

Harry G. Frankfurt, Philosopher With a Surprise Best Seller, Dies at 94

He spent his career exploring will and deceit. Then came a sudden success: a bluntly titled book that found that one strain of dishonesty with a barnyard name was worse than lying.

By James Ryerson

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Harry G. Frankfurt, a philosopher whose fresh ideas about the human will were overshadowed in the broader culture by his analysis of a kind of dishonesty that he found worse than lying — an analysis presented in a bluntly titled surprise best seller, “On Bullshit” — died on Sunday in Santa Monica, Calif. He was 94.

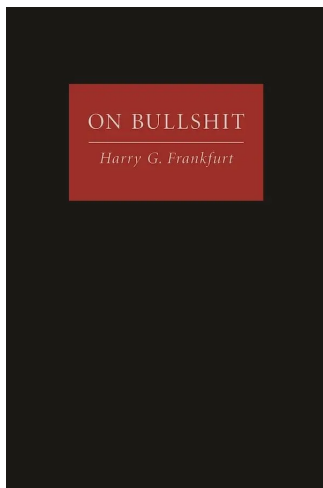
His death, at a nursing facility, had a number of causes, among them congestive heart failure, his daughter Kate Frankfurt said.

Professor Frankfurt’s major contribution to philosophy was a series of thematically interrelated papers, written from the 1960s through the 2000s, in which he situated the will — people’s motivating wants and desires — at the center of a unified vision of freedom, moral responsibility, personal identity and the sources of life’s meaning. For Professor Frankfurt, volition, more than reason or morality, was the defining aspect of the human condition.

Despite the ambition and inventiveness of this project — the philosopher Michael Bratman praised it as “powerful and exciting philosophy” of great “depth and fecundity” — Professor Frankfurt became best known for a single, irreverent paper largely unrelated to his life’s main work.

The paper, written in the mid-1980s under the same title as his eventual book, discussed what to his mind was a pervasive but underanalyzed feature of our culture: a form of dishonesty akin to lying but even less considerate of reality. Whereas the liar is at least mindful of the truth (if only to avoid it), the “bullshitter,” Professor Frankfurt wrote, is distinguished by his complete indifference to how things are.

Whether its purveyor is an advertiser, a political spin doctor or a cocktail-party blowhard, he argued, this form of dishonesty is rooted in a desire to make an impression on the listener, with no real interest in the underlying facts. “By virtue of this,” Professor Frankfurt concluded, “bullshit is the greater enemy of truth than lies are.”



Professor Frankfurt’s 80-page essay became an unexpected No. 1 New York Times best seller.

The essay was originally published in the journal *Raritan* in 1986, but it was not popularized until nearly two decades later, in January 2005, when Princeton University Press repackaged it as a small, sparsely lined 80-page book. It was an unexpected commercial hit, becoming a No. 1 New York Times best seller. Soon Professor Frankfurt was making television appearances on “60 Minutes,” the “Today” show and “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart.”

The book’s popularity seemed to be fueled in part by the recent re-election of President George W. Bush, many of whose critics viewed his administration, with its purported dismissal of what one Bush aide called the “reality-based community,” as exemplifying the very blitheness about truth that Professor Frankfurt had described.

“On Bullshit” was followed by a sequel, “On Truth” (2006), for which Professor Frankfurt received a six-figure advance from Alfred A. Knopf.

“On Truth,” also an essay in book form, was less successful commercially as well as philosophically. In part this was a problem of scale. As the philosopher Simon Blackburn observed, bullshit was “a paradigm of the essay-sized subject,” but truth was “bigger game.”

Professor Frankfurt was born David Bernard Stern on May 29, 1929, at a home for unwed mothers in Langhorne, Pa. He never knew his biological parents. He was adopted almost immediately and given a new name, Harry Gordon Frankfurt, by Bertha (Gordon) Frankfurt, a piano teacher, and Nathan Frankfurt, a bookkeeper. He was raised in Brooklyn and Baltimore, where he attended Johns Hopkins University. There, he received both his Bachelor of Arts degree, in 1949, and his Ph.D., in 1954, both in philosophy.

Professor Frankfurt spent two years as an Army draftee during the Korean War before embarking on an academic career that would include positions at the Rockefeller Institute (later Rockefeller University) in New York, from 1963 until 1976; Yale, until 1990; and Princeton, until 2002. He was a professor emeritus at Princeton at his death.

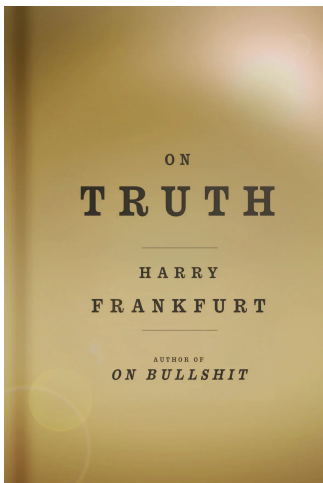
He made his name with two seminal papers, in 1969 and 1971, that changed the debate about free will. As traditionally understood, a person is morally responsible for his actions only if he could have acted otherwise. For example, a person is not to be blamed for striking someone if that behavior resulted from an involuntary muscle spasm in the arm.

But this moral principle, when combined with the mechanistic universe described by modern science, seemed to imply that people are never responsible for their actions. After all, if every instant of your life is the causally determined result of the previous instant, you can't possibly act other than as you do.

In the 1969 paper, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," Professor Frankfurt challenged this moral principle. He constructed ingenious hypothetical situations in which a person could not act otherwise but still intuitively appeared to be morally responsible. These examples, later known as Frankfurt cases, suggested that moral responsibility was compatible with a deterministic universe.

In the 1971 paper, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person," Professor Frankfurt proposed a novel way of thinking about freedom that complemented this vision of moral responsibility. Instead of seeing freedom as the absence of external constraint, he saw freedom as an internal psychological relation between different levels of desire. You might want to smoke a cigarette, but you also might want *not to want* to smoke. As Professor Frankfurt saw it, you act freely when the desire that motivates you to act is the one that you want to motivate you to act — the desire you identify with.

An elegant upshot of this account of freedom is that in acting freely, you disclose not only how you want to act, but also the kind of person you aspire to be.



After his surprise best seller, Professor Frankfurt received a six-figure advance from Alfred A. Knopf for "On Truth."

Professor Frankfurt continued to explore this connection between personal values and the human will in the 1980s. In his paper "The Importance of What We Care About," he argued that our most important desires are those that we cannot help being moved to act on, no matter the circumstances, for they establish what we ultimately value or "love." Paradoxically, he wrote, it is this lack of freedom that gives our lives meaning. (Think of Martin Luther's defiant declaration "Here I stand; I can do no other.")

Professor Frankfurt's first marriage, to Marilyn Rothman, ended in divorce. In addition to his daughter Kate, a child from his first marriage, Professor Frankfurt is survived by another daughter from that marriage, Jennifer Frankfurt; his second wife, Joan Gilbert; and three grandsons. He and Ms. Gilbert had lived in Santa Monica for several years.

Bold and daring in his ideas, Professor Frankfurt was somewhat aloof in style, with a dry wit and a strenuous aversion to pomposity. When asked what had inspired his interest in Descartes, the subject of his first book, "Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen" (1970), he admitted that he had liked that Descartes's books were short.

Defending his reluctance to keep up with the extensive scholarly literature his papers had generated, he explained that he was "pretty sure" his views were correct — but that if they weren't, his mistakes would eventually become clear "regardless of what more I might say."

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For all this sang-froid, Professor Frankfurt was heartfelt in his philosophical pursuits. Throughout his career, he was drawn to lines of inquiry — about freedom, love, selfhood and purpose — that he said appealed to him not only as an academic but also “as a human being trying to cope in a modestly systematic manner with the ordinary difficulties of a thoughtful life.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.