Deeper into Argumentative Bullshit

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Abstract: In a recent paper, José Ángel Gascón extends the Frankfurtian notion of bullshit to the sphere of argumentation. On Frankfurt's view, the hallmark of bullshit is a lack of concern for the truth of an utterance on the part of the bullshitter. Similarly, Gascón argues, the hallmark of argumentative bullshit should be viewed as a lack of concern for whether the reasons that are adduced for a claim genuinely support that claim. Gascón deserves credit for drawing attention to the idea of argumentative bullshit. Nevertheless, we argue, his treatment leaves room for further refinement as he fails to clarify important points and misidentifies several features of argumentative bullshit. In particular, Gascón's account fails to accommodate non-Frankfurtian forms of argumentative bullshit. This paper aims to amend and extend his proposal and proposes a general account that can encompass both Frankfurtian and non-Frank-furtian forms of argumentative bullshit.

Résumé: Dans un article récent, José Ángel Gascón développe la notion frankfurtienne de la connerie à la sphère de l'argumentation. Du point de vue de Frankfurt, la marque de la connerie est un manque de souci de la vérité d'un énoncé de la part de la personne qui exprime des conneries. De même, soutient Gascón, la marque des conneries argumentatives doit être considérée comme un manque de préoccupation quant à savoir si les raisons avancées pour une conclusion étayent véritablement cette conclusion. Gascón mérite la reconnaissance d'avoir attiré l'attention sur l'idée de connerie argumentative. Néanmoins, selon nous, ses réflexions laissent une marge d'amélioration supplémentaire, car il ne parvient pas à clarifier des points importants et identifie mal plusieurs caractéristiques des conneries argumentatives. En particulier, le récit de Gascón ne tient pas compte des formes non francfortoises de conneries argumentatives. Cet article vise à modifier et à étendre sa notion et propose un compte rendu général qui peut englober à la fois les formes frankfurtoises et non frankfurtoises de conneries argumentatives.

Keywords: argumentation, assertion, bullshit, deception, implicature, lying, pseudoscience, sophistry

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1. Introduction

"One of the most salient features of our culture," writes Harry Frankfurt in his ground-breaking essay *On Bullshit*, "is that there is so much bullshit" (Frankfurt 2005, p.1), which is, according to him, "a greater enemy of the truth than lies are" (p. 61). This, it seems, is reason enough to explore the phenomenon of bullshit and to identify it in various areas. Recently, it has been suggested, for instance, that the idea of bullshit may be used to understand the nature of pseudoscience (Ladyman 2013, Moberger 2020) and fake news (Mukerji 2018, Jaster and Lanius 2021). It is not too far to seek, therefore, that bullshit may be found in various other fields, too. José Ángel Gascón (2021), in a recent issue of *Informal Logic*, has proposed to use the notion of bullshit to identify a common defect in the area of argumentation. In his paper, he suggests that we can draw a distinction in argumentation theory between two types of bad arguments, and he thinks that this distinction parallels the one between bullshit and lies that interests Frankfurt. In the following, we want to discuss Gascón's intriguing idea and call attention to several problems with his treatment of it.

The remainder is structured as follows: We start, in Section 2, by summing up the relevant aspects of Frankfurt's account of bullshit and, in particular, Frankfurt's distinction between bullshitting and lying. After that, in Section 3, we briefly discuss a few other phenomena which, as various scholars have argued, deserve to be called "bullshit," too, even though they do not fit Frankfurt's account. In Section 4, then, we address Gascón's idea of argumentative bullshit. In this connection, we discuss, in particular, the distinction he draws between argumentative bullshit and sophisms, which he takes to be analogous to Frankfurt's distinction between bullshit and lies. After that, in Section 5, we home in on various aspects of Gascón's discussion and attempt to clarify and rectify several points. We seek to show, specifically, that Gascón errs in thinking of argumentative bullshit as a new phenomenon that has hitherto not been described. As we argue, it can be viewed simply as a form of ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, namely, one that is used to lend argumentative support to another proposition. In Section 6, we clarify the relationship between ordinary Frankfur-

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tian bullshit and argumentative bullshit. Specifically, we ask whether the former necessitates the latter and vice versa. Finally, we propose, in Section 7, how the notion of argumentative bullshit may be extended to include the alternative forms of bullshit we introduced in Section 3 and that Gascón's account does not cover. In this connection, we also propose a more general account of argumentative bullshit, which can encompass, as we believe, non-Frankfurtian forms as well. In Section 8, then, we briefly summarise our findings and conclude.

2. Frankfurt on bullshit

The phenomenon of lying is, arguably, as old as humankind (McGlone and Knapp 2019).[1] Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that philosophers have studied it intensely for centuries. In a famous essay, St. Augustin discusses, for instance, eight types of lying and the extent to which they are morally problematic (Augustin 2002). In Immanuel Kant's moral philosophical treatises, the duty not to lie may be regarded as one of our paradigmatic moral duties. Curiously, even though our culture views liars with disdain, it does not, as Harry Frankfurt has pointed out, view bullshitters in the same way. Bullshit may even be a necessary component of various spheres of life. Arguably, the norms of courtesy are, for instance, often in tension with the norm of truth-telling and, to the extent to which the former take precedent over the latter, a certain amount of bullshit may be justified.[2] It is perhaps for this reason, then, that the phenomenon of bullshit had more or less escaped the attention of philosophers before Frankfurt attempted the first serious discussion in his spearheading essay *On Bullshit* (2005). His famous suggestion is that bullshit is distinct

[1] As McGlone and Knapp (2019) elaborate, the prevalence of lying and deception in ancient cultures is evidenced by many ancient sources. The Hindu *Yajurveda*, for instance, which was written ca. 1000 BCE, contains advice on how to spot a person who intends to poison food, and the foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all discuss truthfulness as a moral requirement.

[2] Even Kant, infamous for his unyielding injunction against lying, saw it as legitimate to bullshit. In his *Metaphysics of morals* (1797/1996) he states, for instance, that it is, of course, morally acceptable to commend an author for a piece of writing even though one does not particularly like it.

from lying to the extent that, unlike the liar, the bullshitter is unconcerned with the truth. While the liar cares about the truth because she tries, precisely, to misrepresent it in her utterances, for the bullshitter, "all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false" (Frankfurt 2005, p. 56). In other words, the liar tries to say the opposite of what she takes to be true, while the bullshitter, like the participants of a bull session,[3] is "unconstrained by a concern with truth" (Frankfurt 2005, p. 23) and simply says what is expedient in light of non-alethic goals.

Accordingly, lying and bullshitting may, at first glance, appear to be entirely distinct phenomena that do not have much in common. It is important, however, not to overstate the difference between these two kinds of communicative acts. There is, in fact, a way in which the liar and the bullshitter are alike on Frankfurt's original account: both the liar and the bullshitter misrepresent, to use Frankfurt's phrasing, "what they are up to." They both "represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth" (p. 54). The liar does not want us to know that what she says is true is not believed by her. The same is true of the bullshitter. He wants us to think that he actually believes what he says even though he is entirely unconstrained by the norm of truth-telling. Hence, lying and bullshitting are not different in all respects. What they share in common is the fact that both the liar and the bullshitter attempt to deceive the addressee of their utterances about their attitude towards the norm of truth-telling.

Also, lying and bullshitting are not mutually exclusive. As Frankfurt points out in reply to an influential critique by G.A. Cohen (2002), it may be possible to bullshit and lie at the same time. This occurs when the bullshitter who utters *p* happens to know that *p* is false but affirms it nevertheless because this suits his purpose.[4]

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[3] Frankfurt discusses the notion of a bull session and clarifies it using the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which states that it is "an informal conversation or discussion, esp. of a group of males" (quoted in Frankfurt 2005, 34).

[4] Frankfurt uses the practice of advertisement as an illustrative example. He writes: "My presumption is that advertisers generally decide what they are going to say in their advertisements without caring what the truth is. Therefore,

3. Deeper into bullshit

After the publication of Frankfurt's initial essay *On Bullshit* (2005), his proposal has subsequently been discussed, refined, and extended. Given the scope of the present paper, which does not aim to be exhaustive, we shall confine ourselves to three points we shall come back to in Section 7 below.[5]

The first point comes from G.A. Cohen's previously mentioned critique of Frankfurt's original essay, which he voiced in a paper aptly entitled "Deeper into bullshit" (2002). In it, Cohen points out that Frankfurt, in his discussion of the concept of bullshit, focuses entirely on the producer of bullshit, that is, the bullshitter, and not on the product, that is, the bullshit itself. This has the consequence that, on Frankfurt's view, what a speaker says will be categorised as bullshit only if she has the requisite attitude, namely an indifference to the truth of what she says, which Frankfurt considers to be the essential characteristic of bullshitting that sets it apart from lying. Cohen thinks this cannot be the whole story. For it would make it conceptually impossible to categorise any incomprehensible gibberish uttered by a hopelessly confused person as bullshit so long as she genuinely tries to make a valuable contribution to a debate. Intuitively, though, there is a sense in which nonsensical utterances are bullshit, too, even if they are made in earnest.[6]

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what they say in their advertisements is bullshit. Of course, they may sometimes also happen to know, or they may happen subsequently to discover, disadvantageous truths about their product. In that case what they choose to convey is something that they know to be false, and so they end up not merely bullshitting but telling lies as well." (Frankfurt 2002, 341)

[5] In the present paper, we shall confine ourselves to views of bullshit that are premissed on the idea that the nature of bullshit lies in the content of an utterance or in the speaker's attitude towards that content. Arguably though, there may be varieties of bullshit whose nature lies in the way in which an utterance is expressed. For instance, Mukerji (under review) has recently proposed the notion of *highfalutin bullshit* to refer to the needless use of 'big words' (e.g., corporate claptrap) with deceptive intent.

[6] This is, as Cohen points out, confirmed by the fact that the *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions the words "nonsense" and "rubbish" as synonyms for bullshit in one of its primary meanings (cf. Cohen 2002, p. 324). An anonymous reviewer for this journal has begged to differ arguing that it is "[k]ey to the concept of bullshit … that it originates from a bullshitter." Our semantic intuitions are more in line with Cohen's view (and with the OED entry) than with

As Thomas L. Carson (2016) argues, there are other senses, besides Cohen's, in which an utterance can be bullshit without there being an indifference to the truth on the part of the bullshitter.

- The first kind of such bullshit may be classed as *evasive bullshit*. It is marked by the bullshitter's refusal to answer the question under consideration. Think, for instance, of a politician who is asked about her stance on a particular political issue, *X*, that is currently debated in society and who replies, evasively: "Well, as you know, I have always argued that *X* is an important issue that deserves much more attention than it has been getting in the past. In fact, since you ask me what I think about the present debate: I welcome it!" The politician is hopelessly evasive. However, she is not necessarily indifferent to the truth of what she says. It may be true that she thinks of *X* as an important issue that deserves more attention, and it may also be true that she welcomes the debate. Hence, it is at least conceivable that she is trying, very carefully, to avoid claiming anything she thinks is false and that she cannot be described as indifferent to the truth of what she says.

- The second kind may be called *rambling bullshit* (though this is not Carson's own phrase). To illustrate it, Carson gives the example of a student taking an exam in which she is asked to write an essay on a clearly defined question about which she basically knows nothing. However, she expects her teacher to give her partial credit for "making an effort" and writing anything that comes to mind. Therefore, this is what she does. In this case, there is, in a certain sense at least, no truth-indifference either. The student would, indeed, prefer it if what she writes were correct because that would increase the chance of her earning a few extra points. Also, she does not try to be evasive. In fact, if any of her answers would indeed qualify as a relevant reply to the teachers' exam questions, she would prefer it.

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the reviewer's opinion. However, we do acknowledge that there may be disagreement about the essence of bullshit and hope that experimental philosophers may feel called upon to investigate the issue.

Interestingly, the non-Frankfurtian types of bullshit can coincide with the Frankfurtian version.[7] For instance, one can bullshit in Frankfurt's and Cohen's sense at the same time when one utters *p*. This happens when the speaker is indifferent as to whether or not *p* is true and ends up saying something that does not even mean anything. Similarly, an evasive bullshitter can be an ordinary Frankfurtian bullshitter, too. An evasive bullshitter tries to avoid answering the question under consideration and may, of course, do that by making statements while not caring about their truth values. Rambling bullshit, however, may, as we have seen, be incompatible with ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit—at least in the example of the student that we have just considered. The student rambles because she does not know the correct answer to the exam question but hopes that she will stumble upon it by accident. So, in this case, it seems we have, in fact, a preference for truth and not, like in the Frankfurtian case, an indifference to the truth. Note, however, that there are different ways of cashing out the notion of truth-indifference, and there is at least one sense in which this notion may be interpreted such that the rambling bullshitter may also be described as truth-indifferent.[8] The fact that she does not have a positive reason to think that her rambling contains true statements does not, after all, keep her from uttering it. In that sense, then, she may be characterised as indifferent to the truth—just like the Frankfurtian bullshitter.

4. Gascón on argumentative bullshit

José Ángel Gascón has recently drawn attention to a phenomenon he refers to as "argumentative bullshit."[9] According to him, it is a

[7] There can also be a significant overlap between various non-Frankfurtian varieties of bullshit. For instance, someone who uses nonsensical statements in an attempt to avoid answering a question under consideration may be described as a Cohenian evasive bullshitter.

[8] For a discussion of the different senses of truth-indifference, see Mukerji (2018, p. 933 ff.). See, also, our remarks in Section 7 below.

[9] The phrase "argumentative bullshit" does not, it seems, originate with Gascón since a Google search for it throws up three pages worth of results when the search is limited to the period before Gascón's paper was published. However, he appears to be the first to discuss it in a formal academic paper.

"special case of bad argumentative performance, one that does not merely involve flawed arguments" but involves "a deeper flaw—or, rather, a deeper perversion of argumentative standards" (Gascón 2021, p. 290). The main difference between plain vanilla bad arguments and the argumentative bullshit that Gascón has in mind is, as he explains, that, "in the face of a bad argument, it is generally appropriate to use a counterargument to point out its flaws" (p. 290), while in the latter case "it is not even possible to pin down an argument that can be plausibly attributed to the arguer." Instead, the "argumentative utterance is so problematic that we cannot even outline a plausible scheme for the purported argument in order to assess its quality" (p. 290).

To illustrate this characteristic of argumentative bullshit, Gascón starts with a comparison between two cases.

- The first comes from the popular TV series *The Simpsons*.[10] In it, Homer maintains that the lack of bears in the area suggests that "[t]he bear patrol must be working like a charm." Lisa points out that this is a spurious inference since, by the same logic, it could be claimed of a nearby rock that it keeps tigers away.[11]
- The second case is taken from a public hearing on mask mandates in Palm Beach County (Florida), in which an anti-masker makes the case that "I don't wear a mask for the same reason I don't wear underwear—things gotta breathe."

Now, Gascón points out that, although both cases contain terrible arguments, the second is noticeably different from the first. The difference, thinks Gascón, is that "[o]ne cannot avoid the feeling that a reasonable counterargument, similar to Lisa's, would be very awkward." Such counterarguments, he thinks, "seem to *miss the point*. They are treating seriously arguments that were not designed to argue in a serious and responsible manner" (p. 292; emphasis in the original). As he elaborates further, responding to

[10] The episode in question is Episode 23 of Season 7 of *The Simpsons*, entitled "Much Apu about nothing."

[11] Homer, of course, is immediately convinced by this and wisely offers to buy the rock from Lisa.

the anti-masker's utterance would be as odd as asking for evidence when a neighbour casually remarks that the weather will be nice tomorrow. "Sure," says Gascón, "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" (p. 292; emphasis in the original).

Now, why would it seem odd to engage an argumentative bullshitter using counterarguments? The answer lies in the nature of argumentative bullshit, as Gascón views it. He thinks that when an argumentative bullshitter puts forward an argument, he is not really committed to what he is saying. Just like the ordinary Frankfurtian bullshitter is not really committed to the truth of their assertion, the argumentative bullshitter is not really committed to the supporting relation between the reasons adduced to argue for the claim and the claim itself. As Gascón writes, "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" (p. 303).

Above, we have seen that bullshit was, when Frankfurt first introduced the concept to academic discourse, interesting, primarily, because it allowed us to distinguish one type of problematic assertion, namely lying, which had already been well studied, and another type, namely bullshit, which had hitherto been neglected. Gascón thinks that argumentative bullshit allows us to do something similar. Its usefulness lies, according to him, mainly in the fact that it helps us to address a form of defective argumentation that is not captured by the ordinary resources of argumentation theory. Usually, we would examine whether a given statement (or set of statements) is problematic by finding an argumentation scheme that fits it. If somebody says, for instance, that *p* is unacceptable because a bad person endorses *p*, we can easily see that this line of reasoning fits the scheme of the *ad hominem* argument, which, at least in this crude form, is defective. Somebody who knows this but engages in sophistry and uses the argument nevertheless to convince others does, on Gascón's view, something

which is very much akin to lying.[12] However, the problem with many flawed argumentative utterances is not, according to him, that arguers put forward forms of reasoning that they know to be defective. Instead, the issue with them is that they do not even care whether there is a logical connection between the premisses and the conclusion, such that interpreting what is being said "as an argument" already "feels like a misrepresentation" (p. 304). Accordingly, there is, on Gascón's account, a distinction between argumentative bullshit and sophistry that parallels the distinction between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and lying.

5. Deeper into argumentative bullshit

Gascón's account of argumentative bullshit is surely an interesting new addition to the toolkit of argumentation theory. However, it should, in our view, be discussed, clarified, and extended, especially in light of the general remarks about the concept of bullshit that we made in Sections 2 and 3 above. We shall do that in the following.

First, we should highlight that Gascón's account of argumentative bullshit is, at its core, very much Frankfurtian. As we have pointed out above, however, the Frankfurtian account is not the only one. Therefore, the question arises whether there are additional, non-Frankfurtian forms of argumentative bullshit that Gascón misses by focusing, more or less exclusively, on what Frankfurt had to say. In Section 7 below, we shall answer this question in the affirmative, and we shall have more to say about how the idea of argumentative bullshit may be extended to cover the additional forms of bullshit that Cohen and Carson discuss.

Before we do that, however, we shall focus on the Frankfurtian nature of Gascón's account. It lies, firstly, in the fact that there is a distinction between argumentative bullshit and sophistry, which parallels Frankfurt's distinction between bullshitting and lying and, secondly, in the fact that the essential characteristic Gascón uses to explain the nature of argumentative bullshit is, at the very

[12] Interestingly, and seemingly unbeknownst to Gascón, Roy Sorensen has, in fact, explored the possibility of lying with arguments in a recent paper (Sorensen 2017).

least, very similar to the one Frankfurt uses to explain what bullshit is (in the ordinary Frankfurtian sense).[13] In fact, we should ask whether argumentative bullshit, in the sense in which Gascón explicates it, is even a phenomenon that is distinct from the latter. We think it is not. Gascón's argumentative bullshit is merely a new sub-form of ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit.

Interestingly, this is an observation that Gascón fails to make even though it suggests itself based on what he himself says. As Gascón explains, when an arguer puts forward an argument, she commits herself to two things, namely, the premisses,[14] on the one hand, and the supporting relation between the premisses and the claim to be supported, on the other hand. Accordingly, argumentative bullshit can be found either in the premisses of an argument or in the supporting relation between the premisses and the conclusion to be established. We shall call the former kind *argumentative bullshit*$_P$ and the latter *argumentative bullshit*$_S$. Now, it is evident that if bullshit is found in the premisses, "[t]his is," as Gascón says, "simply Frankfurt's concept of bullshit" (p. 300). Argumen-

[13] Interestingly, Gascón thinks that argumentative bullshit has no essential nature. He writes that, "as in the case of bullshit assertions, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions that uniquely identify argumentative bullshit" (p. 306). Instead, there are, thinks Gascón, only indicative factors. This appears to us to be a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, Frankfurt himself views a "lack of connection to a concern with truth" or "indifference to how things really are ... as of the *essence* of bullshit" (Frankfurt 2005, pp. 33-34; emphasis added). So, he clearly thinks that bullshit can be delineated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Secondly, argumentative bullshit can evidently, on Gascón's own account, be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, too. As Gascón says, argumentative bullshit is "the production of reasons for a claim without regard to whether the reasons given really support that claim" (p. 293) or, alternatively, a "lack of concern for [truth of] the supporting relation" (p. 307).

[14] Note that Gascón uses the term 'reasons,' not 'premisses.' We think, however, that, for various reasons, the latter term is better suited in the present context. For one thing, it is more fine-grained. A premiss, as we understand this notion, is simply a proposition which, in the context of an argument and, perhaps, in connection with other premisses, supports a conclusion. A premiss may state a reason. However, if an argument contains multiple, non-redundant premisses, then the premisses state the reason which is adduced to support the conclusion only in conjunction with one another. In other words, each premiss contains, then, only a part of the reason for the conclusion.

tative bullshit$_P$, in other words, can be viewed as a form of ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit. However, Gascón thinks that if it is found in the supporting relation, if, in other words, the arguer is indifferent as to whether her premisses actually support her conclusion, then it cannot be reduced to ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit. Evidently, he believes that such argumentative bullshit$_S$, though it may be viewed in analogy to ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, is, nevertheless, to be seen as a form of bullshit *sui generis* which, just like the forms identified by Cohen or Carson that we mentioned in Section 2, is distinct from the Frankfurtian variety. If this is, indeed, Gascón's view, we beg to differ. It is simply not clear to us why argumentative bullshit$_S$ should not be viewed as ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit just because the essential bullshit attitude concerns the supporting relation between premisses and conclusion rather than the premisses themselves.

To be sure, one reason why one might think that one should make such a difference is that the supporting relation is not stated explicitly in an argument, while bullshit assertions that are contained in the argument in the form of premisses always are. To see this, consider the following argument (Argument 1):

Argument 1

(P1) If p, then q.
(P2) It is not the case that p.
(C) It is, necessarily, not the case that q.

An arguer who puts forward this flawed argument may be bullshitting, then, in one of two ways, namely, in the sense of argumentative bullshit$_P$ and the sense of argumentative bullshit$_S$. She would be engaging in argumentative bullshit$_P$ if she were, in fact, unconcerned with the truth of either P1 or P2 (or both), and she would be engaging in argumentative bullshit$_S$ if she were indifferent as to whether P1 and P2 in conjunction genuinely support C. Now, the seeming difference between these two forms of argumentative bullshitting is that, in the case of argumentative bullshit$_P$, a bullshit assertion is explicitly stated and, as such, endorsed by the arguer. In contrast, in the case of argumentative bullshit$_S$, no bullshit

assertion is endorsed. Here, the bullshit lies, instead, in the fact that the arguer uses P1 and P2 to support C even though she may not, in fact, believe that these two premisses genuinely support the conclusion.

However, this is merely a superficial, non-logical difference that does not justify drawing a fundamental distinction. The difference lies only in the fact that an arguer who puts forward the above argument commits herself to the supporting relation not explicitly but pragmatically, that is, via conversational implicature.[15] Accordingly, the difference between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit$_S$ is not, *pace* Gascón, a difference in the kind of bullshit at issue but, rather, a difference in the mode of assertion. While ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit is usually asserted explicitly, argumentative bullshit$_S$ is mostly communicated pragmatically because the supporting relation between premisses and conclusions is not verbalised.

What is more, this may not always be the case. It is possible to communicate argumentative bullshit$_P$ via conversational implicature, and it is also possible to communicate argumentative bullshit$_S$ explicitly. The former case occurs when the arguer is indifferent to the truth of one of the premisses of her argument, and the premiss is enthymemic, that is, "only tacitly, but not explicitly stated" (Walton 1989/2008, p. 143). The latter case occurs when the supporting relation between premisses and conclusion is explicitly asserted. An arguer who uses Argument 1 may, for instance, find herself pressed by an interlocutor to explain how she infers C from P1 and P2. In that case, she may answer by stating the following bullshit:

> (P3) If we can assume that if *p*, then *q*, and if we can assume, also, that it is not the case that *p*, then we can conclude that, necessarily, it is not the case that *q*.

In that case, the supporting relation is added to the argument as a separate premiss, and if the arguer does not care whether this

[15] The observation that ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit may be communicated via conversational implicature rather than explicitly can be found, for instance, in Webber (2013).

supporting relation genuinely holds, we have a case of argumentative bullshit$_S$ that is explicitly asserted. Note, also, that in such a case, the distinction between argumentative bullshit$_P$ and argumentative bullshit$_S$ collapses because an argument that contains P1, P2, and P3 would be a case of the former as well as the latter.

What all this comes down to, then, is that there is no difference in kind between argumentative bullshit$_S$ (and, for that matter, argumentative bullshit$_P$), on the one hand, and ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, on the other. There is only a difference in the way the respective bullshit is asserted. Argumentative bullshit$_P$ is, like ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, usually asserted explicitly, while argumentative bullshit$_S$, unlike ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, usually is not. However, both of them are of the same kind. Argumentative bullshit is, on the understanding that Gascón proposes, simply ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit which is used to argue for another claim.

This raises the question of what the logical relationship between argumentative bullshit and ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit is. That is, it raises the question of whether an ordinary Frankfurtian bullshitter necessarily is an argumentative bullshitter and vice versa, or whether the relationship between the two is, if it exists, only accidental. We shall deal with that issue in Section 6 below. Before we do that, however, we would like to comment on two further remarks that Gascón makes, which we take to be problematic.

The first concerns his claim that it would be awkward to reply to argumentative bullshit with arguments. First of all, this should not be understood as a conceptual feature of argumentative bullshit. If we took it to be part of that concept, this would destroy its Frankfurtian nature, which Gascón, we presume, is interested in preserving. On Frankfurt's account, after all, the fact that bullshit assertions are sometimes awkward to reply to is not part of the concept of bullshit but only an accidental feature, if any. Also, this observation only seems apt when we imagine talking to a bullshitter and we see right through the bullshit. For instance, consider a situation in which you are talking among friends about a topic—say, philosophy—on which you are an expert, and everybody knows that you are more knowledgeable than everybody else who is present. Imagine, now, one of your friends saying:

> You know, I think Immanuel Kant's philosophy is completely overrated. He was, after all, just a con-artist who wrote longwinded, incomprehensible sentences in an attempt to cover up that he had nothing to say.

This has, indeed, an air of cringiness to it. You know as well as your friend that she has never read much of Kant and that, even if she had, she would not be in a position to support such a strong judgement because she does not have the requisite training. In such a case, it may feel strange for you to address your friend's remark about Kant's philosophy being overrated head-on by offering counterarguments. Instead, you would probably reply something like the following:

> Come on, that's just bullshit! You know as well as I do that you do not have the slightest idea about Kant's philosophy. Whom are you kidding?

In other words, you would not engage the bullshit uttered directly. You would point out that your friend does not even believe her statement about Kant and the argumentative bullshit she utters to give the impression that she knows what she is talking about.

However, imagine now a slight modification of the case. Once again, your friend makes the same statement about Kant's philosophy being overrated and supports it with the argumentative bullshit that Kant's opaque style was just an attempt to cover up the fact that he had nothing of substance to say. In this case, however, another person, whom your friend is evidently trying to impress with her bullshit take on philosophical issues, is listening in on the conversation. Your friend knows that you see through her bullshit, but what she has to say is not addressed to you. You are not, as it were, the *bullshittee*. The other person is. If you do not want your friend's bullshit to stand, you have to engage it and show why it is bullshit. You could say, for instance:

> Okay, Kant is hard to read. But there is plenty of substance to what he says. If you don't see it, allow me to explain….

The lesson of the comparison between these two cases, it seems to us, is that the sense of awkwardness that Gascón identifies as a general characteristic of argumentative bullshit is, instead, a consequence of the fact that the bullshittee knows what the bullshitter is up to. Since Gascón fixes his gaze on the bullshitter, he loses sight of the bullshittee and fails to observe this.

In fact, argumentative bullshit of this kind can be found in the political arena all the time. When a serious politician argues, for instance, with a populist who denies the reality of anthropogenic climate change, both the populist and the serious politician will normally know full well that the latter is just bullshitting. In that case, it would not feel awkward for the former to assume the role of the bullshit buster and explain to the designated bullshittee, that is, to the audience, why her interlocutor is an argumentative bullshitter.

The second problematic remark of Gascón's that we would like to come back to is his claim that in the case of argumentative bullshit, the "argumentative utterance is so problematic that we cannot even outline a plausible scheme for the purported argument in order to assess its quality" (p. 290). Gascón seems to think this is a general characteristic of all forms of argumentative bullshit, even though this is not entirely clear from what he says. However, if he does, he unnecessarily obfuscates his account of argumentative bullshit by changing his criterion of demarcation. In the manner in which we have, up to this point, explicated this account, the essential Frankfurtian feature of argumentative bullshit is that the arguer does not care whether the premisses of her argument are true (in the case of argumentative bullshit$_{\boldsymbol{P}}$) or whether the premisses genuinely support her conclusion (in the case of argumentative bullshit$_{\boldsymbol{S}}$). The quality of the argument is neither here nor there.

6. The relationship between ordinary bullshit and argumentative bullshit

Let us now return to a question we have asked in passing in the previous section, namely, what the relationship between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit is. To this end, we first have to analyse the relevant notions a little further. Consider a

person *P*, a proposition *p* that *P* endorses in communication, and an argument *A* that *P* may put forward to support *p*. Now, *P* may or may not be a bullshitter in the ordinary Frankfurtian sense regarding *p*. If she is, this means, simply, that she does not care whether *p* is true or false. If she is an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*, this means that *P* puts forward *A* to support *p* and is either indifferent as to whether the premisses of her argument *A* are true (argumentative bullshit$_P$) or as to whether these premisses genuinely support *p* (argumentative bullshit$_S$). To analyse the logical relations between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit, we have to assess, then, the following four cases that are, at least combinatorically, possible:

> Case 1: *P* is neither a bullshitter regarding *p* nor an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*.
> Case 2: *P* is merely a bullshitter about *p* but not an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*.
> Case 3: *P* is not a bullshitter regarding *p* but is an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*.
> Case 4: *P* is both a bullshitter regarding *p* and an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*.

Let us consider each of these cases in turn. Case 1 is clearly possible. Here, *P* neither bullshits about *p* in the ordinary Frankfurtian nor the argumentative sense. She believes that *p* is true. If she did not, she would not affirm it. Also, she believes to have a good argument, *A*, in favour of *p*. She thinks all premisses are correct, and she is convinced that the premisses genuinely support *p* as a conclusion. If she did not, she would not use *A* as an argument. This, we might say, is a case of pure honesty.

In Case 2, *P* merely bullshits about *p* in the ordinary Frankfurtian sense but not in the argumentative sense. This case is possible as well. After all, *P* may utter *p* while being indifferent to its truth. In that case, she is an ordinary Frankfurtian bullshitter regarding *p*. *P* does not have to be an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*, however, because she may not even propose an argument in favour of *p*.

Case 3 is a bit trickier. Here, *P* is not a bullshitter regarding *p* but is, nevertheless, an argumentative bullshitter regarding *p*. This case seems logically possible as well, and strikes us, at least in certain constellations, also as psychologically plausible. To see this, suppose *P* may be a principled person who is completely honest about important claims she makes, and she may consider *p* to be one of these claims. If she knew *p* to be false, were sufficiently unsure about its truth, or unable to form a reasoned opinion about it, she would resist uttering it. However, she may not only feel that she has to be honest about *p* but, also, that *p* is so important that others should accept its truth as well. Unfortunately, though, the reasoning and knowledge required to see that *p* is true is quite complicated and, at least for a layperson, counter-intuitive such that *P* believes that arguing honestly in favour of *p* will not help her convince many people. Thus, she is considering using a different argument for *p* that others will accept with a higher probability. *P* doubts the truth of this argument's premisses and thinks that even if they were all true, they would not support the conclusion properly. But—heck!—why not support *p* with a little bit of bullshit? It is, after all, for a good cause.

To be sure, one reason why *P* should, perhaps, refrain from using a bullshit argument to support *p* is that every bit of bullshit can be dangerous and should not be unleashed on the world if one can help it. Also, *P* is, as we have assumed, a principled, honest person. Accordingly, it may be objected that Case 3 does not seem psychologically plausible after all. However, assume that *P* thinks the claims of her bullshit argument are, unlike *p* itself, not important such that complete honesty about them is not morally required. Also, *P* may be concerned about the many bullshit arguments that are circulating and which may lead people to believe a very problematic untruth, namely $\neg p$. Accordingly, she may judge that a little bit of argumentative bullshitting is, in this context, for the best—all things considered.

The issue of whether or not argumentative bullshitting in pursuit of a good cause is morally permissible comes up in many contexts and is by no means a new idea. As Henry Sidgwick saw lucidly in his *Methods of ethics* (1874/1907), "it may be right," based on a utilitarian moral system, "to teach openly to one set of

persons what it would be wrong to teach to others" (Sidgwick 1874/1907, p. 489) because there may be cases in which this would have the best consequences. One such case is Case 3, where, as *P* assumes, it is vital to persuade people of what one regards as a true claim *p*. This may, as we saw, justify a certain level of argumentative bullshitting because the people one wants to convince of *p*'s truth may not be sufficiently trained, knowledgeable, or interested to understand the sophisticated reasoning that supports *p*. However, this case is not the paradigm example Sidgwick had in mind. He was primarily concerned, it seems to us, with situations in which it would be for the best to get people to accept a bullshit assertion based on bullshit arguments, as in Case 4. This suggestion is not as crazy as it may initially seem. For the sake of illustration, consider, once again, the plight of a science communicator whose job is to educate people about the problems associated with anthropogenic climate change. She may know that conveying accurate information and supporting it with scientifically sound arguments would not be effective in getting people to change their ways. Thus, she may decide to describe the state of the climate and its current trajectory in more catastrophic terms than warranted and to use bullshit arguments that cut some corners.

We may conclude, then, that ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit are, to a large degree, independent as all of the above cases are evidently possible. That is, the presence or absence of the former does not tell us, in and of itself, that the latter is present also—and vice versa. This holds, at least, from a logical point of view. However, one might suspect that, as a matter of empirical fact, some cases should be more common than others. Specifically, one might argue that, in social settings in which people are commonly pressed to defend their assertions with arguments, there should be a rather tight empirical correlation between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit such that Case 1 and Case 4 would be the most common ones.[16]

[16] In situations where it is possible to get away with asserting any bullshit without having to defend it, Case 2 may be equally common because an ordinary Frankfurtian bullshitter would not be pressed to argue for his bullshit and would, hence, not be forced to become an argumentative bullshitter as well.

The reason why this should be expected is, if we may dabble in some armchair psychology, that both ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit plausibly are, in equal measure, the product of certain problematic attitudes. We believe that, as far as such attitudes are concerned, there are two primary candidates.

The first candidate is what Quassim Cassam has referred to as *epistemic insouciance*. Insouciance in the ordinary sense is, as Cassam explains, "a casual lack of concern, carelessness, or indifference" (Cassam 2018, p. 2). Epistemic insouciance, as he thinks of it, is, accordingly, a casual lack of concern, carelessness, or indifference in epistemic matters. More precisely, it means, as Cassam explains, "being excessively casual and nonchalant about the challenge of finding answers to complex questions, partly as a result of a tendency to view such questions as less complex than they really are." Or, to put it in a more sloganish form: "Epistemic insouciance means *not giving a shit*" (p. 2; emphasis added). It seems to us psychologically entirely plausible that an epistemically insouciant person would, on the one hand, endorse claims without caring about their truth and, when pressed, would, on the other hand, use arguments without caring about the truth of their premisses or the supporting relation between premisses and conclusion.

Note, however, that even though, as Cassam explains, the "primary intellectual product of epistemic insouciance is bullshit in Frankfurt's sense" (p. 1), this epistemic vice is not a necessary condition for bullshit. A person may be very much concerned about her beliefs having a solid basis in reality. Nevertheless, she may choose to *say* anything in pursuit of her non-alethic aims because—and this is the second candidate we would like to suggest—her attitude is one of *intellectual dishonesty*.[17] She may not be epistemically indifferent at all when it comes to figuring out what she can say to advance her non-alethic goals in the most effective way possible. In fact, she may be pretty meticulous about that. Also, she may be genuinely interested to know whether the things she says are actually correct. However, she may be entirely indifferent regarding the truth of the utterances she then makes—unless, of course, making true (or false) statements would promise her more success in achieving what she is looking for.

[17] Cassam is aware of this distinction and draws it in his paper as well.

In conclusion, we can thus record that even though there is no logical connection between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and argumentative bullshit, we should expect to see an empirical correlation between the two—at least in social settings where it is expected that those who make assertions also defend them using arguments. This is because ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit is commonly the product of certain problematic attitudes—we mentioned epistemic insouciance and intellectual dishonesty—which should produce argumentative bullshit to the same extent.

7. Even deeper into argumentative bullshit

Up to this point, we have only discussed the Frankfurtian stripe of argumentative bullshit because this is the one on which Gascón focuses. As we have mentioned in Section 3 above, however, certain types of bullshit utterances are not marked by an indifference to the truth on the part of the bullshitter. Accordingly, it seems well-motivated to ask, as we have already pointed out in Section 5 above, how the account of argumentative bullshit that Gascón offers may be generalised to accommodate such non-Frankfurtian notions of bullshit. In this section, we shall discuss how this may be done.

Recall that, as we have argued in Section 5 above, argumentative bullshit should be understood as that which results when an arguer offers an argument in support of a proposition *p* and does not care either whether the premisses of this argument are true, as in the case of argumentative bullshit$_P$, or the premisses genuinely support her conclusion, as in the case of argumentative bullshit$_S$. As we have seen, however, not all forms of bullshit seem to involve such an attitude of indifference. Cohen draws our attention to a shit-focused variety of bullshit, where a feature of the utterance in question, instead of a feature of the utterer's mind, is the essential characteristic. This form of bullshit consists of nonsensical utterances which are, as Cohen puts it, "by nature *unclarifiable*" (Cohen 2002, p. 332; emphasis in the original). To render precise what Cohen has in mind, we would have to say a lot more about what it means for a statement to be by nature unclarifiable. We shall not do that here. Instead, we would simply like to point

out that it is easy to see how this kind of Cohenian bullshit can give rise to a non-Frankfurtian form of argumentative bullshit. Such a form would result when either the premisses of an argument contain bullshit of the type Cohen has in mind, that is, consist of unclarifiable nonsense, or when an arguer is pressed to make explicit the supporting relation between the premisses and the conclusion and then offers, in place of an intelligible proposition explaining the connection, some piece of ungraspable nonsense.

Above, we mentioned two other types of bullshit that Carson discusses. The first was *evasive bullshit*. This type is characterised by the bullshitter's attempt to avoid answering a question under consideration. In this case, there may or may not be an indifference to the truth on the part of the evasive bullshitter. That is, in addition to trying to avoid answering the respective question, he may or may not care about the truth values of the propositions he utters. Now, can there be evasive, argumentative bullshit as well? It seems to us that there can be. This occurs when a speaker has been asked whether she affirms or denies p and then goes on to affirm propositions q, r, s, … in an attempt to avoid committing herself to either p or $\neg p$. Crucially, though, for this to count as evasive, *argumentative* bullshit, she has to draw inferences—either between q, r, and s, or between those propositions and some further proposition p^* which contains no answer to the question of whether p or $\neg p$.

Finally, then, there is *rambling bullshit*. The mark of this type of bullshit is that the bullshitter goes on and on aimlessly because he hopes to end up saying something that will advance his non-alethic goals. We have considered the case of the exam taker who does this because she hopes that she might, by saying anything that comes to mind, stumble upon the correct answer to the exam question. An argumentative version of rambling bullshit results when some part of the rambling is made to look like it logically supports some other part of the rambling. To achieve this, the exam taker merely has to flick in the occasional 'hence' or 'therefore.'

We can record, then, that it is possible to find non-Frankfurtian *analoga* to Gascón's argumentative bullshit. A critic may suggest, however, that what we have said about them so far is rather eclectic and that we have only added additional forms of argumentative

bullshit to Gascón's picture instead of offering a unified account of how all these forms may be connected. Hence, we would like to explore how such an account might be developed.

Recall, once more, that there is, seemingly, a fundamental distinction between bull-focused and shit-focused views of bullshit. A general account should be able to include both, which initially appears to be a challenge. To tackle it, it is essential, as a first step, to get clear on what it means to speak of "bull-focused" and "shit-focused" views. Importantly, this distinction does not suggest that, on some views, we can have a bull without a shit and, on others, a shit without a bull. Both on bull-focused and shit-focused views, the bull and the shit are always part of the picture. What bull-focused or shit-focused views do, however, is to home in, more or less narrowly, on specific aspects of this picture: Bull-focused views like Frankfurt's classify as bullshit only those cases where the purported bull has a specific property (e.g., indifference to the truth), while the shit can have a wide range of attributes (truth, falsity, meaninglessness). In contrast, shit-focused views like Cohen's allow the bull to possess a wide range of attributes (e.g., indifference, incompetence, confusion, etc.) but require that the shit be of a specific sort (e.g., unclarifiable nonsense). Accordingly, it would be more appropriate to speak of *views with a narrow (or wide) bull-focus* and *views with a narrow (or wide) shit-focus*.

We can use this insight to develop, in the next step, a broadly inclusive approach to argumentative bullshit based on two parameters, namely, a bull-focus and a shit-focus. Let us start with a setting that yields a version of argumentative bullshit analogous to ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit. To this end, we use a narrow bull-focus on a specific epistemic vice, namely, indifference. However, we do not focus on indifference to the truth but, instead, on *indifference to reasonable argumentation*. Regarding the shit, we cast our net as widely as possible. That is, we do not focus only on specific argumentative failings. Instead, we are interested in indifference to the standards of reasonable argumentation at the most general level. This yields, then, the following version of argumentative bullshit:

Frankfurtian argumentative bullshit (narrow bull-focus, wide shit-focus)

Argumentative bullshit is that which results when someone argues with *indifference to the standards of reasonable argumentation*.

Before considering how we can reconstruct other forms of argumentative bullshit using our approach, let us clarify how the first form should be interpreted.

Firstly, the label "bullshit" only reasonably applies when certain norms are in place. For instance, satire may mischaracterise the facts. However, it is not bullshit because the norm of truth-telling does not apply to satire as it does to other forms of speech (Mukerji 2018). In like manner, argumentative bullshit seems to be conceptually limited to cases where the standards of reasonable argumentation apply. Plausibly, this is the case whenever someone puts forward a claim *and* supports it, either implicitly or explicitly, with an argument. In contrast, if a person puts forward *p* but does not defend it with any argument, *p* may be bullshit in the ordinary Frankfurtian sense. However, it is not *argumentative* bullshit since no argument is given, such that the standards of reasonable argumentation do not apply.

That said, there may, arguably, be cases where the standards apply even though no argument is given at all. This may be so because an argument is *called for*. Suppose, for instance, a person claims that *p* and claims, also, to possess a reasonable argument for *p*. However, she does not actually possess such an argument. If she is subsequently pressed to produce it but declines, this may be categorised as a special case of argumentative bullshit, namely, *argumentative bluffing* (van Laar 2010). So, the standards of reasonable argumentation seem to apply as soon as they are invoked and seem to include an obligation to fulfil one's argumentative burdens.

Secondly, the notion of *indifference* deserves to be spelt out more fully. When we say that someone is indifferent to the truth (as in the case of ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit), the most obvious interpretation is that the person does not have any preference whatsoever when deciding what she will say. However, this seems to be a very implausible state of mind, which, presumably, only a

few people are in. Plausibly, most of us—and even the bullshitters among us—have, at least to some extent, a preference for truth-telling. After all, such a policy has obvious advantages. For instance, someone who only ever says what she thinks is true does not have to remember what she has said in the past. Now, even someone who has, other things equal, a preference for truth-telling should, in the sense relevant here, be called "truth-indifferent" to the extent that she may sometimes be willing to violate the norm of truth-telling.

To illustrate, consider a politician. She may want to tell the truth on a particular issue. However, there are other considerations. She feels that she should, for instance, take into account what her constituents want to hear, fulfil her donors' expectations, toe the party line, and so on. In light of such concerns, she may become, let's say, 'increasingly flexible' when it comes to the truth values of her assertions, and this, we believe, is the adequate interpretation of what it means to say that she is "truth-indifferent" and, in Frankfurt's sense, a bullshitter.

Note that, on this construal, indifference to the truth and, by extension, bullshitting becomes a *gradual* notion. One can be more or less indifferent to the truth and, hence, more or less of a bullshitter. This point is noteworthy because it may be covered up by the term "indifference," which, in its primary sense, refers to a preference relation between two objects. When we are indifferent between *a* and *b*, we prefer both to the same extent. There are no gradations. In truth-indifference, however, there are.

What we have said about truth-indifference implies that we can test whether a person is a Frankfurtian bullshitter regarding her utterance *p* by asking: (i) Does the person even have any conviction regarding *p*? And, if so: (ii) Under which conditions would she have uttered *p*? In the case of the honest person and the liar, we answer the first question in the affirmative, while the answers to the second question differ. The honest person only utters *p* if she thinks *p* is true, while the liar does the opposite. In contrast, in the case of the bullshitter, "all these bets are off," as Frankfurt (2005, p. 56) puts it. He may or may not have a conviction about *p*, and he will utter *p* as long as this suits his purpose.

Now, if we construe argumentative bullshit in analogy to Frankfurtian bullshit, we get this: An argumentative bullshitter is someone who may not even have any conviction as to whether his argument, *A*, complies with the standards of reasonable argumentation. But even if he does and judges his own argument unreasonable, his 'flexibility' in applying the standards allows him to use it nevertheless, and he will do so as long as this offers sufficient benefits in some other way. Note that this notion of argumentative bullshit also allows for degrees since there can be more or less "flexibility."

Thirdly, the attitude of indifference to the truth is not a uniform phenomenon as it may result from several different epistemic vices. Above, we mentioned epistemic insouciance and intellectual dishonesty as examples. In all likelihood, arrogance, overconfidence, and similar vices of the mind can be added to the picture (see Cassam 2019 for a comprehensive study). Accordingly, from the standpoint of vice epistemology, instances of Frankfurtian bullshit can differ significantly from each other. What all parts of bullshit have in common is only their crusty outer shell, which consists of indifference to the truth. However, all pats contain multiple layers of vices that lie deeper within them.

There is also a social epistemology angle. How flexible bullshitters can afford to be in their (mis)treatment of the truth depends, certainly, also on the attributes of others. A gullible audience, for instance, which is uninclined to call out cases of bullshit, is probably a factor that increases the amount of bullshit we have to put up with.

Since we are construing argumentative bullshit in analogy to Frankfurtian bullshit, all these points should also apply to the former. Indifference to the standards of reasonable argumentation is, plausibly, also a multi-layered phenomenon that can be analysed from the perspective of vice epistemology, and social epistemology can likely give us insights as to how Frankfurtian argumentative bullshit spreads.

Finally, the question arises of what the *standards of reasonable argumentation* are. It seems that our account of argumentative bullshit would be incomplete without an answer to that question.[18]

[18] We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on that point.

We believe, however, that a purely *conceptual account* of argumentative bullshit should, in fact, be silent on it. Of course, we do not mean to claim that nothing meaningful can be said regarding these standards—quite the contrary.[19] It means merely that we should distinguish between our concept of argumentative bullshit and our conception of it. The concept, we believe, only points to the standards of reasonable argumentation but does not spell them out in detail. When paired with a substantive account of what these standards are, this concept is developed into a full *conception of argumentative bullshit*. The concept/conception distinction seems necessary to us for a simple reason: We first have to make sure that when we discuss argumentative bullshit, we *mean* the same thing. We do this by developing a concept of it. Only then can we argue about what this thing amounts to *in substance*. This is done by working out a conception (Lalumera 2013). The latter task is one we shall not tackle here.

Now, some drum-beating for our proposal. One thing it has going for it is that it is broadly inclusive and unifying. At any rate, it naturally unifies the various forms of argumentative bullshit that we have touched upon so far. This is because the standards of reasonable argumentation, which this account points to, plausibly forbid straying from the point and poking about in the fog. So, it includes evasive and rambling forms of argumentative bullshit. On our approach, these forms can both be construed as versions of Frankfurtian argumentative bullshit with a narrower shit-focus on specific argumentative failings, namely, argumentative evasions and ramblings, respectively.

The approach can, at least to some extent, even make sense of a Cohenian stripe of argumentative bullshit since unclarifiable nonsense uttered in support of a proposition is, plausibly, also forbidden by the standards of reasonable argumentation. It, too, has a narrower shit-focus and is, therefore, also a sub-form of Frankfurtian argumentative bullshit.

However, it may be reasonably objected that Cohen's version of bullshit has not only a narrower shit-focus but also a wider bull-focus. It does not require indifference but allows incompetence,

[19] One of us (Mukerji 2017a) has offered such an account.

confusion, and similar defects on the part of the bullshitter. So, if we want to develop an account of argumentative bullshit that is perfectly analogous to Cohen's version, it is not enough to narrow our shit-focus. In addition, we have to broaden our bull-focus, too. Fair enough, then. This leads us to the following account.

> **Cohenian Argumentative Bullshit (Wide Bull-Focus, Narrow Shit-Focus)**
>
> Argumentative bullshit is that which results when an *arguer utters unclarifiable nonsense* to support a proposition, be it due to indifference, confusion, incompetence, or similar attributes on the part of the arguer.

What we have said so far is not exhaustive but seems sufficient to demonstrate that our approach is broadly inclusive and flexible enough to accommodate *analoga* in argumentative bullshit to all forms of ordinary bullshit proposed in the literature.

Finally, let us highlight two advantages of our proposal: Its first advantage is that it seems to chime in nicely with recent developments in bullshitology. Victor Moberger (2020) has suggested that we should view bullshit as "a culpable lack of epistemic conscientiousness" (Moberger 2020, p. 597). And he thinks that we should, therefore, "keep an eye out for classical fallacies such as *ad hominem*, *straw man*, *false dilemma* and *cherry picking*" (p. 598; emphases in the original) to determine whether we are dealing with a piece of bullshit. Obviously, such classical fallacies are manifestations of a neglect of the standards of reasonable argumentation. So, Moberger's account of bullshit seems to build on argumentative bullshit, as we propose to understand it.

Hence, if Moberger is correct about the true nature of bullshit, and if we are right about the nature of argumentative bullshit, then argumentative bullshit is, indeed, the logically prior notion. In that case, Frankfurt—and all philosophers who have followed him in the study of bullshit—would have been well advised to focus on argumentative standards right from the beginning. So, three cheers for argumentation theory!

The second advantage is a corollary of the first. We believe that our account of argumentative bullshit may cast new light on a

long-standing problem in the philosophy of science, which concerns the demarcation of science from pseudoscience.[20] If Moberger (2020) is correct, pseudoscience should be analysed as a special case of bullshit as he understands it, namely, bullshit with scientific pretensions.[21] And if, as we have suggested, argumentative bullshit lies at the heart of epistemic unconscientiousness, that is, of what Moberger takes bullshit essentially to be, then our deeper look into the nature of argumentative bullshit may also enable us to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of pseudoscience. Elaborating on this idea is, however, a task for another paper.[22]

8. Conclusion

We have discussed Gascón's intriguing suggestion that there might be room in argumentation theory for a notion analogous to Frankfurt's idea of bullshit. This notion is that of argumentative bullshit. As we have argued, however, Gascón's discussion is defective in various ways.

Most importantly, he seems to misidentify argumentative bullshit as a form of bullshit *sui generis*. We have proposed a view on which it is, instead, regarded as merely a sub-form of ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, namely that kind which the arguer uses to defend another proposition. Also, Gascón unnecessarily obfuscates his account by adding extra features to his characterisation of argumentative bullshit. To preserve the Frankfurtian nature of Gascón's account of argumentative bullshit, we have suggested that these additional features should be viewed merely as accidental properties.

After we discussed the relationship between ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit and its argumentative sub-form, which yielded the

[20] Laudan (1983) traces the demarcation problem back to Aristotle's *Posterior analytics*. In modern times, it has been closely associated with the works of Karl R. Popper, who thought its solution was "key to most of the fundamental problems of the philosophy of science" (Popper 1963, p. 55). For an overview of the various proposals for solving the demarcation problem, see Hansson (2021).

[21] In like manner, one of us (Mukerji 2018) has proposed to understand fake news as bullshit that pretends to be news.

[22] An initial sketch can be found in Mukerji (2017b).

hypothesis that, in social settings where assertions have to be defended with arguments, the two phenomena will be empirically correlated, we also addressed the issue of how alternative non-Frankfurtian forms of argumentative bullshit may be construed. We showed that it is possible to find *analoga* to other types of bullshit, namely, those suggested by G.A. Cohen and Thomas L. Carson. Furthermore, we discussed how a general account of argumentative bullshit, which, unlike the one Gascón proposes, can also accommodate non-Frankfurtian forms of argumentative bullshit, could be developed.

At this point, it remains to be seen what the implications and applications of the concept of argumentative bullshit will turn out to be. As we have suggested, it may be instrumental in explaining the nature of pseudoscience. In addition, we find it plausible that its practical value will lie, among other things, in the heuristic function of argumentative bullshit to detect ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit. If, as Frankfurt thinks, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are, then we should want to know whether a person is intellectually honest or a bullshitter in the Frankfurtian sense. However, to assess this directly, we need immediate access to the person's attitudes which, with the possible exception of fancy-schmancy neuroscientific techniques, will be unfeasible in most instances. It is likely feasible and sufficiently reliable, however, to judge whether a person is a bullshitter by using indirect evidence, that is, by analysing what she says in defence of her assertions. If argumentative bullshit is, as Gascón believes, often accompanied by a palpable sense of cringiness and if, as we have suggested, there should be an empirical correlation between argumentative and ordinary Frankfurtian bullshit, then the presence of bullshit in arguments could give us valuable hints as to whom we can trust.

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