

Aristotle & Bullshit

by John McArdle

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American philosopher Harry Frankfurt's 1986 essay "On Bullshit" provided a theory of what constitutes bullshit and bullshit's truth functionality regarding statements. Lacking in his theory however, by Frankfurt's own admission is a consideration of "the rhetorical uses and misuses" (2) of bullshit. In this paper I will showcase Bullshit's essential properties before making a case for Bullshit's place within the rhetorical tradition. Said "place" will be demonstrated on the strength of Bullshit's commensurability with Aristotle's three "ends" or "species" of rhetoric, namely, forensic, deliberative and epideictic performances as they are outlined in *Rhetoric*. To assist in demonstrating bullshit's place in the Aristotelian "rhetoric as (t)ruth" paradigm, examples of Frankfurt's bullshit as it manifests itself in practice will be culled from examples of rhetoric used in both political and journalistic discourse in the United States from the last two decades.

Frankfurtian bullshit's essentialist properties are twofold. Firstly, is bullshit's "indifference" with a statement's truth value. Expanding on what is meant by this, bullshit's "indifference," Frankfurt writes, "although it is produced without concern for the truth, it need not be false" (48). This sidestepping the "principle of bivalence" which states that a given statement must be either true or false to be considered a statement, also bears an uncanny resemblance to Aristotle's example of the problem of future contingents. Using Aristotle's example of a problematic future contingent as presented in *On Interpretation*, "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" has no truth function at all and remains vacuous until the predicate of "a sea battle tomorrow" is realized in it's happening or not happening. The chief difference between using future contingencies and bullshit is that the former has no truth value to speak of as opposed to the later which isn't concerned with truth value at all, true or false, as long as the utterance of said future sea battle works towards bullshit's second property.

The second essentialist property of bullshit lies in its teleological function as a means of "misrepresenting" the mind state and or agenda of the bullshitter in question. Whereas a liar is just as concerned with truth as an honest person, so that they may subvert said truth via effective lying, the bullshitter "may not deceive us, or even intend to do so... his only distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to" (Frankfurt 54). This crucial point of difference between the liar and the bullshitter is a matter of intentionality. Think back to

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Aristotle's sea battle. The liar is one who knows that it is a logically necessary proposition that there will not be a sea battle tomorrow but knowingly lies that there will be one, thereby

subverting a known truth value. Contrasted with the bullshitter who hasn't any idea if there will or will not be a sea battle but categorically states there will be one regardless of this ignorance so as to make himself appear as someone with great clairvoyance. It is with this sort of projection of authority or status as a knower of something and the aforementioned disregard for whether something is true or not that encapsulate Frankfurtian bullshit.

The "study" of bullshit was dubbed *taurascatics* by professor of rhetoric, James Fredal, who refers to bullshit as the "antistrophe of rhetorical theory [which] claims... an understanding of rhetoric will help in the analysis of bullshit...and analysis of bullshit will help clarify the identifying features of rhetoric" (243). Certainly, the Aristotelian maxim of rhetoric as "the faculty of observing

in any given case the available means of persuasion” (181) gives the rhetor considerable latitude when utilizing dicta from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* insofar as bullshit is concerned. Aristotle’s three ends of rhetoric are all amenable to incorporation of bullshit as it performs the same function of framing the rhetor’s ethos or intent within the context of each forensic, deliberative, or ceremonial act. Aristotle’s framework is so commensurate with a rhetorical application of bullshit that Frankfurt’s definition of the bullshitter as appears in his essay appears to be a reworking of Aristotle’s famous maxim, “[the bullshitter is] concerned with using any available means to achieve his single purpose: to get what he wants” (56).

Before delving into the three “species” of Aristotelian rhetoric and their interplay with bullshit, the role of the audience or “bullshitee” as Fredal phrases it in *Rhetoric and Bullshit* needs to be addressed. In the ensuing study of bullshit since Frankfurt’s theory was originally posited in 1986, philosophers of language and rhetoricians have been expanding on the theory in earnest, and the most prominent development has been with regard to the audience. Just as Aristotle stated “the hearer must be either a judge, with a decision to make about things past or future, or an observer” (185), philosopher of language Consuelo Preti states “essential to bullshit; it’s audience. Bullshit needs our compliance” (20). Preti posits the audience as the third essential property of bullshit omitted by Frankfurt in his theory. Preti’s expansion of the theory works off the audience’s mode of “inspiration” contrasted to the essential “intention” of the bullshitter.

An example of this revolving around the infamous novel *A Million Little Pieces* which was marketed as a memoir and was later revealed to be a work of fiction by the author is cited by Preti, who argues “if I think your specific story S is true, and I am inspired by it, then to discover it isn’t true is to discover that there is nothing in it *by which* to be inspired” (23). Preti’s explication on what makes a truth work for lack of a better term runs into issues, though, when the truth value does not matter at all; ergo, the bullshitee. In the case of Frey this would be Oprah’s “avowal that it didn’t matter whether or not he had been lying” (24) prior to his confession that the book was a work of fiction. Granted Oprah assented to the importance of truth after the nature of the book’s content surfaced but Preti’s point on the third property of bullshit remains. “Bullshit has one significant weakness: it needs to be believed or accepted” (24).

The first of the three Aristotelian species of rhetoric is that of political or deliberative rhetoric. The deliberative end of rhetoric is concerned with “the future, about things done hereafter that he advises, for or against” (185). The future as a concept in all its intangibility is fertile grounds

for bullshit as is living in a democratic society with unfettered access to information as Frankfurt notes “where people are frequently impelled to, whether by their own propensities or the demands of others to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree, ignorant” (63). Evocative of Preti’s inclusion of the “bullshitee” into the theory of bullshit, Edward Bernays’s *Manipulating Public Opinion* provides a glimpse of what Frankfurterian bullshit in the deliberative rhetorical process can look like. “Very often the propagandist is called upon to create a circumstance that will eventuate in the desired reaction on the part of the public he is endeavoring to reach” (961). This “creating” of a desired reaction evokes Aristotle’s recommended tactics for deliberative rhetoric to a tee, “speak so as to bring his hearers into a frame of mind that will dispose them to anger, and to represent his adversaries as open to such charges” (216).

Preti’s expanded theory of bullshit comes into its own when in the employ of this sort of deliberative invention. In the presence of a decided lack of raw materials with which to induce the desired reactions in an audience, course of action for the future can be established upon a foundation erected from bullshit provided the audience is less than scrupulous. A pertinent example of this brand of deliberative rhetoric can be found in the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq. David Kellogg of Duke University in his paper, “*The Bullshit Revival*”, about the use of bullshit in political discourse describes the rhetoric surrounding the polarizing invasion as rife with bullshit. “To say that the Bush administration lied to start the war implies, for some people at least, that the administration knew (or thought they knew) there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and made the charge anyway. Many people are unwilling to go that far” (Kellogg 555). This affirms the presence of bullshit’s first essential quality surfacing in the political sphere, namely lack of definitive knowledge either true or false. The second and third composite pieces follow with “important rhetorical events leading up to the war, such as Colin Powell’s infamous PowerPoint presentation to the United Nations or President Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address. The Bush administration may not have not lied to start the war, but it may well have bullshitted” (Kellogg 555). The performative aspect of bullshit, in this case posturing towards possession of knowledge relating to extant weapons of mass destruction is accompanied by an audience receptive to this message in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Forensic speech, Aristotle’s second “species” of rhetoric concerns itself with discerning history and past events. While forensic speech is the most amenable to treatment via “inartistic” proofs, it still isn’t invulnerable to pervasion by bullshit. Part and parcel of forensic rhetoric

lies in, “(considering) the motives and states of mind of wrongdoers, and to whom they do wrong” (201) which indicates forensic rhetoric’s potential for rhetorical application of Frankfurtian bullshit. Frankfurt makes explicit that the bullshitter “cannot avoid misrepresenting his own mind” (13), even if they aren’t cognizant of their proliferation of bullshit hence the essentiality of this “misrepresentation.” Aristotle seems to be exhorting the bullshitter over the liar in his dicta regarding forensic rhetoric’s “artistic” proofs as he never makes explicit the notion of outright lying. “You may feel able to make it appear that your crime was due to chance, or to necessity, or natural causes . . . or habit” (206). All of the aforementioned qualities can be expressed as constituent elements of the “state of mind” of the rhetor making their case and thus amenable to being invented from bullshit.

The media’s treatment of the court case regarding the slaying of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin can be analyzed as an example of forensic bullshit in practice. In her paper *Teaching Trayvon*, UCLA professor, Safiya Noble, examines the ways by which both George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin’s ethos prior to the shooting were depicted differently to different audiences using techniques that fall comfortably into the category of bullshit devoid of any function towards establishing truth or falsity. Regarding Trayvon’s treatment by FOX news in particular, Noble writes, “and their intensity in mischaracterizing the teen as such. He is wearing a hoodie—the uniform of threatening black youth. . . Social media circulated pictures of Trayvon in an effort to make him match the narrative of black youth as out of control and to be feared” (16). Making a point that Trayvon was a fan of hooded apparel and listened to rap music does nothing in itself to incriminate him as the aggressor in the altercation with Zimmerman but that doesn’t appear to have been the point.

The three pillars of bullshit are all involved in the aforementioned example. Firstly, that he was a fan of hooded sweatshirts seems to have no engagement with the truth of Trayvon Martin being or not being a criminal. Secondly, this vacuous bullshit seems to be working off connotation to establish something about Martin’s ethos that may or may not be true. And thirdly, Preti’s amendment to the theory, that of the necessity of a willing “bullshitee” for bullshit to work, is also evident in the media’s application of forensic rhetoric, as Noble also noted: “media outlets are emphasizing different aspects of the Trayvon Martin story to grab the attention of particular audiences . . . media stories became different things for different news outlets depending on how they galvanized audiences” (15).

Probably due to its racy signifier and close relation to

lying, the term bullshit has strong negative connotations. However, in light of bullshit’s crucial role in practicing

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forensic rhetoric as presented in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, consideration should be paid towards bullshit’s amoral utility in generating ethos or a narrative in the face of a lack of materials for

“non-artistic” proofs regarding historical events. In James Fredal’s *Rhetoric and Bullshit*, Fredal details Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade’s depiction of bullshit as “a framing device” for “construction and maintenance of our social identities and social relationships” (246). In the event demonstration cannot be performed, establishing ethos or intentionality through the use of bullshit is fully commensurate with Aristotle’s outlining of forensic rhetoric in section X of *Rhetoric* as Fredal snugly fits bullshit firmly within the three points of Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle. He argues that “A full view (of bullshit) is . . . a speaker with a specific set of qualities or concerns (ethos) . . . characteristic features of the bullshit itself (logos) . . . and responses on the part of the audience (pathos)” (247).

The last of *Rhetoric*’s three “species” is that of epideictic or ceremonial oratory. As opposed to deliberative rhetoric’s province over the future and forensic over things past, the ceremonial species of rhetoric is concerned with the present generally in the form of “ceremony or funeral, which attempt to establish moral qualities of someone or something in the present” (Bizzell and Herzberg 172). Bullshit deployed towards an epideictic end also works through each of the constitutive essentials of bullshit. Aristotle notes the importance of a receptive audience or “bullshitee” as in his example, “the nature of our particular audience when making a speech of praise . . . it is not difficult to praise Athenians to an Athenian audience” (199). Potential for indifference to the truth value of the rhetoric at hand is also intimated in the same section when Aristotle notes “that is esteemed we are to present as noble” (199). Lastly, using bullshit to craft the rhetor’s ethos through a web of connotation and non-verifiable truthiness à la the first principle of bullshit, is also affirmed in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: “we are also to assume, when we wish either to praise a man or blame him, that qualities closely allied to those which he actually has are identical with them . . . the cautious man is cold-blooded . . . the stupid man a

good tempered one” (198). Aristotle’s use of *assumption* should be taken as signaling the essential structural indifference to truth inherent in Frankfurian bullshit.

A recent example of bullshit being used in an epideictic or ceremonial context can be found in president elect Trump. Following his victory in the 2016 presidential election he tweeted “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally” (Trump) which is a paragon example of bullshit being used to instill a sense of authority or moral quality. The indifference to the truth value of his statement is accounted for by virtue that the tweet doesn’t quite fall into the province of the lie in the fact that “millions” of illegal votes cannot be proved or disproved without an audit or some other empirical analysis of the results. Additionally, the “I won the popular vote,” frames this particular slice of bullshit firmly within the epideictic framework by virtue of the bullshitter implying he played by the rules throughout the election and was shafted the popular vote as consequence.

With bullshit’s potential for interplay with Aristotle’s three “species” of rhetoric addressed, the question now turns to bullshits role in the “rhetoric as (t)ruth paradigm.” Aristotle makes clear the importance of conveying truth via rhetoric in the opening of *Rhetoric* when he states “for we must not make people believe what is wrong” (181). This doesn’t seem to outright admonish bullshit however as bullshit isn’t necessarily false. The closest Aristotle gets to explicitly censuring bullshit’s usage is in his claim that “what makes a man a “sophist” is not his faculty, but his moral purpose” (181), surely using “sophist” as a pejorative term for the amoral or immoral rhetorician. Even one of the focal points of Aristotle’s whole system, the enthymeme, is open to being used as a vessel for bullshit. He argues “It is evident therefore, that the propositions forming the basis of enthymemes . . . will most of them be only usually true” (183), which it should be noted seemingly flies in the face of his earlier opinion that the rhetor should not willingly lead the audience towards falsity. Although Aristotle does not suggest using false propositions in his rhetorical syllogisms, he provides the framework by which bullshit can be used to manufacture (t)ruth.

Although published in 1986, Harry Frankfurt’s theory of bullshit incorporates seamlessly with the system presented in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as well as the “rhetoric as (t)ruth” paradigm. Developments in the field of philosophy of language toward expanding the theory, namely Preti’s positing of a third essential property of bullshit in the form of the bullshitee does nothing to destabilize bullshit’s conjunctive position alongside

Aristotle’s three species of rhetoric. The examples of the three species of rhetoric culled from contemporary discourses provide a demonstration of Aristotelian bullshit in effect as well as illuminating the fact that Aristotle’s treatise on rhetoric is just as applicable today as it was during its heyday of 4th century BC.

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John McArdle is currently in his last semester at UCF since transferring from Pasco-Hernando State College in 2015. A philosophy major with a minor in writing and rhetoric as well as cognitive science, John is looking forward to continuing his philosophical education into graduate school. His current areas of academic interest are history of philosophy, Heideggerian philosophy, and object-oriented ontology. Outside the classroom, John likes reading up on Stoicism, hanging out with his girlfriend’s rabbit and playing the game Advanced Squad Leader.