

Bullshit

Reader please beware, as this is a very sensitive topic, but written with good humour and serious intent for our common edification. It's best to read on (if you wish to) with an open mind, and then see what you think of it. It also helps to know that this reflection is based on an essay entitled "On bullshit" (1986), the New York Times Sunday Book Review (5 June 2005) bestseller for the preceding week. It was by Harry G Frankfurt, a Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Princeton University. Therein, he defines the concept of "bullshit," and analyses its applications in the contexts of communication.¹

What does "bullshit" really mean? The Oxford-English Dictionary (OED) defines "bullshit" simply as "rubbish, nonsense; = bull." It also defines it as a verb: "to talk nonsense (to); also, to bluff one's way through (something) by talking nonsense." Under its synonym, "bull," the OED helpfully defines: "trivial, insincere, or untruthful talk or writing; nonsense."

Bullshit, then, either can be true or can be false; hence, the bullshitter is a man or a woman whose main aim – when speaking or publishing bullshit – is to impress us with words that communicate an impression favorable to the speaker, without any concern for the truth of what has been said. Likewise, the bullshitter is unconcerned with consistency between what he is saying now, and whatever he has previously said.

Consequently, "the bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean he necessarily gets them wrong" (Frankfurt 2005:46 = PDF 11 f). He is communicating an impression that something is being done or has been done, words that are neither true nor false, and so obscure the facts (whatever he is saying, or what is being discussed) (61 = PDF 15).

We can see numerous examples of bullshit in, for example, religious talks. Even the best speakers often given platitudinal (which is worse than boring) talks. However, because we love or respect the speaker (this emotion is, in fact, often the basis of religious faith), we will blissfully bleat sweet compliments to the speakers and to others when the talk is mercifully over.

Buddhist leaders, or those who see themselves as leaders, show boundless generosity when it comes to complimenting other less illustrious speakers, too. After all, these speakers do draw a crowd – what is Buddhism, or any religion, without a crowd? So, even when the speaker tells a bad or bawdy joke, a few in the audience would laugh because they knew better, and others are compelled to laugh because others are laughing. We often lose ourselves in a crowd.

A bad speaker is never told how what's bad about his talk, or how he can improve himself. The painful irony is that without any truthful feedback, those speakers will probably continue his small talk before big crowds. No wonder no one really pays much attention during such talks, and when handphones ring, they are politely, with relief, answer right in the midst of the talk.

¹ Harry G Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005 (booklet); also as article (PDF): <http://www.stoa.org.uk/topics/bullshit/pdf/on-bullshit.pdf>. Further reading: G Pennycook et al, "On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit," *Judgement and Decision Making* 10,6 Nov 2015:549-563, <http://journal.sjdm.org/15/15923a/jdm15923a.pdf>.

We could say that much of local Buddhism is rooted in the Confucian notion of “saving face.”² The faces of those in power and those speaking to crowds must be saved at any cost. After all, Confucian filial piety teaches that it is not “dishonest” for a father to conceal a son’s fault, and the sons to conceal their father’s fault. It is said in the Analects that Duke of Shè 葉 (whom Confucius criticizes), however, proudly states that his people were honest because they testified even against their own father who had stolen sheep. (Lunyu §13.18)³

Do such Confucian ideologies then justify our not telling the truth when our seniors or superiors commit wrongs? The famous Lunyu 13.18 passage is Confucius’s response to Legalism (or rule of law) by favouring “rightness.”⁴ However, this rightness was seen in terms of social hierarchy and status, where those of lower status should defer to those of higher ones.

It is difficult to accept today that we are justified to hold back the truth – even if it is a “noble lie” – for the benefits of others, even (or especially) when they are above (“atas”) us.⁵ Has this kind of tradition been so ingrained into the local Chinese so as to withhold the truth, cosmeticize it, or even lie, for the sake of saving face? Perhaps, such a social conditioning has given rise to the notion of the “Chinese yes” or “Chinese truth,” especially in western discourse.⁶

However, the more mature Chinese are wise enough never to take others on the word level – or, even the “face” level. They, for example, try to outdo one another (often noisily) in a display of generosity and kindness. I’m only citing this as an example; there are many other examples in other cultures, too. But being Chinese myself, it is surely politically correct to cite my own culture as an example, rather than those of others.

Coming back to bullshitting. According to Frankfurt, the bullshitter simply doesn't care if he is telling the truth or not. In contrast, the liar must know the truth, of what he is saying, and of the matter under discussion, so that he can better conceal the truth from the listener or the reader who is being deceived with the lie.

The bullshitter, on the other, will glibly use a truth, a lie, a half-truth, a non-fact, a white lie, or whatever words can convey (or not) so long as it serves his purpose. For, his sole concern is personal advantage, audience control and exploiting others. Bullshit, then, is a far worse enemy of truth than are lies. (33 = PDF 8)

Bullshit is not merely the promotion of wrong views, but also includes the misuse or misrepresentation of right views. Hence, it is **religious bullshit**.⁷ The early Buddhist suttas are full of in-

² On the issue of “face” (saving face and losing face), see SD 28.9a (3.4): ***

³ 論語 Lunyu §13.18, <http://ccontext.org/analects/zi-lu>. Compare Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a15, where he famously criticizes his own teacher, Plato, thus: “Where both are friends, it is right to prefer truth.”

⁴ Traditional Chinese 義; simplified 义; pinyin: yì.

⁵ A “white lie” may be acceptable in very special cases, such as when robbers demand where our loved ones or parents are hiding, and we would surely not willingly tell the truth. However, it creates social and legal problems, when it is the rule. “Atas” is local Malay slang for the snobs of “the upper class.”

⁶ See Amy Olberding (ed), *Dao Companion to the Analects*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2014:161 f.

⁷ An example of this is when, say, someone who believes in transcendental Buddhas and cosmic Bodhisattvas claims that they exist “just as you and I exist.” But when asked how does he know that such “beings” actually exist, he replies: “We cannot say that they exist, or not exist, or both, or neither!” See **Anurādha S** (S 22.86), SD 21.13. They form part of the 10 points on which the Buddha is famously silent: see **The unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

structions by the Buddha and his arhats reminding us to discern and avoid religious bullshit – teachings, even truths, that are useless or harmful – and also that we should neither speak nor practise bullshit, whatever does not bring us closer to awakening in this life, or does not bring us true happiness here and now.

This is not to say that only what is taught in the early Buddhist texts is not bullshit (this may well be a good guide, though), but that even such teachings can be wrongly quoted or falsely quoted to promote some worldly, useless or harmful ends. The Internet, for example, often has a thick and thorny undergrowth of “fake Buddha quotes,” sayings reflecting their authors’ biases, views, or asininity, pushed into the Buddha’s mouth. If their authors have ulterior motives, such as promoting their own ego, or worse, to mislead Buddhists and others, then, these are clearly bullshit – “truths” that are worse than lies.

There is a real problem here: not many of us can really detect and reject bullshit in Buddhism – unless we are familiar with the early Buddhist texts and literature reflecting them. More likely, we would happily click Like or Love or Wow to some bullshit that endorses our views, or which we find amusing, or perhaps even delightfully shocking. Such bullshit is thus also a smear on our own looking-glass.

Or, worse, we might simply pontificate that whatever bears even the word “bullshit” is just that. Thus squinted, this reflection would still have not reflected any wisdom, and so be dumped into the waste-basket of bullshit. Nevertheless, I suspect there are those who know – or at least want to know – what bullshit is, and reject or correct them accordingly.⁸

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⁸ For similar instructive readings, see Jason Holt (ed), *The Ultimate Daily Show and Philosophy* series, 2007 & 2013: <http://philpapers.org/rec/WILTUD-2>.