

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry.

In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory. I propose to begin the devel-

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opment of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis. I shall not consider the rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit. My aim is simply to give a rough account of what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not—or (putting it somewhat differently) to articulate, more or less sketchily, the structure of its concept.

Any suggestion about what conditions are logically both necessary and sufficient for the constitution of bullshit is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. For one thing, the expression *bullshit* is often employed quite loosely—simply as a generic term of abuse, with no very specific literal meaning. For another,

the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous that no crisp and perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean. Nonetheless it should be possible to say something helpful, even though it is not likely to be decisive. Even the most basic and preliminary questions about bullshit remain, after all, not only unanswered but unasked.

So far as I am aware, very little work has been done on this subject. I have not undertaken a survey of the literature, partly because I do not know how to go about it. To be sure, there is one quite obvious place to look—the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *OED* has an entry for *bullshit* in the supplementary volumes, and it also has entries

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for various pertinent uses of the word *bull* and for some related terms. I shall consider some of these entries in due course. I have not consulted dictionaries in languages other than English, because I do not know the words for bullshit or bull in any other language. Another worthwhile source is the title essay in *The Prevalence of Humbug* by Max Black.¹ I am uncertain just how close in meaning the word *humbug* is to the word *bullshit*. Of course, the words are not freely and fully interchangeable; it is clear that they are used differently. But the difference appears on the whole to have more to do with

¹ Max Black, *The Prevalence of Humbug* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

considerations of gentility, and certain other rhetorical parameters, than with the strictly literal modes of significance that concern me most. It is more polite, as well as less intense, to say “Humbug!” than to say “Bullshit!” For the sake of this discussion, I shall assume that there is no other important difference between the two.

Black suggests a number of synonyms for *humbug*, including the following: *balderdash*, *claptrap*, *hokum*, *drivel*, *buncombe*, *imposture*, and *quackery*. This list of quaint equivalents is not very helpful. But Black also confronts the problem of establishing the nature of humbug more directly, and he offers the following formal definition:

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HUMBUG: deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.²

A very similar formulation might plausibly be offered as enunciating the essential characteristics of bullshit. As a preliminary to developing an independent account of those characteristics, I will comment on the various elements of Black's definition.

Deceptive misrepresentation: This may sound pleonastic. No doubt what Black has in mind is that humbug is necessarily designed or intended to deceive, that its misrepresentation is not merely

² Ibid., p. 143.

inadvertent. In other words, it is *deliberate* misrepresentation. Now if, as a matter of conceptual necessity, an intention to deceive is an invariable feature of humbug, then the property of being humbug depends at least in part upon the perpetrator's state of mind. It cannot be identical, accordingly, with any properties—either inherent or relational—belonging just to the utterance by which the humbug is perpetrated. In this respect, the property of being humbug is similar to that of being a lie, which is identical neither with the falsity nor with any of the other properties of the statement the liar makes, but which requires that the liar makes his statement in a certain

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state of mind—namely, with an intention to deceive.

It is a further question whether there are any features essential to humbug or to lying that are *not* dependent upon the intentions and beliefs of the person responsible for the humbug or the lie, or whether it is, on the contrary, possible for any utterance whatsoever to be—given that the speaker is in a certain state of mind—a vehicle of humbug or of a lie. In some accounts of lying there is no lie unless a false statement is made; in others a person may be lying even if the statement he makes is true, as long as he himself believes that the statement is false and intends by making it to deceive. What about

humbug and bullshit? May any utterance at all qualify as humbug or bullshit, given that (so to speak) the utterer's heart is in the right place, or must the utterance have certain characteristics of its own as well?

Short of lying: It must be part of the point of saying that humbug is “short of lying” that while it has some of the distinguishing characteristics of lies, there are others that it lacks. But this cannot be the whole point. After all, every use of language without exception has some, but not all, of the characteristic features of lies—if no other, then at least the feature simply of being a use of language. Yet it would surely be incorrect to describe every use of language as

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short of lying. Black's phrase evokes the notion of some sort of continuum, on which lying occupies a certain segment while humbug is located exclusively at earlier points. What continuum could this be, along which one encounters humbug only before one encounters lying? Both lying and humbug are modes of misrepresentation. It is not at first glance apparent, however, just how the difference between these varieties of misrepresentation might be construed as a difference in degree.

Especially by pretentious word or deed:
There are two points to notice here. First, Black identifies humbug not only as a category of speech but as a category of action as well; it may be accom-

plished either by words or by deeds. Second, his use of the qualifier “especially” indicates that Black does not regard pretentiousness as an essential or wholly indispensable characteristic of humbug. Undoubtedly, much humbug is pretentious. So far as concerns bullshit, moreover, “pretentious bullshit” is close to being a stock phrase. But I am inclined to think that when bullshit is pretentious, this happens because pretentiousness is its motive rather than a constitutive element of its essence. The fact that a person is behaving pretentiously is not, it seems to me, part of what is required to make his utterance an instance of bullshit. It is often, to be sure, what accounts for his making that utter-

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ance. However, it must not be assumed that bullshit always and necessarily has pretentiousness as its motive.

Misrepresentation . . . of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes: This provision that the perpetrator of humbug is essentially misrepresenting himself raises some very central issues. To begin with, whenever a person deliberately misrepresents *anything*, he must inevitably be misrepresenting his own state of mind. It is possible, of course, for a person to misrepresent that alone—for instance, by pretending to have a desire or a feeling which he does not actually have. But suppose that a person, whether by telling a lie or in another way, misrepresents something else. Then he necessarily misrepresents

at least two things. He misrepresents whatever he is talking about—i.e., the state of affairs that is the topic or referent of his discourse—and in doing this he cannot avoid misrepresenting his own mind as well. Thus someone who lies about how much money he has in his pocket both gives an account of the amount of money in his pocket and conveys that he believes this account. If the lie works, then its victim is twice deceived, having one false belief about what is in the liar's pocket and another false belief about what is in the liar's mind.

Now it is unlikely that Black wishes the referent of humbug to be in every instance the state of the speaker's mind. There is no particular reason, after all,

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why humbug may not be about other things. Black probably means that humbug is not designed primarily to give its audience a false belief about whatever state of affairs may be the topic, but that its primary intention is rather to give its audience a false impression concerning what is going on in the mind of the speaker. Insofar as it is humbug, the creation of this impression is its main purpose and its point.

Understanding Black along these lines suggests a hypothesis to account for his characterization of humbug as “short of lying.” If I lie to you about how much money I have, then I do not thereby make an *explicit* assertion concerning my beliefs. Therefore, one might with some plausibility maintain

that although in telling the lie I certainly misrepresent what is in my mind, this misrepresentation—as distinct from my misrepresentation of what is in my pocket—is not strictly speaking a lie at all. For I do not come right out with any statement whatever about what is in my mind. Nor does the statement I do affirm—e.g., “I have twenty dollars in my pocket”—imply any statement that attributes a belief to me. On the other hand, it is unquestionable that in so affirming, I provide you with a reasonable basis for making certain judgments about what I believe. In particular, I provide you with a reasonable basis for supposing that I believe I have twenty dollars in my pocket. Since this supposition is by hypothesis false, I do in tell-

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ing the lie tend to deceive you concerning what is in my mind even though I do not actually tell a lie about that. In this light, it does not seem unnatural or inappropriate to regard me as misrepresenting my own beliefs in a way that is “short of lying.”

It is easy to think of familiar situations by which Black’s account of humbug appears to be unproblematically confirmed. Consider a Fourth of July orator, who goes on bombastically about “our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.” This is surely humbug. As Black’s account suggests, the orator is not lying. He would be lying only if it

were his intention to bring about in his audience beliefs that he himself regards as false, concerning such matters as whether our country is great, whether it is blessed, whether the Founders had divine guidance, and whether what they did was in fact to create a new beginning for mankind. But the orator does not really care what his audience thinks about the Founding Fathers, or about the role of the deity in our country's history, or the like. At least, it is not an interest in what anyone thinks about these matters that motivates his speech.

It is clear that what makes Fourth of July oration humbug is not fundamentally that the speaker regards his statements as false. Rather, just as Black's

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account suggests, the orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. 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, who appreciates the importance of religion, who is sensitive to the greatness of our history, whose pride in that history is combined with humility before God, and so on.

Black's account of humbug appears, then, to fit certain paradigms quite snugly. Nonetheless, I do not believe that it adequately or accurately grasps the essential character of bullshit. It is

correct to say of bullshit, as he says of humbug, both that it is short of lying and that those who perpetrate it misrepresent themselves in a certain way. But Black's account of these two features is significantly off the mark. I shall next attempt to develop, by considering some biographical material pertaining to Ludwig Wittgenstein, a preliminary but more accurately focused appreciation of just what the central characteristics of bullshit are.

Wittgenstein once said that the following bit of verse by Longfellow could serve him as a motto:³

³ This is reported by Norman Malcolm, in his introduction to *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. xiii.

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In the elder days of art
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part,
For the Gods are everywhere.

The point of these lines is clear. In the old days, craftsmen did not cut corners. They worked carefully, and they took care with every aspect of their work. Every part of the product was considered, and each was designed and made to be exactly as it should be. These craftsmen did not relax their thoughtful self-discipline even with respect to features of their work that would ordinarily not be visible. Although no one would notice if those features were not quite right, the craftsmen would be bothered by their consciences. So noth-

ing was swept under the rug. Or, one might perhaps also say, there was no bullshit.

It does seem fitting to construe carelessly made, shoddy goods as in some way analogues of bullshit. But in what way? Is the resemblance that bullshit itself is invariably produced in a careless or self-indulgent manner, that it is never finely crafted, that in the making of it there is never the meticulously attentive concern with detail to which Longfellow alludes? Is the bullshitter by his very nature a mindless slob? Is his product necessarily messy or unrefined? The word *shit* does, to be sure, suggest this. Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or

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dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case certainly not *wrought*.

The notion of carefully wrought bullshit involves, then, a certain inner strain. Thoughtful attention to detail requires discipline and objectivity. It entails accepting standards and limitations that forbid the indulgence of impulse or whim. It is this selflessness that, in connection with bullshit, strikes us as inapposite. But in fact it is not out of the question at all. The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept. And in these

realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who—with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth—dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right.

Yet there is something more to be said about this. However studiously and conscientiously the bullshitter proceeds, it remains true that he is also trying to get away with something. There is surely in his work, as in the work of the slovenly craftsman, some kind of laxity that resists or eludes the demands of a disinterested and austere discipline. The pertinent mode of laxity cannot be equated, evidently, with simple care-

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lessness or inattention to detail. I shall attempt in due course to locate it more correctly.

Wittgenstein devoted his philosophical energies largely to identifying and combating what he regarded as insidiously disruptive forms of “nonsense.” He was apparently like that in his personal life as well. This comes out in an anecdote related by Fania Pascal, who knew him in Cambridge in the 1930s:

I had my tonsils out and was in the Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself. Wittgenstein called. I croaked: “I feel just like a dog that has been run over.” He was disgusted: “You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like.”⁴

⁴ Fania Pascal, “Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir,” in Rhees, *Recollections*, pp. 28–29.

Now who knows what really happened? It seems extraordinary, almost unbelievable, that anyone could object seriously to what Pascal reports herself as having said. That characterization of her feelings—so innocently close to the utterly commonplace “sick as a dog”—is simply not provocative enough to arouse any response as lively or intense as disgust. If Pascal’s simile is offensive, then what figurative or allusive uses of language would not be?

So perhaps it did not really happen quite as Pascal says. Perhaps Wittgenstein was trying to make a small joke, and it misfired. He was only pretending to bawl Pascal out, just for the fun of a little hyperbole; and she got the tone and the intention wrong. She

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thought he was disgusted by her remark, when in fact he was only trying to cheer her up with some playfully exaggerated mock criticism or joshing. In that case the incident is not incredible or bizarre after all.

But if Pascal failed to recognize that Wittgenstein was only teasing, then perhaps the possibility that he was serious was at least not so far out of the question. She knew him, and she knew what to expect from him; she knew how he made her feel. Her way of understanding or of misunderstanding his remark was very likely not altogether discordant, then, with her sense of what he was like. We may fairly suppose that even if her account of the incident is not strictly true to the facts of Witt-

genstein's intention, it is sufficiently true to her idea of Wittgenstein to have made sense to her. For the purposes of this discussion, I shall accept Pascal's report at face value, supposing that when it came to the use of allusive or figurative language, Wittgenstein was indeed as preposterous as she makes him out to be.

Then just what is it that the Wittgenstein in her report considers to be objectionable? Let us assume that he is correct about the facts: that is, Pascal really does not know how run-over dogs feel. Even so, when she says what she does, she is plainly not *lying*. She would have been lying if, when she made her statement, she was aware that she actually felt quite good. For however little

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she knows about the lives of dogs, it must certainly be clear to Pascal that when dogs are run over they do not feel good. So if she herself had in fact been feeling good, it would have been a lie to assert that she felt like a run-over dog.

Pascal's Wittgenstein intends to accuse her not of lying but of misrepresentation of another sort. She characterizes her feeling as "the feeling of a run-over dog." She is not really acquainted, however, with the feeling to which this phrase refers. Of course, the phrase is far from being complete nonsense to her; she is hardly speaking gibberish. What she says has an intelligible connotation, which she certainly understands. Moreover, she does know something about the quality of the feeling to which

the phrase refers: she knows at least that it is an undesirable and unenjoyable feeling, a *bad* feeling. The trouble with her statement is that it purports to convey something more than simply that she feels bad. Her characterization of her feeling is too specific; it is excessively particular. Hers is not just any bad feeling but, according to her account, the distinctive kind of bad feeling that a dog has when it is run over. To the Wittgenstein in Pascal's story, judging from his response, this is just bullshit.

Now assuming that Wittgenstein does indeed regard Pascal's characterization of how she feels as an instance of bullshit, why does it strike him that way? It does so, I believe, because he perceives what Pascal says as being—roughly

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speaking, for now—unconnected to a concern with the truth. Her statement is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality. She does not even think she knows, except in the vaguest way, how a run-over dog feels. Her description of her own feeling is, accordingly, something that she is merely making up. She concocts it out of whole cloth; or, if she got it from someone else, she is repeating it quite mindlessly and without any regard for how things really are.

It is for this mindlessness that Pascal's Wittgenstein chides her. What disgusts him is that Pascal is not even concerned whether her statement is correct. There is every likelihood, of course, that she says what she does only in a somewhat clumsy effort to speak

(continued...)