

Meaning in Gibberish: In Defence of Deep Bullshit

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Abstract In this essay I examine G. A. Cohen's notion of deep bullshit; I provide a counterexample to the often-implicit belief that deep bullshit is always bad, and unphilosophical. Section 1's outline of deep bullshit includes an important criterion for being deep bullshit which philosophers often leave implicit; deep bullshit is a bad and undesirable phenomenon that we should root out. Section 2 examines whether the *kōans* of Chan Buddhists were deep bullshit. In this section I argue they were; not only do they fit all modern definitions of deep bullshit, the Chan teachers were intentional deep bullshitters. In section 3 I argue we should not see the deep bullshit of Chan Buddhism as bad and un-philosophical; in Chan, through deep bullshit came philosophical inquiry. Section 4 responds to the Cohenian position, which holds any text which is "suggestive" is not deep bullshit; a Cohenian could claim Chan's *kōans* are suggestive, and so are not deep bullshit. I criticise this position by arguing that since philosophers of deep bullshit categorise Sokal's spoof article as deep bullshit, they must also categorise Chan *kōans* as deep bullshit. In section 5 I argue most allegations of deep bullshit are likely to be epistemic trespass. In section 6 I make recommendations for how to avoid trespassing deep bullshit allegations in future.

1 Deep Bullshit

The philosophical discussion of bullshit originates in Harry Frankfurt's work. Frankfurt identified Bullshit as a form of deceit, which was distinct from lying. Upon his account, when one lies one has the intention to convince the listener of a proposition which is not true, whereas when one bullshits one has no interest in the truth whatsoever.¹

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1. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 52-4.

Cohen² mainly agreed with Frankfurt's definition of bullshit but thought he could identify bullshit of a different kind. Whereas Frankfurt's bullshit was identifiable from the intentions of the speaker, Cohen's bullshit is identifiable from the speakers' expressions themselves. Cohen called his new category "deep bullshit"; he believed it was especially prevalent in academia.

Cohen argued a condition for being deep bullshit is that a statement has "unclarifiable unclarity"; the statement is obscure and cannot be unobscured. Cohen argued that for unclear statements "adding or subtracting (if it has one) a negation sign from a text makes no difference to its level of plausibility".³ If we could put a negation sign on Heidegger's definition of *dasein*, or Russell's definition of a set, and leave it equally plausible, then it would be unclear. If the statement can't be clarified to a sufficient level to change the symmetry of plausibility in negation, then it is deep bullshit. Below I call this the negation condition for deep bullshit; Cohen saw it as a sufficient condition.

Cappelen and Dever also gave an account of deep bullshit; they argued deep bullshit is "nonsense or gibberish"; the expression has no meaning, although it may appear to.⁴ Non-exhaustive examples may include instances of one's words referring to things which don't exist, or one's expressions failing to satisfy the necessary conditions for meaningfulness (which they decline to give).⁵

A final, very important but often implicit, aspect of all bullshit is that it's bad. Frankfurt originally wanted to explore a phrase already used in everyday language, which we take as a bad quality of a statement, and investigate what this bad quality is. He claimed we use the word "bullshit" to describe the statements of bullshitting speakers because we find their statements, like excrement, "so repulsive".⁶ Cohen wrote of how allegations of bullshit serve to "stigmatize" a text, and urged us to "conduct a struggle against" bullshit in the academy.⁷ This is also true of Cappelen and Dever's recent chapter on bullshit, they call for a crusade to "root (deep bullshit) out".⁸ The use of these words about bullshit are illuminating because of how they look down on statements which they classify as (deep) bullshit.

Unlike with Frankfurt's bullshit, it is possible to deep bullshit unintentionally. The unintentional deep bullshitter is probably gullible, but they are not morally blameworthy. It is the charlatan who, through "speak(ing) meaninglessly on purpose", intends to "deceive" by presenting their expressions as if they have meaning.⁹ This inten-

2. Gerald Allan Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit", in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011).

3. Gerald Allan Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit", 333.

4. Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever, *Bad Language* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 60.

5. *Ibid*, 63-4, 67-9.

6. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 43-4.

7. Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit", 335.

8. Cap.& Dev., *Bad Language*, 65.

9. *Ibid*, 64-5; Alan D. Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Ab-*

tional deception, on Cappelen and Dever's view, gives the charlatan a higher amount of reprehensibility than the unintentional deep bullshitter.

2 Deep Bullshit in Kōans

Chan Buddhism is a Chinese school of Buddhism. *Kōans* emerged in Chan from the 11th century. A *kōan* is a very concise story which is meant to help the reader achieve progress in their spiritual practice. *Kōans* commonly involved a question and answer between a student and a teacher, with the teacher's response expressing a great truth. In this section I argue many *kōans* are deep bullshit.

Cohen's negation condition for deep bullshit is especially true of a certain type of *kōan*. In certain *kōans* the student asks the teacher "what is Buddha?". In *kōans* 30, 33, and 34 of a single volume collection of *kōans* the teachers respond: "the very mind is Buddha", "no mind, no Buddha", and "mind is not Buddha".¹⁰ The contradiction here is evident, but at no point in this collection of *kōans* is it suggested that the logically contradictory answers are incompatible; Chan holds the negation of one answer to "what is Buddha?" to be equally as plausible as the non-negated form. Therefore, it seems clear that Chan *kōans* fit Cohen's unclarifiable unclarity sufficient condition, and a Cohenian would categorise Chan *kōans* as deep bullshit.¹¹

Would Cappelen and Dever categorise the "What is Buddha?" *kōans* as deep bullshit? It is difficult to speak on their behalf given their refusal to give necessary or sufficient conditions. But there are certainly examples which interpreters hold to be nonsense, or gibberish. For example, in another "what is Buddha?" *kōan* the teacher responds "*Masaḡin!* (Three pounds of flax!)"¹² Certainly there is a metaphorical element to the expression here, but Yamada's commentary on the case stresses that a central part of any interpretation should focus on the sound, the gibberish noise, with nothing else.¹³ You could substitute *Masaḡin* for "whack (hitting the table)!" or just "*Ma!*", but the response should involve a nonsense element.

use of Science (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999), 5. Sokal and Bricmont coined "charlatan" for the intentional bullshitter; Sokal is introduced in §4.

10. Yamada Kōun, *The Gateless Gate: the Classic Book of Zen Koans*, 2nd ed. (Somerville, MA, USA: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 148, 161, 165.

11. There are attempts to clarify Chan Buddhist metaphysics. Although, even on these readings, many key Chan Buddhist concepts behind *kōans* such as "transcending duality" remain "not, of course, entirely clear". Graham Priest, "Enlightenment", in *The Fifth Corner of Four: an Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoti*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 141. See chapter 9 of this work for as clear a reading of Chan metaphysics of enlightenment as is likely possible. For any reader still convinced that all *kōans* can be clarified, this essay can be read as saying even if it were the case that *kōans* were unclarifiable, it would not follow that they were something to be rooted out. I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for this clarification.

12. Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, 89.

13. *Ibid*, 90.

Reflective readers will already be unhappy with Cohen, and Cappelen and Dever's accounts of deep bullshit. Cohen's definition itself is unclear; what does it mean to be "plausible"? This is quite a dubious notion for a number of reasons.¹⁴ Cappelen and Dever's account is also quite underdeveloped. For instance, when talking about French psycho-analyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan, Cappelen and Dever are very confident in claiming "much of what Lacan said was meaningless", but they decline to give necessary and sufficient conditions for a statement to have meaning.¹⁵

I'm sure there are responses to the above criticisms, but to an extent this doesn't matter. "Poking fun" and deprecation of peoples' life works is very common in the Chan tradition, sometimes it almost seems as if the higher the mockery, the higher the praise.¹⁶ For example, Bodhidharma (the monk who brought Buddhism to China) is called a "broken toothed barbarian", but Mumon, the compiler of this work, insists that what initially sounds insulting (not because of any mistranslation) has "friendly overtones".¹⁷ In this sense, when one says that Chan philosophy is "bullshit" it sounds like one is affirming, even grasping the true message, of the tradition.

I believe the Chan Buddhists were intentional deep bullshitters. To me, despite the weaknesses of Cappelen and Dever's account, deep bullshit as some sort of profound-sounding gibberish is still intuitive. For example, I would be more than happy to refer to something that comes from a New Age Bullshit generator as deep bullshit.¹⁸ In Froese's interpretation of Chan, she argues for an interpretation to the effect that they intentionally created their own deep bullshit.¹⁹ There is a story of a Chan teacher who speaks to a congregation of the "great mystery", claiming most do not appreciate its "application". Yang Shan, a student, asks for clarification on these words, and is promptly kicked in the face by the monastery's abbot, at which the teacher laughs.²⁰ Froese takes this story as the teacher baiting the students into seeking intellectual pursuit through "grandiose words"; the words used are intentionally profound-sounding, but are in fact deep bullshit.

3 The Meaning of the Gibberish

Cohen wanted to formulate deep bullshit independently from intentions, but, as in the case of charlatans, if the author aims at deep bullshit it is likely that they succeed. In

14. I am indebted to comments from Walter Pedriali in an email exchange for this point.

15. Cap.& Dev., *Bad Language*, 70-1.

16. Katrin Froese, *Why Can't Philosophers Laugh?* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 174.

17. Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, 194-7.

18. See: <https://sebpearce.com/bullshit/>

19. Froese *Why Can't Philosophers Laugh?*, 178.

20. Tao-Yuan and Sohaku Ogata, *The Transmission of the Lamp: Early Masters* (Wolfeboro, NH: Longwood Academic, 1990), 300.

my view, the Chan Buddhists certainly intended for their words to be deep bullshit. But I wouldn't call the Chan teachers charlatans, because I don't see their discourse as bad and un-philosophical. I justify this through answering why Yang Shan is kicked.

On the one hand, Yang Shan is refused clarification; the language the Chan teachers are using embraces contradiction and unclarity as a way to expose what they believe is the inevitable paradox and bullshit in all language; their statements draw attention to a universal unclarity they think is present in language.²¹ On the other hand, the kick is Yang Shan's clarification; you will find what the teacher means outside of language, through experience of day to day sensations like the pain of a kick in the face.

To me, these interpretations of the Chan teachers gives them a philosophical position. Chan has a position on the nature of all language; it is all gibberish. Phrases like "the sound of one hand clapping" serve to illustrate this but are no more gibberish than the rest of language. The Pyrrhonian sceptics held a similarly unoptimistic position about the nature of all justification; if the Pyrrhonians' position doesn't exclude them from being philosophers, it seems difficult to non-chauvinistically exclude Chan Buddhism for their comparable positions.

Furthermore, Chan takes a normative position on the best course of action to accumulate virtue; it is awareness of everyday experience. They thought that the contradiction in all statements entailed that we should focus on what is immediately aware to us in perception. Their normative ethics is like any other in philosophy. They use reasoning to find the best course of action; the only difference is that with their use of logic they also reject logic as we know it.

Each *kōan's* idiosyncratic response, like a thought experiment, functions as a philosophical tool; it serves to illustrate Chan's broad theses about truth. The "what is Buddha?" *kōans'* meaning is that there is no meaning, or at least no non-contradictory meaning; in this sense, there is meaning to the gibberish. There is just "whack!" The *kōan* functions as a pedagogical tool to frustrate, and then gradually remove attachment to language. Through tying our brain into knots with its deliberate nonsense, the *kōan's* message is to highlight the unsatisfactoriness of language as a tool for seeking happiness.²² This is certainly obscure, unclear, and even deep bullshit, but should we root it out? Is it not worthy of the name philosophy?

We might complain that any account of meaning which includes gibberish is unsatisfactory, but do we already have sufficient handle on the notion of meaningfulness to exclude gibberish? Without assuming that the methodology that has been useful to analytic philosophers for **their own** purposes and discussions for the last 100 or so years is superior and philosophy-defining, can we justifiably say that the Chan approach is bad and unphilosophical?

Some opponents to my view might admit that the Chan teachers were not being

21. Froese, *Why Can't Philosophers Laugh?*, 22, 182-3.

22. *Ibid*, 18.; Useful quote from this page: "Sense becomes nonsense; nonsense becomes sense".

unphilosophical with their *kōans* and more general methods of inquiry, but the opponents would maintain the claim that what the Chan teachers were doing was **bad**. Indeed, claiming the Chan inquiry was good philosophy is a far stronger claim than Chan philosophy was philosophical in any sense, and the two are separable. One might admit that the Chan Buddhists aimed to answer similar questions to good philosophers but used a poor methodology to do so. This section has made a very tentative attempt at defending both claims. I hope that this section provides little doubt that the Chan Buddhists were doing philosophy in some form; they made similar claims to others whom we call philosophers. A much longer essay would be needed to indisputably defend Chan inquiry as **good** philosophy. Certainly, if I am correct that there is good Cohenian bullshit, then further work needs to be done to distinguish the good from the bad.

4 Productive Suggestiveness is not an Anti-necessary Condition

One might argue that, despite the arguments in Section 2, Chan *kōans* are not deep bullshit. Cohen appealed to “suggestiveness” to classify “good poetry” that is still unclear/gibberish, as not deep bullshit. Cohen wanted to formulate his deep bullshit independently from the speaker’s intentions, preventing him from arguing that poetry is not deep bullshit because it is designated *as* poetry by the speaker. Instead, he argued an unclarifiable text could be “valuable”, i.e. not deep bullshit which is bad, “because of its suggestiveness”. Through the multiple interpretations that we can draw from the text it can “stimulate thought” to give us valuable insights.²³

Cohen himself, in a reference, gave a very brief suggestion about what his own views might have been on Chan Buddhism. He allows “the unclarifiable may be productively suggestive” but does not agree with Yu-Lan’s claim that Chinese philosophy’s common lack of “articulateness” (presumably, close enough to be a synonym for clarity for Cohen’s use) is compensated for by Chinese philosophy’s “almost boundless” suggestiveness.²⁴

But let’s move past Cohen’s personal biases and assume that Chan Buddhism is “productively suggestive” (as said in section 3, to show that Chan Buddhism is good philosophy would need a much longer essay). In the context of philosophy, productive suggestiveness is the ability of a text to “stimulate thought” in a manner which is productive in helping us reach valuable philosophical insights. Cohen held productive suggestiveness as an anti-necessary condition (the negation of the condition

23. Cohen, “Deeper Into Bullshit”, 333-4.

24. *Ibid*, 334.; Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derek Bodde (London: Macmillan, 1960), 12.

is necessary) for being deep bullshit that overrode his unclarifiable unclarity sufficient condition; if an unclarifiable text is productively suggestive, then it is not deep bullshit.

I would agree with Cohen that the productive suggestiveness of Chan *kōans*, assuming that they are productively suggestive, is what makes them philosophically valuable. However, I would maintain that Chan *kōans* are often deep bullshit; I just wouldn't condemn them, and label them as non-philosophy because of this. We can tell Chan *kōans* are deep bullshit because Froese's interpretation of the Yang Shan kicking case tells us the Chan Buddhists **aimed** at deep bullshit.²⁵ Sokal made a spoof article which Cohen accepted as "deliberate bullshit"; the piece was "self-condemning" in that it was presented as non-deep bullshit at first, and when it fooled people as sincere it was supposed to illustrate a point about the nature of philosophical inquiry (namely, that lots of philosophy conducted on the continent is deep bullshit).²⁶ Just as with Sokal, Chan Buddhists aimed to tell us something about the nature of philosophical inquiry through producing a piece of self-condemning philosophy; the meaning was that the statements they were making inevitably included some deep bullshit, which makes a broader point about philosophical inquiry. What this shows is that, even with their productive suggestiveness, Chan Buddhist *kōans* are still deep bullshit, because they intentionally embrace deep bullshit just like Sokal's article. It is also true that, like Sokal's article, it is perfectly possible for the *kōans* to be insightful despite being deep bullshit.

A Cohenian might complain that the response in the previous paragraph ignores Cohen's formulation of deep bullshit as independent from "intentional encasement" i.e. the intentions of the speaker.²⁷ Cohen admitted Sokal's article was deep bullshit, but not because of Sokal's intention to create deep bullshit. There were some other satisfied conditions which made Sokal's article deep bullshit, including the article's unclarifiable unclarity. That Sokal was open about his intent to create deep bullshit is helpful in identifying that the article is deep bullshit, but the intent is not what makes the article deep bullshit.

To me this doesn't seem right; the reason Sokal and Cohen saw Sokal's article as "really" deep bullshit is because of Sokal's devious intention to create deep bullshit. But, even if it is true Sokal's article was deep bullshit because of an intention-independent sufficient condition for deep bullshit being satisfied, I would challenge objectors to identify a condition which can be found in Sokal's article that classifies it as deep bullshit which is not present in the teacher's statement in the Yang Shan case. We might claim Sokal's article was deep bullshit because it was obscure, unclear, and

25. This doesn't make the *kōans* deep bullshit on the accounts of deep bullshit we are working with. However, this does provide a good additional indicator; if the speaker aimed at deep bullshit, and upon analysis their statements seem to be a profound-sounding nonsense, then their statements are most likely deep bullshit. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this point.

26. Alan D. Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", *Social Text*, no. 46/47 (1996): , 217-252, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466856>.

27. Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit", 7.

unverifiable; these are all true in the Yang Shan case.

Cohen's classification of Sokal's article as the archetype of that which aims to be deep bullshit and succeeds, and the similarity of productively suggestive argumentation from Sokal's intentional deep bullshit to Chan's intentional deep bullshit is noticeable.²⁸ Therefore, a Cohenian claim that the productive suggestiveness of Chan excludes it from being deep bullshit cannot work; assuming Chan is productively suggestive, it is so in the same way as Sokal's article (which Cohen is happy to call deep bullshit).

In the current and previous sections, my goal has been to question the narrative that deep bullshit is not always negative with examples from Chan Buddhist philosophy. Another aim was to suggest that nonsense might have some meaning, but this is a far more ambitious aim that I do not claim to have proven.

In the following sections, I want to reflect on why deep bullshit allegations have arisen.²⁹ In section 5, I analyse why deep bullshit allegations emerge; I argue that epistemic trespass is often the most likely explanation for deep bullshit allegations. In section 6, I make some recommendations for avoiding false, trespassing, deep bullshit allegations.

5 The Best Explanation for Allegations of Deep Bullshit is Epistemic Trespass

Epistemic trespass occurs when an expert has competence to make judgements in one field, but they speak about another field where they lack competence. With so-called public intellectuals, it is easy to think of cases of this. Richard Dawkins is one example. Dawkins is certainly an expert on evolutionary biology, but he has also published books and given talks about religion. Philosophers of religion, of all beliefs about the existence of God(s), have accused Dawkins of being very uncharitable to his opponents and ignoring the genuine issues.³⁰ Despite his lack of expertise in this domain, Dawkins speaks with as much confidence as he would if he were talking about evolutionary biology.

Why do deep bullshit allegations emerge? For most instances, I think there are two explanations that are most plausible:

28. Cap.& Dev. Bad Language, 64. Cappelen and Dever call Sokal's work "intentional gibberish" so they may not be so susceptible here. Although, my reading of Cappelen and Dever would interpret them as being happy with calling Sokal's spoof deep bullshit.

29. Katherine Hawley, "Identity and Indiscernibility", *Mind* 118, no. 469 (January 2009): , 101-119, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzn153>. This is strongly influenced by Katherine Hawley's change of direction in the final section of her paper on the Identity of Indiscernibles.

30. Nathan Ballantyne, "Epistemic Trespassing", *Mind* 128, no. 510 (December 2018): , 367, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzx042>.

1. The allegation is correct. The accused is producing deep bullshit; possibly intentionally.³¹
2. The allegation is incorrect. The accused is not producing deep bullshit. The accuser has committed epistemic trespass.

There are other plausible explanations. Perhaps the accuser is incorrect but there is no trespass, maybe they just want to discredit their dialectical opponent and are committing (Frankfurt's) bullshit, but I imagine these are relatively rare cases.

I don't want to make a systematic survey of all allegations of deep bullshit, and claim most of them are instances of epistemic trespass. Instead, I want to suggest that in most situations the allegation is best explained by epistemic trespass, rather than genuine deep bullshit. But, to illustrate the point, Sokal and Bricmont's high profile allegations against Lacan are useful.³² Lacan was a prolific French psycho-analyst, who has been highly influential for continental philosophy.³³ Sokal and Bricmont argued Lacan created deep bullshit; they took particular issue with his claims which make use of mathematical language. For instance, they expressed disdain for Lacan's equating "the erectile organ. . . to the $\sqrt{-1}$ ".³⁴

Perhaps 1. is true. Lacan was competent enough to achieve highly in academia, so he and his most intelligent successors probably also figured out that this is nonsense. They have gone along with the bullshit; they are knowing charlatans. The charlatans have conned philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, Marxists, and those in many other fields. They have also fooled the students who study under them and who pay lots of money to be taught by them (although, not if they are being taught at a public French university).

Option 1. would be the most likely explanation if:

- (i) The accuser(s) are experts in the field that they are accusing someone in.
- (ii) The accused are talking about a domain outside of their own expertise, making the accused more likely to be trespassing.

31. Despite my non-pejorative use of "deep bullshit" to refer to discussions in Chan philosophy above, I have not seen any other deep bullshit attributions that are non-accusatory, and non-pejorative.

32. Sokal and Bricmont don't use the phrase "deep bullshit", but Cappelen and Dever, and Cohen, took them as showing that many "French thinkers" wrote deep bullshit.

33. Adrian Johnston "Jacques Lacan" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2018).

34. Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 27.; Jacques Lacan, in *Ecrits: a Selection.*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 292-325.; For a defence of Lacan's statement see Arkady Plotnitsky, *The Knowable and the Unknowable: Modern Science, Nonclassical Thought, and the "Two Cultures"* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005). Arkady Plotnitsky, "On Lacan and Mathematics", *Oeuvres & Critiques XXXIV 2* (2009): , 143-162.

- (iii) There is a consensus, within the field that the accused's work is part of, that the accused's work is deep bullshit.

None of these are the case for Sokal and Bricmont's allegations against Lacan's statements that Sokal and Bricmont quote.³⁵

i. does not apply. Sokal and Bricmont seemed to be aware they were writing about thinkers whom they were not experts on.³⁶ The implication seems to be that when in their allegations Lacan wrote 'nonsense' they limited themselves to areas where Lacan made use of mathematical concepts, on which they are experts. But in Sokal and Bricmont's treatment of Lacan this is blatantly not the case. For instance, when Lacan re-appropriates the mathematical concept 'compactness' for his psycho-analysis and gives a definition of compactness in the psycho-analytic sense, they argue Lacan's definition of "compactness is not just false: it is gibberish".³⁷ They make a similar claim that the concept "space of *jouissance* in psycho-analysis" is "ill defined".³⁸ In both cases, what most indicates their lack of expertise is their failure to provide **any** justification whatsoever for why, when treating the term in a psycho-analytic context and not a mathematical one, the concepts they criticise are "nonsense". They seem to believe the texts they quote "speak for themselves" as nonsense, but this is merely a way of appealing to the intuitions of readers already sympathetic to Sokal and Bricmont's position rather than an example of any competence with the material they criticise.³⁹ When writing about both 'compactness' and the 'space of *jouissance*' Sokal and Bricmont stray into talking about the psychoanalytic, non-scientific aspects of Lacan's work which they readily admit they are "not competent to judge".⁴⁰

ii. does not apply either. It might initially seem like he was trespassing; equivocating the "erectile organ" (whatever that may be) to $\sqrt{-1}$ does initially seem like a fantastical claim about mathematics. Mathematics, in the sense that we usually think of it, is a domain that Lacan as a psycho-analyst was not an expert in. But Lacan was not actually writing about the same $\sqrt{-1}$ as Sokal and Bricmont. Under Plotnitsky's interpretation of Lacan there are two types of $\sqrt{-1}$.⁴¹ The first is (M) $\sqrt{-1}$, the mathematics we immediately think of, on which Sokal and Bricmont have a good level of expertise, and on which Lacan was quiet. The second is (L) $\sqrt{-1}$, Lacan's very broadly analogous mathematics, which he invented. Lacan's "mathematics" was only strictly mathematical in the sense that it made an analogy between psycho-analytic phenomena and complex numbers.

35. Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 18-37.

36. *Ibid*, 7.

37. *Ibid*, 22-3.

38. *Ibid*, 9.

39. *Ibid*, 37.

40. *Ibid*, 7. 'It goes without saying that we are not competent to judge the non-scientific aspects of these authors' work'.

41. Plotnitsky, *The Knowable and the Unknowable*, 113.

Lacan argued truths captured by psycho-analytic concepts are extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to visualise and conceptualise.⁴² Lacan compared his psycho-analytic concepts to complex numbers; a similarly elusive phenomena which, when we signify them, we signify not the thing itself, but an image of the thing.⁴³ Lacan constructed a much more complex (L) mathematical system than this paper can outline, but his claims always remained psycho-analytic while employing only very broadly mathematical analogies.⁴⁴ In this light, Lacan would be the foremost expert to talk about (L) mathematics; he invented the system.

Finally, iii. does not hold. there is not a consensus among those who are experts on Lacan that what Lacan said was deep bullshit. Therefore, 1. seems an unlikely option in this case.

The alternative option is 2; the accuser has committed epistemic trespass. The expert in their field, as the high-profile cases usually are or else they wouldn't have enough social capital for anyone to listen to them, has strayed from their own domain to talk about something which they wrongly believe they have the proficiency to speak on.

I think that, in most cases where allegations of deep bullshit have emerged, 2. is the most reasonable explanation. In the allegations of deep bullshit I have mentioned above, none of i-iii apply. I think attention to the absence of i. in the accusers gives the most insightful explanation of why the allegations are there. Investigating further, the accuser initially might **seem** to be accusing within their own domain. For example:

- Sokal and Bricmont **initially seem**⁴⁵ to be criticising Lacan's interpretation of something they are experts on; mathematics.
- Cappelen and Dever are experts on philosophy, and while they call Lacan a "thinker" rather than a philosopher, it would be easy to think that their philosophical training makes them an authority on Lacan given his influence on (continental) philosophical fields.⁴⁶
- Cohen was no doubt an expert on Marxism, but his readings on French Althusserianism as a youth do not make him an expert on it; he helped found Analytical Marxism, an entirely different research project.

42. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this claim.

43. Plotnitsky "On Lacan and Mathematics". 151-2.

44. Sokal and Bricmont's complaints 'misuse' of mathematics in analogies are separable from their claims about nonsense, with which this essay is concerned. They make the distinction: Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 4-5.

45. I am indebted to a series of lectures on paradoxes during Michaelmas 2019 by Patrick Greenough at the University of St Andrews for the phrasing "initially seems".

46. It is also possible that they are appealing to the authority of Sokal and Bricmont, who confirm their bias.

For all the above, it initially seems as if the accusers are experts in the domain within which they accuse, but this is in fact not true. This lends weight to the theory that deep bullshit accusations are often instances of epistemic trespass due to overzealous transfer. Overzealous transfer is when agents transfer their skills to another context, but their skills are inappropriate.⁴⁷ Due to the initial seeming proximity of the fields the accusers are experts in to the one in which they accuse, they falsely think that their expert-domain skills will transfer well to the accusing-domain. In Sokal and Bricmont's case, this mistake is most obvious.

I hope that this section has successfully suggested that deep bullshit allegations are often instances of epistemic trespass due to overzealous transfer, rather than the truth of a conspiracy theory in French academia. Ballantyne claims that examples of epistemic trespass allegations are widespread, and I hope that my recommendations in the following section can help prevent further trespassing deep bullshit accusations.⁴⁸

6 Some Recommendations

To avoid instances of future trespassing deep bullshit allegations I make the following three recommendations:

First, have greater epistemic modesty. Before making any allegation, ask yourself: do I really have enough expertise to reliably make this deep bullshit allegation? Do I have a good track record in this domain, or does it just initially seem that I do? If the domain is outside of your own expertise, ask: do I have enough cross-field expertise to make this allegation?⁴⁹

Second, don't use generics around instances of deep bullshit. In the same volume as their chapter on bullshit, Cappelen and Dever have a chapter dedicated to pointing out the dangers of generics in leading us to cognitive error.⁵⁰ A generic is, roughly, a general claim about a certain kind that is vague as to how strong it is between an existential and universal claim e.g. 'cats aren't loving' or 'French philosophers come up with lots of deep bullshit'.⁵¹ Despite the warnings, Cappelen and Dever are perfectly happy to use relatively vague quantifying determiners in their claims, such as "much of what Lacan said was bullshit".⁵² This makes their claims very difficult to falsify; if I were to give them some quotes from Lacan, they could simply say 'oh, no I wasn't talking about those cases'.

47. Ballantyne, "Epistemic Trespassing", 385.

48. *Ibid*, 369.

49. *Ibid*.

50. Cap.& Dev., *Bad Language*, 126-43.

51. The latter is a quote from a lecture given by Professor Cappelen during Candlemas semester 2018 at the University of St Andrews. It is more specific than the cats example, but still vague as to the strength of the claim.

52. Cap.& Dev. *Bad Language*, 66, 71.

To me, the third recommendation is most important of all, as the first two should have always been fairly obvious. I believe the splits that exist within philosophy have made the deep bullshit allegations more acceptable. In addition to the overzealous transfer explanation, I think allegations of deep bullshit represent a chauvinistic attitude toward other philosophical traditions. Whereas Chan mockery toward Bodhidharma, because he was an Indian “barbarian” who didn’t know Chinese, was playful mockery, philosophical close-mindedness is often entirely serious.⁵³ An example from a lecture by Professor Cappelen should be revealing here. Cappelen divulged an anecdote about a friend who studied Lacan prior to starting “real philosophy”, before Cappelen quickly corrected himself as having “mis-spoken”.⁵⁴ The French thinker conspiracy, like many other conspiracy theories, has emerged in large part from suspicion toward those belonging to a different social group.

A disparaging attitude towards other philosophical traditions is not unique to the analytic school. Jay Garfield, in an account of how he became interested in Buddhist Philosophy, writes about how the late director of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Gen Lobsang Gyatso, told him western philosophy was “shallow and materialistic” when they first met.⁵⁵ Fortunately, Garfield’s teachings on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* allowed Gyatso to notice the trespass.⁵⁶ Similarly, Jacques Bouveresse, an analytic philosopher at a French university, wrote in 1983 about how fellow French philosophers dismissed analytic philosophy as useless and “in the process of dying” because it was only concerned with logic. These cases were clearly trespass, given the same individuals often thought Wittgenstein was a logical positivist.⁵⁷

The split in philosophy between analytic and continental, and between Eurocentric and non-European, non-English speaking, and/or non-Eurocentric philosophies exists. Strassfeld’s work shows that the split between continental and analytic in America was because of a “brahmin caste” of elites who ensured analytic philosophy became dominant.⁵⁸ Garfield and Van Norden claim that the split between western and non-western philosophy has emerged as a legacy of colonial euro-centrism.⁵⁹ Hence, historically speaking, neither split was as a result of the superiority of a specific methodology.

53. See §4 for this example.

54. During a lecture given by Cappelen during Candlemas semester 2018 at the University of St Andrews.

55. Jay L Garfield *Practicing without a License and Making Trouble along the way: My Life in Buddhist Studies*. (2018), 5. <https://jaygarfield.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/practicing-without-a-license.pdf>

56. I would like to stress that Gyatso’s action is in no way comparable to the injustices which emerge from Eurocentric philosophy departments, merely that the disparagement is commonplace.

57. Jacques Bouveresse, “Why I Am so Very UnFrench”, in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U., 1983), 10-11, 13.

58. Jonathan Strassfeld, “American Divide: The Making Of ‘Continental’ Philosophy”, *Modern Intellectual History*, 2018, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1479244318000513>.

59. Jay L Garfield and Bryan W Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call it What it Really Is” *The Stone* (The New York Times, May 11, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html>.

Ballantyne calls for fields with potential for trespass to “rub shoulders”, but I hardly feel that this is a sufficiently high-reaching recommendation to correct the splits in philosophy which have led to trespass susceptibility.⁶⁰

In 2020 at the University of Edinburgh I presented an early draft of this paper.⁶¹ Before the talk, someone approached me and asked why I was presenting on Buddhism and philosophy, which they told me were very different things. Afterward, the same person told me kōans are poetry and not philosophy, of course without giving me any justification whatsoever when I asked them why they thought that. This was an instance of boundary policing; a claim that a paper is “not philosophy” rather than a genuine engagement which critiques the paper’s arguments.⁶² To me, it seems unlikely that genuine engagement with the positions presented will miraculously occur if we merely encourage philosophical shoulder rubbing between philosophers of differing traditions. To correct this, my final recommendation is more of a demand: we need an ambitious policy of diversification of philosophy departments’ teaching and research interests, and a more general inclusivity of marginalised voices within philosophy.

7 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued deep bullshit is not always a dirty, unworthy phenomenon which we should root out of philosophy. In section 1 I quickly outlined Frankfurt’s account of bullshit, before moving onto Cohen’s deep bullshit. I highlighted the fact that all philosophers who have written about deep bullshit argue it is always a bad occurrence. In section 2 I introduced kōans and I argued some kōans are deep bullshit. However, in section 3 I argued these kōans are not a negative phenomenon which we should root out of philosophy. In doing so I argued, contra the assumptions of Cohen and Cappelen and Dever, deep bullshit is not always a bad occurrence. In section 4 I responded to a potential objection from a Cohenian which claims kōans are not deep bullshit, because they are productively suggestive. In response, I argue that because Cohenians take Sokal’s paper as deep bullshit, they must categorise kōans as deep bullshit too. In section 5 I moved in a different direction to argue the best explanation for most occurrences of deep bullshit allegations are epistemic trespass, rather than genuine occurrences of deep bullshit or charlatanry. In section 6 I made some recommendations to avoid future spurious deep bullshit allegations. The most important recommendation argues that we need an ambitious project to transform philosophy

60. Ballantyne “Epistemic Trespassing”, 388.

61. I had a great evening and my thanks go to the University of Edinburgh Philosophy and Buddhist societies for hosting me. I give this example because it is relevant, not because it represents my experience of the whole of the evening.

62. For a seminal paper on this phenomenon: Kristie Dotson, “How Is This Paper Philosophy?”, *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2012), [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2012\).030105](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2012).030105).

departments so that trespassing deep bullshit allegations can no longer occur.⁶³

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63. My thanks go first to the Laidlaw Scholarship for providing me with the means to seriously dedicate my time to studying Buddhist philosophy. Thank you to the Aporia editors and referees who made this an infinitely better paper. A huge thank you also to Dr Simon Prosser for supporting my novel research project during the Summers of 2019 and 2020. My thanks also go to James Glover, Tom Kaspers, Dr Walter Pedriali, and Dante Philp for reading and providing comments on drafts of this essay (Dante also originally gifted me the book on kōans years ago as a joke, because we thought the nonsense in it was funny). Thank you to Matthew McClure and Hugh Laurence from the University of Edinburgh Philosophy and Buddhist societies respectively for hosting a wonderful joint event where I presented an early version of this paper. My thanks to Charmaine Au-Yeung, Emmanuella Ibrahim, Prof Jay Garfield, and Quan Nguyen for their invaluable guidance and for reassuring me that this kind of work is important. Thank you to my family for supporting me while I write about bullshit.

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