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# Sniff the Air and Settle In: Bullshit, Rhetorical Listening, and the Copenhagen School's Approach to Despicable Nonsense

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The long history of rhetoric being branded ‘the harlot of the arts’, often denigrated as manipulation or mere ornamentation, is so potent to rhetorical scholars that it has certainly been useful in helping them—I should say ‘us’—to resist treating ‘bullshit’, so called, as mere uninteresting lies. Generally taken to mean, as Harry Frankfurt (2005, 34) says, speech with “(an) indifference to how things really are”, bullshit reminds rhetoricians immediately of the ancient sophists who would construct a winning argument on any side of a question, often for profit (See: Poulakos, 1995, 13-14). Bullshit also likely reminds of just how often contemporary scholars celebrate the sophists’ pragmatic and constructivist impulses, agreeing that arguments should be tailor-made for audiences and that the truth of a case is often relative or unclear (See: Frankfurt 2005, 23). Yet bullshitting also riles the rhetorician because it stands often opposed to good faith deliberation between two parties trying to negotiate and find a solution. Given these intimate resonances with the history of the field—not to mention the sheer amount of public bullshitting by political officials that one encounters today—bullshit requires careful rhetorical consideration.

James Fredal (2011) has recognized just how common bullshitting can be and how important it is that rhetorical scholars think more about it. He goes so far as to sound like he might be bullshitting us when he says that “the analysis of bullshit will

clarify the identifying features of rhetoric” (243). I am not so hopeful about this especially strong assessment, since ‘rhetoric in my view cannot be thought as a discursive production alone nor its “identifying features” containable to a specific situation where “bullshit” reigns. Rhetoric must be thought—for reasons I have described elsewhere (See: Gruber, 2020)—as much more than words; I think of the rhetorical as an ecological coming-together, a happening and a worlding, emplaced and embodied, not to be separated in any case from the suasive powers of things like weather systems, lightbulbs, and gut bacteria. Nevertheless, Fredal’s enthusiasm for elucidating verbal bullshit and seeing it as an exposé of the rhetorical attunes to the rhetorical tradition traditionally focused on speech as itself a social action with motivation and some utility. That is not to rule out the idea that bullshitting may take other forms, such as the gestural or a stage setting. Trump’s twisty faces in debates, for example, often strike me as a form of bullshitting. I equally suspect that some might well see the (in)famous parade with a bible in front of St. John’s Church in Washington D.C. as a bullshit material and performative claim about Trump’s high morality and/or love of Jesus (Douthat, 2020). Anyhow, despite not clearly delineating how bullshit, per se, can be a material expression, Fredal does strike at what rankles most of us about bullshit: the intent of the speaker to trick the listener in some capacity. Fredal says it this way: “a speaker might be (and I would argue, most are) motivated by other factors in addition to a commitment to the truth” (244). Amid the discussion, Fredal recognizes that multiple, well-known ancient philosophers, Plato as prime example, were seriously disturbed by speakers disregarding truth in favour of effectiveness, yet Fredal argues ultimately for not doubling down on a Platonic truth-appearances dichotomy that would condemn bullshitting to eternal hell—thankfully for him and for us. Rather, Fredal argues for the *interactional nature* of bullshit, which is to say that when bullshitting happens, audiences and interests are coming together. Bullshitting happens in a context and for a reason (250-255).

A review of the literature on bullshitting reveals a tendency to focus on the ‘why’ of bullshitting with many scholars getting

caught up in the ‘how bad is bullshitting, really?’ discussion. Few, it seems, have much to say about how rhetors might actually respond—which is where I aim to go in this paper. A few examples will suffice.

Consider Christensen and colleagues’ (2019) work. For them, bullshitting is functional and a means of strategizing. Bullshit works, at least in some cases, to establish authority and the directionality of a speech by delivering what is ‘more or less true’ or likely to be seen as true to an audience (1588). So bullshit is not all bad but, as they say, ‘often accepted—sometimes encouraged—in social interaction’ (1589). Thus, the ‘why?’ of bullshitting comes down to the ‘why?’ of communication; it is a way “to celebrate shared perspectives, reduce uncertainty, learn about the world, maintain relationships, express feelings, pass time, and influence or manipulate” (1590). Christensen and colleagues do not, of course, overlook the way that bullshitters distort and disrespect facts, but they merely point to commonality amongst the functions of communication and the functions of bullshitting to help scholars understand why bullshitting is sometimes overlooked and often (enough) effective. Also important is the way that their depiction keeps us from assuming that a rhetor’s intention when bullshitting is to deceive. That is to say, bullshitting can take on at least two forms: “Bullshit as Deceptive Misrepresentation”, as noted in Frankfurt’s original definition (2005, 6-7), but also “Bullshit as Unclarifiable Unclarity”, per Christensen and colleagues’ viewpoint (1590-1591).

We can find scholars in both camps. Kelly (2014), for example, emphasizes willful misrepresentation. He states:

When we call bullshit, suspect someone is bullshitting, or label someone a bullshitter, we are noting that what appears to us is really an absence, an emptiness, a kind of phoniness in the communication from an agent who knows what his audience is willing to let him get away with and what they are not willing to let him get away with (166).

Heffer (2020), as another example, remains so concerned with “the facts” and an “irresponsible attitude toward truth,” that he develops an elaborate framework for identifying bullshit (i.e., the opposite of truth) through investigations of “word-to-world relationships” and discursive analyses of justifications and qualifications (57-60). In contrast, Phinn (2005) recognizes that:

there is no actual ground-floor agreements amongst all participants on the parameters of honest and ethical banter. The endeavor to detach the false from the true (or the willful exaggeration from the plain spoken) has been a global one, and has had, predictably, a lackluster history of temporary consensus salvaged from the wrecks of previous years’ much-vaunted paradigms (24).

Maes and Schaubroek (2006) say something similar. They note an “evaluative complexity of bullshit” noting that some audiences will see the shit as positive even when realizing the rhetor’s disinterest in precision (3). The rhetor may, instead, be signalling the fun of being bombastic or the ethics of standing in opposition to a hated opponent.

Needless to say, constructing a neat, clean retort to bullshit confronts an elusive criterion for what entails an honest, pure confession and also battles a melodrama of social fancies infused with degrees of sympathy and competing interests. Seen in that light, Fredal is right: rhetoric is what is being produced when bullshit reigns, and the *interactional nature* of bullshit does reveal how rhetoric is not an art independent of social relations and lived realities. The question however remains: how can we respond to steaming piles of bullshit that sticks to the shoes, smells disgusting, and cannot be washed off hearts or minds very easily? There is nothing very clean and neat about bullshit, so if we are to believe Fredal’s emphasis on bullshit being rhetorical, then we must also say that rhetoric as a mode of critique and as an artful practice should be able to respond to it/itself.

Despite the fact that numerous scholars understand bullshit as a rhetorical production or as a communicative act, we do not really get a good answer regarding what to do about bullshitters. We

could, of course, give this pat advice: *be equally as savvy, equally rhetorical*. But we may feel hesitant to do so. Can we recommend being equally as cunning, snide, distracting or disinterested? What can we recommend?

Fredal does not leave us with zero opinions on the matter. He suggests that some scholars might find promise in comedic replays of the bullshit (2011, 251). Treating the bullshit like a joke might work if the matter is able to be conformed into a joking one. But in so many cases, bullshit is about legal infractions, land rights, hospitals, battlefield progress, and other difficult and horrific topics. Overall, in my estimation, Fredal seems largely content to fall back on the old adage that language “is phatic” and not only for composing truth claims, so therefore we can use the rhetorical toolbox to deal with cases of bullshit when we encounter them, in-situ (255-257). As for me, I want a little more. Maes and Schaubroek turn back to logics. They conclude that identifying the “fallacious reasoning” and blatant obscurity of bullshit will probably out the bullshitter, even though they recognize that audiences may not care. So there, we get some hope that the audience will indeed recognize the bullshit as such, but we remain somewhat flummoxed as to how to change an audience’s feelings about it. Christian Kock (2019) takes a similar position on bullshitting, stating that the audience probably does not even believe former US President Donald Trump when he says that Trump Tower has “the best taco bowls” but, rather, that Trump merely wants the American people to see him as a hell of a guy, or the kind of guy that does not actually despise Mexican immigrants because the evidence is, of course, taco bowls (153). In this assessment, bullshitting can be—or often is—another way to communicate an impression, reframe an exterior argument in one’s favour, or build ethos. But the lingering question that sticks to me like shit on the shoe is, of course, how to respond? What to do? If all bullshitting was so banal and non-hurtful as Trump saying that “Trump Tower has the best taco bowls”, then I doubt that anybody would be concerned and writing about it. The problem is that bullshit is often much messier than that.

Jenny Rice (2015), the editor of a special issue in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* on bullshitting, offers a much stronger and yet depressingly dismal assessment regarding what to do. She states that “any attempts to question, engage, or respond to the bullshit’s claims are obstructed”, by which she means *necessarily obstructed* by bullshitters. Her idea is that bullshitters reject upright deliberation and, therefore, will never answer to bullshit nor recognise it as such. Thus, she suggests responding with “tactics that are largely aesthetic (revulsion, disgust, gagging)” (471). Her recommendation, however, derives from the belief that bullshitting is a way to close-off personal or political exposure and to avoid unwanted facts to such an extreme extent that opponents can only make a show of the other’s rhetorical manoeuvre (471).

Foroughi et al (2019) take a different approach. They understand bullshitting to be flatly a form of lying “bolstered by fantastical forms, such as nostalgia or conspiracies” (18); accordingly, they argue that opponents of bullshitters must tackle it by motivating “empowered citizens to get out on the streets and engage in a much-needed social critique to counteract today’s post-truth politics” (17-18). This advice sounds inspiring enough, but it lacks the necessary specificity. It is not really a recommendation for an embedded context nor for a specific kind of rhetor or situation. I read it mostly as a statement serving to build rhetorical solidarity against recent bouts of far-right bullshit. But suggesting that the best response is solidarity with the likeminded folks with good hearts seems to be counter-rhetorical with respect to rhetoric’s call to engage everyone every day, especially with those who see the world differently than we do.

Reviewing this work, I have concluded that more must be said about how to respond to bullshit. If we give up the Aristotelian obsession with universalizing categorization for a moment and try to think more organically about the shit that we see, then whatever bullshit is, we can trust that we will want to respond when we recognise it. And when we do, we must notice how wildly varied bullshit can be. Despite Fredal’s recognition that bullshitting could be a form of light phatic communication including even politeness—we might here imagine the “ugly baby” scenario

(251)—ideas about bullshit in rhetoric still tend to see it as threatening, and scholars emerge mostly disgusted by its stank. I believe that this is why the recommended approaches are thin. What Rice and Foroughi and colleagues suggest with respect to responses is revealing as well because they all seem to imagine bullshitting as *pure shit*. Bullshit does not therefore need be engaged, as the presumption is that bullshit is something outright offensive amid a (mean) rhetor’s carelessness about pitching what is fake. As noted, Fredal, Maes and Schaubroek, and Kock have a more nuanced take, but they do not always seem sure where to go next. I hope to convince the reader that crafting an elaborate Venn diagram of types of bullshit, each with a savvy rhetorical response, will not be the profitable path in-situ. For me, rhetoric happens too suddenly for that, is too located in a context, too creative and responsive to the immediate.

In my view, bullshitting is a creative act of communication having multiple manifestations and endpoints. Accordingly, there must be so many interesting approaches to it. Bullshit is simply not as singular or always as intractable as rhetoricians sometimes seem to believe. And this may be because Rice and others imagine, I think, that they will be arguing *against a rhetor* who spouts bullshit or *against the bullshit itself*. But what the Copenhagen School of Argumentation (CS)—the driving force of this book—recommends is not *arguing against rhetors* but *crafting arguments with and for our own audiences*. In this way, I hope to extend the conversation. I aim not to be very content with recommendations highly ambiguous—*fight bullshit in the streets!*—or singular—*call it out as despicable and make twisty faces of disgust!* Ultimately, in my view, both of those are too disbelieving about what the rhetorical tradition offers and what rhetoric can do.

In what follows, I argue that rhetorical argumentation from a CS point of view suggests a great many possible responses to bullshitting. My presentation here is rooted in the idea that relegating bullshit to the trash bin of the unacceptable right out of hand pretends as if it is not the case that, in the words of George Carlin (2009), “bullshit is rampant... everyone is full of shit”, at

least sometimes, a little bit, say, when explaining why the rent is late or begging for a good deal at the car lot (“Advertising”). Drawing strong lines of separation between good rhetors with worthy arguments, on the one hand, and bullshitting rhetors, on the other, strikes me as too invested in a traditional truth-appearances dichotomy, a way of pretending that utterances are or can be outside of a situation and objectively enrolling ‘the truth’. Putting up one’s nose to bullshit (because it can stink to those who do smell it—nobody denies this!) is a rhetorical performance, certainly, but one that pretends too much that truth and rhetoric are two absolutely separated entities. Most scholars accept as a matter of course that language does not objectively describe an exterior situation, as Phinn (2005) noted, but makes it come alive as *a type* of situation, which is selected and shaped—and involves audiences and what they accept already (See: Lanham, 1993, p. 154-159; Fleming, 1998). The articulated truths, stated claims, and good reasons *construct* the situation, at least alongside an ecology. We can recall Tindale (2017) here when he says that a “narrative rationality” infuses arguments at their base of formulation because we must present our discourse as a story about the known world and make it sound coherent and realistic enough to fit preconceptions (16). Thus, when a bullshitter misrepresents, describes a situation to play to her interests, inflates, aggrandises, solidifies, and touts, she is still a rhetorician, still addressing audiences; a politician’s bullshitting about the state of the Union, greatness of the party, or *huge* personal achievements, for example, never sit outside of an audience’s own broad narrative rationality about the rightness of the underlying values inscribed, even if the details are notably tweaked.

None of this is to say that bullshitters deserve an easy pass for being rhetorical. Likewise, levelling the constructivist playing field does not mean that bullshitters deserve our sympathy. Rather, bullshitting and responding to it, as *rhetorical tactic*, needs greater attention in the field of rhetoric because bullshit itself is part of everyday argumentation just as bullshit is nuanced and often geared precisely to make a claim appear more seductive. To cut to the point: I argue that some—and I suppose many—cases of



bullshitting are “unconcerned with the truth” because they *must* direct attention away from the concrete case and ignore certain facts, even in the face of proof and obviousness, in order to underscore a different stance or value, which is *designed for*, *known by*, or *coming from* the audience/s addressed.

If I am correct, then bullshit comes in many forms probably too numerous to number; it also would manifest within the scope of other rhetorical terminologies, such as false equivalency, *ad hominem*, or hasty generalisation, etc. Some of those would be what Ángel Gascón (2021) calls “argumentative bullshit”, or arguments without concern for the truth of the evidence. Other instances would appear as additional justifications for otherwise evidence-able claims. Yet others would be throw-away bullshit phrases meant as a joke or a hyperbole. However, outside of simply noting that bullshit should be an umbrella term, a core starting point is that bullshit strikes somewhere, even if smelling like utter shit. Fredal (2011) makes a similar statement, noting that bullshit always draws out “*audience sensitivities*” (252, italic in original). I like that phrasing, but it gets us no closer to identifying bullshitting against other rhetorical manoeuvres since, of course, most rhetorical performances mark out or draw out audience sensitivities. And that is precisely the point. Bullshit, to really *be bullshit* and live up to its name, is going to be intent on doing what it needs to do and, thus, be chuffed with its own creative definitional boundary breaking.

Of course, as Fredal argues, bullshit is usually rife with an attitude, arising “from arrogant gestures of disregard” (256), but I also doubt that disregard is the end of the story, since the statement once again presumes self-awareness and intentionality. Indeed, in making the statement, Fredal uses the example of a police officer who dismisses a driver in a pat way to show superiority. For me, that example demonstrates how much ‘bullshitting’ is actually pluralistic and can be a product of tropes of interaction or of underlying power relations not always consciously recognized as a discursive strategy. Indeed, it is a good example of someone (the officer) underscoring a social structure using other words but not necessarily doing anything out of the norm for the job. The

officer says, “*Get that taillight fixed, or else... Have a nice day now.*” Here, Fredal identifies the cop as delivering an un-truth with disregard, since the officer never really wanted the person to “have a nice day”. However, the pat usualness of that phrase should stand out, as should the affective power and social import of what hangs between the lines for audiences. That is to say, the police officer may be hammering out a hierarchical order and hit home doing it—“*Have a nice day now*”—but the fact that the cop said it is not necessarily “arrogant disregard” since any cop may well say that line thirty times per day. More importantly, once the phrase is read from the position of being in the submissive, vulnerable posture of the one being interrogated by the cop, we see that the audience will almost certainly read the statement as some kind of jab: ‘*Your fucking day is ruined— I am in control here.*’ I am not sure that is bullshit. It is not as much “arrogant disregard” as it is an implicit power exercise and warning. That gets me to my point.

Bullshitting, at least sometimes, operates a mode of suggestion that the audience ‘fills in’, and in that respect, bullshit might be an as-yet unrecognized enthymematic expression. Note here that I did not say bullshit is necessarily a way of *making an argument*; the bullshitter might well slip bullshit into any number of thin-lipped lines or squirmy arguments. In the face of this pluralism, what matters more is bullshit’s *suggestive quality*—because this means that we cannot respond to bullshit with shouts of outrage nor concoct any moralistic retort in advance of hearing it. That simply would be putting the cart before the horse. In fact, standardized responses, especially of revulsion in the face of bullshit, would ignore what the audience does—fills in the meaning. We cannot set aside why the audience absolutely hates or loves to hear that (bull)shit.

As an approach or way of thinking about argumentation more generally, CS proves useful when confronting rhetors happy to rattle off lines of bullshit precisely because CS suggests listening, reflecting, and responding to the *anticipated* or *enthymematic component* while thinking from the audience’s point of view. Reflecting on how and why bullshit seduces is one viable path for productive engagement that does not attempt to fight bullshit

with outrage or with more bullshit. On the face of it, CS might not sound very radical, especially to rhetoricians trained in the ‘New Rhetoric’ tradition that takes Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1966) now well-worn call to attend to audiences most seriously. But CS challenges us, I believe, to focus on the action that we want to take and to take the difficult road to doing so: to listen, really listen, to the most despicable, potentially harmful lines of bullshit spouted by the loudest, most unabashed politicians and then step back, pause, and look directly at the audience.

To move forward, I first detail how I understand CS, describing it with four distinguishing characteristics. I then apply CS to a variety of bullshit statements about the Covid-19 pandemic delivered by the Governor of the US State of Florida, Ron DeSantis. The discussion aims to show just how much CS reorients rhetorical scholars toward audiences who consume bullshit from rhetorical opponents. Despite obvious bullshitting in the speech that manifests across various rhetorical manoeuvres, what one hears when listening to Governor DeSantis with the CS lens is *another concern*, one held by the audience and one about emotional experiences and values and not about facts.

In the conclusion, I offer recommendations for rhetoricians who still hold out hope for engaging a big pile of stinky bullshit. And I think that we should have this hope, at the least for the sake of our audiences. But we should champion this hope also because rhetoric is an event, a happening, diverse in its articulations, as Nathan Stormer (2016) tells us, often expressive out from an affective and bodily atmosphere and not stuck in the muck by any necessity. Rhetoric, Stormer says, has a “polythetic ontology”, meaning a flexible, fluid, and multiple Becoming not confined to logical boundaries or even human ones (302-303). The rhetorician approaching bullshit does not approach the words of the bullshitter alone. So much is approached. Once emplaced and engaged, a rhetor adopting the CS point of view might well find that a sensible, slow approach to bullshit is productive, even if it does prove to require a creativity that comes from sniffing the air—and then, despite any instinct to throw up or throw the bullshit away, we must keep our stomach, stay put and respond.

## What is The Copenhagen School of Argumentation?

CS, like all ‘schools’ is going to be varied across those involved—because if we agreed all the time, then we wouldn’t have studies of argumentation or schools of argumentation. My first encounter with CS came as I was tasked with taking up the course on argumentation in 2019, a course that Professor Kock dutifully and by all accounts expertly taught for fifteen years. We sat down over coffee to review the list of readings and the history of the course. Over the next hour and a half, Professor Kock delivered to me personally a lecture on his view of rhetorical argumentation. Despite what the reader may think here, I took this ‘lecture’ to be an honor—because I quickly realized that he was learning and sharing-in his deepest convictions. He had something important to say about rhetoric. He did not rattle off a string of facts nor show his wealth of knowledge on the history of argumentation. Instead, he explained that argumentation as taught in Copenhagen has always responded to everyday concerns; it emphasizes the audience’s local values; thus, it is not taught as a subject about structures or ways to judge formalisms; it is always focused on decisions and on actions. Over the following year or so, I formed a better idea of what CS meant, and I admit that my own conception at this stage is probably influenced by Professor Kock most directly yet peppered with my rhetorical dispositions and background. Despite me bringing something of North America’s material-centricity and rhetorical expansionism into CS, I do think that my orientation to CS resonates with what students in Denmark have been taught, not only by Professor Kock by others represented in this volume as well.

I currently view CS as an approach to argumentation with four basic tenets or shall we say emphases. To my mind, they are as follows:

1. CS emphasizes paying close attention to a specific, situated domain of action. This means that cases are of some definable domain and approaches only work or matter to the extent that they fit the ‘domain’. Now

Professor Kock has elucidated this idea of ‘a domain’ in his book titled, *Deliberative Rhetoric: Arguing About Doing*. There, he states that the domain concerns those who are actually affected by the debate in question within a context, “typically in the civic sphere”, and rhetoricians, accordingly, must think about domains of civic action (2017, 27). I imagine a domain as a kind of circle where the rhetorician finds the ‘who’, ‘when’, and ‘where’ of the ‘who, what, when, where, and how’ quintet.

2. CS remains more concerned with questions about action, or concrete proposals, than with abstracting and trying to formalize the ‘truth’ of a case. This is perhaps the most important of all tenets, tied directly to the previous tenet. Unlike other ‘schools’ of argumentation that follow from analytic philosophy, CS does not think about argumentation as a way necessarily to decide what is true or false, nor does it recommend even trying to craft fully sealed or philosophically valid claims that nobody can oppose—because people, we must admit, can oppose always them regardless. Further, CS does not so much aim to resolve divergent views between parties but to decide next steps. The CS perspective here does not mean that arguments should not be cogent with meaningful and reliable premises nor that matters of truth and falsity do not come into play when debating in a social or political context. Instead, the avoidance of the obsession with truth-guarantees cuts to the core of a rhetorical tradition about specific events as compositions and social phenomena. In Kock’s (2017) words, “argumentation about actions has characteristics that differ significantly from argumentation over the other main type of issues: those concerned with how something ‘is’” (31), and this matters to the extent that no matter how something ‘is’, it is always what collectivities and environments come together to

believe and see at a moment such that they act. Thus, arguing about the ‘is’, should a rhetor ever do such a thing, fits mostly within a framework of ultimately arguing about what we should do.

3. CS also asks rhetors to prioritize and address the actual, lived concerns held by various local stakeholders in-situ. In that sense, CS proponents are not intent to bring in an outside not comprehensible to the audience/s but works out from, and sometimes must work fully within, the ideas and values being heard. Here I am reminded of Fredal’s (2018) work on the enthymeme; specifically, Fredal argues that enthymemes, according to Aristotle’s recommendations, were always using what the audience already knew but also, crucially, making use of the opposing rhetor’s own words to craft a narrative where the opponent is exposed as being deficient or wrong. Fredal gives the example of the lawyer saying that a family’s claim that they refused entry to an official who arrived to confirm a will was ultimately ludicrous because everyone in the jury knows that nobody would call this official except to change a will, and the will would greatly benefit the family (32-34). The enthymematic emerges then at the combination of what the opponent said—‘We called him ourselves just to confirm the will’—and what everyone presumes about the situation, i.e., nobody calls a lawyer to confirm and then refuses entry. Surely, the lawyer actually came to the house because the old man called him right before passing with the intent to change the will. The enthymematic, like CS, works through and within the existing context.
4. As a compliment to the third point above, CS focuses not on ‘how to win’ an argument, per se, but on how to find a way through to a next step, which is understood as a relevant next possible action. ‘Finding a way through’ should be a guiding mantra, something

between a dedication and a challenge but without the presumption of ‘a solution’. By ‘finding a way through’, I highlight any number of needs in a debate, such as: find a way to unstick the talk; find a way to prepare for a next engagement; find a way to identify with the audience; find a way to move forward. I adamantly do not mean ‘to win’. To focus on ‘winning’ is what philosophical argumentation aims to do when logic teaches students to try to design valid, full-proof structures. The problem, of course, is that those are not *fool*-proof just as those who do end up viewing them as missing the point, as empty, or as ludicrous are not always necessarily fools. To me, to focus on ‘winning’ is like focusing on hunger. To focus on ‘finding a way through’ is more like focusing on a building a good diet for one’s self. CS seeks a long-term engagement, always wanting something that will keep the body (politic) going.

Overall, CS is pragmatic argumentation geared to get things done democratically, but it is also kind. That is, the rhetor must be willing to listen to what others are saying no matter what they are saying. The rhetor must only proceed from attention to the specific concerns at hand. Sometimes, these are not vocalized but simmering beneath the surface, appearing at the corners of the mouth, lingering in lines of suggestion and exaggeration. Sometimes, speech contains slurs and silences simultaneously. In that respect, I see clear alignments between how CS hopes to orient students of rhetoric to argumentation and what Krista Ratcliffe’s (2005) calls “rhetorical listening,” namely, “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” (17, italics in original). The two key words there are ‘choose’ and ‘any’, meaning that a rhetor consciously stops and listens for values and positions as well as for commonalities, identifications, and connections, especially from those most foreign, reviled, and difficult. To my mind, CS takes seriously the closeness and the attentiveness that rhetorical listening advocates.

CS then then tries to find a way forward without trying to erase the other's differences or to dominate everything. CS tries to infuse this ethos into all aspects of teaching argumentation, and that, of course, includes listening and responding in kind to bullshit. To separate bullshit as not worthy of response is to undermine our very reasons for studying rhetoric and to appear self-contradictory insofar as a rhetorical pedagogy is prototypically founded on the democratic call to engage difference, not to disregard it when we decide it is *just 'bullshit'*. The democratic direction aims to give more voice to all, not to silence those who are doing (apparently well) what communication itself does (Christensen et al., 2019, 1590) while seeking also to discover next best actions, not dominating the course of those actions. We cannot avoid engagement with what undoubtedly resonates with some if it so riles others.

### **Case Study: Bullshitting Covid-19**

Given bullshit's variety of forms—blow-off phrases, snipes, false promises, exaggerations, self-serving generalizations and more—nobody really can be surprised to hear public figures bullshitting about even the most palpable, evidently real phenomena. In recent times, I am thinking of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a global health crisis responsible for near five and a half million deaths at the time of writing this chapter (See: "Covid-19"), there is nothing funny about bullshit regarding Covid's effects, spread, or outcomes. In such cases, a rhetor might well find it irresistibly compelling to take up Rice's suggestion to respond to such bullshit using "tactics that are largely aesthetic (revulsion, disgust, gagging)" (471). That would be understandable. In fact, I aim to briefly examine claims about the pandemic here because I want to examine a case that leads rhetors to engage stank smelling, stomach-churning bullshit. In that respect, bullshitting about the pandemic for political gain raises an especially tough challenge to CS and its orientation. How can CS not argue about the truth, and how can it stay so focused



on the next best action for a community? How can CS resist trying to ‘win’ the argument? How can CS listen, no matter what, to find a way through to lasting engagements—with bullshitters? The reader will wonder if CS can be recommended. Indeed, CS sounds nice but only when applied to the easier topics, say, differences of opinion about tax laws. But even there, it risks sounding naive or too generous.

Importantly, CS does not ignore ethics nor necessarily dismiss dangerous lies just because it focuses on listening and on crafting arguments for actions. CS offers another approach, another consideration in the broader context. CS aims to give a response in every case and to lead to more than cycles of opposition and outrage. If CS slows down the process of argumentation, makes rhetors more prone to listen between the lines for values and hidden suggestions, then perhaps it helps to mitigate divisive retorts or responses that are so easily construed by lovers of bullshit as hurtful or vicious. But CS does, I admit, take patience and a certain calm. It takes a belief in the audience—at least some part of it—that they do display values and commonalities that can bridge a distance and ultimately realign a conversation maligned with bullshit.

To my mind, the US Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, provides an interesting example of how CS might help rhetors to engage the most political, most ridiculous sounding, yet potentially dangerous bullshitting. Specifically, I examine DeSantis’ opposition to a ‘mask mandate’ in Florida schools, and I aim to articulate why some of his stated reasons are good candidates for bullshit. I then pivot to discuss CS and explore how a rhetor adopting the CS approach might invent means to respond.

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Between July and August of 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis held numerous public forums and press conferences decrying regulations regarding face masks and rejecting the efforts of President Joe Biden’s administration to install restrictions designed to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the public school system. As a result, DeSantis became a prominent figure

and flashpoint. His often strident opposition and public lambasting of President Biden's recommendations follows stylistically, at least, from former President Donald Trump's general political playbook (See: Gankarski, 2021; Skoneki, 2021). Ultimately, I argue that DeSantis' specific rhetorical responses against the mask mandates at that time offers a good example of bullshitting. This is not to say that everything he said in those sessions was bullshit. Often, bullshitting slips in like butter to make other claims taste more delicious. However, to see why DeSantis' reasons for not requiring mask mandates have entailed at least a little bullshit, it is important to detail his reasons and to note that they are not reliant on mask wearing studies or on scientific claims about Covid-19 or how it can be mitigated. The reasons he offers are instead 1) exaggerative of the trouble that masks cause and 2) often embedded within a story that reframes the conversation to be about a federal government that intentionally imports migrants who spread the virus and cause infection rates—despite the ridiculous falsity of a claim that the government actually 'imports' migrants or that the migrants are the ones responsible for spreading Covid-19; further, DeSantis argues that mask mandates over-step parental rights, ignoring other well-known school-related regulatory requirements in Florida that bear on the question of individual freedom and parents' choice to a much greater extent. Noticing these slips and dismissals helps to bring the bullshit to the surface as such.

Using quotes from DeSantis' own press conference, I hope to accurately summarize his rhetorical manoeuvres, but I encourage the reader to watch the press conferences as well. What is important as far as CS is concerned is that I try to hear him even though he bullshits, which means that I can point out his logical fallacies and dismissals but still make an effort to understand more basically what he is saying and to read between the lines; I am looking for the *enthymematic or anticipated arguments* that help the embedded bullshit appear to local Florida audiences to be relevant and appealing. It may help that I am from Florida, went to high school there, and keep friendships there, including with people who interact on a regular basis with Governor DeSantis.

However, I do not think that my familiarity with the domain of situated action is special with respect to CS as an approach, since CS presumes that the rhetor knows or can get to know the specific civic domain and pay close attention to it. Ultimately, I hope to show that rhetors can think about CS and then more generally invent ways to respond to bullshit, appealing to the audiences in the situated case and crucially not focusing on the bullshit but on what the bullshit means to those who are enticed by its production.

With respect to the specific bullshit around mask mandates: Governor DeSantis first promotes the idea that state-wide mask mandates should be rejected because the federal government and Joe Biden in particular is ‘importing more virus’ by allowing migrants to cross the US-Mexico border. This is DeSantis’ first point in an August 4th press conference where he responds to President Biden’s frustration with the State of Florida’s lack of action on the issue. In DeSantis’ words:

People are pouring through, not only are they letting them through, they’re then farming them out all across our communities across this country, putting them on planes, putting them on buses... so he’s [Biden] facilitating— who knows what variants are out there—But I can tell you, whatever variants there are across the world, they’re coming across that southern border. (“DeSantis”, Aug 4, 2021, 0:30-0:38 sec)

Although one might presume that this fact would therefore certainly mean that people in the state of Florida should be required to wear masks, it is used instead as evidence that any covid mandates are not going work. In essence, DeSantis argues that the expansion of a harmful virus is the migrants’ and the federal government’s faults. Given DeSantis’ own position against masks, the comment seems to offer a ‘might as well not try anything’ attitude in the face of a federal government painted as conspiratorially and strategically shipping migrants around the country. From a perspective in argumentation studies, raising the topic of migrants and the US southern border is a distraction to a separate argument about mandating state measures to control Covid’s spread or not. Bringing migrants into the discussion

effectively distracts, and it also demonizes the migrants while functioning to entrench the views of those who already despise migrants. The reader can note that the subject in DeSantis' sentences is pointedly the 'migrants' with repeated emphasis on "letting them through... them... them"; the focus is not on 'migration' as a policy, much less on masks, or even more specifically, masks in schools.

Second, DeSantis tends to argue concurrently that 1) kids suffer when they wear masks and 2) that the federal government forcing masks is a kind of suffering, presumably a suffocation. These dual ideas—suffering and suffocation—may get conceptually overlaid onto each other insofar as it is difficult to know what kind of 'suffering' DeSantis is referring to in his press conferences. Since he never details the type or nature of the suffering, the audience is left to fill it in, and one can only imagine a child that cannot breathe. DeSantis says, "His [Biden's] solution is that he wants to force *kindergarteners* to wear masks in school" ("DeSantis", Aug 4, 1:05-1:10) with the implication being that the idea is absolutely outrageous and sad. A few days earlier, he stated, "I know they're [lawmakers] interested in coming-in even in a special session to be able to provide protections for parents and kids who just want to breathe freely and don't want to be suffering under these masks" ("Ron", July 29, 0:35-0:42). The focus on kindergarteners here, as opposed to high school students, heightens the feeling of undue 'suffering' and victimisation. Although it is fair for the government to consider suffering amid any legislation, the idea that kids 'suffer under these masks' borders on the ludicrous if suffering, as a term, is to mean more than feeling uncomfortable or being inconvenienced. He offers no evidence of suffering and delivers the line as if it is obvious; my guess is that this happens not because it is actually obvious to everyone but rather because the line allows audiences to fill-in the gap with their own frustrations and troubles with respect to kids during covid times. Indeed, what probably does not sound ludicrous to the American sensibility amongst Republican supporters is the idea that government should not require much of anything of citizens, whether they live or die, fall into abject poverty or become

billionaires—it's up to them. That may be over-stating it, but it is fair to say that once any restriction—whether for the sake of public health or not—becomes framed as 'a mandate', then DeSantis and the Republican Party likely already secured the upper hand in a debate for Republican hearts and minds; 'suffering' in this context can therefore become rhetorically admissible, even sensible, as an emotional descriptor in the face of top-down mandates. 'Suffering', or masks by association and default, becomes a synecdoche for Big Government Evils.

DeSantis then argues that parents should be the only ones to decide if their individual child should wear a mask in school. Positioning himself directly opposed to President Biden—and presumably thereby staging his own Presidential run in 2024—DeSantis states, "He [Biden] doesn't believe the parents should have a say in that. He thinks that should be a decision for the government. Well, I can tell you in Florida, the parents are going to be the ones in charge of that decision" ("DeSantis", Aug 4, 1:10-1:20). Just as it sounds silly that kids suffer under masks, it also seems unrealistic to suggest that the parents know when a virus is going to actually be dangerous for others or know how to contain such a virus. In like manner, given that children in Florida must have multiple vaccines to attend school at all—with the government even providing 'school shots' info-sheet for parents on shots ("School Shots")—the idea that a simple mask would be an unacceptable suffering or a restriction on parental freedom sounds a lot like bullshit. In addition, when realizing that kids in public schools in Florida cannot wear 'vulgar' t-shirts, cannot alter their clothing, must cover their chests from "armpit to armpit", cannot have skirts too high above their knees, and all of the parents must follow "state grooming guidelines", then DeSantis standing so strongly and emotionally against masks looks more and more like bullshitting ("OCPS"). Those other clothing rules and restrictions, one might also note, are specifically set as "promotions of health and safety" and intended to protect others, yet masks worn in school during a global pandemic is framed as an unacceptable, outrageous form of suffering ("OCPS").

Fourth and finally, DeSantis argues that there is no good scientific evidence for the effectiveness of masks. Yet, there is quite a lot of data on masks from the CDC and on Covid-19 infection numbers in states that required masks versus those that did not when accounting for adherence rates and time, leading anyone reviewing the data to immediately recognize the bullshit (See: “Science Brief”; Fischer et al. 2021). Nevertheless, amid the discussion, DeSantis tries to turn the table on Biden, saying, “He [Biden] rejects science because he denies the fact that people that recover from Covid have long-lasting immunity. And that’s been proven time and time again and the data is very clear” (Aug 4, 2:12-2:20). Again, a distraction fallacy is evident at this point, as the idea of a mask mandate in schools—which is at the center of this controversy between DeSantis and Biden—is designed to avoid a situation where the government forces everyone to recover from Covid-19 with hopes of achieving what DeSantis describes as “long-lasting immunity”. It is likely also self-evident to the reader here that “long-lasting immunity” can fall under question, as vaccination offers “higher, more robust, and more consistent level of immunity” (Sun and Achenbach, 2021) while the University of Nebraska researchers in their Covid-19 summary report just simply say, “The data is clear. Natural immunity is not better... More than a third of COVID-19 infections result in zero protective antibodies” (“Covid natural”). If cutting through the bullshit or avoiding any bull at all, then one might rather have expected DeSantis to say something more like this: “For those who survive Covid infection and can achieve a natural immunity, some will have a long-lasting form, but it likely won’t be as reliable as the immunity that vaccinated people have.”

DeSantis then closes the press conference by saying, “So I think the question is: we can either have a free society or we can have a biomedical security state. And I can tell ya’, Florida, we’re a free state... If you’re trying to deny kids a proper in-person education, then I am standing in your way” (“DeSantis”, Aug 4, 2021, 3:00-3:10). Of course, the question for Biden was how to keep schools open in Covid times so that kids could, in fact, get a “proper in-person education” and was never about “denying kids”

an education. The bullshit here is thick. The bullshitter bluffs his way into the rhetorical high ground. And the audience cheers and nods along.

## **Upon Hearing So Much Bullshit: Recommendations for Rhetoricians**

One perennial difficulty in thinking through bullshit is the way that it pops up, often quickly, embedded in a longer discourse, snappy, a confident-seeming way of adding a little faux solidity to a broader case. A second difficulty follows. The rhetor who hopes to respond may feel a need to be certain that the bullshitter, as Frankfurt says, has “(an) indifference to how things really are”. Knowing the extent to which DeSantis, for example, has an “indifference” might weigh on a response yet seems to vary across statements. In the case of the August 4th press conference, what one hears first are distractions paired with exaggerations. We hear about migrants and then about suffering kids. We then hear some half-truths, such as the “long-lasting immunity” line, followed by lie-injected reframing, such as when DeSantis says that Biden is “trying to keep kids from getting a proper in-person education”. What is a rhetor hoping for honest deliberation on the reasons for the precise question of requiring masks or not in schools supposed to do?

The above line keeps a focus. The question is not: what is a rhetor supposed to do to combat all that bullshit? For that, one would need to catch the bullshit in action, but bullshit is fast and slippery, like a wet ball (of poo) flying through the air. Like the ball, one might miss it as it flies past or just get hit in the face. So the question, from the CS perspective, remains much more focused: how is the rhetor to respond, not to the shit, but to the case circumstances and the audience’s feelings about those circumstances?

In my view, CS challenges us, as a first order, to think through what the bullshit implies about how local people see the case and what they are feeling when confronted with bombast and

bluster of a dishonest sort. The rhetor need not spend much time formally categorizing the bullshit to get a sense of where the audience finds it appealing. The rhetor standing opposed usually hears the audience's applause, stands in the midst of the action and notes the stresses in the bullshitter's lines—*The Government*, *Kindergarteners*, and *Suffering*.

Rhetorical listening proves useful here. One of Ratcliffe's (2005) core ideas is that we can miss what others different from us are really saying when we listen only with ears to agree or not and think always in advance of their speech about the many ways to reinscribe our own position. Ratcliffe challenges us to listen "for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (25). The word "excess" resonates. In some ways, bullshit is always an excess and a type that we find particularly disgusting. But when we stop to think of our own self as embodying "the dominant logic", then we better understand the point as Ratcliffe says, "the unacceptable excess [is] being exiled from the dominant logic" (24). And in a bullshitting case, it certainly should be exiled, one might think, right? Bullshit deserves exile, doesn't it? Well, from my point of view and for CS, the excess cannot only be about the perceived truth of a case but also about an excess spanning a diverse and embodied rhetoric. In other words, CS as an approach follows Ratcliffe's lead by implying a need for inward reflection, a space to turn around and ask ourselves about bodies' internal actions and ruminations: what are we exiling that makes such rank bullshit sound disgusting to us but like delicious dessert to others?

Reviewing DeSantis' statements, which I have unambiguously detailed as bullshit, I can still come back more attuned to his audiences once turning the inquiry back onto bodies and embodied feelings. I can, for example, consider how the vocal stress that DeSantis uses on the word *Kindergarteners* points toward parents' care for and very present worries about their kids in this pandemic time. The most subtle micro-expression on a kid's face can be felt in the gut of parents. Underscoring the smallest and most vulnerable kids, *kindergarteners*, puts an emphasis on frailty; the focus on the small versus the big helps, on the one hand, to pave the audience's enthymematic action, which is to say that



the ‘Big Government’ concept can more easily be filled-in by the Republican audience as an evil nemesis in greater contrast when the little kids are situated as the victims of the proposed policy. On the other hand, the focus on the smallest-as-victims also helps to reach parents obsessed with their child’s discomfort and, of course, with their own in/sanity as the children are locked down at home with them while they all try to work online. The kids, we also need to remember, do not often understand what is happening to them and to their parents. Many do not know why they must wear a mask. It must be difficult for them to keep it on, not only because they are young, but also because it has not previously been acceptable in American culture to wear one; mask wearing is, in fact, read as a sign of weakness or of fear unacceptable to display in public, more often we can say for American men. As Alisha Haridasani Gupta (2020) says, “From the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an aversion to basic common-sense protections—wearing masks, observing social distancing and embracing government-imposed lockdowns—that has done a poor job at concealing its entwinement with male insecurity” (para 10). Indeed, there is a masculinity performance around the refusal of the mask; watching Trump and DeSantis, much less our own friends and family members, can we believe otherwise? Can we doubt that kids see this too or, at least, feel the awkwardness? In addition, when the parents talk so much about the trouble of wearing masks and the anxiety that the sickness raises, they themselves waver back and forth between a paralyzing fear of illness and the need for a catharsis of free living; the kids pick up the signal and might well be expected to be seriously confused.

All of this is cause for self-reflection. If I am sometimes lost on a wild emotional rollercoaster over the course of the pandemic, how much more are they? And if I pause and think back to being young and how strikingly emotional it was for any teacher at school to yell at me when I was five or ten years old, I can start to imagine how kids whose masks slip off their faces or break must feel when they are quickly pulled aside and chided—for what? ‘What did I do’, they must think to themselves. My dominant logic that kids are not suffering overlooks something about those kids’

experiences just as it fails to give good attention to the parents and their emotional lives—and they are the audience members.

Working through these connections and internal dialogues provides the means for a response. Indeed, such ruminations are the start of a response, in this case one addressing what bullshit about kids and masks is tapping into. It's a male insecurity born of cultural identities tied to America's history of promoting self-reliance and individual decision-making; it's an exploitation of well-meaning parental feelings, a kind of frustration with uncertainty and a worry about developmental damage being done to children who, we might tend to think, should always feel unburdened by nature and by life. Listening to DeSantis, we can hear bullshit but, at the same time, we can hear a call to present fears about harsh immediacies; we can then articulate what we hear in a kind and passionate way, just as we notice how bullshit acts as a reaction to the ways that the world does not suddenly align with what one believes about themselves, the nation, the manner of how things *should be*.

Bullshitting, in this case in Florida, may well be an effort at recuperation and reclaiming, a rhetoric operating with a conservative function, namely, to reinstate values and simultaneously blame the shift in a global reality on an opponent that the audience already dislikes. When everything suddenly cannot be free from government control and freedom of movement cannot be unimpeded, DeSantis seems to want his audience to believe that he can resuscitate their values. What results is a lot of hot air being blown around but also, crucially, a lot of warm, comforting air to the families that can't catch a breath under those fucking masks.

Again, for me, CS does not ask us to respond to the bullshit itself; it asks that we, as rhetors, understand it better and then pivot toward honest questions about why audiences prefer certain frames and actions at the heart of the deliberation. Once one articulates shared compassion and gets a better sense of why the opposition feels the need to bullshit or feels that bullshitting is in its interests, then rhetoric's ways and means are allowed to emerge. Rhetorical training, I suspect, will pave the rest of the way. But

it starts with the connection. Whether a rhetor subsequently tells the audience what bullshitters like DeSantis should have said or comically replays what he did say or insists on the overlooked benefits of a different policy and how it, too, is compassionate and attuned to them, the rhetorical manoeuvre must leave audiences stunned by how well the rhetor hears their underlying concerns. It must not leave the audience wondering about the distance between them and the rhetor.

At this point, perhaps the reader is wondering: yes, but will a CS motivated rhetorician actually emerge victorious? Bullshitters bullshit because they win. It is a bullying, a form of domination. And here you are suggesting the opposite?

The obsession with winning in the face of bullshitting might well grow more intense than usual. Recognizing bullshit does seem to bolster the inner desire for justice, and winning the argument might then secure a sense that truth really does prevail. Everything will be okay. However, rhetorical argumentation provides no assurances. No rhetor can ever guarantee that her views will be adopted. The domain of rhetoric is not so clean and neat as to instigate the belief that the perfectly valid claim, nor the moral or ethical one, will always win the day. We can hope that our arguments do succeed in the end, but argumentation was always messier than do X and win the vote.

Taking Professor Kock at his word, rhetorical training is designed for the polis, which means for people's collective decision-making. Even the simplest of questions—such as deciding whether or not a city will be better off with or without an underground sewer system—is not properly a question of truth when before the polis. For the man who gets sick from rats climbing through the sewer—as millions did in Europe's fourteenth century plague—the sewer system was certainly not better, despite an obvious 'truth' to the contrary. After the plague, the family of the man may well go into the streets and cry and shout, proclaiming that they were told the sewer would improve their lives. Were they better off in some ways, perhaps yes, but is the man dead, yes. Now what? People must come together and argue about next steps. In the course of this example, of course,

there are questions of truth. The man is dead; the rats infected the man, and so on. But the argument in the polis is not about whether the man is dead, and the argument about whether or not the rats are responsible is not itself free from public reason or rejection; it, too, will hinge on the locally suitable and the admissible evidence, only then to lead once more to a question about what to do next. In brief, CS suggests not that truth does not matter but that thinking about action helps to orient the rhetorician to the domain of action—and from there, the argument becomes how a certain proposal ties to interests and values.

In different words, keeping the focus on the audience is by far the best approach to bullshitting when the rhetor is tasked with a response—since rhetors answer audiences, not abstractions. A rhetor adopting this approach finds the concern and applies it to the opposite suggestion for action. The rhetor in the process does not necessarily let the bullshitter get away with the bullshit. At any point, a rhetor might say flatly that the opposition is lying and might even roll the eyes when hearing the outrageous, but the two questions should always be: will the audience respond to this technique, and will I (as rhetor) successfully move through the bullshit to get at the question at hand, a question almost certainly about action and one whose decision must pass through the audiences' value alignments and embodiments?

The CS approach has benefits reaching beyond an 'aesthetic' show of disgust with bullshitting. Principally, CS does not automatically assume bullshit is singularly unethical or unanswerable because it is one way to bolster a position or block an opposition. CS also does not address the bullshit except through discovering new attunements to the audience's own views and preconceptions, taking some of the power of the bullshit away. Further, CS invests in what Ratcliffe (2005) calls "rhetorical listening," following a mode of argumentation that takes the form of a reply to underlying concerns, staying true to the 'new rhetoric' tradition of audience attention while understanding just how much the emotional life participates in thinking. And finally, CS fits with the structure of a democratic forum, namely, the pursuit of joint decision-making.

If CS is seen as lacking value when confronting bullshit, then perhaps the rhetor is totally outraged and maybe for good reason. But when the bullshit is piled there by an opposition to try to ensure the success of a party or a policy, then I am not convinced that outrage as a response will move audiences who love that (bull)shit over to another table. They are too busy eating up what they got and clinging to what they hold dear. We cannot forget: bullshit smells good to those who consume it. We must, therefore, take some time to listen, anticipate, and make our way through its implications, as ugly as it can sound, as painful as it may be. That is the very nature of argumentation. We should expect argumentation to be this way. It is an experience of upheaval as much as of intimacy.

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