# Retoryka liczb
# Rhetoric of Numbers

**VARIA**

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**Seeing Bullshit Rhetorically: Human Encounters and Cultural Values**
**Retoryczne spojrzenie na „wciskanie kitu": transakcje komunikacyjne i wartości kulturowe**

## Abstract

This essay explores the idea that *calling bullshit* exemplifies Mercier and Sperber"s social intuitionist theory. It discusses a range of empirical research related to bullshit, including belief in the worldviews of Individualist vs. Communitarian and Hierarchical vs. Egalitarian with regard to accepting and rejecting ideas. *Calling bullshit* fits well with using the heuristics of like/not like and cognitive mechanisms of debunking misinformation.

Autor eseju odnosi się do idei „wciskania kitu" (ang. *bullshit*) jako egzemplifikacji intuicjonistycznej teorii społecznej H. Merciera i D. Sperbera. Przywołuje wiele badań empirycznych, poświęconych temu zjawisku, w tym te, które omawiają podział światopoglądów według osi indywidualizm vs komunitarianizm oraz hierarchia vs egalitaryzm w kontekście akceptacji bądź odrzucania idei. Odkrywanie „kitu" w przekazie dobrze odzwierciedla heurystykę afektu (lubię/nie lubię) oraz kognitywne mechanizmy obalania dezinformacji.

## Key words

## License

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# Seeing Bullshit Rhetorically:
# Human Encounters and Cultural Values[1]

It seems odd that we use ideas very comfortably and effortlessly when we have a hard time defining those ideas; moreover, we are not aware that we have a hard time defining ideas until we try to define them. One might even be annoyed at being asked to define a simple and seemingly self-explanatory concept we use regularly, like *bullshit*. After all, it is what it is. But what is it? In his 2005 book, *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt opens with this:

> 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, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, 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, we have no theory (Frankfurt 2005, 1).

That we are unclear on what we mean by the concept *bullshit* is all the odder since we are often quite certain about what we point to as an instance of bullshit. It is not hard to give our reasons for why something is bullshit, but it is hard to define *bullshit*. This should make us wonder about how our minds work.

Bullshit, it seems, is something we experience that is apart from us (some refer to this as being a realist, see: *eResearch Methods*). Cohen (2012, 104) wrote this, speaking of different senses of bullshit: "My bullshit belongs to the category of statement or text. It is not primarily an activity but the result of an activity (whether or not that activity always qualifies as an activity of bullshitting)". Cohen was limiting his definition of bullshit to statements that do not make sense, hence the bullshitter's intentions were seen to be irrelevant. And that is why he

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added, "whether or not that activity always qualifies as an activity of bullshitting," meaning that bullshit occurs even when people are not bullshitting.

In this essay, however, it is argued that when bullshit statements do make sense, we need to look behind the directly observable to motives for producing bullshit, to the intentions of the bullshitter, to the reasoning that we use to interpret something as bullshit, to our beliefs and to the cognitive processes by which we produce and label something as bullshit. Once we shift the spotlight to our assessment of motives and how we reach the conclusion "That's bullshit," we are forced to think of bullshit not as something to be found out there but rather something to be determined by us, something to be reconstructed by us. In short, we shift to a focus on the process rather than the product. We move from a ready-made structure to a rhetorical transaction. Fredal (2011, 243) makes the connection between bullshit and rhetoric this way: "The study of bullshit should occupy an important place alongside rhetoric because taurascatics [the study of bullshit] is the antistrophe of rhetorical theory, for both are concerned with the politics of semiotic interaction, and with the frameworks within which that interaction will be produced, interpreted, and judged".

We take our place in the process and recognize that there are a number of ways in which our minds have a role in our experience of bullshit. The point here is not to blame the receiver for all the bullshit in the world; rather it is to recognize the part we play in experiencing bullshit. The better we understand the process, the better position we are in to be able to manage the bullshit/not bullshit in our lives. And that includes our bullshitting ourselves and others. But there is an even bigger benefit to derive from rethinking how we come to conclusions and that is to recognize the place of intuitive thinking. Since we often decide that something is bullshit in milliseconds, *calling bullshit* is an exemplar case of intuitive thinking.

Fredal (2011, 245) offers this view of bullshit and bullshitting. He wrote:

> In fact, taurascatic theories before and since Frankfurt can be categorized into a familiar rhetorical triad: they tie bullshit variously to the intent or character of the speaker, to the features of the text itself, or to the proclivities and biases of the audience. The parallel to the Aristotelian rhetorical triad is not accidental, for like rhetoric, bullshit presumes a speaker, a listener, and a text that enacts a symbolic exchange characteristic of language in use. Both rhetoric and bullshit attend to the power of speech, not only to shape and influence the speaker, the listener, their relationship, and their shared world, but to construct each of these elements from moment to moment through the ongoing negotiation of each encounter. And bullshit, like rhetoric, must emphasize the centrality of the response of the audience as the end of any given encounter. Neither rhetorical nor taurascatic analysis can dispense with the audience. Each of these three perspectives (the speaker, the text, the audience) brings with it a set of strengths and weaknesses, each can be conceived of in both positive and negative terms, and each can be seen to have roots in traditional explorations of rhetorical artistry.

## Values, Convictions, Personality, Emotions, and Bullshit

Our beliefs, dispositions, personality, reasoning, intuitions and attitudes play a role in what we judge to be bullshit. Kimbrough (2006, 16) points out that in calling bullshit we are concerned with justification but not always with the truth. He argues that our values ultimately inform our judgment of justification. He offers the example of a bottom-line businessman finding business ethics to be bullshit. Protecting one's identity and respecting the claim to identity of the other is always present in producing and perceiving bullshit.

Neil Postman (1969, 5) held "that one man's bullshit is another man's catechism". Postman also maintained that values are central to understanding bullshit. He said: "In other words, bullshit is what you call language that treats people in ways you do not approve of" (1969, 5). If our values play such a central role in deciding what we count as bullshit, we ought to explore how this might work. For instance, when we asked a small sample of undergraduates (N=36) if they would label as bullshit the teacher's response, "nice job," to a student's poor work, we found a split, which can be attributed to valuing encouragement versus feedback on the task.

Evidence suggests that our values influence how we respond to arguments, what we accept as true or not. For instance, in an impressive study of values, subjects showed that they judged questions about public policy according to where they stood on valuing the sovereignty of the individual versus the society (Kahan et al. 2007).

We can hypothesize that one's underlying beliefs/ideology, conscious or unconscious, would correlate with their judgment "That's bullshit." Kahan et al. (2007, 31) concluded:

> The impact of cultural worldviews is consistent with the hypothesized relationship between risk perception and cultural-identity-protective cognition. In keeping with the association of gun ownership with hierarchical and individualistic norms, for example, respondents who held hierarchical and individualistic worldviews were predictably disposed to reject the assertion–leveled by their egalitarian and communitarian rivals–that guns are dangerous. The respondents inclined to see guns as safest of all were hierarchical and individualistic white men. Their stance of fearlessness is convincingly attributable to identity-protective cognition insofar as they are the persons who need guns the most in order to occupy social roles and display individual virtues within their cultural communities.
> The implications of our study for risk communication are more straightforward. The influence of cultural worldviews on risk perception demonstrates that it would be a profound mistake to assume that the simple ascertainment and dissemination of empirical truth will lead to public enlightenment on various societal and personal risks. Where the activities associated with those risks are conspicuously emblematic of one cultural worldview or another, identity-protective cognition will induce individuals to credit or dismiss scientific information, depending on its congeniality to their cultural norms.

In another study of the effects of worldviews on decision making, Kahan et al. (2012) demonstrated that subjects' worldviews dramatically influenced how they perceived videos of protestors with regard to either free expression or acting harmful to others, the speech-action distinction in law.

Taylor (2006, 52) wrote about the human tendency—called confirmation bias, the tendency "to ignore, avoid, or undervalue the relevance of things that would disconfirm one's beliefs." Taylor continued, "Confirmation bias helps to explain the imperviousness of strongly held beliefs to contravening evidence and it also helps to explain our tendency to overestimate our own epistemic reliability" (2006, 52). Mooney (2013) explains this same phenomenon as motivated reasoning. Mooney opens his "Mother Jones" article with this:

> "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point." So, wrote the celebrated Stanford University psychologist Leon Festinger, in a passage that might have been referring to climate change denial—the persistent rejection, on the part of so many Americans today, of what we know about global warming and its human causes. But it was too early for that—this was the 1950s—and Festinger was actually describing a famous case study in psychology.

If strongly held convictions, beliefs, attitudes, values, begin to explain how we think about arguments and evidence for positions, then strongly held ideas begin to account for people viewing the same set of evidence as you and yet concluding that what they believe is true and what you believe is bullshit (see: Galef 2016). We see this phenomenon in such current day issues as gun control, abortion, climate change, and ways to deal with racial tensions. Understanding the dynamics behind such disagreements is central to our wellbeing.

Avi Tuschman (2013), an evolutionary anthropologist, presents a strong case for differences of opinion on controversial issues that derive from genetically based universal personality traits, e.g, tolerance for inequality. He points to three clusters of attitudes, (1) toward inequality, (2) toward tribalism, and (3) perceptions of human nature. Tuschman argues that these universal political proclivities exist "because [of] political orientations and natural dispositions that have been molded by evolutionary forces" (Tuschman 2013, 24). Tuschman presents strong evidence that genetics accounts for a sizeable amount of variation in political differences between individuals, 40 to 60 percent. Further, he brings together evidence from political science to show that income does not correlate significantly with voting left or right. Instead, the data show that there is a strong statistical relationship between the personality traits of Openness and Conscientiousness and left-right voting behavior (Tuschman 2013, 41). Hence, one's tendency to respond to the world in certain ways weighs heavily in how he/she sees controversial issues.

### *Bullshit, Strongly Held Beliefs, and Automatic Processing*

A few brilliantly executed empirical studies tested the idea that values concerning the individual versus the group predict how one assesses where to stand on a number of controversial issues. Kahan et al. (2007, 3–4) have argued for:

> a form of *motivated cognition* through which people seek to deflect threats to identities they hold, and roles they occupy, by virtue of contested cultural norms. This proposition derives from the convergence of two sets of theories, one relating to the impact of culture on risk perception and the other on the influence of group membership on cognition.

Accordingly, strongly held beliefs may help to explain both the proliferation of bullshit and our tendency to not recognize it. It could be hypothesized that people perceive more bullshit as their beliefs become stronger and the argument does not confirm their beliefs; and they are less inclined to see bullshit when their beliefs are stronger and the argument confirms their own beliefs.

Several theories of attitude change would also support the idea that holding strong beliefs would go along with being less reflective on claims and evidence offered in support or against those claims. The decision to reject or accept ideas is theorized to operate at high speed, to occur automatically. For instance, Social Interaction Theory says that strong ego involvement in beliefs would predict a larger area of rejection of ideas (Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall 1965). Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) describes the cognitive processing of incoming claims as either central or peripheral, where central involves reflective thinking and peripheral is a mindless sort of processing, focusing on superficial trappings. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger 1957) suggests that our beliefs and behaviors connect to our feelings of dissonance and hence our responses to ideas. Where our beliefs are in conflict with one another or our behaviors, we are motivated to change our beliefs, change our behavior or add new beliefs to the mix. Deciding that something is bullshit might be one way to reduce the dissonance. Gilovich and Ross (2017) remind us that our political leanings and values influence more than our opinions. They influence the actions we perceive, the meanings we take from events we observe (Kahan et al. 2012). When deciding on issues, people with different beliefs may imagine and consider very different facts and circumstances (Gilovich and Ross 2017, 24).

We would not be the first to see a close connection between how discourse operates and how bullshit operates. Some of us have trouble with small talk. "How you doing?" "Nice day." "Gee, you are up and out early." One possible reason for this is that small talk may be a good example of the tug of war between different levels of meaning in an exchange. If one values and focuses on the relational meanings, then small talk is to be valued. If stating the truth and only what is

necessary is foremost, then small talk may be seen as bullshit and (for that reason) hard for some to do.

An exploration of bullshit may benefit greatly from both a serious analysis of the text, usually utterances or written words, where the focus tends to be upon its truth-value—and also from a rhetorical, communication theory point of view—where the focus is on a transaction between people (and/or communication within one's self), involving social actions. What this means is that bullshit appears to operate as speech acts and indirect speech acts (Searle 1969) which involve truth--value but also conditions of sincerity, context (including power), rules that define social actions of various kinds, such as promising, threatening, suggesting, offering and reporting, to name a few. Speech acts and indirect speech acts involve inference as we relate strongly held beliefs and multiple kinds of meaning to the immediate context. If you bag food items at the supermarket and your boss says to you:

"I need someone to sweep up aisle twelve."

she/he is referring to an abstract someone—not them self—a physical part of a supermarket, an act of cleaning, in other words, the semantics of the utterance. Or, they may be expressing their need at one level, suggesting at another level and ordering you to sweep up as well. The indirectness of the command softens the relational message, but given your roles and the immediate context of the utterance, including the recent loud sound of a bottle breaking in aisle twelve, perhaps your background knowledge of the boss's style, you understand what appears to be a mild suggestion or expression of need is really a command, a directive in speech act theory terms. Bullshit functions at more than one level simultaneously. Bullshit, it is hypothesized, functions at the level of direct content, (1) the semantic meaning of the words uttered/written and (2) underlying relational messages, underlying value/belief messages, implied or insinuated meanings and inferred meanings. There can be a tension between these levels and messages. To offer a simple example, a bullshit response to a student's poorly facilitated discussion may be something like, "great job". We may know this is not true but it serves the underlying task of being supportive. One can see a tug of war already in values attached to this example. If we consider the key underlying components of bullshit as the words uttered (possibly non-verbal's as well), the state of mind of the speaker (sender) and the nature of the receiver (interpretation of the utterance, history involved between sender and receiver, cultural outlook of the receiver, receiver's relationship to sender), then we see that bullshit not only operates at multiple levels and for multiple possible motives, but with potentially very different kinds of meaning, semantic and pragmatic. Philosophers have recognized this multiplicity of bullshit. Reisch (2006, 41) has referred to the bullshitter as running two conversations at once. He wrote:

> Frankfurt's definition of bullshit crucially involves semantics insofar as bullshitters, as he defines them, don't care whether or not their utterances are true. But some of his examples of bullshit also point to the pragmatic aspects of language. To see these, we must expand our picture of language to include not just meaning and truth but also the uses and purposes to which language may be put.

Fredal (2011, 252) argues that "rhetoricians since Burke have understood that the motives for symbol use are never pure, and that the suasory intrudes in every manifestation of the symbolic, especially in those most ardently proclaiming their objectivity, accuracy, or truth". Hence, as we open up our understanding of bullshit to include the full transaction, we open up discourse to the claim that all symbolic exchanges are potentially seen as bullshit.

A pragmatics perspective on bullshit entails that there are many kinds of bullshit, some benign and conventional, where it is understood that the discourse is not intended to express accurate information, and some kinds of bullshit that evoke strong negative reactions, where there is pretentiousness, an obvious use of power to get away with something (Richardson 2006). Richardson writes about the conventions of bullshitting in proposal writing, letters of recommendation, patriotic gatherings, and moments of courtesy. These are benign instances of bullshit. Perla and Carifio (2007) argue that an important function of bullshit is in developing new ideas. They wrote: "But something as ubiquitous as BS may exist for a reason and perhaps an important and good reason… bullshit is a matrix for the development of higher-order thinking" (Perla and Carifio 2007, 124). In short, there are many sorts of bullshit, and understanding bullshit as a function of pragmatics helps to explain this wide field and our reactions to it.

**Pragmatics and Strongly Held Beliefs (values)**

With a multi-level perspective on bullshitting, we introduce a variety of contexts in which the speaker and the listener are creating meaning. One of these contexts is the values or beliefs the speaker and listener holds. Values (strong beliefs) appear to be a particularly powerful variable involved in the pragmatics of discourse. Interestingly, studies of values have suggested that values have a strong impact on assessing the truth-value of arguments, on accepting or rejecting evidence. With this in mind, some studies attempted to determine the relationship between cultural worldviews (values/beliefs) having to do with the dimensions of Individualist-Communitarian and Hierarchist-Egalitarian and the acceptance or rejection of arguments. In rough terms, we can think of these two dimensions as underlying (1) a belief in the extent to which society should allow individuals to go in making decisions for themselves and (2) a belief in equality as opposed to discrimination (see: Barnett 2016).
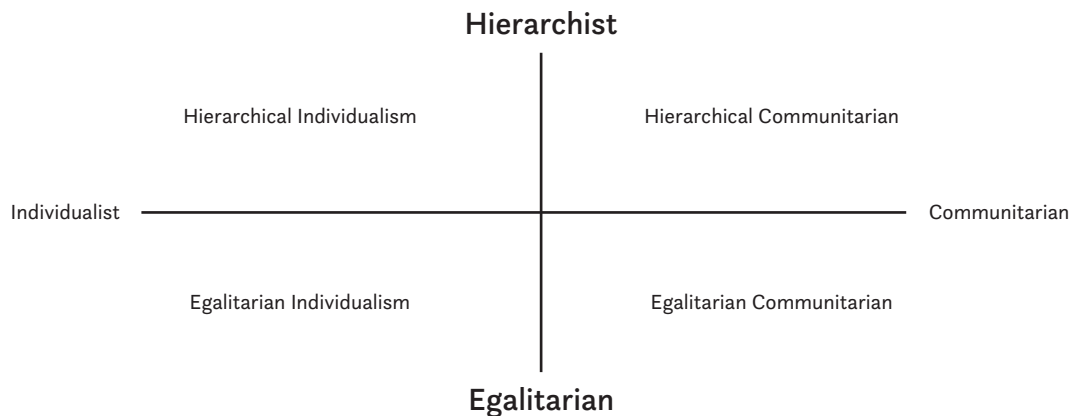
**Figure 1.** Dimensions of Belief

Kahan et al. (2007) explain the connection between two dimensions, Individualist-Communitarian and Hierarchist-Egalitarian, and political conflict this way:

> These preferences, cultural theory posits, explain political conflict over risk regulation. Persons who are relatively egalitarian and communitarian are naturally sensitive to environmental and technological risks, the reduction of which justifies regulating commercial activities that produce social inequality and legitimize unconstrained self-interest. Those who are more individualistic predictably dismiss claims of environmental risk as specious, in line with their commitment to the autonomy of markets and other private orderings. So do relatively hierarchical persons, who perceive assertions of environmental catastrophe as threatening the competence of social and governmental elites (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). Building on Douglas's and Wildavsky's work, numerous empirical studies have shown that perceptions (lay and expert) of various types of environmental and technological hazards do vary in patterns that conform to these (Dake, 1991; Ellis & Thompson, 1997; Gyawali, 1999; Jenkins- Smith & Smith, 1994; Jenkins-Smith 2001; Marris, Langford & Langford O'Riordan, 1998; Peters & Slovic, 1996; Steg & Sievers, 2000; Poortinga, Steg & Vlec, 2002; Wildavsky & Dake, 1990).

**Bullshit, Pragmatics, Rhetoric and Intuition**

James Fredal's paper, "Bullshit and Rhetoric" (2011), helps to shed light on the idea of bullshit as multi-leveled, where multiple meanings can be derived from one and the same utterance, where multiple speech acts can be performed simultaneously, where more than one purpose can be served by one expression. Fredal (2011, 244) wrote:

> For Frankfurt, discourse can be divided into two categories: that which is motivated by the truth and that which isn't. He doesn't, however, consider discourse that is motivated by multiple factors (in addition to a concern for the truth), nor does he consider the variation the speaker may feel in [his/] her level of confidence in the truth.

In short, Frankfurt (2005) focuses on the truth-value of bullshit. Like Fredal, Mears (quoted in Fredal 2011) also points to another framework for bullshit in addition to the truth-value. Mears points to the ways in which bullshitting functions in creating and maintaining social relations between people. Fredal (2011, 246) explains Mears's thinking on bullshit in this excerpt:

> Like Frankfurt, Mears locates the source of bullshit in the speaker herself and her desire to craft a creditable self-image. But whereas Frankfurt sees bullshitting as a species of deception worse than lying (because at least liars have to know the truth if only to lead us away from it, whereas bullshitters have no concern at all for the truth), Mears understands bullshit as a significant social phenomenon that serves several prosocial functions.7 For Mears, we engage in bullshit for purposes of socialization and play, for self-exploration and self-expression, for the resolution of social tensions and cognitive dissonance, and for gaining an advantage in encounters.

To put it another way, Mears described bullshit as a communication transaction, a negotiation, a social phenomenon (Mears, 2002). With this definition, the focus is not solely upon the text and the speaker's interest in the truth. For Mears, bullshit is involved with the state of mind of the bullshitter with regard to dealing with relationships with people. Levine and Kim (2010, 17), writing about deception, put it this way: "In short, speaker intent and message consequence in conjunction define deception, not the objective qualities of messages or information dimensions". They are pointing to what goes on between people as they communicate, with an emphasis on the assessment of motives (Levine and Kim 2010, 31).

Mercier and Sperber (2017) maintained that when people have a common interest in finding the truth, reason operates best in the give and take of argumentation, resulting in the best ideas winning out. They refer to this as the interactionist perspective. However, when reason is a solitary operation, it tends to be biased and lazy (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 10–11). Mercier and Sperber wrote: "[…] reason, we maintain, is first and foremost a social competence" (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 11). It would seem to follow that where we wish to seek the truth and reduce bullshit, discussion is recommended. They go even further in telling us that reasoning is a kind of intuitive inference, and that when we think on our own we essentially use intuition. We use reason primarily to convince others of our intuitions and to justify ourselves (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 7–8). Where many psychologists have seen reason as flawed in its assumed function of helping people acquire knowledge and making good decisions, Mercier and Sperber question this assumption about the function of reason. Instead, they hold that reason functions to give reasons to ourselves and to convince others. Reason, they claim, is to produce reasons to use in arguments to persuade. Hence, reason is not flawed. It does what it is designed to do. Reason does not exert a great effort to assess the arguments it produces. If we start with a strong opinion, we tend to find

reasons that support that opinion. However, reason also functions to assess the arguments of others. They take the position that "We are as good at recognizing biases in others as we are bad at acknowledging our own" (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 330). The mechanism they propose is high speed and largely unconscious inference from what is reconstructed from memory. Memories themselves are inferred. Inference is influenced by semantics, pragmatics, and context. Mercier and Sperber wrote: "Intuition is often characterized as 'knowing without knowing how one knows'" (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 64). Jonathan Haidt (2001, 814) is a moral psychologist who reviewed evidence against rationalist models and proposed the social intuitionist model in moral thinking. Haidt wrote:

> Intuitionism in philosophy refers to the view that there are moral truths and that when people grasp these truths they do so not by a process of ratiocination and reflection but rather by a process more akin to perception, in which one "just sees without argument that they are and must be true" (Harrison, 1967, p. 72). Thomas Jefferson's declaration that certain truths are "self-evident" is an example of ethical intuitionism. Intuitionist approaches in moral psychology, by extension, say that moral intuitions (including moral emotions) come first and directly cause moral judgments (Haidt, in press; Kagan, 1984; Shweder & Haidt, 1993; J. Q. Wilson, 1993). Moral intuition is a kind of cognition, but it is not a kind of reasoning.

Intuition has been shown to be highly biased at times and shockingly accurate at other times (Kahneman 2011). Kahneman points out that often, especially with difficult questions, intuitions are based on the affect heuristic, "where judgments and decisions are guided directly by feelings of liking and disliking, with little deliberation or reasoning" (Kahneman 2011, 12). What do you mean when you say, "That's bullshit"? *Calling bullshit* implies that it is clear—self-evident—when something is bullshit, and calling it bullshit expresses certainty. We can speculate that with certainty there is little motivation to engage in more effortful thinking. Reflection is halted. Open discussion is ended. As Kahneman suggests, where intuition asserts itself, deeper, effortful thinking is unlikely to occur. Kahneman wrote: "most people are overconfident, prone to place too much faith in their intuitions" (Kahneman 2011, 45). Moreover, we tend to believe that our opinion is more commonly shared than it actually is (Ross, Greene, and House, 1977).

On the question of how we conclude, "That's bullshit," it is proposed that we operate largely on automatic. Imagine an underlying set of beliefs that can be accessed without conscious thought and which trigger a response based on a superficial assessment of whether the claim is in line with or not in line with beliefs. Perhaps the like or dislike heuristic would do the job. The connection between the claim and the underlying beliefs is unconscious much like how we access knowledge of our native language. Reasons in support of our response are constructed after the initial acceptance or rejection of the claim. In a sense, we are operating on fixed rules that we carry around in our heads.

**Empirical Studies of Bullshit**

Few empirical studies have been done explicitly on *bullshit*. Given the great range of theoretical connections to bullshit, we need to recognize that some studies relate to the topic without referring directly to the term *bullshit*. This point underscores the importance of defining *bullshit* and its connections. For instance, it was argued earlier that some studies of values fall into the category of empirical studies of *bullshit*. A good number of empirical studies that come under the labels of deception and the gray area that lies between truth and deception (McGlone and Knapp, Eds. 2010) are relevant to *bullshit*. And with a theoretical framework for understanding *bullshit*, it can be seen that many, many empirical studies in social psychology help us understand the phenomenon of *calling bullshit* (Gilovich and Ross 2017). What these studies have in common is showing that the context in which a communication takes place influences our interpretation of it, contexts such as: beliefs, experiences, motivations, and values.

In one of the few empirical studies of detecting bullshit, Pennycook et al. (2015) examined "whether there are consistent and meaningful individual differences in the ability to spontaneously discern or detect pseudo-profound bullshit". Pennycook, et. al. (2015) defines pseudo-profound bullshit this way: "seemingly impressive assertions that are presented as true and meaningful but are actually vacuous". They found that there are individual differences, and their results indicate that reflectiveness, which was independently measured, is a key individual difference variable (Evans and Stanovich 2013; Toplak, West, and Stanovich, 2011). More reflective individuals were more likely to detect pseudo-profound bullshit than less reflective or less analytical individuals. We can speculate that holding strong beliefs would go along with being less reflective on certain claims and evidence offered in support of those claims. Debunking misinformation is difficult to do. It requires counterarguing and detail (Chan et al. 2017). Hyman and Jalbert (2017, 377) maintained that "In the post-truth world, we believe, applied cognitive researchers must begin by addressing how someone's worldview drives misinformation acceptance and the rejection of true information".

**Conclusion**

Up until this point in this essay, it has been argued that *calling bullshit* is a cognitive process that is best described as an intuitive response that makes use of beliefs stored in memory and inferential mechanisms. Reference has been made to what others have had to say on the topic or what has been found in empirical studies. Now let's depart from that approach and speak largely from a subjective position. It is further proposed that sometimes there is a powerful yet subtle emotional experience when we conclude, "That's bullshit".

In one's experience of the world, every so often she/he feels that they have a clear and personally arrived at truth. In instances when our newfound insight opposes ideas that we had carried about and accepted as true but now denounce, here is where we might refer to the prior ideas as bullshit. Right or wrong, our newfound thought throws off what now seems like prejudice, inaccurate pronouncements of how things work or what exists in the world. We have come to believe that a rule we blindly followed was really empty. We will no longer follow that rule. It is at these moments that we experience an especially liberating jolt. We have freed ourselves of the restrictions imposed on our world by unthought out ideas. We have risen above authority. We have flexed our intellectual muscle and we feel fit.

So, what is put forward here is that sometimes, *calling bullshit* is not simply unthought out belief. Sometimes, it is based on coming to your own understanding. And this is an exhilarating emotional experience. This could happen when we experience, read or hear something that changes our mind and we agree to throw off some shackles. This feels exciting, but not nearly as exciting as when we work our way to the new understanding, pulling together pieces, rejecting ideas, debating the issues and finally coming to see the light. So, yes, the idea that sometimes we do deliberate remains viable and part of the process, though it is not as common as using intuition.

This essay has tried to make the case that *calling bullshit* may initially be seen as labeling something in the world separate from us, but that after some reflection, it appears that in addition to considering the text, we need to consider the role that perceived intentions play as well as our values and the context in which we operate. Moreover, it is proposed that our standard way of reasoning by intuition plays a key role in the overall process of *calling bullshit*. There is a great deal of similarity between the processes in discourse and the production and determination of bullshit. While there is reason to think that awareness of the process is not enough to keep us safe from the foibles of the mind (Taylor 2006), it is a significant first step (Beaulac and Kenyon 2018). Finally, in summing up, Fredal says it well (2011, 253):

> Thus, any language exchange could appear to one of its participants as bullshit, precisely because bullshit, for Postman, is not a quality of texts per se, nor of speakers and their intents, but of audiences and their sense of language as motivated (and therefore ethically charged) action. This makes the charge of bullshit highly subjective or, as Postman says, "One man's bullshit is another man's catechism." Any text by any speaker can (and will) be perceived as bullshit by someone, from celebrity apologies to declarations of global warming, from French post-structuralism to Barack Obama's campaign language of "hope" and "change" (satirized by Sarah Palin in her Tea Party speech of February 6, 2010). And, because of his understanding of the situatedness of bullshit and its sensitivity to an audience's value system, Postman recognizes that we all, at some point or another, produce what will be seen by someone else as bullshit, especially those of us most confident in the rightness of our beliefs: we have, in the words of Pogo, met the enemy and he is us.

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