

# Scholarly Pornography

by Irving Louis Horowitz

*"[T]he most heroic sentiments will lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas will drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by inelegant applications."*

— Samuel Johnson

## Mindf--king: A Critique of Mental Manipulation

by Colin McGinn

Stocksfield, U.K.: Acumen Publishing Ltd.; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; 76 pp., \$12.95

## On Bullsh-t

by Harry G. Frankfurt

Princeton: Princeton University Press; 80 pp., \$9.98



In January 2005, one of the premier scholarly publishers in the English language, Princeton University Press, published an 80-page pamphlet in book form called *On Bullsh-t*, by a well-respected philosopher, Harry G. Frankfurt, who had written widely on basic themes in epistemology. The titles of his previous works indicate the subject matter: *The Reasons of Love*, *The Importance of What We Care About*, and

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Melanie Anderson

*On Truth*. The concerns addressed range far and wide in the history of philosophy, from Augustine to Wittgenstein, and do so with intelligence and appreciation.

*On Bullsh-t* received a wide variety of critical responses in reputable publications, ranging from "defining the essence of postindustrial society" (Scott McLemee) to "the humor and the naughtiness lie in the contrast between the highfalutin' and the indelicate" (Roger Kimball). For one critic the effort was a metaphor for the presidency of George W. Bush: "We are drowning in bullsh-t. I mean the Bush administration has practically made it a Cabinet position" (Dan Neill). It would take a strong will to make the counterclaim that we are not wallowing in

humbug, or that our life and times are exempt from the history of hubris.

After 175 reviews of this monograph, the inevitable happened. One year later, Graham Edwards produced *The Business of Bullsh-t*, and Nick Webb offered up *The Dictionary of Bullsh-t*. Alas, although Professor Frankfurt's extended essay is a proper attempt to distinguish academic practice from professional principle, it ends up discarding the latter by casting a wide net of moral suspicion on the current status of learning as a whole.

What brought back such recollections of this recent success in university-press publishing is less Professor Frankfurt's monograph than the inevitable effort at imitation, not so much of the contents of that volume as the shock value of obscene language as a measure of the courage of the cowardly. We now have a new volume of philosophical discourse for the learned class, entitled *Mindf--king*, which attempts to extend the boundaries of epistemology, or at least to demonstrate that the field is not the preserve of ancients and fossils, but can be practiced with ease by campus-dwelling freshmen. This work, by another professor of philosophy, Colin McGinn at the University of Miami, was first published by Acumen, a small house in the United Kingdom, then issued in Canada by McGill-Queen's University Press,

a distinguished university press in its own right, and finally distributed in the United States by an equally venerable house, Cornell University Press.

This mimetic work seeks to investigate and clarify “modern techniques of thought control.” To his credit, Professor McGinn acknowledges that “it was Harry Frankfurt’s groundbreaking discussion of bullsh-t that promoted me to undertake a similar enquiry into a related (but distinct) concept: the concept of mindf- -king.” He assembles the conceptual components of this most complex of concepts: trust, deception, emotion, manipulation, false belief, and vulnerability. And as a display of one-upmanship, philosophy itself is seen as

a type of mindf- -k. A vast litany of psychological characteristics, from jealousy, disorientation, insecurity, and prejudices, are adduced as an aid in this mindf- -k. The result is delusion and even insanity.

So this book can be viewed as a protection against insanity. Again, in 76 pages, with the aid of a keen apparatus drawn from the history of philosophy, we are urged to use expletives as therapy.

The promotional effort for this work offers a plain guide to the perplexed.

Being surrounded by bullsh-t is one thing. Having your mind f- -ked is quite another. The former is irritating, but the latter is violating and intrusive, unless you give your consent. If someone manipulates your thoughts and emotions, messing with your head, you naturally feel resentment: he or she has distorted your perceptions, disturbed your feelings, maybe even usurped your self. Mindf- -king is a prevalent aspect of contemporary culture and the agent can range from an individual to a whole state, from personal mind games to wholesale propaganda.

Just where the line is to be drawn between education and manipulation

remains the mystery in this appeal to natural goodness and perfection. But this is a secondary concern that Professor McGinn can work out more directly with Professor Frankfurt. Indeed, for all I know, he may well have done so already.

The use of coarse language introduces serious issues in ethical theory, which is certainly a strong part of the history of philosophy. It also expands the limits of taste for presumably the most elevated segment of publishing. Such large questions merit attention: Does criticism of language condemn the critic to being an old fogey or, worse, an old fart? Does the use of such expletives add to our knowledge of the subject matter of the field, or aid in studying Kant or Wittgenstein? Are we better able to avoid “mental manipulation” by employing such expletives? Or put in reverse order, does the removal or censorship of such “curse words” detract in any way from the subject matter at hand? And finally, do the university presses publishing these works extend such tough street rhetoric to include criticism of all the popular myths and ideologies of the time, or is a line drawn ruling issues of race, sex, and class off limits? More pointedly, does the new freedom in expletives open up new vistas of analysis, or does it effectively seal off such areas in favor of cheap linguistic thrills? It comes to pass that large issues of liberty and license are very much part of drawing the line either between or after bullsh-t and mindf- -king.

I will leave it to the professional philosopher to respond to these multifaceted queries and will simply address the issue of the appropriateness of these volumes for university-press publishers. If these books are part of the discourse on basic issues in the history and status of philosophy, will the language used in the titles promote the larger concerns of civil discourse? If this unique community of roughly 100 publishers in North America fails to address this question, then it seems perfectly within the bounds of good judgment to question

whether the university press will stand for anything distinct from any other segment of the publishing community. Beyond that, what is the connection between the university press and the university community as a whole? Is the latter simply an extension of the social nexus, without special norms or responsibilities?

More pointedly, if university presses, in their perfectly reasonable desire to survive and expand their sphere of influence, both within the field of higher learning and in the mass society, must resort to pornographic language, pure and simple, to sell their wares, what distinguishes them from commercial presses? It is hardly a secret that the margins of profitability in university-press publishing are so narrow that they often require subventions from general university funds. Even the mere ten percent of university presses that are relatively sound in fiscal terms are expected to contribute to the general welfare of the universities in which they coexist—or at least not draw from general funds.

The problem is not only the implications of efforts to sell to a market through the use of shocking terms, but the potential impact on core curricula. Will professors be advised to juice up their course offerings? Are we to suggest that, instead of calling a course topic “sexual behavior,” we substitute the terms “f- -king interaction?” More pointedly, is the classroom to become a vehicle for self-examination or just plain exhibitionism and experimentation? By the same token, if a student is to find himself in disagreement with the professor, is the proper comment, “Sir, you are a bullsh-tter” (to the roars of the fellow students), or “Are you a mindf- -ker?” Does such language become the end-all and be-all of discursive behavior among students and teachers, or, for that matter, teachers and administrators?

I suspect that the uses of such rhetoric, far from having a liberating impact, in fact serve to curb dissent and discussion of serious issues. Those who carry weapons of grading or sheer physical intimidation, hardly an unknown property in college and university life,

will be granted a license to employ precisely the instrument of emotivism, in general, and cursing, in particular, as a means to quiet dissent or constrain opposition. The use of such rhetoric forecloses discussion and rarely opens new avenues of thought. The history of thought, whether of radical, liberal, or conservative ideas, is conducted in a common linguistic discourse, and according to the rules of civil conduct, precisely in order to bridge the gap between ideas and to reach out to people in non-intrusive, non-menacing ways.

The problem in the metaphysical assumption that profanity is a source of liberation inheres in the logical equation of language and higher learning. There is not a shred of evidence to indicate that the unrestrained use of taboo words (rightly or wrongly imposed by the larger society on the individual at a particular moment in time) is an indicator of a person superior in intellect or, still less, a person capable of ethical conduct conducive to a complex society. Indeed, I am not sure that such a claim could be made even for simple societies.

The extent to which the uninhibited use of certain terms is an advantage or a disadvantage to a community or a society is determined by its explanatory powers, its ability to resolve empirical or ethical issues one must cope with on a daily basis. It might well be argued that such terms as *bullsh-t* and *mindf-king* are so widely employed to cover a range of emotions and preferences that this search for meaning, for philosophy itself, is deadened—often permanently so. One derives the meaning of those who use such language by ignoring the curse words and seeking answers in the remaining part of the sentence or the emotive contents of the comment.

The emotive impact of terms like *bullsh-t* and *mindf-k* has the power of weapons behind them, not the weapon of power, as both Professors Frankfurt and McGinn doubtless intended. I submit that behind the courage of low-level quotidian slang is high-level intellectual reticence, incapacity, or at least unwillingness to come to terms with fundamental issues of personal psychology and public philosophy in

ways that promote the advancement of civilization as such. University presses are under competing and contradictory pressures: They are set up as paragons of quality (if not of virtue), but then demands are placed upon them to show a surplus or, more specifically, provide a profit to the university at large. In a sense, this is a new phase in the struggle first observed by Charles Homer Haskins, in *The Rise of Universities*, between the medieval inheritance and the commercial realities of modern university life.

Particularly questionable is what, if any, response can be offered to name-calling of this sort for the purpose of distinguishing bombastic carrying-on and the place of legitimate authority. This is especially the case when it comes to universities that derive their very sustenance, commercial as well as intellectual, by presuming a difference between those who know and teach and those who do not know and learn. Appeals to evidence, experience, and empirical information are grounded in more than a primitive positivist creed that to state a preference is simply to put forth a bias. Wittgenstein has often (and wrongly) been charged with offering a solipsist agenda for the denial of a real world apart from the language that expresses its contours. These jeremiads offered by Frankfurt and McGinn only serve to rekindle a mid-20th-century argument that analytic philosophy and scientific method have happily moved beyond.

University presses that promote such titles in search of meaning would be well advised to take seriously the risk factor in becoming successful commercial-publishing agents. They may actually wake up one day to find themselves having attained fiscal success in the process of losing the aim and intent of scholarly publishing as such. When the shock value of these titles wears off, through excessive usage if not in revulsion—and that will be soon enough—the world of higher learning will be left to wander about in the lower depths, with no light in sight. As the nonacademic underworld often declares, money talks, nobody walks. ◊

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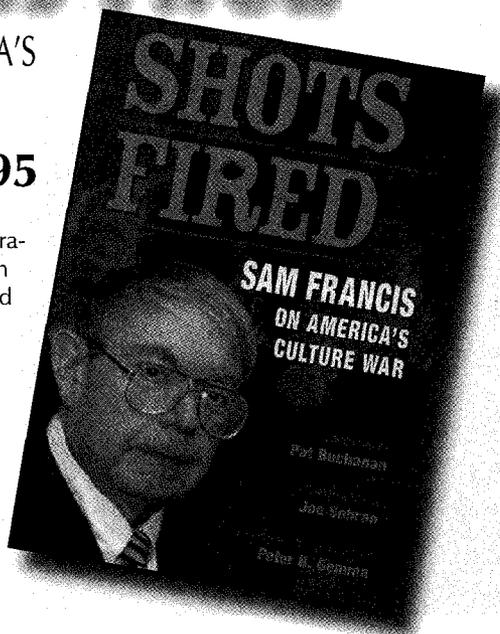
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# St. Elmo's Pay

by Michael J. Ard

## Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World

by Roger Crowley  
New York: Random House;  
368 pp., \$30.00



When news of Lepanto arrived in Rome, the Pope exclaimed, "Now Lord, you can take your servant, for my eyes have seen your salvation." The battle's outcome gratified the pontiff, but it may not have surprised him. Legend holds that, at the moment the Turkish admiral was slain on his quarterdeck, Pius V had sensed, perhaps through divine inspiration, that his fleet was victorious.

The Pope deserved a share of the credit. It was he who had cajoled the shortsighted Christian naval powers into a Holy League to check the Turkish threat. The gigantic sea battle that resulted in 1571—the last great clash of galley fleets—turned the tables on the Ottomans, who'd had things their way in the Mediterranean for over a century. The battle's results were celebrated throughout Christian Europe, and its date—October 7—remains a feast on the Catholic calendar.

In *Empires of the Sea*, Roger Crowley narrates the 50-year struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian powers dominated by Spain. The book centers on two battles: the thrilling siege of Malta (1565) and the great clash at Lepanto. Along the way, Crowley relates the many reverses for Christian arms during the period, including the losses of Rhodes and Cyprus to the sultan's armies. Crowley, an amateur historian, achieves his purpose of restoring these battles to their proper place in the ongoing clash of civilizations.

At the dawn of its golden age, the Spanish Empire was conquering the New World but under assault in the old. Muslim corsairs plundered its unguard-

ed coasts. The great pirate Barbarossa carried off into slavery thousands of Charles V's subjects from Habsburg lands in Italy and Spain. These daring raiders worked directly for the Ottoman sultan, whose power extended from the Bosphorus to the Straits of Gibraltar.

When the Muslim corsairs started venturing into the Atlantic, the Spanish decided to act. But catastrophic setbacks along the Barbary Coast debilitated their naval might. The Ottomans appeared to have nothing in their way—nothing except some scattered outposts in the central and eastern Mediterranean, which still remained in Christian hands. When the Knights Hospitaller, based out of the sandstone island of Malta, captured a large merchantman owned by the sultan's chief eunuch, the decision in Istanbul was made: The Hospitallers must be destroyed.

Suleiman the Magnificent, like other Ottoman sultans, regarded himself as a new caesar. Conquest drove his rule. To legitimize his reign—all sultans lived in fear of palace revolts led by their kin—he had to capture new territory. And so he sent a great armada to Malta, whose capture would lay open Sicily, and even Rome, to be taken for the Dar-al-Islam.

Five hundred knights fortified tiny Malta and stood in Suleiman's way. The Hospitallers were granted a home on Malta by Charles V after a young Suleiman had forcibly evicted them from Rhodes. There they established a naval base and, with their sleek galleys, assaulted Ottoman shipping. Now in 1566, an older but wiser Suleiman would eliminate these Christian corsairs for good.

The Knights Hospitaller were throwbacks to the days of Richard the Lionhearted—crusaders in an age when chivalry had all but expired. (Cervantes fought with them at Lepanto.) Of noble birth, they came from all parts of Western Europe to take monastic vows and dedicate their lives to fighting Muslims. Their grand master was Jean Parisot de la Valette, a devout warrior who fought at Rhodes and had once been a galley slave. He had re-

stored their moral discipline and prepared them for the inevitable clash with Suleiman.

Contemporary witnesses estimate that 40,000 soldiers and sailors of the Ottoman Empire with siege artillery landed on Malta to face the knights and some 7,000 Spanish, Italian, and Maltese troops. Their main challenge was to level the Hospitallers' three main fortifications guarding the great harbor. Needing a safe haven for the sultan's expensive fleet, the Turk commanders decided to reduce the smallest fort, St. Elmo, which their spies estimated would fall in a few days.

Valette made a fateful decision: He would defend St. Elmo rather than withdraw his precious forces into the more powerful fortresses across the bay. He would make the Turks pay for every foot of Maltese soil.

And pay they did. Even though the fort was reduced to rubble by Turkish cannon, and its outer works taken, the small garrison of knights and troops held on. Turkish losses piled up, even from the sultan's beloved Janissary corps. The struggle mixed the medieval and the modern: The combatants fought with swords and pikes, cannon and incendiaries, even using primitive flamethrowers. Nightly, Valette ferried more volunteers and supplies across the bay.

After holding out for weeks, St. Elmo's garrison, nearly all of them wounded, finally fell. The Hospitaller commanders, too weak to stand, accepted the assault seated in chairs, broadswords in hand. The enraged Ottomans slaughtered nearly all survivors, even crucifying some of the knights' corpses. After witnessing this atrocity, Valette executed his Muslim captives and cannonaded the Turkish camp with their severed heads.

St. Elmo would be the Turks' only gain. They battered the knights' chief strongholds with cannon but failed to overwhelm the depleted garrison. Finally, in the siege's fifth month, a long-promised relief force from Sicily arrived and routed the demoralized Turkish army. Against long odds, Valette and his few troops had prevailed in one of the greatest sieges in history.