

# Bullshit and Philosophy

## On the Topic

Disinformation lies at the center of currently prevalent subjects such as fake news, alternative facts and echo chambers. The issue of disinformation touches numerous integral domains of our society – science, health, politics. One important job of philosophy is to provide means to separate fact from fiction, truth from fabrication. I think we should take this job seriously and continue discussions on issues of disinformation. The first step in such a project would have to be identification, characterization and investigation of crucial concepts. One of these concepts that is particularly relevant to issues of disinformation is bullshit.

Interest on the issue of bullshit was initially ignited by Harry Frankfurt's short book "On bullshit", which was equally successful in academic as in public spheres. On Frankfurt's account bullshit is characterized based on the intentions of its utterer – when someone speaks without being concerned about the truth of their utterance, they bullshit. A second influential account due to Cohen defines bullshit via attributes of utterances. On this view an utterance is bullshit if it is "unclarifiably unclear". These conceptions are not mutually exclusive but they show that reception on bullshit covers broad areas of thought. While discussions of Frankfurt-bullshit focus on whether bullshit must be intentional and whether there are desirable or tolerable forms of bullshit, Cohen-bullshit neatly ties into discussions of verificationism and the program of the vienna circle. There are also some really interesting texts on bullshit in personal, political and organizational contexts which tie the conceptual reflection on bullshit to its actual application, deliberating on questions such as how bullshit can be identified in practice and what can be done against it. If desired, we can easily extend the topic to include:

- A. More philosophy and history of science, by discussing issues such as pseudoscience and fake news.
- B. More philosophy of language by reflecting on tools for deceit besides bullshitting (e.g. lying) and discussing how they interact.

## Possible Questions

Here are some suggestions on questions we could discuss:

- Are there forms of bullshitting beyond those identified by Frankfurt and Cohen?
- Do Frankfurt and Cohen capture the colloquial use of “bullshit”? If yes, are there better ameliorative definitions we can give?
- Wherein lies the difference between lying and bullshitting? Are we wrong to sanction lies more severely than bullshitting?
- Are there desirable or tolerable forms of bullshitting?
- How is bullshit created, spread and maintained?
- Which aspects of our economic system, culture and practices favor bullshitting? What can be done to reduce bullshitting?

### **Why this Topic?**

As I see it, bullshit as the next forum topic exceeds on four fronts:

1. It lies at the intersection of conceptualization and application, catering both to die-hard theorists as well as aspiring activists. It furthermore has strong ties to the philosophy and history of science.
2. It is flexible enough to where we can choose many directions to venture into depending on our interests. We can go deeper into the underlying theory (e.g. verificationism) focus on actual application (e.g. business bullshit) or reflect on the societal background that allows bullshit to flourish (e.g. “the Dumbing-Up of Democracy”).
3. “Bullshit” both in a title and as a subject grabs immediate attention and I think there is real potential here to get people to partake in the forum which haven’t before. Only some will stay in the long term of course but I think it would be great to get a couple people to join at least one forum session even if it is only out of curiosity.
4. Many independent studies have shown that bullshit is the best subject ever. All smart people I know agree on this as well.

### **Possible speakers:**

Heather Douglas (Michigan State University)

Cornelis de Waal (Indiana University Indianapolis)

Naomi Oreskes (Harvard University)

André Spicer (Bayes Business School London)

Victor Moberger (Stockholm University)

### **Possible Readings:**

Carnap, R. (2005). *Scheinprobleme in der Philosophie und andere metaphysikkritische Schriften*.  
Meiner.

Cohen, G. (2006): "Deeper into Bullshit", in: Gary L. Hardcastle und George A. Reisch (ed.):  
*Bullshit and Philosophy. Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*. Chicago: Open  
Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy, 24), S. 117–135.

Douglas, Heather. 2006. "Bullshit at the Interface of Science and Policy: Global Warming,  
Toxic Substances, and Other Pesky Problems", in: Gary L. Hardcastle und George A. Reisch  
(Hg.): *Bullshit and Philosophy. Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*. Chicago:  
Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy, 24), S. 215–228.

Evans, M. (2006): "The Republic of Bullshit: On the Dumbing-Up of Democracy", in: Gary L.  
Hardcastle und George A. Reisch (ed.): *Bullshit and Philosophy. Guaranteed to Get Perfect  
Results Every Time*. Chicago: Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy, 24), S. 185–  
202.

Frankfurt, H. (2005): *On Bullshit*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Von Mises, R. (1942) *Kleines Lehrbuch des Positivismus*. *The Philosophical Review*, 51, 331.

Oreskes, N. & Conway, E. (2010): *Merchants of Doubt. How a handful of scientists obscured the  
truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Spicer, André. 2018. *Business Bullshit*. London, New York: Routledge.

Waal, Cornelis de. 2006. "The Importance of Being Earnest: A Pragmatic Approach to  
Bullshitting", in: Gary L. Hardcastle und George A. Reisch (Hg.): *Bullshit and Philosophy*.  
*Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*. Chicago: Open Court (Popular Culture and

Philosophy, 24), S. 99–113.