

REVIEW ESSAY

Working with Cynicism

Books Discussed:

Joep P. M. Schrijvers
The Way of the Rat: A Survival Guide to Office Politics
London: Cyan Books, 2004.

Harry G. Frankfurt
On Bullshit
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

By Howard A. Doughty

No matter what our political persuasions or commitments in the “culture wars” that seem to surround us, we may all be forgiven for feeling a measure of disillusionment. If the rest of the millennium proceeds as it has begun, our prospects may be dim. Still, we need not lull ourselves into a perpetual despair. Back in the desolate winter of 1776, when George Washington’s troops balanced between devastation and desertion, Tom Paine tried to boost their spirits by telling them that these were the times that tried men’s souls. In retrospect, it appears that all times are such times; so, whether socially, economically, culturally, environmentally or politically, we seem to be in for a bit of a rougher patch than many progressive modernists had anticipated. Yet, we certainly didn’t invent trying conditions. It has all been seen before (though admittedly not with the level of technological toxicity with which we must contend).

In the current challenging circumstances it is unsurprising that books with an edge, a bit of sarcasm, a critical eye, and a healthy dose of pessimism might become popular. These do not—at least in the prosperous nations—seem like revolutionary times; more likely they are times of anxiety, anomie and a perception of pervasive corruption and incompetence for which no coherent explanation, much less promising palliative, exists.

For those experiencing economic or existential angst, the politics of progress seem to have failed, the wheels are off the engine, and a new diagnostics is in order. Where to turn?

It has long been my view that history has given certain political thinkers an unnecessarily rough ride. Their time of resurgence may be at hand. No longer persuaded that technology is the key to progress, that there may have been something in that old theological notion of sin, and that humanity may not only be possessed by some sort of generalized Freudian *thanatos* but may even be permanently pathological—both suicidal and toxic for the planet—we are ripe for darker visions.

In the Western canon, two prominent thinkers have long been chastised and now may be ready for rehabilitation. Nicolo Machiavelli is one. Thomas Hobbes is the other. Modern liberalism (whether in its late 18th-century version of unfettered capitalism or in its 20th-century revision as the welfare state), is embarrassed by them both. After all, even cut-throat capitalists usually insisted that their greed served the common good, that investment provided employment, and that their rewards were not only seen in the personal acquisition of wealth but in a rise in prosperity for all.

Machiavelli and Hobbes or, rather, the cardboard cut-out versions of them that commonly infect introductory studies in political theory, or early modern history, or (worst of all) “survey courses” in Western Civilization do seem like pretty unpleasant pieces of work.

Machiavelli is regularly regarded as the sort of mentor that would befit political spin-doctors and electoral tacticians eager to use any ruse to smear an opponent and vilify alternative views to that of their preferred candidate. He was the prince of chicanery and not above “extraordinary means” when needed. Hobbes was little better. Defining human nature as aggressive, selfish and addled by the desire for domination, he famously described life in the “state of nature” as “nasty, brutish and short.” He more than hinted that individuals caught up in the “war of all against all” might well meet the criteria for a clinical assessment of paranoid megalomania. This was the essence of our species. Humanity was something that needed to be overcome. These characters, we have been informed, would not have worn happy face buttons or said “Have a great day!” unless, of course, it was demonstrably expedient to do so.

Now may be their time to shine, at least in the reflected glory of contemporary writers who have the wit to take advantage of their insights into the human character and the arsenal of skullduggery that assists the demonic and despotic to find success in areas of endeavour from business and politics to sport and entertainment, and possibly even the higher levels of religious and academic leadership.

Two commercially successful volumes have been reckoned to come close to fulfilling the promise. To me, each is a disappointment, but for rather different reasons.

The first is the international best-seller, *The Way of the Rat*. In it, Joep P. M. Schrijvers sets out a handbook for what he calls “verminicity” or rat-like behaviour that will allow anyone from the mail room clerk to the CEO (in private or public organizations) to make and maximize opportunities for advancement.

I am tempted to criticize Schrijvers for his failure to provide not so much a justification as even an explanation of why people should or do behave like rats. He doesn't. He just takes it for granted that it is part of the job description of employees in organizations, or at least of managers and workers who wish to protect or, better, to advance their career interests. Of course, he does not condemn people who enjoy their work for its own sake, or who ply the trade of the starving artist, or choose to live in the country. They are just uninteresting to him and he will only shrug and sigh when they get eaten by rats. To probe this deeply, however, is to miss the point. Schrijvers, despite an incongruous epilogue that, I imagine, is either backtracking or a gratuitous peek at our desperate future, is not a philosopher. He must be evaluated by less rigorous standards.

The main practical problem with Schrijvers stems from the fact that he either knows or cares little about real rats (*Rodentia Muridae Rattus*, and all their siblings and cousins). All that is

needed to satisfy him is the revulsion that many people display when rats are mentioned or discovered in the pantry. Machiavelli is a symbol; rats are symbols: Schrijvers takes off from there.

Alas, he does not go far. His catalogue of cunning strategies is mostly just the application of common sense (a characteristic he ascribes to Machiavelli, though he also calls him “immoral” as though that would matter to a rat). Though he describes them as tactics uniquely suited to the sewer, consider the following: according to Schrijvers, one wicked way to get ahead is to look at the rules or, as he calls them, the “formalities.” He details at great and unnecessary length a fight about the ownership and running of a family business. Sides are taken. One looks at the company’s by-laws and the other apparently doesn’t. Guess who prevails? Here’s another: networking. It seems, according to Schrijvers that setting up strategic alliances is a good way to get ahead. I suppose it is, but is this really sordid, slimy behaviour? He gets closer when he talks about how leaking information or fomenting gossip about a rival is sometimes useful and has certainly led to the downfall of many a superior; but, again, this is the stuff of television commercials for hand-held cameras that take embarrassing pictures of the boss at holiday *fêtes*.

To give some supposed *gravitas* to the text, Schrijvers lightly peppers it with quotes from and references to Heraclitus and Dante, Nietzsche and Foucault and, of course, Machiavelli. He also leans heavily on Baltasar Gracià (1601-1658) who was a Spanish Jesuit scholar and satirist. Schrijvers reports that he dabbled in made-to-measure thumb screws (a “modest proposal”); he also set out some distinctly unrattish aphorisms: “A single lie destroys a whole reputation of integrity”; “Aspire rather to be a hero than merely appear one.” No matter, none of this illuminates much; and Nietzsche, about whose attitudes to modern bureaucracies Schrijvers speculates, would surely not be amused. Indeed, if I cared about unethical office politics, I am sure I could find more effective advice in a brief history of Enron, or Ireland, or even tired old Byzantium. What Schrijvers offers is not the arsenal of verminicity but an account of the behaviour of slightly unsympathetic gerbils.

Want to smell a rat? Try C. S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*.

Should you pick up these mouse droppings, do not fail to take the test for verminicity. It consists of thirteen questions and if you score twenty-one or more points, you qualify as a “filthy rat” (the highest, or lowest, kind depending on your point of view). Being good at “interrogating or interviewing” gets you three points. Knowing where you are going and having “aims” gets you two. Even objecting to office politics and wanting to be “open and honest” gets you one. No matter how sweet and straightforward you are, it is impossible to get less than nine points. No matter how I looked at it, I could not figure out how to be anything less (or more) than “clever rat” (over thirteen points). After all, if you got the points mentioned on the three questions above you are almost half-way there and there are still ten questions to go!

On Bullshit is a different matter. It would be a simple task to present a review that said: “To call *On Bullshit* a book is bullshit.”

There would be some truth in that. Originally an essay composed a quarter-century or more ago by a distinguished moral philosopher at Princeton (now Professor Emeritus), it came almost accidentally into print in January, 2005 because of the intervention of the esteemed professor’s editor. The editor had examined this old twenty-five page essay and, as he explained, decided that if they fiddled with page size (10 cm x 15 cm), used wide margins all round and played with font size, they could publish it as a serviceable sixty-seven page hardcover. And so they did.

Arguably, no book except perhaps for the sacred texts of various religions, has sold so many copies on the basis on nothing but its title. In this instance, you *can* tell a book by its tiny cover.

Inside, there are some items of interest. Frankfurt has two or three points to make. He is keen to say that we are surrounded by bullshit (tall tales, dissembling, political spin, advertising, the chronic production of the “bullshit artist”). He offers the opinion that bullshit is more corrosive of civil society than outright lies. By his lights bullshit is false representation but it need not be untrue. It is more a misrepresentation of a person’s project than an attempt to convince the audience of something that the bullshitter knows to be untrue.

For Frankfurt, the essential problem with bullshit is that the bullshitter is quite indifferent to the truth. A liar, in the alternative, knows the truth and wants to convince us of something else. In their own way, liars respect the truth; they merely want us to believe something else. The bullshitter simply doesn’t care. To Frankfurt, bullshit (especially when it comprises almost everything everyone in power and authority says) is more dangerous because it disrespects the truth. I remain unconvinced. I do not think the brain trust in the White House just bullshitted its way into Iraq. And, in any case, there remains the iconic spectre of Goebbels.

Frankfurt is also interested in the language itself. He spends some time discussing various theories of language and relies on authorities such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* to tell us a little about the etymology of the word. He also muses on the quite sensible ideas of American theorist Max Black. This rumination arises from a consideration of Black’s book, *The Prevalence of Humbug* (published about the same time as Frankfurt wrote his original paper). He considers Black’s ideas for a good (perhaps the best) fifteen pages, almost a quarter of the text. It seems he wants to come up with a definition of bullshit that conforms to ordinary usage, but he goes astray.

In an almost statutory reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Frankfurt reprises a story in which Wittgenstein visits a friend who has just had a tonsillectomy. When she says that she feels like a dog that has just been run over, Wittgenstein goes apoplectic and expresses disgust, saying “You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like.” O.K., a slightly exaggerated metaphor, but certainly not something that need upset even a hyper-literalist philosopher, and certainly not something that should occupy over ten pages of the book. Life, to say nothing of this “masterpiece,” is too short. Other honourables are given mention. St. Augustine pops up. So do Ezra Pound and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Interesting company, but only Augustine gets to say much.

I wish Professor Frankfurt well. Whereas Schrijvers is described as an expert on personal development, coaching and learning and is said to have worked as a researcher, trainer, video director, manager and consultant (in short, to have slogged along up to his arm-pits in corporate bullshit), Professor Frankfurt at least put in some years as a (presumably) honest and successful teacher. I know nothing of his economic status, but this little exercise in shoveling bullshit will certainly give him a nice nest-egg (should he need one) for his declining years.

Meanwhile, what about Machiavelli and Hobbes? The times cry out for a restoration of concern for truth and virtue or, at least, a thorough inquiry into lies and villainy. To do so, we could do worse than to re-examine what *really* concerned those two unfortunates. Both sought out the roots of civic virtue. Both had pessimistic thoughts about human nature, but both attempted to think systematically and practically about what would help humanity climb out of its primordial stink. Both cherished civilization and esteemed what Machiavelli called virtù—not quite the same thing as its English doppelgänger, but close enough for these purposes.

To do the job right, however, I would recommend going all the way back to Diogenes of Sinope, not the first Cynic (that honour goes to Antisthenes) but probably the most famous one. Doing so will soon impress upon you the fact that there are two kinds of cynics. One (which I spell with a capital “C”) belongs to a fine tradition that began in ancient Athens and has worked its way through the centuries exemplifying a belief in personal freedom, an indifference to wealth, status and power, a contempt for most social conventions and, in its more pleasant forms (e.g., the philosophy of Crates as expressed in his poem *Pera*) an invigorating blend of poetics, self-reliance, pacifism and some variant on anarcho-socialism. Some reputable theologians have called Jesus a Cynic; I don’t think they were far wrong. Others associate it with Taoism; I don’t think they are far wrong either.

The other cynicism (which I spell with a small “c”) conforms to the ordinary use of the word. Liars, bullshitters, corporate manipulators, office politicians and too many politicians in office are cynics. They are selfish, amoral and eager to do in others before others do them in. They inhabit the world from which Hobbes wanted to extricate us.

Curiously, in our age, both the perpetrators of noxious acts and the people who have been victimized by them and who therefore no longer want to play the game are called cynics. Avaricious bosses and apathetic workers, disingenuous politicians and alienated non-voters are equally called cynical. Perhaps it is time to resuscitate Cynicism. Perhaps if we were to revitalize both Diogenes on the one hand and Machiavelli and Hobbes on the other, and if we were to get over our self-induced disillusionment and become genuinely “realistic,” we would be in a better place to help restore our society and our confidence in it and in ourselves. To do so, however, will take stronger medicine than either Schrijvers or Frankfurt currently provides.

Howard A. Doughty teaches philosophy at Seneca College in King City, Ontario, Canada. He can be reached at howard.doughty@senecac.on.ca.