On Bullshit, and Especially Execrable Bullshit

In October 2014, I resigned my position as professor of political science, philosophy, and law at Stanford University to work full-time at Apple University. I had been working at Apple for a few years, decided to move there permanently, and made the final break from Stanford very abruptly. Two months later, I accepted a one-day-per-week position at Berkeley.

After Berkeley announced my appointment, some comments about it appeared on a political science blog (http://www.poliscirumors.com/topic/top-theorist-ditches-stanford-to-work-at-berkeley). I was reminded of them recently as I was re-reading Harry Frankfurt’s On Bullshit. Here are a few choice examples:

1. “250k for 8hrs per week not a bad gig if u can get it”

2. “Top theorist gets a state school to pay his salary while he's really working at Apple University. Nice gig if you can get it.”

3. “So what this now looks like is-- spent a couple years at Apple U, decided it was where he wanted to spend most of his time, tried to work out an arrangement for a very-part-time relationship to Stanford, they said no, probably then started talking to Berkeley but the deal wasn't finished and signed by the time he had to formally decide whether he was coming back to Stanford, so he announced he was leaving Stanford for Apple. A deal like the one Berkeley is describing doesn't get put together in six weeks over Christmas, so it was already in the works and when he left Stanford he knew he was going to sign with Berkeley soon.”

4. “He is very ill. 'Retirement' isn't the right word here.”

Lets start with (1) and (2): I am not paid anything by Berkeley, at my request. I requested that I not be paid because I am very handsomely compensated by Apple. I did not need any additional compensation. Of course the financial terms were not publicly announced, but it would not have been hard to find out the truth: if anyone had asked me, I would have told them. Absent that effort, why pretend to know?

Or consider (3). The reality is that I did not talk to anyone at Berkeley about doing anything there until a few days after I resigned from Stanford. No one at Berkeley (or at Stanford) knew that I was thinking of leaving: I shared my thinking only with my wife and the Dean of Apple University. Once I left Stanford and started talking with Berkeley, the deal was concluded in roughly 7 weeks. Contrary to the writer’s confident assertion, it was not “already in the works” when I left Stanford. Again, easy to learn the truth. And again, absent that effort, why pretend to know?

As for (4): I was treated for prostate cancer in summer 2011. It would news to me—very unwelcome news—to find out that I am currently “very ill.” The author’s knowing solicitude is unwelcome.
So here we have four claims: each confidently asserted, each completely wrong. Of course we all get lots of things wrong, including lots of things about which we have confident judgments. But these claims are not simply mistakes. They are bullshit, and of an especially execrable variety.

In his essay on bullshit, Harry Frankfurt characterizes the bullshitter as someone who is indifferent to the truth or falsity of her assertions in a context in which “the distinction between truth and falsity is crucial” (33).

Let’s distinguish two kinds of bullshitters, who exhibit two kinds of indifference. The first kind make assertions while cheerfully acknowledging an indifference to whether their assertions are true or false. These are the bullshitters that Frankfurt writes about. His prime example comes from a conversation between Fania Pascal and Wittgenstein. Pascal says “I feel just like a dog that has been run over.” Wittgenstein responds in disgust that Pascal has no idea what a dog feels like after it has been run over. She is not lying, Frankfurt says, because “she does not presume that she knows the truth” (33). Instead, she is bullshitting because she has the bullshitter’s defining “indifference to how things really are.”

The people who made the assertions on the political theory blog are bullshitters of a second type. They do presume they know the truth. At least they give the impression that they believe what they are saying, have given the matter some thought or have some special information, and are not indifferent to the truth or falsity of their assertions. Consider the precision in the first quotation, the complicated reasoning in the third, and the solicitude in the fourth: these all suggest an attentiveness (at least an alertness) to how things are. But they do not take the slightest trouble to get things right. They make no investment, bear no cost, to get things right. So they pretend to a concern to get things right. But their conduct reveals the bullshitter’s indifference.

Why do I say that this variety of bullshit is particularly execrable? Because it mixes a practical indifference to truth or falsity—an unwillingness to make any investment in finding out what is right—with a pretended seriousness about getting things right. It does not simply exhibit indifference to reality. It actively recruits the value of truth without submitting at all to its discipline.