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Now That's Bullshit!

Bullshit. It's a term everyone has heard at one time or another, a term that most people have probably used at one point. It's a word with many uses. It can be used as an adjective: "that's Bullshit;" as a noun: "That's a bunch of Bullshit;" or just as a general expression: "Bullshit!" But despite the familiarity most people have with the word, few have stopped to ponder the true meaning behind the popular phrase. One such man, however, does exist. His name is Harry G. Frankfurt, author of the book *On Bullshit*, which was published in 2005. Through the use of comparison, definition, logic and social references, Frankfurt breaks the term down into smaller pieces, and ultimately arrives at the true meaning of Bullshit.

To begin to analyze the argument being made here, one must first understand the author's background. This is important in developing ethos, and establishing the author's credibility. Upon reading the "About the Author" in the book, it is learned that Harry G. Frankfurt is a "renowned moral philosopher, [and a] Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Princeton University." (Frankfurt 68). With further research, it is also learned that Frankfurt has taught at Yale and Rockefeller Universities, and that he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Johns Hopkins University. (Harry Frankfurt). These credentials are essential in establishing Frankfurt's credibility. As a philosopher, Frankfurt is a thinker by profession. He is able to deeply analyze

different ideas and scenarios, one of which being the concept of Bullshit. Once his credibility is confirmed, it is possible to begin looking at the argument critically, and breaking it down further.

Frankfurt begins his search for the meaning of Bullshit by comparing it to the word “humbug,” and referencing the literary work *The Prevalence of Humbug* by Max Black. Black gives the definition of Humbug: “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.” (qtd. in Frankfurt 6). By examining the definition of a related term, Frankfurt begins his argument with a resemblance stasis claim: Bullshit is like Humbug. This argument is recurrent throughout the work; bullshit is later described with its resemblance to poor work ethic:

It does seem fitting to construe carelessly made, shoddy goods as in some way analogues of bullshit. But in what way? Is [it] the resemblance that bullshit itself is invariably produced in a careless or self-indulgent manner . . . Is the bullshitter by his very nature a mindless slob? The word *shit* does, to be sure, suggest this. Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. (21-22).

Frankfurt’s use of resemblance is effective for his argument, because he is able to make his audience see the meaning of bullshit through previously unrelated means. The use of resemblance works hand in hand with definition, as it exposes ideas about bullshit most people do not consider.

Perhaps the goal of Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit* is stated most perfectly in the article *Truth, Bullshit and Blame Culture* by Richard Mullender. Published in *Legal Ethics*, Volume 11, No. 2, Mullender states: “With the aim of indicating how bullshit “differs from what it is not,” Frankfurt draws a distinction between the honest person and the liar in one hand and the person

who engages in bullshit in the other.” (274). This is almost another form of resemblance, in that Frankfurt is attempting to clarify the difference between lying and bullshitting by describing the two and pointing out the differences. Frankfurt understands that many people consider bullshitting the same as lying, and he intends to prove that they are, in actuality, two completely different concepts.

In *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (from this point on the *OED*,) for terms he feels are “pertinent to clarifying the nature of bullshit.” (34). He does so to persuade his audience through logos, providing a clear logical definition of the term. He refers to the definition of *bull session*, in which people speak openly about important issues in a casual, laid back atmosphere. People are able to speak about topics which are usually taboo, with the understanding that the contributors are not to be taken overly seriously. “They are like bullshit by virtue of the fact that they are in some degree unconstrained by a concern with truth.” (Frankfurt 37). The definition of *bull session* is then compared to *shooting the bull*, leading to the conclusion that *bull session* is “quite probably a sanitized session of *bullshit session*.” (38). Frankfurt then analyzes the *OED* definition of *bull*: “trivial, insincere, or untruthful talk or writing; nonsense.” (41). By combining the meaning of *shit* (excrement) and *bull*, Frankfurt comes to a logical definition of bullshit. However, Frankfurt never states the *OED* definition of *bullshit* itself: “talk nonsense in an attempt to deceive.” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). His attempt at defining bullshit by breaking it apart is more effective, because he understands that the parts of a word add up to the whole.

Frankfurt also takes into account the prevalence of bullshit in society. By giving his audience real-life scenarios to ponder, he effectively opens up his argument for consideration. The first line of the book reads: “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so

much bullshit.” (1). Toward the end of the writing, Frankfurt returns to this idea, quoting Eric Ambler’s *Dirty Story*: “[never] tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through.” (qtd. in Frankfurt 48). Frankfurt examines this idea thoroughly. He accepts that this is a common thought process in society, and states: “the consequences of being caught are generally less severe for the bullshitter than for the liar.” (50). Bullshitting requires creativity and imagination, and is created to fit the situation one finds themselves in. “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about.” (Frankfurt 63). Many people have found themselves in a situation where they have had to “bullshit” their way through. By taking this into consideration, Frankfurt invites his audience in to the argument, and asks the audience to consider a time when they themselves have been a “bullshitter.”

Frankfurt concludes his argument by accepting that truth can never truly be known for sure. “Facts about ourselves are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution . . . And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.” (67). He is stating that while it is possible to think we know the truth in a situation, it is impossible to be certain. Truth is only a relation between two things. Since we cannot be certain of the truth, the truth may, in fact, be bullshit.

“The contemporary proliferation of bullshit also has deeper sources . . . which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things really are.” (Frankfurt 64). Most people believe they are good at recognizing bullshit, but what if what you think is true is really false? By knowing the meaning of bullshit, one can better evaluate what they hear, and hopefully arrive at the truth. By using logic, definition, and real life scenarios, Frankfurt helps his audience answer the age old question: “Are you bullshitting me?”

Works Cited

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