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Article abstract

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# Argumentative Bullshit

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**Abstract:** Harry Frankfurt characterised bullshit as assertions that are made without a concern for truth. Assertions, however, are not the only type of speech act that can be bullshit. Here, I propose the concept of argumentative bullshit and show how a speech acts account of bullshit assertions can be generalised to bullshit arguments. Argumentative bullshit, on this account, would be the production of an argument without a concern for the supporting relation between reasons and claim.

**Résumé:** Harry Frankfurt a caractérisé les conneries comme des affirmations faites sans souci de la vérité. Les affirmations, cependant, ne sont pas le seul type d'acte de parole qui peuvent être des conneries. Ici, je propose le concept de conneries argumentatives et je montre comment l'explication des affirmations de conneries par les actes de parole peut s'appliquer à des arguments de conneries. Avancer des conneries argumentatives, dans ce récit, serait la production d'un argument sans se soucier de la relation d'appui entre les raisons et leur conclusion.

**Keywords:** assertion, reasons, speech acts, supporting relation, truth

## 1. Introduction

It is often pointed out that there are a lot of bad arguments out there.<sup>1</sup> People frequently assess opinions on the basis of irrelevant characteristics of the person who expresses them, draw strong conclusions from insufficient sets of data, and distort the meaning

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use the qualifiers “bad” and “good” as general terms that characterise the quality of arguments without committing myself to any specific view about the criteria of a good argument. For my purposes, it is immaterial whether the quality of arguments is conceptualised in terms of the acceptability-relevance-sufficiency criteria (Johnson and Blair 1994), of argumentation schemes correctly applied in a certain type of dialogue (Walton 2013), or any other way.

of those standpoints with which they disagree, among many other argumentative blunders and tricks. In this article, I am not interested in these garden-variety cases of bad argumentation. Rather, I would like to focus on a special case of bad argumentative performance, one that does not merely involve flawed arguments. The phenomenon that I will discuss here reveals a deeper flaw—or, rather, a deeper perversion of argumentative standards.

The main difference between bad arguments and the kind of cases that I have in mind is, I believe, the following: in the face of a bad argument, it is generally appropriate to use a counterargument to point out its flaws. Even if the arguer is so unskilled or obstinate that nothing will convince them that their argument is flawed, it *makes sense* in the context to expose those flaws. The reason is that the arguer is at least *trying* to put forward a good argument. They sincerely believe that their argument is good and should convince us, even if they are wrong. Their efforts may be minimal, they may have lazily satisfied themselves with the first, manifestly inadequate argument that came to their mind, but they are genuinely presenting a reason in support of a claim. In this paper, however, I am not interested in such merely bad arguments. I will focus on cases in which it is not even possible to pin down an argument that can be plausibly attributed to the arguer. In those cases, the argumentative utterance is so problematic that we cannot even outline a plausible scheme for the purported argument in order to assess its quality.

As a simple case of bad argument—the kind of arguments that will *not* concern me here—consider the following example from the popular TV series *The Simpsons*.<sup>2</sup> A bear is spotted roaming the streets of the small town of Springfield—an unprecedented event. Having received numerous complaints from frightened townspeople, the mayor decides to create a “bear patrol.” Then, the following dialogue ensues between two of the protagonists of the series, Homer and his daughter Lisa:

Homer: Not a bear in sight. The bear patrol must be working like a charm.

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<sup>2</sup> Season 7, episode 23, “Much Apu about nothing.”

Lisa: That's specious reasoning, dad.  
Homer: Thank you, honey.  
Lisa: By your logic I could claim that this rock keeps tigers away.  
Homer: Oh, how does it work?  
Lisa: It doesn't work.  
Homer: Uh-huh.  
Lisa: It's just a stupid rock.  
Homer: Uh-huh.  
Lisa: But I don't see any tigers around, do you?  
Homer: Lisa, I want to buy your rock.

Here, Homer puts forward an argument to the effect that the current absence of bears shows that the bear patrol is working. It is a bad argument because it attempts to establish a relation of causality by pointing to a single instance of the presence of a bear patrol and the absence of bears, while historically there has been no such correlation—there had never been either bears or bear patrols. Lisa tries to show this to her father with her analogy of the “anti-tiger” rock, albeit with little success. Nevertheless, the important point here is that Lisa's counterargument is relevant and appropriate: Homer genuinely pretends to support a claim with a reason and Lisa's analogy shows why Homer's attempt fails.

Consider now a different example of poor argumentation. In June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a public hearing in Palm Beach County (Florida) to discuss a mandate for wearing masks in public. Several residents intervened with anti-mask arguments that went viral on the Internet. Here are a couple of the most remarkable arguments:

I don't wear a mask for the same reason I don't wear underwear—things gotta breathe.<sup>3</sup>  
They want to throw God's wonderful breathing system out the door. You're all turning your backs on it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.freepressjournal.in/world/i-dont-wear-a-mask-for-the-same-reason-i-dont-wear-underwear-anti-maskers-in-us-warn-of-satanism-pedophilia>  
<sup>4</sup><https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53178251/they-want-to-throw-god-s-wonderful-breathing-system-out>

These are, as in our previous example, very bad arguments, but there is a slight yet crucial difference: how could we possibly respond to them? One cannot avoid the feeling that a reasonable counterargument, similar to Lisa's, would be very awkward. Would it have really been necessary to point out to the first arguer that we do not "breathe" through our genitals in the same sense that we "breathe" through our mouth and nose? And did the second arguer really need the explanation that protecting our respiratory system with a mask is not throwing "God's wonderful breathing system out the door," just as wearing sunglasses is not throwing our visual system out the door? There would have been something odd in those responses, not only because, in all likelihood, the arguers were not unaware of that information, but also because the counterarguments seem to *miss the point*. They are treating seriously arguments that were not designed to argue in a serious and responsible manner.

The oddity of engaging in thorough argument in those cases resembles, I believe, the awkwardness of responding "What evidence do you have?" to a neighbour who has casually remarked in the elevator that the weather will be nice tomorrow. Sure, the neighbour has made an assertion, and every assertion commits the speaker to the truth of its propositional content, but it would be a mistake to take it as a *serious* assertion. Small talk hardly counts as a language game in which epistemic norms should be respected. Sometimes, however, in contexts that call for epistemic responsibility, people also make assertions without committing themselves to the truth of their propositional content, just as our neighbour in the elevator. One can detect those cases because, in spite of the context, it feels odd to ask the speaker for evidence or to challenge the truth of the proposition asserted. I believe that something similar happens in the example of the anti-maskers: it would feel odd to put forward counterarguments. In that case, however, the problem lies in their arguments rather than their assertions. Even if they are seriously committed to their opposition to masks, the anti-maskers' arguments do not seem to be serious arguments.

There is a well-known term for assertions that disregard the norm of truth: *bullshit*. As we will see in the next section, the bullshitter is unconcerned about whether the assertions they are

making are true or false. The assertions may be true as a matter of fact, but that is irrelevant to them. In that respect, they are unlike a liar: lies are assertions that are believed to be false. Bullshit is not always objectionable, it is common and acceptable in certain circumstances, such as the example of the elevator; however, very often it is.

Here I want to argue that a similar concept can fruitfully be applied to argumentation. Briefly put, *argumentative bullshit* could be the production of reasons for a claim without regard to whether the reasons given really support that claim. This is different from sophisms, which are argumentative tactics used to deceive an audience, from paralogisms, which are errors of reasoning (Walton 2013, p. 216), and also from simply bad arguments that are put forward sincerely. Whoever tries to deceive or makes a mistake in argumentation is still taking into account the supporting relation between reasons and claim, just as those who lie or who mistakenly make a false assertion are taking into account the norm of truth. The argumentative bullshitter, on the other hand, does not care about the supporting relation. That is the difference between the Simpsons and the anti-maskers examples. Homer is a very bad reasoner, but he sincerely believes that he is putting forward a good argument. Anti-maskers, however, are simply using humour and religious appeals without considering whether *they themselves* even see their reasons as good grounds for their claim.

In the following sections, I will sketch out the details of the concept of argumentative bullshit. First, in section 2, I will discuss the notion of bullshit as it was outlined by Harry Frankfurt, and I will propose a speech acts approach. Then, in section 3, I will show how that concept, which was originally related to assertions, could be adapted to arguments. The most promising way to do that, I will argue, is to conceptualise arguments as speech acts. Through several examples, I hope to show that argumentative bullshit can be distinguished from mere bad or weak arguments, just as bullshit is distinct from lies.

## 2. The concept of bullshit

In a very brief essay, Frankfurt (2005) proposed a theory of the common and widely used word “bullshit.” Bullshit, he argued, is an assertion that does not purport to represent how the world really is. Assertions, such as “The weather will be nice tomorrow” or “The major cause of tides is the moon’s gravitational pull,” are supposed to describe parts of reality, but bullshit dispenses with that requirement altogether. This is the essence of bullshit, according to Frankfurt (p. 33): “lack of connection to a concern with truth.” Whoever produces bullshit does not care whether they are providing an accurate description of reality—they are not using assertions the way they are meant to be used.

Bullshitting, however, is not merely lying. The bullshitter is undoubtedly faking something, and that is what makes it problematic, but unlike the liar, the bullshitter is not interested in covering up some truth. Rather, what the bullshitter fakes is their attitude towards reality. As Frankfurt puts it:

The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it (2005, p. 55).

On some occasions, an assertion produced as bullshit might turn out to be true after all, but that is irrelevant to its characterisation as bullshit. What matters is that the speaker is not using assertions the way they are supposed to be used: as representations of the world. In a way, liars at least take into account the truth-value of assertions, if only to deceive about them. A person must believe that they know the truth in order to lie. Bullshitters, on the other hand, are completely uninterested in truth. As Frankfurt says, “the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*” (2005, p. 47). He explains this difference with an illuminating metaphor:

Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game. Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one

is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands. The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are (2005, pp. 60-61).

Nonetheless, bullshit is tolerated and even encouraged in many contexts of interpersonal relations where truth is not the main concern. These are usually contexts in which politeness trumps truth, as in the elevator example that we saw in the Introduction. For other examples, consider what happens when people get presents that they do not like and must show gratitude, when people have to apologise for an action that they do not regret doing, when people say to a friend in distress that “Everything’s going to be ok,” or when a company tells each of its clients “We care about you.” All of that is bullshit, no doubt, but our societies approve of it.

The problem, of course, is that bullshit is very often not that innocuous. It is produced in contexts in which truth does matter. Politics is usually the first domain that comes to mind when one thinks about pernicious bullshit. As Hardcastle and Reisch (2006) point out in the preface to their edited collection of essays on bullshit, when Frankfurt was presenting his book, everybody was thinking of the claims, made by supporters of the invasion of Iraq, that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that it was involved in the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Moreover, not only politicians but also all of us produce bullshit. According to Frankfurt, our current democracies encourage bullshit because of the “widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything” (2005, pp. 63–64), even though it is not possible to have reliable evidence about everything. The result is a continuous flow of factual claims in our societies whose purpose is alignment with a political party or movement, moral grandstanding (Tosi and Warmke 2016), or practical interests—anything but truth. Even in academic contexts, claims can be suspected to be bullshit when, for example, they are factual claims for which it is impossible to find real evidence. Cohen illustrates this with a quote by David Miller: “Of course,



everyone spends much more time thinking about sex now than people did a hundred years ago” (2006, p. 131).

Now, as I said, I want to adapt this concept of bullshit to arguments rather than assertions. As we will see in the next section, this requires sustaining the notion that bullshit arguments are not used as they are meant to be used, just as bullshit assertions are not used with a concern for truth. For this analogy to be successful, we need a clear view of how assertions relate to truth so that a similar relation can be defined between arguments and their point, their purpose, their function, or whatever that relationship consists in.

Is it that the *function* of assertions is to represent reality? Relying on a functional relation would be problematic both for assertions and arguments. The idea that assertions have a function would be very controversial<sup>11</sup> for one would not want to endorse it. Assertions serve a variety of functions. One could perhaps say that the essential function of assertions is to convey information, and that idea may seem appealing because it links assertions to truth. However, very often the main function of an assertion is not to convey information, even though it is appropriately related to truth; instead, it may be to warn, to entertain, to make acquaintances, to pass an exam, to protest, and so on. So it seems that assertions do not have a definite function and, for similar reasons, the same can be said of a goal or a purpose.

As for arguments, admittedly the notion that they have a function or purpose has proven to be more appealing. Johnson (2000, p. 149), for instance, argues that the study of arguments must be based on their function, which—according to him—is persuading someone of the truth of something by producing reasons that support the claim in question. Pragma-dialecticians have also proposed that the function of argumentative moves is to “contribute constructively to the resolution of a difference of opinion” (Eemeren 2018, p. 29). However, this functional approach to arguments is not universally accepted, and Goodwin (2007) has presented a strong case that arguments have no specific function. Therefore, it would be better not to rely on such a doubtful idea as the function of arguments or assertions.

What we need is a relatively uncontroversial account of the link between assertions and truth, one that can also be plausibly applied

to arguments. A promising approach is to focus on the *constitutive conditions* of speech acts: truth figures prominently in the essential condition of assertion, constitutive rules of speech acts do not preclude different uses or purposes, and—as we will see in the next section—arguments can be analysed as speech acts as well. The essential condition is what identifies a speech act, what makes it an instance of *that* type of speech act. In the case of assertions, these belong to the category of *representatives*, and Searle proposed that the essential condition of representatives is that they “commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something’s being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition” (1976, p. 10). Many later treatments of assertion have held that there is a norm of assertion which involves truth in one or another form. For example, Williamson (2000, p. 243) argues that assertion is governed by the rule that one should only assert what one knows<sup>5</sup> and, according to Lackey (2007), the rule is that one should only assert what is reasonable to believe.<sup>6</sup> In Brandom’s (1994) theory, whoever makes an assertion commits themselves to the truth of that assertion, which aligns closely with Searle’s idea of commitment. Assertions, then, are a type of speech act that is inherently connected to truth, even if they can be used for a variety of purposes. An assertion made without any concern for its truth is, in a sense, a bluff or a phony thing (Frankfurt 2005, pp. 46–47). The bullshitter, in this view, would be an asserter who does not honour the essential condition of assertion because they refuse to commit themselves to the truth of their assertions.

This may sound paradoxical: how could an assertion be made if the essential condition—that is, what *identifies* assertions—is not fulfilled? It may seem that, if the essential condition is not fulfilled, there is simply no assertion.<sup>7</sup> The solution to this puzzle, I believe, lies in the public character of the commitment to which the essential condition of representatives refers. Whether or not a speaker is committed to the truth of a proposition does not depend solely on their intentions but also, importantly, to the way their utterances are taken by their audience. If an utterance is seen as an

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<sup>5</sup> Knowledge, as is well known, implies truth.

<sup>6</sup> Believing simply means taking as true.

<sup>7</sup> I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

assertion by their listeners, I would regard the essential condition of representatives as fulfilled—the speaker is indeed committed to the truth of the propositional content. The problem with bullshit, then, would be that the speaker themselves does not acknowledge such commitment. The speech act has been made but the speaker does not take responsibility for its pragmatic consequences. In that sense, the speech act is defective.

Notice also that bullshit does not merely involve a violation of the sincerity condition of assertion, which requires that the speaker *believe* the proposition asserted (Searle 1976, p. 10). Liars obviously violate the sincerity condition, but what happens with bullshitters is, I believe, more complex. Bullshitters' lack of concern for the truth of the propositional content of their assertions results, as I argued, in their refusal to commit themselves to them. What this means is, among other things, that they will not stand by their assertions, will not respond to challenges made to their assertions, and will not even attempt to provide evidence. A liar can respond to challenges and provide evidence and still be a liar. The problem with bullshit, therefore, lies in the speaker's refusal to honour their commitments. It is a lack of seriousness rather than a lack of sincerity.

Such an account of bullshit avoids one problem. Frankfurt argued that bullshitters show a lack of concern for truth, but what truth? Surely *some* truths matter to them—bullshitters do not necessarily disregard truth in general. Advertisers, for example, produce a lot of bullshit when they speak about the virtues of their products, but they are no doubt interested in how well their products are selling, whether or not the public is “buying” their bullshit, and so on. The speech acts account gives a simple answer: “bullshit” is a term that applies to specific assertions when they are produced without concern for the truth *of their propositional content*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Notice that this view would also allow us to characterise as bullshit not only assertions but also other types of speech acts. Bullshit promises can be promises in which the speaker does not regard themselves as *committed* to perform the action in question—even if they *intend* to do it and therefore fulfil the sincerity condition. Bullshit orders can be orders in which the speaker does not *expect* the listener to perform the action in question—even if they *want* the listener to do it.

Now, how can we tell when that is happening? We do not have direct access to other people's beliefs and intentions, so we must find some guidelines to know when an assertion has been made without concern for the truth of its propositional content. Even though I do not believe that necessary and sufficient conditions for bullshit can be found, we can still identify some indications of the likely presence of bullshit:

- The question of whether the assertion is true or false is met with perplexity. (This would be an extreme, and probably uncommon, form of bullshit.)
- When asked for evidence for the assertion, the speaker refuses to provide it.
- Evidence contrary to the asserted fact is disregarded outright by the speaker.
- The assertion is so unclear or vague that its propositional content cannot be determined.<sup>9</sup>
- The assertion plays no role in the speaker's actual practical reasoning.
- The assertion is manifestly incoherent with other assertions of the speaker or with her behaviour.

As I said, these are just clues. If, for example, the speaker refuses to give evidence for an assertion, they might simply be intellectually arrogant; or, if the speaker disregards contrary evidence, they might simply be dogmatic. Nevertheless, taken as guidelines, I

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Richardson (2006) comes very close to this idea when he talks about “performative bullshit.” According to him, performative bullshit takes place when a commitment—a promise, say—is seen as fulfilled simply because it was uttered. Thus, it “has the form of a commitment, but it is not a real commitment” (p. 93). And he adds that “the realm of performative bullshit goes well beyond commitments of various sorts” (p. 94). He remarks that it also includes arguments, as when “performative bullshit directs that an argument be taken as a good argument by virtue of having been offered as a good argument” (p. 94). This conception of bullshit as purportedly self-fulfilling is not, however, the characterisation that I am endorsing here, which is more faithful to Frankfurt's original account.

<sup>9</sup> This mirrors Cohen's (2006) characterisation of bullshit as “unclarifiable unclarity,” which he regards as a different kind of bullshit from Frankfurt's.

believe they can be useful to detect bullshit assertions. Let us see now how all this can be applied to arguments.

### 3. Bullshitting in arguments

Argumentative bullshit takes place in arguments rather than bare assertions. When an arguer puts forward an argument, I believe it is safe to say that they commits themselves to two aspects of the argument: the truth of the reasons and the supporting relation between the reasons and the claim.<sup>10</sup> Let us focus for a moment on the truth of reasons. Given that reasons are assertions, an arguer who puts forward an argument commits themselves to the truth of those assertions. Argumentative bullshit regarding reasons, then, would involve an arguer being unwilling to commit themselves to the truth of certain assertions. This is simply Frankfurt's concept of bullshit, which we saw in the previous section. Therefore, this kind of argumentative bullshit can be reduced to regular bullshit, and for this reason I will leave it aside.

The kind of argumentative bullshit that I find most interesting has to do with the supporting relation between a reason and a claim. In what follows, I will use the term "argumentative bullshit" to refer only to that specific kind. As I explained in the Introduction, argumentative bullshit in this sense is different from bad (even very bad) arguments. The problem is rather that it is difficult to ascertain whether there is a serious argument there. It may be that the purported argument is so manifestly flawed or incoherent that it seems implausible that the arguer themselves would seriously endorse it. In his reply to Frankfurt's essay, Cohen (2006) proposes additional kinds of bullshit based on certain features of the text or utterance. He says: "Unclarifiable unclarity is one such feature. Rubbish, in the sense of arguments that are grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence, is another" (p. 131). The point that I want to emphasise here is that some arguments are so grossly deficient precisely because the arguer does not care about the relationship between the reasons and the claim. That would also explain the arguers' refusal to

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<sup>10</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me the importance of the truth of reasons.

maintain a reasonable argumentative exchange—as we will see—for they were never interested in supporting claims in the first place.

In the previous section, I argued that the problem with bullshit assertions is that speakers utter them without honouring the essential condition of the speech act or the norm of commitment to truth. As it happens, arguments have also been analysed as speech acts, and therefore, a similar account of argumentative bullshit can be offered. Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), founders of the pragma-dialectical theory, first proposed the idea that argumentation can be characterised as an “illocutionary act complex.” It is complex because it is composed of elementary speech acts—assertions, which function as reasons that support a standpoint. Just as Searle did with elementary speech acts, Eemeren and Grootendorst proposed an essential condition for the speech act of argumentation. In fact, they proposed two essential conditions, one for pro-argumentation:

Advancing the constellation of statements  $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$  counts as an attempt by S to justify O to L’s satisfaction, i.e. to convince L of the acceptability of O (p. 43).

Where S is the speaker, L is the listener, O is an expressed opinion, and  $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$  are a constellation of statements. The second essential condition is proposed for contra-argumentation:

Advancing the constellation of statements  $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$  counts as an attempt by S to refute O to L’s satisfaction, i.e. to convince L of the unacceptability of O (Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, p.43).

Bermejo-Luque (2011), following in Eemeren and Grootendorst’s footsteps, characterises argumentation as a second order speech act complex, which is constituted by a speech act of adducing (reasons) and a speech act of concluding (a standpoint). Each of these speech acts has an essential condition, and the speech act complex of argumentation includes the essential conditions of both of its components. Thus, the essential conditions of argumentation are:

1. Adducing R with such and such pragmatic force is a means to show that a target-claim C is correct.
2. S aims to show that a target-claim C is correct (p. 72).

R stands for the reasons and S is the speaker. For reasons of simplicity and convenience, let us adopt Bermejo-Luque's version of the essential conditions of arguments.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for the purposes of characterising argumentative bullshit, we should focus on condition 1—arguably, if condition 2 is not fulfilled, then the speaker is not even pretending to argue. I will suggest just a couple of modifications to condition 1. First, in order to preserve my intuition that argumentative bullshit has to do with a lack of concern for the supporting relation, let us use that phrase instead of referring to the correctness of the target-claim. And second, I believe that the condition should refer to the speaker's *commitment* to the belief that such reasons support that claim, rather than to whether they in fact support it or not. This is because, in Bermejo-Luque's formulation of condition 1, bad arguments—those in which the reasons are *not* really means to show that the claim is correct—would not even count as arguments. Hence, essential condition 1 for arguments could be something like this:

1. Adducing reasons R with such and such pragmatic force commits the speaker to the belief that R supports a target-claim C.

Now, let us assume that the speaker fulfils essential condition 2, and can therefore plausibly be regarded as arguing for a claim. This can usually be determined by context—facts such as that a disagreement has emerged and that a decision has to be made, for example. However, even though the arguer has produced something in the form of a reason, they do not seem committed to the belief that such a reason supports such a claim—either the arguer expressly refuses that commitment, or it is not plausible to attribute it to them. In that case, what we have is argumentative bullshit.

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<sup>11</sup> Notice that both the pragma-dialecticians and Bermejo-Luque speak about the speech act of *argumentation*, but I will use the term “argument” here.

It might be that the arguer is so manifestly incoherent that they cannot be regarded as really committed to the belief in the supporting relation. Other times, the purported supporting relation would be so clearly absurd that it seems implausible to attribute it to the arguer. This was the case with the anti-maskers' arguments mentioned in the Introduction. Just imagine how implausible it would be to interpret the first of those interventions as something like the following argument:

The fact that genitals need to breathe is a good reason not to wear underwear.

The upper airways are similar to the genitals in this respect.

Therefore, there is a good reason not to wear a mask.

For another example, recall Donald Trump's famous controversial announcement in 2017 that the USA would withdraw from the Paris Agreement.<sup>12</sup> Among several reasons he offered—which, regardless of whether they were good or bad, could at least be seen as genuine attempts to support his decision—he said: “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris.” This cannot be plausibly interpreted as a serious reason—even Trump knew that the Paris Agreement was not about the citizens of Paris. The most plausible interpretation, I submit, is that it was argumentative bullshit.

Thus, we can see here that there is a fundamental difference between argumentative bullshit and bad arguments. Bad arguments are arguments after all, but it is characteristic of argumentative bullshit that it typically cannot be plausibly interpreted as an argument to which the arguer is willing to commit themselves. Bullshit arguments are not real arguments; they are vaguely related claims whose point is rather to make a humorous pun, to appeal to religious or political sentiments, to portray oneself in a good light, or to denigrate the interlocutor, among many other possible purposes.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/trump-stands-with-pittsburgh-but-mayor-says-hes-with-paris/2092378/>



The notion of argumentative bullshit, I believe, solves one problem that theorists often face when trying to interpret flagrant instances of defective argumentation. Sometimes, it seems to me, it would be necessary to force argumentative moves such as threats, appeals to emotions, or *ad hominem* attacks into an implausible interpretation so that they fit the scheme of this or that fallacy. At the very least, I believe that this is dangerously likely to happen when analysing actual, real-world arguments—as opposed to the classic made-up textbook examples. The result can be a representation of an argument that bears little resemblance to what the arguer actually said, and that it hardly makes sense to attribute to the arguer. Consider, for instance, the *ad hominem* argument. According to Walton (1998) the generic scheme of the *ad hominem* is:

*a* is a bad person.

Therefore, *a*'s argument  $\alpha$  should not be accepted (p. 112)

However, it seems to me unlikely that all the arguers who make what resembles an illegitimate *ad hominem* move commit themselves to an argument of that or a similar form. Sometimes—perhaps often—personal attacks are not presented as reasons that support a claim on the basis of a plausible warrant but as mere comments or innuendos. Something wrong has clearly been done, but interpreting it as an argument feels like a misrepresentation. The problem here is one that Hamblin already saw:

Person *A* makes statement *S*: person *B* says ‘It was *C* who told you that, and I happen to know that his mother-in-law is living in sin with a Russian’: *A* objects, ‘The falsity of *S* does not follow from any facts about the morals of *C*'s mother-in-law; that is an *argumentum ad hominem*’: *B* may reply “I did not claim that it followed. I simply made a remark about incidentals of the statement's history. Draw what conclusion *you* like. If the cap fits...” This would be disingenuous, but the point remains that *B* cannot be convicted of fallacy until he can have an *argument* pinned on him (1970, pp. 224–25).

When something like that happens, there is a way to conceptualise the wrongness of the move without interpreting it implausibly as an argument: the arguer is just bullshitting.

Finally, consider those cases in which an arguer puts forward something as a reason but is simply incapable of elaborating on it or supporting it when required. Faced with critical questioning, the arguer simply cannot show how their alleged reason supports her claim. As a result, the critical discussion gets stuck. I believe this tends to happen with arguments that are heard and repeated without a proper understanding of what they mean—especially when popular slogans are used as reasons. Think of those people who, in order to defend or undermine a specific claim, simply blurt out slogans like “Not everything is in the books,” “Just because you can't prove it doesn't mean it isn't true,” or “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” If they are simply repeating them without having any idea how they apply to the case at hand, then that is argumentative bullshit.

Recently, a striking example of this kind of bullshit—albeit not one involving slogans—appeared on the TV programme “The Late Show.” The host, Stephen Colbert, was interviewing Kamala Harris, running mate of the Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. Colbert pointed out that Harris had been extremely critical of Biden during the primary debates:<sup>13</sup>

Colbert: In those debates you landed haymakers on Joe Biden. I mean, his teeth were like Chiclets all over the stage and now I believe you that you're fully supportive of him. How does that transition happen? How do you go from being such a passionate opponent on such bedrock principles for you, and now you guys seem to be pals?

Harris: It was a debate.

Colbert: Not everybody landed punches like you did though.

Harris: It was a debate!

Colbert: So you don't mean it?

Harris: It was a debate! Literally, it was a debate.

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<sup>13</sup>[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/08/17/kamala\\_harris\\_dismisses\\_past\\_biden\\_criticism\\_it\\_was\\_a\\_debate.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/08/17/kamala_harris_dismisses_past_biden_criticism_it_was_a_debate.html)

Notice how Harris is unable to provide any satisfactory answer to Colbert's critical questioning beyond simply repeating the same line over and over again. Here, it is not even clear what claim Harris is defending. It is safe to say that she is trying to justify her behaviour, but beyond that, nothing more specific can be said. She refuses to commit herself to more concrete claims, such as "I did not mean it." Her answer, therefore, seems to be argumentative bullshit.

In conclusion, just as with bullshit assertions, certain guidelines can be outlined to detect the likely presence of argumentative bullshit. Here, as in the case of bullshit assertions, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions that uniquely identify argumentative bullshit—it is, after all, a matter of context and interpretation—but I believe that the following factors are strongly indicative of it:

- The warrant that would be necessary to support the purported argument is a belief that would be very implausible to attribute to the arguer—or the arguer explicitly refuses to commit herself to it.
- When critically questioned about the supporting relation between reasons and claim, the arguer refuses to discuss it.
- Counterexamples or, in general, evidence contrary to the supporting relation are disregarded outright by the speaker.
- The purported argument is manifestly incoherent with other arguments presented by the same arguer.

#### 4. Conclusion

A speech acts account of bullshit allows us to generalise the concept beyond assertions. Here, I have proposed a way to apply it to argumentation. I have explained how, far from being a bizarre theoretical curiosity, the concept of argumentative bullshit allows us to interpret more faithfully certain argumentative moves that it is not easy to see as arguments. In my view, just as commitment to truth is essential to assertions, commitment to the supporting

relation is essential to arguments. A lack of concern for the supporting relation is what characterises argumentative bullshit.

Once we know what argumentative bullshit is, what can be done to address such a problem in argumentation? I do not think it would be a good idea to shout “bullshit!” every time we think our partner in an argument is bullshitting. First, as I insisted, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for bullshit, so its identification is always a matter of context and interpretation. There are no hard-and-fast rules here. What seemed at first sight to be argumentative bullshit may turn out to be a serious argument after all. And, secondly, nothing good can come out of an accusation of bullshit. It is an obviously offensive term, and such an accusation is very unlikely to bring a discussion back on track—it is more likely to derail the discussion completely. What, then, is the appropriate response to argumentative bullshit?

In the Introduction I remarked that when an arguer produces argumentative bullshit, it feels odd to counterargue. It would be as if you do not get a joke. It feels too strict. I believe, however, that *that* is exactly what we should do. Someone should have asked the anti-maskers whether they seriously believed that the genitals and the upper airways are similar in that respect. Someone should have asked Trump whether he believed that the Paris Agreement was about the citizens of Paris. What we should do, then, is what Colbert did when he insisted that Harris should explain what “It was a debate” meant. When we suspect that our interlocutor is producing argumentative bullshit, we should take it seriously and challenge it. That way, our interlocutor’s unwillingness to engage in a serious argument will be exposed. And, if it turns out that it was not argumentative bullshit but a serious argument, nothing is lost—we have already taken it seriously and the discussion will continue without disturbance.

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