

KNOWLEDGE, BULLSHIT AND OTHER CURIOSITIES

In his famous article « On Bullshit » Harry Frankfurt attracts our attention to the phenomenon of bullshitting and sketches an analysis of why there is so much of it in our societies. The sociological factors are evident (prevalence of the media culture over all other cultures, widespread agreement with relativism at all social levels, including in academia and among the so-called intellectuals, etc.) but the epistemological ones are less evident.

Frankfurt himself suggests an explication in terms of contempt for truth as a value: the bullshitter does not care for truth, because he does not recognise the value of truth (the bullshitter is not stupid, he is, on the contrary, often very intelligent). In this talk, I want (following Olsson 2008) to relate the phenomenon of bullshit to the problem of the value of knowledge. The problem of the value of knowledge is the one raised by Platon in *Meno*: why is knowledge better than true belief? Recently this problem has been investigated in the epistemological literature (Haddock, Millar, Pritchard 2009). The value problem is difficult in particular for reliabilist theories which define the goal of knowledge as the maximisation of true beliefs: why should it be better to have knowledge rather than true beliefs (the so-called “swamping” problem : true belief “swamps” knowledge).

Olsson 2008 discusses the bullshit issue in terms of his own reliabilist solution to the swamping problem. I examine his solution, and those which are based on virtue epistemology. I try also to relate the bullshit problem to the problem of pointless truths or trivial truths which arises for certain versions of the idea that truth is valuable. If truth is valuable, are we bound to accept as valuable all truths whatsoever, including those which are pointless, like the truth that there 154 567 specks of dust on the leftmost superior corner of my desk? Some writers (Lynch 2005) accept that giving truth an intrinsic value implies valuing all truths. Others want truth which are in some sense interesting. But what is interesting ? This problem also relates to the pragmatist’s claim that what is interesting is more important than what is true. So how can we avoid bullshit in all these domains? Similarly there is an almost universal agreement on the fact that it is good to have the intellectual virtue of curiosity and open mindedness: be receptive to all truths. But here the pragmatist, the bullshitter and the virtue epistemologist are dangerously close to each other. I claim that we have a right *not* to be curious. There are certain things that we do not need to know, and should not have to know.