of truthfulness in his self-presentation.41 The liar hides the truth itself; the

34 Frankfurt 2005, p. 33.
36 Frankfurt 2005, p. 56.
38 Frankfurt 2005, p. 23.
40 Frankfurt 2005, p. 57.
41 Frankfurt 2005, p. 56.
bullshitter hides the truth about himself (whether this requires him to hide the truth about some matter or other is merely coincidental and indeed the bullshitter is fine with presenting the truth if the truth serves his purposes). This description of this purposive bullshitter seems quite different from Pascal who is said to be indifferent to truth by virtue of «not even trying» and who does not seem self-interested in her indifference to the truth (if she is really even indifferent to truth).

The bullshitter’s purpose, however, remains vague. Why, for example, does the person who caught a fish in Maine need to embellish the details of the catch? Indeed, it seems that liars reverse or invert the facts; for the liar, «there is a difference between getting things wrong and getting them right, and that it is at least occasionally possible to tell the difference». The bullshitter does not reverse the facts but overplays or downplays them – and typically around debatable issues or claims to be A, B, or C, where A, B, or C refer not only to facts about the world, but also to the cares, commitments, achievements, or attributes in oneself that cannot easily be detected and rarely can be falsified even if detected as bullshit; in bullshit it is often not «possible to tell the difference» between appearance and reality.

As one fellow in the barber shop says to another in Eddie Murphy’s Coming to America, «You ain’t never met Dr. Martin Luther the King!» That is, I do not believe you, but we cannot prove it and neither can you and yet you insist; this fella may be lying but he may have been a member of some social organization to which King was introduced and so he “met” Dr. King but not in the way we really mean that expression. To take another example, I recently was asked to be an extra in a fitness spot run by one of our local news broadcasts; when reporting this to my friends and spouse, I might have misrepresented how this invitation reflects my status as “fit” by leaving out the fact that the spot was about to run in mere minutes and they were short a malingering “actor”. Whatever. These examples are designed to show that what the bullshitter hides is his truthfulness (or lack thereof) about his cares, commitment, achievements, affiliations.

Frankfurt’s essay thus presents two different accounts of a bullshitting agent’s indifference to truth. On the one hand, he maintains that some bullshit stems from an agent, such as Pascal, «not even trying to get things right»; on the other hand, he later claims that some bullshit stems from an agent who «does not care whether the things he says describe reality. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose». Since he describes the first
manner of indifference, moreover, as «mindless» and «thoughtless», the implication is that the second manner of indifference is mindful and thoughtful.45 The first manner of producing bullshit does not entail trying – is unintentional, mindless, and thoughtless – while the second manner of producing bullshit entails the opposite, namely, «trying to get away with something», specifically, an «interest in getting away with what he says», as Frankfurt puts it.46

I have emphasized the importance of highlighting what Frankfurt terms the essence of bullshit as the essence of the bullshitter and not bullshit itself – an absence of truthfulness and not merely indifference to truth. But some analytic moral psychologists have objected that the focus on the “indifference to truth” rather than the “indifference to truth” creates a misleading view of the essence of bullshit. G. A. Cohen seizes on just this point in his Deeper into Bullshit.47

Cohen holds that «it is a limitation of Frankfurt’s article that […] he took for granted that the bull wears the semantic trousers» and thus he overlooked an «out-put» centered type of bullshit.48 Since Frankfurt implicitly focuses on the bull(shitter), he reduces (wittingly or not) all bullshit to intentional “indifference to truth”. But, Cohen argues, «it is neither necessary nor sufficient for every kind of bullshit that it be produced by one who is informed by indifference to the truth, or […] any other distinctive intentional state».49 Cohen’s critique thus targets exactly what I wish to say we should emphasize about Frankfurt’s essay if we wish to get closer to the essence of bullshit, namely, the absence of truthfulness – the intention of the agent in his lack of care about pursuing truth or sense that getting it right matters. For Cohen, this focus on the subjective correlate of bullshit obscures types of bullshit that may be produced unintentionally (e.g., a student seduced by post-modern, specifically, Heideggerian thought who confuses obscurity for profundity and, however earnestly, spouts off about how the “nothing nothings”, or whatever).50 The proper target of criticism, Cohen concludes, should be «the product, which is

45 Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.
46 Frankfurt 2005, pp. 23, 56.
47 Cohen 2002. Cohen’s Deeper into Bullshit is largely regarded as the best of the secondary literature responding to or developing Frankfurt’s account, and it is the exception to – and perhaps also the cause of – the aforementioned oversight of the subjective dimension of bullshit in the literature about Frankfurt’s theory.
50 Cohen 2002, pp. 335-6. The allusion to Heidegger is Cohen’s, but I have embellished by adding these now hackneyed (but no less discussed) cryptic remarks. I think it is bullshit (in a technical and non-technical sense) to simply dismiss Heidegger and Heidegger scholarship the way that Cohen does.
visible, and not the process, which is not» – the bullshit and not the bullshitter.\textsuperscript{51}

Though Frankfurt does not expressly articulate a type of bullshit unintentionally produced, his account could accommodate Cohen’s interest in a type of bullshit unintentionally produced as the result of the ambiguity of the notion of “indifference” to truth. That is, Cohen wants to emphasize the “indifference to truth” and minimize the “indifference to truth”. But Cohen’s desire to focus on the object or product of bullshit and thus move away from the implicit focus in Frankfurt’s article on the subjective correlate of bullshit (what I have interpreted as the absence of truthfulness) exacerbates the ambiguity in Frankfurt’s account of indifference to truthfulness.

If we accepted Cohen’s claim that one can produce bullshit mindlessly or unintentionally – or if we accepted Frankfurt’s account of the indifference to truth as it stands and admits of this ambiguity – then we are left with a concept of bullshit so broad as to let nothing escape and which thus produces “false positives” (such as we saw in (1a) and (2a) Snog). If a child repeats the prejudicial opinions held by the parent or if the earnest student of Heidegger engages in an extended discussion of how the “nothing nothings”, it is difficult to see how this is bullshit even if it is shit of another sort (e.g., sad or stupid).\textsuperscript{52} The child and the students may get things wrong, but at least they are trying to articulate things in relation to some view of truth – however mistaken – at least they have submitted to some view of truth and operate within its constraints. Cohen may be right to ask of these agents that they confirm these truths they espouse; he may be even justified in saying to the student, “Don’t give me that shit”, or trying to teach the child to see the world differently, but he would be wrong to call their claims bullshit and overly harsh to call them bullshitters. If Cohen is right and Heidegger is bullshit, then bullshit gets propagated more by the ignorance (of the Snog (2a) type) than an untruthfulness as a failure to confirm or verify something as true and good (of the Snog (1a) type).\textsuperscript{53}

Frankfurt’s account – as it stands with his ambiguous descriptions of the indifference to truth – and Cohen’s suggested revision thus could not accommodate the desideratum that while all bullshit will be an indifference to truth, not all indifference to truth will be bullshit. What is needed is a phenomenological development of the intentional structure of the essence of bullshit, that absence of truthfulness. Even when an agent’s attitude reflects an

\textsuperscript{52} John Davenport has made this claim about Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit being too broad in a different context in his excellent contribution to this literature: Davenport 2015, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{53} This is what seems to have happened with Cohen himself as he mentions at the outset of his essay how he outgrew his younger-self’s attraction to Neo-Marxist Structuralism.
indifference to truth or a subordination of truth to some other interest, we still would need to know more about the reasons guiding the agent’s attitude if we are to declare his remark bullshit or not. «What we are really interested in isolating is the underlying intentional attitude [and whether or not] it deserves such disapproval or rebuke». 54

3. Unintentional Indifference to the Truth: No bullshit

Despite the tensions we have identified in Frankfurt’s discussion of the different ways agents are said to be bullshitters by virtue of being indifferent to truth, his descriptions provide the basis for a fuller examination of the intentional structure of the absence of truthfulness and thus a potentially clearer – at least more circumscribed – account of the essence of bullshit.

When Frankfurt traces bullshit to an agent’s disingenuous submission to truth – i.e., «description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes» 55 – he offers what could be called an analytic phenomenology, a glimpse into what we have seen Sokolowski has termed truthfulness and veracity. Sokolowski construes being truthful in the everyday sense as the «making and confirming of judgments about things». 56 Truthfulness, or what «makes it possible to be truthful», means to take or intend reality «thoughtfully, the way the human has objects – with the possibility of expressing what is present to him». 57 The absence of truthfulness in this case would be, as it seems to be on Frankfurt’s account, a kind of lazy making of judgments, a making that never receives a confirmation because it stems from a disinterest in exercising veracity or failing to care that it matters to get it right.

Returning to Pascal’s supposed bullshit – rooted in an indifference to truth that frustrates Wittgenstein because «she is not even trying» 58 – Frankfurt characterizes her fault as «mindlessness», «her speaking about her feelings thoughtlessly, without conscientious attention to the relevant facts» and thus

54 Davenport 2015, p. 5. Davenport puts the matter, «What we are really interested in isolating is the underlying intentional attitude that deserves such disapproval or rebuke». I alter slightly his expression because I wish to emphasize that our first concern should be to discover which modes of indifference qualify as bullshit.
55 Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.
56 Sokolowski 1973, p. 3.
58 Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.
not «‘wrought with greatest care’».

When Pascal claims to feel like a dog that has been run over, she is surely speaking loosely, but if she is choosing to communicate in hyperbole, simile, allegory, exaggeration, satire, etc., she is just as surely not speaking thoughtlessly or mindlessly.

Assuming we were to grant that she had spoken thoughtlessly or mindlessly, was unintentionally indifferent to the truth in this way, we still would have two options to consider before declaring her description bullshit or not. On the one hand, it is possible to interpret Pascal here as mindlessly passing along a phrase that she does not understand and to which she has never given any thought – such as when we ourselves might be sick and tell a friend we “feel like shit” – and to this extent we could say that she is being indifferent to truth and untruthful, for she has made but not confirmed a proposition. If we were to specify and say that we call her expression bullshit because «she is repeating [this description of reality] quite mindlessly and without any regard for how things really are», this kind of mindless or thoughtless indifference to truth would make bullshit a concept too broad; indeed, it would commit us to the claim that any student who has ever been ill prepared for a test or a child who has repeated the sayings of their parents (good or bad) would be bullshitting and have produced some bullshit.

On the other hand, maybe she misperceives the situation as an opportunity for humor and in this way is mindlessly lazy in trying to communicate truth; in this sense, it is not that she is indifferent to truth but that she is not careful – or full of care – about truth as manifest in her possibly having mistaken the situation. Frankfurt himself considers the possibility that Pascal is not being indifferent to truth but just trying to «speak colorfully, or to appear vivacious or good-humored».

Pascal would then perhaps seem to care enough to know that a «genuine submission to the way things are» would be tiresome to even the most charitable audience who would have to listen to her grouse about her post-operative condition. She cares about the situation as a whole and not about the bare facts of how things are. As such, we could say that she is not indifferent to truth as correctness but disregards its importance in this context of friendly conversation. Even if we were to argue that the attempt at liveliness or humor misses the ideal of truth, both possibilities seem more appropriately understood as a mode of selflessness; insofar as selflessness is not apposite to

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60 Thanks to Brian Harding for bringing this point to my attention.
61 Davenport 2015. Davenport’s development of Frankfurt’s notion of wantonness in this context is thoughtful and provocative.
62 Frankfurt 2005, p. 35.
bullshit, Pascal’s description of reality does not qualify as bullshit.\textsuperscript{63}

Pascal may describe the relevant facts clumsily, but she does not miss the truth by misrepresenting it or her relation to it – and especially not in a way that is vicious or that a vicious person would. There is no absence of truthfulness in Pascal and she is not a bullshitter or even bullshitting, for even if we were to say she was indifferent to truth as correctness, she is not trying to mislead Wittgenstein but trying to be entertaining or something like that. If this is a plausible interpretation, then Pascal shows a sensitivity to the social virtue of wit (even if she does not know how to be witty in all the right ways) while Wittgenstein shows himself to be a boor – «[one] who can neither make a joke […] nor put up with those who do […]. The boor […] contributes nothing and finds fault with everything».\textsuperscript{64} Pascal does not seem indifferent to truth as Wittgenstein accuses. She may or may not be careful in this situation; she may be trying to get away with a bad joke or lazy description, but she does not seem indifferent to truth as a result of pursuing some self-interest that requires being phony in some way and trying to get away with what she says. Whatever we can conclude, she is not careless about – without any concern for or paying any attention to – truth.

Being careless, of course, may be a different way of being unintentionally or mindlessly or thoughtlessly indifferent to truth. Consider the person who rambles and rambles and afflicts us with all manner of inanities in conversation (our only hope about which is that it ends quickly or contains some bizarre remark that we can laugh about later).\textsuperscript{65} I have in mind the kind of rambling George Carlin describes in his skit, \textit{Stupid Bullshit}:

\begin{quote}
Did I tell you about my mom and dad? Well, my mom and dad went on vacation to […] Kentucky. This was about six years ago, I think. Seemed like it was six, about six years ago […]. Six or seven, possibly seven, ‘could be… somewhere in there, six, seven, […] more than six, less than seven… Let’s call it six-and-a-half. So, my mom and dad went on vacation to […] Kentucky, and my dad found a big rock, or what he thought was a big rock. Turns out it was a dinosaur turd, a petrified dinosaur turd, twenty-seven pounder. You know, now that I think about it, it might have been eight years ago. That would have been closer to Y2K. Remember Y2K? What ever happened? Everybody was all worried about that and nothing ever happened. Big fuss, and nothing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{63} FRANKFURT 2005, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{64} ARISTOTLE, \textit{Eth. Nic.}, IV 8 (translation by Barnes).
\textsuperscript{65} I do not have in mind the lonely or the bored who often will say anything or ask any question to keep the conversation going; these are serious and unfortunate circumstances.
ever happened […]. Gosh, that’s strange, you know […]. Let’s say it was eight years ago […] it was either eight or five […].

We may very likely call this rambler a bullshitter in everyday language. This rambler is indifferent to truth as a result of his being careless in general. What he never seems to register (and thus what ruffles Carlin’s feather) is just a sense of what is and is not a significant detail to include in sharing the story, what is and is not worth one’s time, or what is or is not valuable. The rambler cannot distinguish the worthwhile from the trivial because he does not even try. As a result, every excruciating detail, every tangent he introduces seems relevant and is presented with equal importance, leaving us to think “what is”, or “please get to”, the point.

A mindless indifference to the truth that stemmed from a careless attitude creates stupid shit but is not essentially bullshit. The rambler, being careless in general, does not will bullshit but a kind of careless indifference (if one can will radical carelessness); as such, this rambler does not willfully misrepresent himself or try to hide something. He is certainly indifferent to truth in the sense that he mindlessly passes along thoughts without confirming them and without any regard for what he discloses. One might even say he is thoughtlessly self-indulgent and to this extent selfish; but these features alone cannot qualify him as a bullshitter or a bullshitting strictly speaking. That he is self-interested insofar as he is self-indulgent does not make that feature of bullshit fit in this instance if one were to hold that this rambler strictly speaking has no interests. Since the true or the false, the good or the bad simply do not register for this fellow (except in a peculiar kind of equivalence) this careless person is not trying to get away with something – though he perhaps gets away with your time and his; he is simply too thoughtless and would rather grant the listener any objection or expression of incredulity and gloss over that detail in order to return to his story. What the rambler offers if he is truly careless is not bullshit but simply stupid shit.

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67 One could draw, here, on what Heidegger calls curiosity. For an account of the relationship between bullshit and idle talk, see Davenport 2015. I would prefer to develop the notion of curiosity in relation to truthfulness that sees it as Sokolowski understands it, namely, as misdirected veracity.

68 So, we could be untruthful in the sense of unconcerned with confirming and providing reasons for our beliefs and opinions. While that is surely lazy and untruthful, it is not always bullshit. Making small talk about politics or sports or passing around company gossip does not seem to qualify as bullshit even if it is untruthful in the sense that the passing along – idle talk, as Heidegger put it – is done without thoughtfulness, without understanding or even an attempt to understand. This I take to be Heidegger’s reason for insisting that he is not passing a normative judgment on idle talk but making an ontological point. If, on the other hand, one were to gossip by way of intending
however, in which this rambler could be said to be a bullshitter carelessly (thoughtlessly or mindlessly) indifferent to truth and that is if we were to assume that he tells us this story as a way to affiliate himself with something – and thereby present himself as – interesting or funny or in some way worthwhile.

Since we can think of types of indifference to truth that do not qualify, strictly speaking, as bullshit, we have concluded that not all indifference to truth is bullshit. Mindless or thoughtless indifference to truth does not seem to produce bullshit. Pascal’s indifference to truth, which lacks care insofar as it is not careful, is unintentionally indifferent to truth, not driven by self-interest, not trying to get away with something, and thus is not bullshit; the rambler’s indifference to truth, which lacks care insofar as it stems from a careless character, is unintentionally indifferent to truth, not necessarily driven by self-interest (because it has no real interests at all), not trying to get away with something, and thus is not bullshit even if it may be annoying, stupid shit. Since all indifference to the truth would be mindless and thoughtless but not necessarily bullshit, we should speak of an absence of truthfulness rather than indifference to truth when seeking the essence of bullshit.

4. Bullshit: Intentional Absence of Truthfulness

In a passage underappreciated in the scholarship on *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt elaborates on the essence of bullshit as indifference to the truth, claiming, «[the

(mindfully or thoughtfully) to turn the news into a rumor that would humiliate, disparage, or otherwise injure the subject of the discussion, then gossip in this way may turn out to be indifference to truthfulness that fits that first criterion for bullshit. This type of gossip understands that it is passing along something damaging because it is interesting to the curious who lack veracity, thus privileging the interesting over the true and the good. This gossiping indifference to truthfulness is not the kind of benign neglect seen in idle talk or what is called too loosely and carelessly, “bullshitting”, but is really just “shooting the shit”. Rather, this gossip that is at least tinged with malice purports to be in the know about purportedly important shit – or at least things that “the gossips” agree is important; the gossiper is a bullshitter because he simply uses information as a vehicle to misrepresent himself as one with valuable cares and interests, one important or attentive enough to be outfitted with this critical information. Gossip understood in this way will be an absence of truthfulness in a different sense than we have been discussing. Gossip in this sense might have all the facts right and may have verified them, thus answering to the truth in one obvious but secondary way, for to verify the information not for itself but in order to pass along “correct” information for petty, self-interested reasons and yet without the gossiper ever really seeing himself as self-interested. Whether or not the gossip is false, the gossiper’s gossip is bullshit because it lacks truthful self-presentation because it does not care about the information reported but about what the reporting says about the reporter.

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bullshitter] does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. *He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose*.\(^{69}\) This is what is really going on with Max Black’s Fourth of July Orator who goes on and on and in an impassioned way about the greatness of the United States’ Founding Fathers and the divine guidance they say – and he purports to believe – they had. In Frankfurt’s assessment, Black’s orator is a bullshitter because:

> it is not an interest in what anyone thinks about [the Founding Fathers] that motivates his speech […]. What he cares about is what people think of him. He wants them to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our country […].\(^{70}\)

The bullshitter in this case purports to care about or take seriously something true and good, but his real project is one of self-presentation. This bullshitter portrays himself as truthful so that he can appear as a profound thinker about important matters. Bullshit thus appears as an absence of truthfulness guided by a self-interest in constructing an image for others of how one would like another to perceive him. The orator wants to get away with what he says or does because he wants others to think he is just how he portrays himself or what he portrays himself to be but is not. All three features of bullshit are found in this fellow.

The things and the truth that the bullshitter does not describe accurately are things and the truth about *himself*. Bullshit is the very faintest passion, a life that «involves a kind of bluff […] [and] is more especially not a matter of falsity but fakery […]. For the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*.\(^{71}\) That is, the bullshitter has said true things with an absence of truthfulness (like Billy Graham or (2b) Snog assuming he gets the books of the *Bible* right). Bullshit is not indifferent to truth as «correctness» or «how things are». Rather, bullshit attends to truth, purports to be serious about the issues conveyed but without truthfulness. The bullshitter does not try to persuade us of its opposite (as the liar does) but he claims to care about or tries to be (appear as) the truth that he believes others want to see if they are to let him get away with what he says. The bullshitter identifies what others consider the features of the valuable or estimable and then he aims to appear to be these things – even if he really is not these things. Bullshit is thus the absence of truthfulness where truthfulness is understood not only as a desire to get things

\(^{69}\) Frankfurt 2005, p. 56.

\(^{70}\) Frankfurt 2005, pp. 17-8 (italics in original).

\(^{71}\) Frankfurt 2005, pp. 46-7.
right for their own sake, but also, as Aristotle used the term, as an accurate presentation of oneself to others with respect to things – one’s cares, commitments, achievements, affiliations, etc. – that the community agrees bring repute; bullshit is thus an intentionally (though not necessarily self-consciously) inaccurate presentation of oneself to others with respect to things that bring repute, makes one estimable.

We have now arrived at the essence of a bullshitter and thus the essence of bullshit as the absence of truthfulness. Black’s orator demonstrates not an indifference to truth but an absence of truthfulness rooted in a self-interested desire to get away with what he says so he can seem to be – and be taken as – what he really is not. The bullshitter is faking it, faking truthfulness, and as you know if you have ever faked it, faking it is the opposite of «not even trying», for it requires a good deal of effort. As noted in the introduction, «the essence of bullshit is […] that it is phony».  

72 This essential bullshitter (1) is indifferent to the truthfulness, (2) tries to misrepresent himself in a certain way or get away with what he says, so that he (3) can realize his self-interest of appearing to others as he wishes to be and thus as he wishes others to perceive him.

If we take truthfulness as genuinely submitting to the constraints that an «endeavor» to accurately present reality imposes on how we make and confirm judgments, then bullshitters precisely pay attention to this demand. The bullshitter is not truthful in the sense of demonstrating a love of truth itself; he instrumentalizes this kind of truthfulness precisely to appear legitimate if called on his bullshit. The bullshitter at least needs to have the right sources and sound like a person who knows or cares about truth (is truthful); he must speak with a tone of authority or confidence or assurance or earnestness or gravity or whatever the situation demands of the performance. As a phony, then, the bullshitter is not indifferent to truth but characterized by an absence of truthfulness because he needs to refine his bullshit in the way of truth and seem serious about it in just the way he believes others would expect him to construe the truth and his seriousness about it if they are to let him get away with what he says. In any event, the bullshitter will be characterized by an absence of truthfulness, especially about things (achievements, attributes, affiliations, cares, etc.) that bring repute, «claiming qualities that gratify other people and that allow someone to avoid detection when he claims to be what he is not – a wise diviner or doctor, for instance».  

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FRANKFURT 2005, p. 47.


5. Conclusion

I have tried to argue that Frankfurt’s account is more about the bullshitter than the bullshit and that this is not the problem for his account that analytic moral psychology sees for it. Rather, the essence of bullshit cannot be the indifference to truth on pain of producing too broad a concept of bullshit. On Frankfurt’s account, since bullshit stems from a failure to subordinate oneself to truth – an indifference to truth and not merely an indifference to truth – bullshit reflects and results from the agent’s attitude – his lack of care about truth and the sense that it is important to get it right – and so is better understood as absence of truthfulness. Bullshit as the absence of truthfulness certainly produces an indifference to truth – a failure to get right some relevant fact about the world, confirm opinions with evidence, etc. But it is a failure to want to get right or take seriously some relevant facts or issues about the world, etc., rooted in a desire to want to appear to get right or take seriously some facts or issues about the world.

There is a laziness to bullshit’s phoniness that purports to be truthful, to care about and have gotten right some relevant facts or issues about the world that is not found in the liar. And if my development of Frankfurt’s account of bullshit and the essence of bullshit presents a convincing revision, then I think that what Frankfurt meant when he declared sincerity bullshit is actually that sincerity is bullshit for the bullshitter. That is, once we have forfeited truthfulness or let our veracity dry up; once we «deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and […] therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are», we concede that «facts about ourselves are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution. Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial […] and insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit too». I do not think Frankfurt thinks sincerity itself is bullshit. I think he will not grant the luxury of sincerity to the kind of skeptic who tries to hold that it is unimportant to get it right, to pursue truth, except that precious “truth” regarding his inner self. Insofar as that may be the case, we should say that insincerity is bullshit.

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