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## Between Truth and Lies, An Unprintable Ubiquity

By PETER EDIDIN

**H**arry G. Frankfurt, 76, is a moral philosopher of international reputation and a professor emeritus at Princeton. He is also the author of a book recently published by the Princeton University Press that is the first in the publishing house's distinguished history to carry a title most newspapers, including this one, would find unfit to print. The work is called "On Bull - - - - ."

The opening paragraph of the 67-page essay is a model of reason and composition, repeatedly disrupted by that single obscenity:

"One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much [bull]. 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 [bull] and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry."

The essay goes on to lament that lack of inquiry, despite the universality of the phenomenon. "Even the most basic and preliminary questions about [bull] remain, after all," Mr. Frankfurt writes, "not only unanswered but unasked."

The balance of the work tries, with the help of Wittgenstein, Pound, St. Augustine and the spy novelist Eric Ambler, among others, to ask some of the preliminary questions - to define the nature of a thing recognized by all but understood by none.

What is [bull], after all? Mr. Frankfurt points out it is neither fish nor fowl. Those who produce it certainly aren't honest, but neither are they liars, given that the liar and the honest man are linked in their common, if not identical, regard for the truth.

"It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth," Mr. Frankfurt writes. "A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it."

The bull artist, on the other hand, cares nothing for truth or falsehood. The only thing that matters to him is "getting away with what he says," Mr. Frankfurt writes. An advertiser or a politician or talk show host given to [bull] "does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it," he writes. "He pays no attention to it at all."

And this makes him, Mr. Frankfurt says, potentially more harmful than any liar, because any culture and he means this culture rife with [bull] is one in danger of rejecting "the possibility of knowing how things truly are." It follows that any form of political argument or intellectual analysis or commercial appeal is only as legitimate, and true, as it is persuasive. There is no other court of appeal.

The reader is left to imagine a culture in which institutions, leaders, events, ethics feel improvised and lacking in substance. "All that is solid," as Marx once wrote, "melts into air."

Mr. Frankfurt is an unlikely slinger of barnyard expletives. He is a courtly man, with a broad smile and a philosophic beard, and he lives in apparently decorous retirement with his wife, Joan Gilbert, in a lovely old house near the university. On a visit there earlier this month, there was Heifetz was on the stereo, good food and wine on the table.

But appearances, in this case, are somewhat misleading. Mr. Frankfurt spent much of his childhood in Brooklyn, and still sees himself as a disputatious Brooklynite - one who still speaks of the Dodgers as "having betrayed us." And, in any event, Mr. Frankfurt is not particularly academic in the way he views his calling.

"I got interested in philosophy because of two things," he said. "One is that I was never satisfied with the answers that were given to questions, and it seemed to me that philosophy was an attempt to get down to the bottom of things."

"The other thing," he added, "was that I could never make up my mind what I was interested in, and philosophy enabled you to be interested in anything."

Those interests found expression in a small and scrupulous body of work that tries to make sense of free will, desire and love in closely reasoned but jargon-free prose, illustrated by examples of behavior (philosophers speak of the "Frankfurt example") that anyone would recognize.

"He's dealing with very abstract matters," said Sarah Buss, who teaches philosophy at the University of Iowa, "but trying not to lose touch with the human condition. His work keeps faith with that condition."

Mr. Frankfurt's teaching shares with his prose a spirit Ms. Buss, who was once his graduate student, defines as, "Come in and let's struggle with something."

"He was very willing," she added, "to say, 'I just don't understand this.'"

The essay on [bull] arose from that kind of struggle. In 1986, Mr. Frankfurt was teaching at Yale, where he took part in a weekly seminar. The idea was to get people of various disciplines to listen to a paper written by one of their number, after which everyone would talk about it over lunch.

Mr. Frankfurt decided his contribution would be a paper on [bull]. "I had always been concerned about the importance of truth," he recalled, "the way in which truth is foundational to civilization and the various deformities of it that were current."

"I'd been concerned about the prevalence" of [bull], he continued, "and the lack of concern for truth and respect for truth that it represented."

"I used the title I did," he added, "because I wanted to talk about [bull] without any [bull], so I didn't use 'humbug' or 'bunkum.'"

Research was a problem. The closest analogue came from Socrates.

"He called it rhetoric or sophistry," Mr. Frankfurt said, "and regarded philosophy as the great enemy of rhetoric and sophistry."

"These were opposite, incompatible ways of persuading people," he added. "You could persuade them with rhetoric" - or [bull] - "with sophistic arguments that weren't really sound but that you could put over on people, or you could persuade them by philosophical arguments which were dedicated to rigor and clarity of thought."

Mr. Frankfurt recalled that it took him about a month to write the essay, after which he delivered it to the humanities group. "I guess I should say it was received enthusiastically," he said, "but they didn't know whether to laugh or to take it seriously."

Some months after the reading, the essay, title intact, was published by The Raritan Review, a journal then edited by Richard Poirier, a distinguished literary critic. In 1988, Mr. Frankfurt included it in "The Importance of What We Care About," a collection of his essays.

The audience for academic journals and collections of philosophical essays is limited, however, and so the essay tended to be passed along, samizdat style, from one aficionado to another.

"In the 20 years since it was published," Mr. Frankfurt said, "I don't think a year has passed in which I haven't gotten one or two letters or e-mails from people about it."

One man from Wales set some of the text to music; another who worked in the financial industry wanted to create an annual award for the worst piece of analysis published in his field (an idea apparently rejected by his superiors). G. A. Cohen, the Chichele professor of social and political theory at All Souls College, Oxford University, has written two papers on the subject.

"Harry has a unique capacity to take a simple truth and draw from it very consequential implications," Mr. Cohen said. "He is very good at identifying the potent elementary fact."

It was Ian Malcolm, the Princeton University Press editor responsible for philosophy, who approached Mr. Frankfurt about publishing the essay as a stand-alone volume. "The only way the essay would get the audience it deserved was to publish it as a small book," he said. "I had a feeling it would sell, but we weren't quite prepared for the interest it got."

For Mr. Frankfurt, who says it has always been his ambition to move philosophy "back to what most people think of as philosophy, which is a concern with the problems of life and with understanding the world," the book might be considered a successful achievement. But he finds he is still trying to get to the bottom of things, and hasn't arrived.

"When I reread it recently," he said at home, "I was sort of disappointed. It wasn't as good as I'd thought it was. It was a fairly superficial and incomplete treatment of the subject."

"Why," he wondered, "do we respond to [bull] in such a different way than we respond to lies? When we find somebody lying, we get angry, we feel we've been betrayed or violated or insulted in some way, and the liar is regarded as deceptive, deficient, morally at fault."

Why we are more tolerant of [bull] than lying is something Mr. Frankfurt believes would be worth considering.

"Why is lying regarded almost as a criminal act?" he asked, while bull "is sort of cuddly and warm? It's outside the realm of serious moral criticism. Why is that?"

