
SIMPLY WHAT ONE DOES:

Truth and Lie in an Extra-Mobile Sense

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In 2005, Harry Frankfurt published *On Bullshit, a vade mecum* for the lay reader with a taste for social philosophy. A reissue of an essay published in the 1980's, the piece's artisanal texture was especially designed for the relativities of our own rank and time. The Internet having created, or at least encouraged, a new generation of cranks and fraudsters exploring the endless permutations of cybernetic personhood, a concise account of bullshitry, and of the bullshitters and bullshitrices who people its rodeos, seemed ripe. In fact, expectation was more than rewarded by demand: sales figures for *On Bullshit* catapulted it onto the *New York Times* bestseller menu. Related books, interviews, lectures, reviews, talk shows, and an opera followed. At last check, one could even find a review of the work, if somewhat unenthusiastic, on journeywithjesus.com.

The centerpiece of Frankfurt's argument in this earlier volume is the fundamental interdependence of truth and lie. These are connected much as God and Satan are in the Christian theogony: vigorous antagonists whose mutual resistance stems from a common allegiance. Both wish to exercise power and to exercise it absolutely, appealing to the same set of principles, the same tradition, and often to the same dogma and evangelium of the blessed. You are more myself than I. In the resulting skirmish, now appearing at a church near you, there can only be one winner. Those supporting the wrong candidate find their offices cleared.

By contrast, the bullshitter is everyone's friend, the mediator or media man skilled in all ways of contending, as Homer said of his eponymous hero, no doubt with some lesser degree of irony than we would apply today. He arrives like an artillery captain at the end of Act V—some glib, inglorious Fluellen—to sprinkle the lime of rhetoric on the gore of tragedy once Truth and Lie have had it out. He is the merchant, the wryly named Mr. Eugenides of *Waste Land* fame, the opportunist whose soul is condemned to wander unplaced in that gallery of liars immortalized in Dante's *Inferno*. In the contemporary world, he is occasionally pegged as the globalist. His proposals are happily convertible, effortlessly translateable, having abjured historical precedent and the spirit of place in a strategic refinement of non-meaning. In Frankfurt's analysis, it is the bullshitter's practice to ignore both the possibly true *and* possibly false consequences of his statements. Like Sidney's poet, the bullshitter doesn't lie because he never endeavors the truth. Unlike the former, however, neither does he make any attempt to express what matters in another way.

Now, as if to supply the natural companion to his earlier reflections, Frankfurt offers an equally compact volume on truth. This volume is, in fact, *On Truth* (2006), presented in gold finish duodecimo. Truth is golden, we are urged to conclude, not least in the engagement of a new publisher (Alfred Knopf in place of Princeton University Press) that promises a more commercial readership. Assured of his audience, Frankfurt in his new volume eschews the academic in-joke that marked the earlier one. Rather than being identified in the "Note About the Author" as a "renowned moral philosopher," Harry G. Frankfurt appears as nothing more or less than "professor emeritus of philosophy at Princeton University." He also continues

to live, we are told, in Princeton town, where he maintains the honor of being (this courtesy of *Wikipedia*) “the ex-husband of Lily Rothman’s great-aunt” (Harry Frankfurt, 2007).

I have no idea who Lily Rothman is, but that is hardly the point. A certain Lily Rothman surely exists (why should one doubt it?), and can be defined in such-and-such a relationship to another person with some connection to the author. Although the referencing act might be taken for an expression of ego, the anonymity of the referent suggests that it is meant as an exemplary, if somewhat quixotic, statement of fact. And it is such statements of fact that give life to the new volume, *On Truth*. What *can* one say, Frankfurt asks, about Truth, or The Truth, or at a minimum, truths here and there? With such a potentially amorphous subject—even less molded, we might think, than bullshit—it is appropriate to keep to the straight and narrow. In this vein, *On Truth* aims to restrict itself to “exactly why truth actually *is* so important to us, or why we should especially care about it” (5). Left for others to ponder are the “forbidding complexities that overhang any conscientious effort to *define* the notions of truth and falsity” (9-10). Similar for detours into psychology or phenomenology: “[m]y discussion will be concerned exclusively with the value and the importance of *truth*, and not at all with the value or the importance of our *efforts to find* truth or of our *experience in finding* it” (11). What is on offer is the thing itself, significantly removed from the various caveats and propaedeutics of big cannon philosophy. “We all know what it means to tell the truth about various things with which we are authoritatively familiar . . . [w]e understand with equal clarity, moreover, what it means to give false accounts of such things” (10). Understanding both positions, in turn, allows us to proceed with common sense, and to refer all points of ambiguity to this criterion.

As one proceeds with the argument itself, it becomes clear that a robust conception of fact is indeed what Frankfurt means by “truth.” In the spirit of Dr. Johnson’s refutation of Bishop Berkeley, Harry Frankfurt has a stone or two to kick against those who dispute propositional statements on the order of, “Mulberry Trees Have Green Leaves,” or “Formosa is an Island Otherwise Known as Taiwan.” Whatever our subjective impressions of mulberry trees or Formosans, we are constrained to begin with simple descriptions of this type as the basis for further discussion. To claim that Formosa is not an island or that mulberry trees do not produce green leaves is to bedevil observation, and therefore to give a false picture of the world. It is to suggest that the world is finally *made*—and therefore presumably open to the manipulation of bullshitters—rather than *found*, in the long, hard, quasi-religious sacrifice to the given.

Frankfurt makes much of the given as integral to the requirements of common sense. Some of his examples seem unexceptional. A bridge that collapses without evident reason implies basic design flaws. Such design flaws, in turn, can be traced to objectively determined miscalculations of stress loads. A physician who misprescribes medicines or mishandles medical procedures can be said to violate fundamental cause-and-effect relationships whose authority rests upon authenticated claims of fact. “X possesses such-and-such properties”; “the application of Y in position Z will create so-and-so”; etc. Yet perhaps the most memorable instance of facticity he recites—Clemenceau’s remark that however WWI will go down in history, it will certainly not include a line about Belgium invading Germany—gains its point not because it restates the apparently obvious, but because it stakes out its territory in a discursive game in which all sorts of positions, factually supportable or otherwise, are considered to be true. The iterative significance of Clemenceau’s statement, in other words, does not derive from its reformulation as “No B. invaded G. in time X,” but from its attempt to isolate a putatively objective point of orientation amid a welter of facts and hypotheses collected under the heading “WWI.” The statement points to the need or desire for factual orientation, but *is not itself* an example of what it advises.

This objection might be considered minor. It would in any case appear to characterize the observation of social behavior rather than physical matter: that part of our discursive world where the object to be described is also the subject (or multiple subject) of previous descriptions. But to defuse the problem by parsing its applicability also paints the correspondence theory of truth into a corner. It might well be that,

as Frankfurt argues, “[c]ivilizations have *never* gotten along healthily, and *cannot* get along healthily, without large quantities of *reliable factual information* [emphases all in the original]” (34), but what this invariably boils down to in all but the most unproblematic cases of quantitative measurement is the use of statements of fact as building blocks in discursive structures of meaning. “Truth,” in other words, is something we find in discrete units. Its higher-order design or coordination (in effect, its *telos*) forms some other reality. While we certainly need truth, therefore, we would seem, in Frankfurt’s exposition, to need what is *done* with truth even more urgently.

Mortar-and-beam models of truth also invite an inquiry into which mortars and which beams are necessary for the task at hand. Frankfurt provides the example of judging: a normative act, he claims, that must be reducible to smaller, evidentiary units upon which an attitude is generated. “Thus we cannot reasonably judge for ourselves that a person has a bad moral character except on the basis of factual statements that describe instances of his or her behavior that seem to provide concrete evidence of moral deficiency” (29). Yet particularly for this example it would seem that what constitutes an “instance,” and hence “concrete evidence,” would vary by observer, circumstance, and magnitude. I make note of a westerner who neglects to give up his seat for an elderly Japanese woman in a crowded commuter train in Tokyo. Having just arrived in the country, I conclude that this is an act of culpable insensitivity that casts the actor’s moral profile in a negative light. My partner, however, points out that it is considered unusual to make such offers on public transport in Japan, and that doing so may even cause confusion. She relates an instance where a foreigner who *had* made such an offer was confronted by a Japanese male who demanded to know, “who the hell do you think you are?” My partner’s friend adds that the westerner whose action (or inaction) I had thought to condemn might in fact be a resident whose behavior has not only changed since he arrived in the country, but who would act differently were he now in his home country. Someone else again points out that even if he did not act differently, the decision not to surrender one’s seat on the subway is hardly the kind of “factual information” that would provide reliable evidence for a judgment of character.

If I then shift the burden of my analytical account to Clemenceau’s aperçu, or even to the problems of medical diagnosis or engineering design, the same fundamental problem asserts itself. In the vast and cluttered museum of reliable statements of fact that compose what we design “World War I”, which are indispensable? Which optional but included in standard definitions of the term? What can be safely classified as subsidiary or irrelevant? Does it matter that Archduke Francis Ferdinand had a slight bald patch above his left ear? That a German doctor (Paul Ehrlich) discovered a treatment for syphilis that would radically transform its treatment for Allied soldiers at the front? That Clemenceau himself married one of his former students at a girl’s boarding school in Connecticut, supported the Dreyfusards against the nationalists, or was forced into compromise over the jurisdiction of reparations claims at the Treaty of Versailles? Should it? How many key truths can I leave out, or de-emphasize, and still maintain some basic currency with the topic?

Many of the facts at issue, of course, will not fall near any line of controversy. For these, Frankfurt is no doubt justified in concluding that a refusal to acknowledge their facticity hinders the intelligible construction of history. But it might also be argued that such facts are of a particularly benign and uninteresting stripe. If we gain little from doubting them, in other words, we also make little headway by admitting them to be true. Yes, Belgium never invaded Germany (at least according to any reasonable definition of “invasion”), but outside the rhetorical contests and contexts in which such a statement appears, what does this tell us? All that is provocatively worth knowing exists in the creative ordering of such evidentiary building blocks, much as the bricks stacked at a construction site are indispensable for the work at hand but finally mute about the building’s final design, scope, or contouring. Here it is the architect’s art, rather than the brickmaker’s, that is paramount.

In part, Frankfurt's allegiance to the brickmaker school of truth appears to be motivated by a visceral dislike of what we might call the Humpty Dumpty school of truth—otherwise known as this or that version of solipsistic relativism. Here, following the lead of the neurotic fat man in *Through the Looking Glass*, words are what we make them be. They fit our subjective understandings of self, the narratives by which we justify our lives, and the peculiar moral account books we keep that allow us to mistreat others with a clear conscience. Frankfurt sniffs this out as one of the prime dropping grounds for bullshit, and reserves some of his most pointed criticism for its subsidized maintenance. The good society, opines Frankfurt, can scarcely tolerate a “slovenly indifference to the distinction between true and false” (33). Nor should it “indulge the shabby, narcissistic pretense that being true to the facts is less important than being ‘true to oneself’” (33). So much, at least, for one branch of the Emersonian legacy.

At the same time, of course, Frankfurt is fully aware that what the narcissists have going for them is—well, narcissism. Although their pronouncements are of little interest to others, they are of supreme and enduring interest to themselves, providing both motive and motivation to keep to the wheel. The brickmakers, by contrast, burn out quickly, it being unclear why one should continue to produce identical rectangular blocks of knowledge when other, sexier pursuits beckon from the neighboring lot. To provide an explanation for why the brickmakers don't abandon the worksite, Frankfurt embarks, at about the half way point in his book, on an unexpected discussion of Spinoza's propositions on love and joy from the *Ethics*. The departure is Aristotelian as distilled through the alembic of medieval Scholasticism: all of us have a nature that it is our natural end, or telos, to fulfill. The acts of fulfilling our nature—not yet fragmented into contemporary talk of the self—bring us “joy,” a term Spinoza prefers to the classical one of *eudaimonia*, or “happiness.” If, in turn, this joy is triggered or advanced by some external cause, we are moved to retain that cause as near to us as possible. The desire for nearness he calls “love.” Where the external trigger is truth, as Frankfurt suggests it often is, it is reasonable to speak of a love of truth. This love burns with a constant flame. We are *compelled* to love truth. “Thus, Spinoza concluded that nearly everyone—everyone who values and who cares about his own life—does, whether knowingly or not, love truth” (47).

I am not sufficiently versed in Spinoza to know if this is a sustainable reading of the *Ethics*. At a minimum, its use as a sub-floor for an empirical, common sense notion of truth might be thought an unusual design choice. It is unclear how the fact that mulberry trees have green leaves, or that Clemenceau was twice Prime Minister of France, inspires in us anything that could be meaningfully termed “love.” If I have long been in error about mulberry trees or French Prime Ministers, I might possibly experience something like joy upon realizing the truth. But this hardly qualifies as an expression of what it means to “care about my life.” Spinoza's language works better where the external trigger is sacred rather than material. The latter stretches the bridge between self and world beyond its weight-bearing limit.

In the context of Frankfurt's argument, however, Spinoza on the necessary love of truth provides at once a justification for the higher good of truth telling and a clever alternative to bad subjectivity. For it is indisputable that caring about oneself as Frankfurt explains it here is an act of being “true to oneself.” But where scorn was heaped upon the latter, the former is saved by tapping into some deeper root of essential being. Perhaps it would be appropriate to designate the Spinozan option a subjectness without subjectivity; the Humpty Dumpty option, subjectivity without the subject. Or simply, truth vs. bullshit.

Because the Spinozan alternative is described as necessary, moreover—a process or loving truth “whether or not we are aware that we do so” (48)—this would seem to be the natural end or *telos* of Frankfurt's reflections. The enemy has been largely co-opted: even bullshitters (though Frankfurt hedges his bets here) really love truth, if they would but clarify their own desires. So, why exactly don't they do so? As a professional philosopher with a short, rather than a long, book to write, Frankfurt fields this question obliquely. To engage it directly would demand an extended exploration of freedom and necessity endemic to theorizing of a teleological sort. This is the stuff of an oeuvre rather than an essay.

To eschew such exploration leaves Frankfurt with the challenge of matching truth's length to the already abbreviated scope of bullshit in the earlier volume. He responds with a series of chapters, some as short as 500 words, covering truth's orienting function in a world of "obstacles and dangers" (61), the consanguinity of truth and rationality, the role of truth-telling in reducing social risk (this via Kant and Montaigne), the injuries that attend the mislaying of fact (solipsism preeminently), and a quixotic sidebar on Shakespeare's Sonnet #138 that ends with an unexpected appeal to what might be called the higher mendacity of desire. Speaking of the lovers in the poem, Frankfurt opines about how "this mutual penetration of their lies [that] has marvelously led their exercises of deception to the truth of love, must be wonderfully delicious" (92-93). Indeed. The circumstance is a middle-aged man involved with a younger woman: a May-October rendezvous in which each withholds the truth about the other's shortcomings while knowing both what these shortcomings are and that they are being mutually withheld. A whole lot of lying, in other words, tied to a minimum of falsehood. "Go for it!", Frankfurt concludes, in a wry comment on the timeless dialectics of "mutual penetration."

This delta of meandering sub-themes finally produces the desired essay length, but with the caveat that Frankfurt might have been better advised to broaden his well-spring: to have contoured truth, or the varieties of truth, along a slightly wider channel, thereby lending his argument greater downstream definition and momentum. As it stands, the impact of narrowing creates a late-session malingering. Today's lesson is over, but we are still 15 minutes short of the bell. Has anyone seen a good movie lately?

Frankfurt's capillary procedure also truncates, and with the same complications, a potentially fruitful discussion of why we should prefer truth to lie (or bullshit) from a public policy perspective. In one sense, he has supplied an answer in his earlier discussion of Spinoza: to the extent that the individual love of truth is governed by natural law, the civil polis is (in theory if not in fact) an effectuation of natural law principles. But the later references to Kant and Montaigne, neither of whom fits into the natural law tradition, encourage a different response. Frankfurt's treatment of both figures is cursory. In Montaigne's case, he simplifies the latter's position in significant ways; in Kant's, he plays upon the sage of Königsberg's idealism vis-à-vis our own anglophilic skepticism. For Frankfurt, Kant is, *selbstverstaendlich*, an inadequate empiricist. One can imagine Lampe, Kant's famous manservant, coming to a not dissimilar conclusion.

So, what if we push the post-medieval, non-Spinozan dimensions of truth and lie a bit further? Why, in other words, is truth collectively preferable to nonsense, bunkum, falsehood, and the like? Kant held that dishonesty functions as a demerit good *per se*. We are obliged to tell the truth as a measure of recognition and respect for the other. To lie, in fact, is to violate the principle of non-instrumentality underlying the Kantian ethical system in the 2nd Critique (Kant, 1998). Although Frankfurt does not offer this extension, lying also imposes upon the lied-to the stigma of non-majority. It is to say to another: I do not find you capable of the truth; you will not understand it, it is too much for you, you will not act responsibly in its possession. The person lied-to, in other words, is to be treated as a child, subject to the stratagems and obfuscations by which children are (presumably) kept from damaging themselves and their environment. Those so treated remain in a state of "tutelage" (*Unmuendigkeit*), as Kant uses the term in "What is Enlightenment?" (1990). It follows also that a society saturated with lying (or bullshit) is a society whose citizens are encouraged to remain as children. Where the political system reflects social norms, one can speak of the paternalistic state, ruled by some Leader or "Papa" who exudes the exogenous qualities of fear and benevolence belonging to the patriarch.¹

1 This would apply equally to "Comrade" or "Big Brother" figures associated with the Communist left. Here the rhetoric suggests a greater degree of equality: the triumph of the brothers (and sisters) over the totemic father as the transition from monarchy to republican democracy in post-medieval Europe. But among the *pares*, there is inevitably a *primus*, and one who recognizes the value of disguising his power, as Pol Pot exemplified at the head of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-70's.

To argue that lying is fundamentally contrary to our human *nature*, however, resurrects the old scruple that there is nonetheless so much of it. The establishment of a normative standard permits one to occupy the high ground in the condemnation of a moral wrong: dishonesty rends the fabric of mind, spirit, happiness, the social order, etc. But insofar as such rending is unnatural, assuming the high ground also implies that what is now torn will ultimately be made whole. One cannot consistently maintain a teleological or natural law position that admits permanent dissent or non-incorporation. The imperfect must remain an *aberration*, a temporary flaw of local proportions. As freedom, it must finally give way to necessity.

In this respect, the empiricists—and especially that branch of empiricism concerned with utilitarian ethics—would appear to have the initial advantage. Rather than positing a categorical imperative of this or that kind, one zeroes in on the consequences that any action has on the actor and his or her environment.² Or, more precisely: the consequences of such an act are seen to determine the relevance of the norm rather than the norm prescribing its consequences. For the deontologist, the principle *must* justify the result; for the empiricist, the result may or may not justify appeal to a principle. From a utilitarian perspective, therefore, lying can be approached as what the Durkheim school called a “social fact.” It is the raw datum of experience, in need of no further justification. What is important is what is *done* with the quantum of lying we are confronted with—how it affects us and why its effects might be expected to be less favorable (though not always so) than those of truth telling.

Addressing the problem in this way, it seems to me, allows us to discover that both the prevalence of and the problem with lying are tied in some important way to the management of uncertainty. In addition to the many other disadvantages that might be attributed to the spread of bullshit or untruths, what makes lying by turns useful and by turns counterproductive is the degree to which it intensifies or ameliorates risk. All other things being equal, a society that tolerates a great deal of lying and bullshitting is also a society that tolerates a large degree of uncertainty. By contrast, a society that puts a premium on truth telling—or, at a minimum, on truth telling in public contexts—would be a society that also puts a premium on the fulfillment of communicative expectations.

But this risk management model yields more complex reflections. To begin with, it is not necessarily the case that the least risky society is the best one. Uncertainty, like privilege, has its advantages: if I am never entirely sure whether or how the other’s speech conforms to reality, this not only fosters in me the habits of careful observation and fact checking, but also encourages unexpected responses whose problem solving potential would otherwise be pruned away. A society of liars may therefore have the idiosyncratic effect of sharpening the contours of publicly available truth. It might even lead to more effective risk control where the given set of lies has become so securely embedded in the social fabric that its invocation automatically triggers a recognition of the true state of affairs. Historical examples of this phenomenon abound: such-and-such is said to be “bad for the people/students/soldiers on the ground” (read: bad for the policy makers who thrive by exploiting the people/students/soldiers’ needs); “the Japanese military never forced civilians to become ‘comfort women’ in WWII” (read: the Japanese military did exactly this but the current rhetoric of globalization in Japan forbids its acknowledgment); and so on. Contoured, *de rigueur* lying of this kind may help account for the initially counterintuitive observation that the most overtly mendacious political states in the modern world have very often also been highly organized, authoritarian regimes. In the Orwellian world of Big Brother, nothing is more certain than the knowledge that politspeak is the exact opposite of the truth.

Admittedly, the problem of risk management becomes more complicated where bullshit rather than

2 I ignore the distinction between “rule” and “consequence” utilitarianisms. To the extent that a rule covers an action that is always seen to have positive or negative consequences, it effectively functions as a law in the deontological sense.

overt lying is on the menu. This takes us back to Frankfurt's original point, somewhat obscured in the later chapters of his new volume, that the bullshitter is a rogue agent precisely because he cannot reliably be located in a truth/lie dichotomy. But aside from the fact that the Ministry of Truth's propaganda in 1984 would probably qualify as bullshit according to most common-sense definitions of the term, the act of bullshitting is not simply one of random, formless emission. To achieve his manipulative purpose, the bullshitter must feign one or another version of what his auditors are likely to accept as the truth. To the extent that these feignings themselves become conventional, one can speak of bullshit production as a form of communicative risk reduction. I know exactly what X is up to when he tries to convince me of something that sounds superficially plausible but that I am unlikely to accept. A benign version of this process, in fact, is given in Frankfurt's discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 discussed above. One reason for the existence of so much lying and bullshitting, therefore, is that these, in certain circumstances, can function a lot like truth does. To the extent that they aid rather than disrupt the ability of individual actors to make responsible decisions, lying and bullshitting might be said to contribute to (or at the very least to not inhibit) our well-being.

One signal advantage of picturing truth telling as a function of social risk management is that it allows access to the topic in a broader conceptual framework. The problem of lying (assuming that it is a problem) can in this way be tied to the problems of counterfeiting, corruption, and related other social bads that generate sustained public attention. One can also see how honesty and dishonesty can be taken as fundamental components of ordinary communicative translation and interpretation. To the extent that I am called upon to evaluate the truth or falsehood of an utterance, I am forced to attend to such matters as the intention of the speaker, the grammatical and semantic consistency of the statement, the context in which it is uttered, and the relationship I hold to the person speaking. I must attend, in other words, to the illocutionary and perlocutionary variables of speech acts (Austin, 1962): the same set of variables that one confronts when undertaking the translation of a text or oral delivery.

To take a mundane example. A colleague with connections offers to "do a deal" for me. "I like you and want to do something for you," he says. He will in fact have a word with my superior about a promotion I have long coveted. The promotion comes through two weeks later. "Thanks," I say. "No need to thank me," he smiles benevolently.

The fact pattern is skeletally clear: my colleague says that we will speak to my boss regarding my promotion and after a time, the promotion is approved. This much is certain; this much I can book to account as a true statement of events. Anything else? The fact skeleton implies that my colleague has indeed spoken to my superior, that he (the colleague) has the power to influence the decision on promotion, and that he *did* influence this decision. It further suggests that I acknowledge my colleague's intervention, that I am thankful for it, and that my patron is not only benevolent but modest.

How many of these implications are true? It is impossible to say without further information. For the sake of illustration, let us assume that this is all I know or am likely to know for certain about the actual sequence of events. I am therefore left with the challenge (if I decide to take it up at all) of construing what I believe *probably* happened by examining the aforementioned interpretive variables of intention, consistency, context, and relationship. Is my colleague generally sincere in wishing to assist me (or others) professionally? Does his story "hold together" on internal grounds, effects following plausibly from causes, time and dates recounted accurately, etc? Is he actually in a position to influence the behavior of my superior, or is he simply grandstanding? What reason would he have for wanting to see me promoted? How equal has our relationship been in the economy of favors? These are only a few of the issues I might wish to have clarified.

In fact, it could well be the case that my colleague has heard, confidentially, that I am to be promoted in two to three weeks anyway. He is privy to inside information without having had any role in the

consultation process itself. Wishing to project influence he does not wield, however, he indicates to me that he will “intercede” on my behalf to bring about what is already a *fait accompli*. Sure enough, what has been decided comes about in due course.

In this scenario, I would surely be justified in labeling my colleague’s actions as bullshit. He is clearly trying to snow me, and trusts that I will not be in a position to discover the ruse. It is even possible that he does not particularly care if I discover the truth, as his moment of triumph has already occurred. I may also not be in a position to “out” him, or think it wise to do so.³ Suppose, furthermore, that he is known to be a repeat bullshitter in just this way: puffing himself up in situations where getting at the facts is difficult. “Oh, that’s just B. That’s just the way he is,” I am told. After a while, I expect such puffery as a matter of course in my dealings with him. I begin to offer the same advice to others.

A consensus view of B’s behavior thereby emerges in the professional context and consistency of his utterances. As with the actions of a character in a novel, B’s behavior undergoes a process of interpretation. This interpretation is never secure, never final. I am never able to “translate” another’s action or statements in such a way that I can claim perfect knowledge or certainty. But this is hardly the point. The point is that what B *does* say and do will inevitably be subject to an evaluative fitting process motivated by the management of communicative risk and giving rise to variable forms of assurance, ambiguity, or alarm. Ironically (or perhaps not), after a lifetime of unremitting bluff and bullshit, B’s decision to “come clean” might produce both consternation and disappointment among those targeted by his reform ethos. His newfound sincerity might even come across—and for the first time—as a kind of bullshitting. Those participating in the interpretive game all these years will find themselves duped. He was always such a reliable fraud!

I would venture to say that the reliability of fraudulence, and the reluctance of fraudsters to demote themselves by undertaking reform, not only accounts for the rhizomatic vigor of lying and bullshitting in our society, but helps us see how and why the dishonest society may not in all cases be the least desirable one. Part of what we expect of people, after all, is what Auden once said we expect of buildings: that they conform to their function.

Yet this is not quite satisfactory. Conformity to expectations cannot be *all* that we demand of others. Even if the lie becomes less demeaning where we anticipate its occurrence, and even if embedded streams of lying and bullshit may contribute to social stability, there is still the feeling that meaningful human intercourse requires probity as a default value. Why this is so is not entirely clear. Attempts at explanation invariably turn up exceptions and counterexamples of the sort we have been examining. Perhaps it is the case that the demand for communicative probity functions as a kind of *Grundnorm*, as Kelsen used the term for jurisprudence (1978). Or to take Wittgenstein’s more prosaic formulation from the *Logical Investigations*: “[i]f I have exhausted [my] justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say, this is simply what I do” (1953). The expectation of probity is the systemic pivot that cannot be fully scrutinized from within the system itself.

Parallels may again be drawn to the acts of translation and interpretation. Good interpretations should satisfy internal and external criteria of consistency and plausibility; yet the satisfaction of these criteria does not itself make the interpretation worthwhile. The text or character to be interpreted may be trivial. The interpretation itself might be redundant—a problem common to material that is seen to conform closely to established genre or stereotype. One might even object that certain texts should not be read or translated. Sacred books proclaiming divine revelation constitute one reason for such a proscription; morally offensive material, another. In these instances, the quality of process takes a back seat to appropriateness of status or subject matter. Regardless of the reliability or smoothness of the transmission, the product strikes us as undesirable.

3 Note, however, that in this fact pattern, the modest disavowal (“no need to thank me”) becomes literally applicable.

Such reflections return the perhaps disappointing conclusion that it is difficult to draw precise conclusions about why it matters to tell the truth. Frankfurt has avoided many of these complications by keeping his analysis brief. One still wishes, at the finish of *On Truth*, that he had allowed his alphabets more play.

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