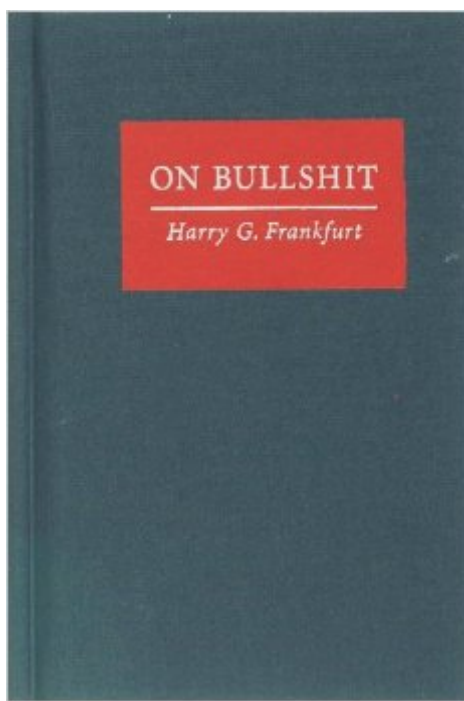


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On Bullshit



Synopsis

A #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER 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. 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, as Harry Frankfurt writes, "we have no theory." Frankfurt, one of the world's most influential moral philosophers, attempts to build such a theory here. With his characteristic combination of philosophical acuity, psychological insight, and wry humor, Frankfurt proceeds by exploring how bullshit and the related concept of humbug are distinct from lying. He argues that bullshitters misrepresent themselves to their audience not as liars do, that is, by deliberately making false claims about what is true. In fact, bullshit need not be untrue at all. Rather, bullshitters seek to convey a certain impression of themselves without being concerned about whether anything at all is true. They quietly change the rules governing their end of the conversation so that claims about truth and falsity are irrelevant. Frankfurt concludes that although bullshit can take many innocent forms, excessive indulgence in it can eventually undermine the practitioner's capacity to tell the truth in a way that lying does not. Liars at least acknowledge that it matters what is true. By virtue of this, Frankfurt writes, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

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Customer Reviews

I confess that when I bought this book, I expected it to be a sort of quasi-satiric send-up of bulls**t. Then by about p. 10, I began thinking it was a really serious scholarly treatment of the subject. (I mean after all - a professor emeritus of moral philosophy at Princeton?) But as I got further into it, and after reading about 20 of the 140 reviews of the book on (how many books get 140 reviews?), I began to get the picture. It is indeed a humorous book--not a quasi-satiric har-har kind of joke book, but a very dry sort of academic humor. In fact, I believe it's an academic put-on--in fact, bulls**t about bulls**t. It is highly self-referential in the sense that a great deal of what it says about bulls**t is applicable to the book itself. Most of the reviewers who figured this out gave it a low rating because they felt they had been conned by the catchy title and resented paying ten dollars for what is little more than a short essay conflated into a publishable format. In some cases, there might have been some degree of humor-impairment involved, but in most, I think it was simply disappointment and the feeling of having been cheated. But I think that misses the point of academic put-ons. We hardly need to be told that there's a lot of bulls**t in today's culture, but I think it's relevant here to note that a lot of it is found in scholarly literature that sounds like bulls**t to anyone not privy to the particular discipline it is targeted to, but is sincerely meant to be taken seriously by its authors. (Frankfurt's last sentence, tellingly, is, "sincerity itself is bulls**t.") This can lead to fairly serious issues about misrepresentation, which is one of the central elements in Frankfurt's definition of bulls**t.

Professor Harry Frankfurt has come up with a compact winner with this provocatively titled tome, all of eighty pages, about a subject around which we all seem to have a vast amount of experience. As a professional philosopher who has earned emeritus status at Princeton University, he surely must be a master at this topic and sets about to prove it by discussing it with irony, broad humor and a cheekiness that ultimately brings a certain seriousness to his work. He is especially effective in portraying the mental improvisation we go through when asked unexpected questions that require thoughtfulness. Whether it is within the context of a political opinion or literary analysis, the very act he discusses actually provides great motivation for someone to learn more about what he or she is saying. What Frankfurt does is take his analysis several steps further by saying his subject, if left unaddressed, will lead to such an altered perception of reality that we will not know what reality is. His argument about his subject as an indictment has merit, though at times, he seems to be carried away with his own rhapsodizing, rather ironic given the topic. According to the author, the very lack of sincerity in some schools of thought, epitomized by the rise of Nazism, for example, has led to a retreat from the ideal of correctness. I would have never thought of Nazism as the result of common

BS, but Frankfurt makes this thinking seem entirely logical and that indeed it is a bigger threat than the outright lie. But he does not dwell on the delivery of such a message, as BS is more easily detectable than a lie, at least from most perspectives. A master at this topic fakes opinions with finesse, but he or she does not necessarily get things wrong.

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