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Is this a bullshit question? Just asking!

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Abstract

We develop an account of bullshit questions that draws on the literature on bullshit assertions. We distinguish bullshit questions from other sorts of anomalous questions. According to our account, bullshit questions are characterized chiefly by the indifference of the speaker to the truth of any answer she might receive. Instead, the bullshit questioner is up to something else, typically a non-interrogative illocutionary act such as introducing a presupposition, insinuating a derogatory sentiment, implying a proposition, making an accusation, or flirting. If this is right, it naturally raises the normative question of whether and how bullshit questions are wrong and whether and how bullshit questioners are blameworthy and vicious. In the final section, we address these questions, arguing that bullshit questions are pro tanto wrong because they tend to thwart inquiry, manifest the vice of epistemic insouciance (which is a disregard for truth or inquiry), express disrespect for the epistemic agency of the interlocutor, introduce epistemic malaise, and lead to the opening of dangerous inquiries by gullible audiences. We then consider some cases in which the pro tanto wrongness of bullshit questioning is arguably overridden by competing reasons.

Keywords Bullshit · Question · Epistemic insouciance · Epistemic agency · Speech act

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1 Introduction

In the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, Mona Lisa Vito is called before a court as an expert witness in automotives. The prosecutor questions her expertise, arguably on sexist grounds. He is given the opportunity to conduct voir dire and decides to quiz her by asking, “Can you tell me what would be the correct ignition timing on a 1955 Bellaire Chevrolet with a 327 cubic engine and a 4-barrel carburetor?” Vito famously responds, “It’s a bullshit question,” then goes on to explain that it contains a false presupposition because “Chevy didn’t make a 327 in ’55. The 327 didn’t come out till ’62. And it wasn’t offered in the Bellaire with the 4-barrel carburetor till ’64. However, in 1964 the correct ignition timing would be 4 degrees before top dead center.” Her response humiliates the prosecutor and earns her the respect of the judge. But what exactly was she doing by rejecting the prosecutor’s question as bullshit? In this paper, we are concerned to diagnose and evaluate what it means to call an utterance a bullshit question. We believe that there is a recognizable phenomenon here, though it may not be sufficiently crystalized in folk psychology and discourse to have clear conceptual contours. A recent Google search for the bigram “bullshit question” returned only 28,200 hits—most of them references to *My Cousin Vinny* or bizarre questions people have been asked during job interviews (e.g., “If you were a fruit, what fruit would you be?”).

That there are bullshit questions can be regarded as something of a platitude, something obvious to most without philosophical reflection. The use of the term in *My Cousin Vinny* reflects that platitude. As David Lewis notes, though, platitudes are often worthy of philosophical reflection, not necessarily to refute but at least to prompt us to “think twice” about them, “so that you will recognize that it explains what you must have had in mind,” (2008, p. 3) or at least a better, clear version of it after having thought twice about it. Thus, we are not offering an analysis of the folk concept of bullshit questions, that is, a theory that can be tested empirically. Rather, the theory on offer here is a robust filling out of what the platitude—that there are bullshit questions—should look like.¹ Our account, as Lewis put it, is likely the (or a) “legitimate heir” to the ordinary folk notion of bullshit questions.²

The philosophical literature on bullshit has grown substantially since Harry Frankfurt published his famous essay in 1986. Most of these publications offer accounts or evaluations of bullshit *assertions*. A few address other types of bullshit. For instance,

¹ For this reason, we do not regard ourselves as engaging in what is sometimes called “conceptual engineering” (Burgess et al., 2020, p. 474). Conceptual engineering involves changing a well-established concept to suit its purpose better. However, we are in the business of creating such a concept, based on earlier work and reflecting on its normative implications. This is in part because we find the phrase a bit highfalutin. Real engineers do stress-testing and implement their designs at scale, while so-called conceptual engineers mostly seem to be better described as tinkerers. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

² A separate question pertains to whether bullshit questions might also be classified by ordinary people as lies. In fact, there is empirical evidence that questions with false presuppositions do get classed as lies (Viebahn et al., 2021). As far as we know, there is not yet empirical evidence about whether they also or differentially get classed as bullshit. It could very well be that many people would class them as both lies and bullshit, even if this is inconsistent with Frankfurt’s seminal analysis of bullshit. But this is merely a speculative hypothesis at the moment. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility.

Gascon (2021) offers an account of bullshit arguments. Graeber (2015) discusses bullshit jobs. And Scliper (2021) develops a theory of bullshit art and kitsch. In this paper, we elaborate an account of bullshit *questions*.

To the best of our knowledge, there are only two papers that touch on this topic. In *Analysis*, Whitcomb (2023) argues that bullshit questions are possible and distinguishes between shallowly and deeply interrogative bullshit. For shallowly interrogative bullshit, the locus of bullshit is in an assertive claim that is implied or presupposed by the question. For deeply interrogative bullshit, the bullshitter does not care about the truth of any answer they might receive. According to Whitcomb, deeply interrogative bullshit is “apt to attenuate our habits of attending to how things really are” (2023, p. 302). Given the word limit at *Analysis*, Whitcomb does not articulate a full account of bullshit questions, arguing instead by way of compelling examples.

Easwaran (2023) also briefly addresses bullshit questions in a wider-ranging paper about many varieties of bullshit, including not only speech acts but also other social practices. On his account, some questions have been conventionalized to perform other speech acts, such as a teacher asking a question to quiz a student. These questions are not bullshit because of those conventions. However, he argues that rhetorical questions that function as stealth assertions count as bullshit questions because the speaker is not sincerely seeking information in response to their utterance. Easwaran also categorizes questions asked by someone who already knows the answer (e.g., a detective interrogating a suspect, a journalist questioning a source) as bullshit because the questioner is not sincerely seeking information (or rather, is seeking a different kind of information, e.g., whether the suspect is honest). We find this account partly unintuitive: we will claim that some questions are not bullshit even without a convention in place for what alternative speech act is being performed because the audience is meant to recognize what particular speech act is being performed in this specific case.

Most accounts of bullshit assertions connect them in some way to a lack of regard on the asserter’s part for truth, inquiry, or epistemic goods in general. A popular diagnosis by Cassam (2018) holds that bullshitters display the vice of *epistemic insouciance*, or systematic indifference to the truth. Importantly, epistemic insouciance encompasses a range of other problematic epistemic dispositions, stances, and attitudes, such as indifference to understanding and wisdom, disregard for evidence and expertise, indifference to inferential connections, disrespect for the epistemic agency of others, lack of motivation to learn, contempt for those who have put in the effort to learn and acquire expertise, and devaluation of education. Cassam, for instance, refers to the moment when Michael Gove, then Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, sneered, “The people of this country have had quite enough of experts.” Perhaps the most definitive indication that someone is not engaging in bullshit questioning is that they are *willing to be surprised*, as we explore in the remainder of this paper.

A challenge for any account of bullshit questions that aims to import details from accounts of bullshit assertions is that questions do not have truth values. For this reason, bullshit questions cannot be defective in precisely the same way that bullshit assertions are. Nevertheless, some questions are better than others (Watson, 2015; Notess & Watson, 2023). We argue that there is a similar underlying problem with both bullshit assertions and bullshit questions. In a nutshell, whereas the bullshit

asserter does not care about the truth of what she says, the bullshit questioner does not care about the truth of the answer to her question. In this way, both manifest indifference to the truth, as well as disrespect for the interlocutor as an epistemic agent.

Here is the plan for this paper: in Sect. 1, we review key concepts from speech act theory on illocutionary acts and briefly discuss what the act of questioning is. We contend that questions are best understood as a variety of a directive: instead of commanding or ordering the interlocutor, they more gently request something of the interlocutor — namely, to provide information. In Sect. 2, we survey a range of ways in which utterances that are syntactically questions may pragmatically do something besides asking a question. Bullshit questions are a variety of such utterances, but not all such utterances are bullshit. For instance, when a teacher asks a student a question to which she already knows the answer, she is not requesting information but instead is inviting the student to demonstrate their knowledge or understanding, or to exercise their epistemic agency in some other way. Thus, the teacher does not manifest a disregard for truth or inquiry or disrespect for the student's epistemic agency. We then demonstrate by way of example that bullshit questions come in several varieties. Finally in Sect. 3, we offer a normative evaluation of bullshit questions. Are they always epistemically or morally lamentable? We argue that they are not. Just as it is not always wrong to lie or to make a bullshit assertion, so it is not always wrong to ask a bullshit question. It depends on the social-epistemic context, the identity of one's interlocutor, the position of any third parties who might overhear the question and any answer that it elicits, and the intentions of the speaker.

2 Illocutionary acts

In order to distinguish bullshit questions from bullshit assertions (and also from non-bullshit questions), it is necessary to draw on prior work on illocutionary acts. As Harris et al. note, “There is no theory-neutral way of saying what makes an illocutionary act” (2018, p. 1). In short, though, the key insight of theorizing about illocutionary acts is this: we can do different things with words. To ask a question is to do a different thing than to persuade, pronounce, promise, propose, or prognosticate. Each is a different illocutionary act, because speakers use them to do (or at least try to do) different things.

As first theorized by Austin (1962), illocutionary acts are distinguished from locutionary acts (i.e., the act of uttering, writing, signing, waving flags for semaphore, tapping out Morse code, etc.) and perlocutionary acts (i.e., acts producing downstream effects of the illocutionary acts themselves). Bullshit questions are a kind of illocutionary act. They are best characterized in terms of what they're intended to do. A key point to emphasize is that since illocutionary acts are defined by what they do, they are therefore not fundamentally defined by syntax or semantics. The same sentence (with the same syntax and semantics) can be uttered to perform two different speech acts. That said, syntax and semantics matter, and they can inform one's analysis of a particular illocutionary act. (For example, if someone says, “I promise to pay you back,” then the semantics of ‘promise’ strongly suggest the speaker is performing the illocutionary act of promising.) In what follows, we will stipulate a

syntactic limitation on bullshit questions. To count as a bullshit question, an utterance must syntactically be a question.³

Austin proposed that illocutionary acts are best understood not as true or false but as felicitous or infelicitous. An infelicitous illocutionary act was not successful because the felicity conditions for that particular illocutionary act were not satisfied. Infelicities are either misfires or abuses. If I promise something without the intention to keep that promise, my insincerity makes the promise infelicitous. It is an abuse of the conventions of promising. On this line of thinking, bullshit questions would be infelicitous abuses of the illocutionary act of asking a question. Here, questioning is the illocutionary act, and so bullshit questions are just one way a speaker can fail to ask questions correctly.

As will become apparent in the next section, we think something complicated and nefarious is going on with bullshit questions. Instead of being a wrong way to ask a question, bullshit questions are doing something else altogether. Making that case will require something requiring more theoretical complexity than Austin's account can provide. (To be fair, Austin presented his proposed taxonomy as not "definitive" (1962, p. 151).) So, we turn to Searle (Searle, 1976), who proposes at least twelve dimensions along which various illocutionary acts can be distinguished. For our present purposes, three of them are most relevant to our analysis of bullshit questions. First, the point or purpose of the illocutionary act is the most important for distinguishing illocutionary acts from one another. What was the speaker intending to achieve? Searle emphasizes that the point of an illocutionary act is distinct from its perlocutionary intent. "For many, perhaps most, of the most important illocutionary acts, there is no essential perlocutionary intent associated by definition with the corresponding verb, e.g., statements and promises are not by definition attempts to produce perlocutionary effects in hearers" (Searle, 1976, p. 3).

The second dimension upon which to distinguish illocutionary acts is the direction of fit between words and the world. In short, to succeed, what the speaker meant with the utterance (i.e., the words) and the way the world is should match. But which has primacy? One option is that the world is how it is, and the speaker is trying to produce words that accurately reflect that reality. Alternatively, the words may have primacy: the speaker is trying to change how the world is by producing their utterance. As we will address below, one limitation of Searle's account here is that it only applies to illocutionary acts with propositional content. "Hello" does not have propositional content, for example. But the idea of trying to alter the world by means of one's words will be important for explaining bullshit questions.

Searle's third distinguishing feature of illocutionary acts is the expressed psychological state — or what he elsewhere calls the sincerity condition (Searle, 1969, p. 60). Assertions, for example, express beliefs, requests express desires, and promises express intentions. Though Searle does not say so, a question can be taken as expressing desire generally or a desire to inquire more specifically (or perhaps just

³ We recognize that speakers can convey a question by means other than by producing an utterance that is syntactically a question. What precisely makes a question a question is at present an unresolved question (Schmitz, 2021; Viebahn et al., 2021). Our syntactic limitation on bullshit questions may in the future be able to be lifted as work on the speech act of questions develops.

curiosity). Here, sincerity is insignificant. It does not matter whether the speaker was sincere when making their utterance. The issue is not what psychological state the speaker actually embodied, but rather what psychological state they expressed with their utterance. An insincere assertion still expresses belief. So, an insincere question will still express a desire to know.

These are the main points from speech act theory we will rely on below. Before proceeding, let us briefly reflect on the illocutionary act of asking questions (i.e., not bullshit ones). Asking questions, according to Stocke and Fallis (2017), is part of *inquiry*: “the cooperative project of reaching truth in discourse.” They point out that both lies and bullshit assertions thwart and undermine that project. Although they frame their account in terms of “questions under discussion,” they do not consider the possibility that questions themselves could be bullshit or that a question could perform a non-interrogative illocutionary act. In the following section, we argue that both of these phenomena are possible and provide an account that makes it possible to distinguish bullshit questions from other types of anomalous questions.

3 Questions that aren’t (only) questions

The idea that a question can be more than a question is not new. As Searle (1975, p. 60) notes, a speaker can utter the question “Can you reach the salt?” and mean it as a request (or even command) to pass the salt. In this example, the utterance has the syntactic form of a question, but with that utterance the speaker performs a non-interrogative illocutionary act. The speaker of this question does not expect an answer, at least not a verbal one.⁴ So, perhaps bullshit questions are those for which the speaker does not care what the answer is or whether the question gets answered. This analysis would correspond to the key feature of Frankfurt’s analysis of bullshit assertions, namely that the speaker does not care whether the assertion is true or false. In what follows, we will focus solely on questions that are syntactically interrogative but perform some non-interrogative illocutionary act. We will divide them into three categories: sincere (non-bullshit) questions, bullshit questions, and borderline questions that could be seen either as bullshit or not depending on how one views a range of other factors.

3.1 Sincere non-interrogative questions

While the thumbnail account above is a good start, it is not fit for purpose. It would be overextending the notion of bullshit to claim that all questions that speakers use to do something more than (or instead of) asking a question are bullshit questions. Searle proposes that the reason for the commonality of using questions to express imperatives is politeness. Often, it is impolite to express direct imperatives (“Pass the salt!”) or explicit commands (“I order you to pass the salt!”). Speakers navigate this

⁴ The standard dad-joke response is to take the utterance literally as a question and answer, “Yes, I can,” without passing the salt, leading to sighs and eye-rolling. Such responses show that everyone knows that what syntactically is a question was not performing an interrogative speech act.

politeness requirement by using questions to indirectly accomplish the same goal. This explanation is plausible. These are not bullshit questions.

Yet bullshit questions work in a similar manner. They too take the form of questions. They too are used by speakers to indirectly perform non-interrogative illocutionary acts. The key to understanding bullshit questions is to distinguish them from sincere questions with non-interrogative illocutionary force.

To begin, consider the following examples:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| (Shut Door) | “Can you shut the door?” |
| (Pope) | “Is the Pope Catholic?” |
| (Genius) | “So, you think you’re a genius?” |
| (Socratic) | “So with all other things, justice is useless in their use, but useful when they are not in use?” (Plato, trans. Grube, 1992, 333d). |
| (Quiz) | “What’s $12 + 12$?” |

All of these are questions. Searle (1976, p. 11, n. 2), in his taxonomy of illocutionary acts, regards all questions (these included) as directives, in that by uttering them, the speaker attempts to direct the audience to do something—namely, provide information that answers to the semantic content of the utterance. These examples challenge that analysis, but they are all examples of sincere questions with non-interrogative illocutionary force.

Consider (Shut Door). Commonly, a speaker’s utterance here is an indirect directive, in accordance with Searle’s view. The speaker does not really request information, but instead directs, requests, or orders the audience to shut the door. (Note, however, that it would be felicitous for the hearer to respond, “As a matter of fact, I can’t. The door is jammed open.”) It is imperative, though, to note that this directive can only be achieved when the audience works out what the speaker is conversationally implicating (Grice, 1975) by uttering (Shut Door). The audience can reason out that the speaker would only ask the question if they were directing the audience to shut the door.

The case of (Pope) is different. It is a rhetorical question. No answer is expected. One might be tempted to classify it as a bullshit question. We think that is on the wrong track, for reasons we shall come to soon. For now, note that (Pope) as it is typically used is not a directive. Here, some prior question has already been asked (likely by the audience of (Pope)). To respond to a question with this question is to assert that the answer to both questions is the same. In this case, *<OBVIOUSLY YES>* is the answer to both, with the further implication that the initial questioner is a bit thick.

Likewise, the utterance of (Genius) is not an indirect directive. With (Genius), the speaker performs the illocutionary act of mocking the hearer. The audience is not directed to do anything. Again, the speaker only achieves this mockery if the audience is able to work out the compound conversational implicature that the speaker thinks the audience is not a genius and deserves mockery for acting as if he is a genius. (Genius) is not polite, but it is also not a bullshit question, even though no answer is expected.

(Socratic) is an example from Plato's depiction of Socrates in the *Republic*. While Socrates's questions were not socially well-liked (see Plato's *Apology*), they were not bullshit questions, nor are Socratic questions bullshit when a modern-day instructor uses the Socratic method in the classroom. We propose that while Socratic questioners do often expect at least a pro forma response ("Yes" or "No"), speakers primarily are doing something else besides directing the hearer to respond. Specifically, the illocutionary act that the speaker typically performs by means of a Socratic question is to direct the audience to answer a question for themselves or to notice a now-obvious entailment or contradiction. That is the point of Socratic elenchus. Again, this illocutionary act only succeeds if the audience recognizes that this is what the speaker is trying to do.

Lastly, (Quiz) is an example of a pedagogical question. We imagine a context such as a primary school, where the teacher puts a student on the spot in front of their classmates to prove that the student knows simple addition. The teacher of course knows that the answer is 24, so they are not seeking the answer to the question that they ask. But the teacher is not disrespecting the epistemic agency of the student; indeed, the question is meant as an invitation to *exercise and demonstrate* epistemic agency.

This example is relatively simple, but it can be varied to show that the epistemic goals of quizzing can shift in subtle and interesting ways. For example, a clever student might respond that $12 + 12 = 12$, pointing to the clock on the wall and saying that if we go from noon to midnight and then midnight to noon, we're back at 12. In a more sophisticated context, an examiner might ask a question to which they think they know the sole consensus answer but be surprised by the examinee's response. For instance, according to legend, Niels Bohr was asked during an oral examination how to determine the height of a tall building using a barometer (Calandra, 1968). The examiner was confident that there was only one correct answer (involving measuring pressure at both the top and base of the building), and therefore thought he was quizzing Bohr. But Bohr proposed several alternative (correct) answers, such as hanging the barometer off the top of the building by a rope and summing the length of the rope and the height of the barometer; dropping the barometer off the top of the building, tracking how long it took to crash, and calculating height based on the gravitational acceleration constant at the surface of the Earth; or even bribing the superintendent of the tower by offering him a fancy barometer in return for an accurate report of the height of the building. While potentially apocryphal, the mere possibility of these responses shows that quizzing that starts as a test of knowledge can transform, through the talk exchange, into a case where the questioner becomes informed of unexpected answers to their question. The questioner can be surprised. This possibility in cases of quizzing shows that the quizzier can manifest respect for the epistemic agency of their interlocutor and is therefore not engaged in bullshit questioning. Interestingly, the examples entertained here are different from the case of Mona Lisa Vito in *My Cousin Vinny*. In the courtroom scene, the prosecutor did not know the (or an) answer to the question, and in fact unwittingly introduced a false presupposition. He was solely interested in humiliating Vito. By contrast, in both (Quiz) and the more extended example involving Bohr, the questioner cares about the knowledge, expertise, and epistemic agency of the person being quizzed.

The questions surveyed above do not expect informative answers. Yet they are all sincere questions, not bullshit. Speakers use them to sincerely perform various non-

interrogative illocutionary acts. Their sincerity resides in the fact that the speaker expects the audience to be able to work out what the speaker was trying to do (i.e., what illocutionary act the speaker performed) when making the utterance. What is needed then is an account of bullshit questions that avoids labeling rhetorical questions, exam questions, and disguised imperatives as bullshit, as Easwaran's brief discussion of bullshit questions sometimes fails to do when there is no standing convention.⁵ To accomplish that task, some condition beside not caring about the truth of any potential answer will be required to correctly distinguish between sincere non-interrogative questions and bullshit questions.

3.2 Bullshit questions

To contrast with the sincere questions above, consider the following, all of which we take to be examples of bullshit questions:

(Just Asking)	"Are there any <i>invulnerable</i> communities?"
(Emails)	"What about her [Hillary Clinton's] emails?"
(Pompous)	"How does your post-structural hermeneutics align with the Neo-Derridean critique of structural monism, particularly as presented by Žižek's unpublished discussion of Hegel's clandestine letters to his mistress?"

⁵ Easwaran (2023) allows for the possibility that rhetorical questions, trivia questions, exam questions, etc. are derived from bullshit but by convention no longer are bullshit. In other words, the first time something like (Shut Door) was asked to mean <Shut the door!>, it was bullshit because no answer was expected. Only now that a convention has been established is it not bullshit anymore. This conventionalist escape hatch from bullshit will not work for three reasons. First, on this first utterance, there *was* no convention. Second, despite the lack of a convention, the speaker intended the hearer to be able to work out the intended meaning. Otherwise, the door would remain open, contrary to the speaker's wishes. Therefore, as previously stated, we take the speaker of (Shut Door) to conversationally implicate <Shut the door!>, even before the conventions emerges. Third, if the speaker did not actually mean <Shut the door!> (or wanted to deny that they did), the speaker can cancel the implicature—precisely as Grice's theory requires for conversational implicature—by saying, "I'm not actually asking you to shut it." Finally, and most importantly, because the speaker stills wants their meaning to be clear and for the door to be shut, phrasing their utterance as a question does not by itself obscure what they are trying to do. It merely changes how they are going about it. As we will argue, this is the crucial difference between the sincere (Shut Door) and the bullshit (Just Asking). Only the latter attempts to obscure what is being done. So, even the first time a question was used to express a command, the speaker expected the audience to work out their meaning. Because it worked, the form was used again and again, thereby leading to the development of a convention. Therefore, if a convention develops around using a question (or type of question) in a non-interrogative way, the convention developed because it worked. So, it was not bullshit to begin with. The existence of the conventions is the result of (not the cause of) a question not being bullshit.

That said, we thank one of our referees for pointing out just how close cases of requests by implicature and Just-Asking-Questions bullshit can be. To use their example, a boss might say, "Is anyone available to take the opening shift tomorrow?" When asked if that is an order to work tomorrow, the boss—seeing that their bluff was called—replies, "No, I was just asking." We contend that this response demonstrates the initial question was *not* a sincere question that conversationally implicated an order but rather was a bullshit question all along. Had the boss instead responded, "Yes, it is," then the initial question would not have been bullshit. Thus, it cannot be the form of the question or the absence of convention that makes a question bullshit, but rather the non-cooperative intentions of the speaker.

We contend that all of these are bullshit questions. Interestingly, there are different types of bullshit questions here. Before covering those different types, let's first focus on what unites them. They are all bullshit questions because they all fit the following account (at least in the contexts we will examine).

Bullshit question An illocutionary act wherein.

- A. the utterance is syntactically a question, but.
- B. the speaker does not care about the truth of the answer or, in some cases, whether the question is answered at all (i.e., the speaker is epistemically insouciant when uttering the question), and.
- C. the speaker intends to perform a non-interrogative illocutionary act by means of the utterance, and.
- D. in performing (C), the speaker intends to obscure the nature or existence of that intended non-interrogative illocutionary act to some audience (at least to some extent).

We claim that the examples in this section all satisfy these conditions and so are bullshit, while the previous examples in § 2.1 do not. To make that argument, several elements of this definition require explanation or defense, which we shall provide as we proceed through the examples. The first regards obscurity in (D). As the disjunct captures, there are two ways a bullshit question can be obscure about what illocutionary act is being performed. The first is *existential obscurity*: it is unclear whether or not a non-interrogative illocutionary act was being performed. The second form of obscurity is *categorical obscurity*: it is unclear what non-interrogative illocutionary act is being performed (if any). When present, either obscurity will provide a speaker with what we call the *veneer of deniability*: the speaker will have the future conversational affordance of being able to deny that they were performing a non-interrogative illocutionary act. As we will show, there are two kinds of bullshit questions corresponding to these two types of obscurity. Questions with categorical obscurity are *fully obscure bullshit questions*. In contrast, *minimally obscure bullshit questions* only possess existential obscurity. We will discuss this latter kind in § 2.3, as they represent more borderline cases of bullshit questions on the spectrum of sincere non-interrogative questions to fully obscure bullshit questions.

Let's start with (Just Asking), which is a question that James Rosen of right-wing Newsmax asked White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on 13 September, 2024 during the US Presidential election.⁶ For context, Donald Trump and his running mate, J. D. Vance, were spreading malicious rumors that Haitian immigrants to Springfield, Ohio were killing and eating the pet dogs and cats of other denizens. Jean-Pierre called out Trump and Vance, especially after bomb threats had been made against the community and the city. Jean-Pierre, who is Haitian American herself, had just said that "Political leaders should not be attacking vulnerable communities."

⁶ See URL=<<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2024/09/13/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-september-13-2024/>>, accessed 13 September, 2024.

Rosen responded by uttering (Just Asking). Jean-Pierre refused to answer, and Rosen responded, “I’m just asking a question.”⁷

(Just Asking) is a bullshit question. It was (or at least should have been) clear in context that when Jean-Pierre referred to “vulnerable communities,” she meant *especially* vulnerable communities, which would clearly include Haitian immigrants who were being maligned and threatened. Though Rosen’s utterance was syntactically a question, questioning was not the illocutionary act Rosen was performing here. It was asked with a clear disregard for truth; Rosen did not really care whether there are invulnerable communities. Rosen neither expected an answer nor cared what answer Jean-Pierre might give and was instead seeking a soundbite for cable news coverage. So, what illocutionary act was Rosen trying to perform? As Rosen himself indicated, the act performed is that of Just Asking Questions (or JAQing off, as it is sometimes called), which we identify as a kind of bullshit question. Yet, traditional (often idealized) accounts of context, common ground, or accepted purpose of a talk exchange are inadequate to handle examples like (Just Asking) (Keiser, 2023). We can compare this sort of utterance to the retort “All lives matter” when activists insist that “Black lives matter” (Alfano et al., 2023). The point that activists are trying to make with this slogan, at least in most cases, is that Black lives matter in a way that is not acknowledged and appreciated, not that *only* Black lives matter. In the same way, Jean-Pierre was pointing out that this Haitian immigrant community was vulnerable in a way that was not acknowledged and appreciated, and Rosen’s question was aimed at transforming that comparative claim into a categorical question about whether any group is truly invulnerable. So, we see JAQing off as a form of presupposition manipulation. The speaker aims to alter in some way what is being presupposed in the context up to that point in a communicative exchange. In this case, the standing presupposition was that Haitian immigrant community was especially vulnerable. Rosen’s question was meant to stealthily alter the presupposition to hold that only some communities (including the Haitian immigrant community) are vulnerable at all. Hence, (Just Asking) exhibits categorical obscurity. By syntactically structuring the statement as a question, Rosen was attempting to obscure his presupposition manipulation (hoping that it will be more effective by doing so), i.e., attempting to disguise the illocutionary act he was performing. So, (Just Asking) highlights the fact that fully obscure bullshit questions exhibit categorical obscurity because the illocutionary act is more likely to be effective if it is disguised.

Furthermore, pretending to ask a question furnished Rosen a veneer of deniability: he was not on the hook in quite the same way that he would have been if he had outright asserted that Haitian immigrants were not urgently in need of protection from racist, xenophobic conspiracy theories and the vigilante intimidation and violence they inspire. By phrasing the utterance as a question, those engaged in JAQing off keep open the possibility of denying that they were attempting anything nefari-

⁷ We note that Jean-Pierre could have responded with a bullshit question of her own. She would have been well within her rights to respond, “Does J.D. Vance in fact fornicate with furniture, copulate with couches, do the dirty with the davenport? Just asking!” JAQing off can cut both ways across the political spectrum. It also suggests that some bullshit questions may not be all-things-considered wrong or objectionable, as we discuss in more detail below.

ous, even if few find such denials plausible. To say you are “just asking questions” amounts to asserting, “Oh, I didn’t mean *that*.”⁸

Next consider (Emails), which was a common refrain heard during the 2016 US Presidential election. It was typically uttered by right-wing supporters of Donald Trump to deflect concerns about his trustworthiness back onto his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Clinton had previously used a private server to send emails with classified material while serving as Secretary of State. In the runup to the election, this information was made public, along with the fact that thousands of the emails had been automatically deleted before they were reviewed. (Emails) is another kind of bullshit question. Typically, speakers of (Emails) did not care what answer their question received or whether it was answered at all. Given the disregard for truth on display here, we again must inquire regarding what actual illocutionary act they were trying to perform. The point, the objective speakers were trying to achieve with (Emails), was to hijack the conversation in order to shut down questions about Trump. Here, the key to success is not the manipulation of presuppositions, but rather the constant repetition of (Emails). This use of repetition for conversational hijacking is the hallmark of our second kind of bullshit questions, namely sealioning.⁹ Green (2022) describes sealioning as asking bad faith questions in order to disrupt a conversation. Likewise, Sullivan et al. (2020) characterize sealioning as “incessant, bad-faith invitations to engage in debate.” By asking a question, the sealion interrupts the flow of conversation, demanding immediate answers to one or more questions, which are regarded as trivial or settled by the other interlocutors. If the interlocutor answers the questions, the conversation has been successfully hijacked. If the interlocutor refuses to answer the questions, then the sealion can play the victim, accusing their interlocutor of bad faith for refusing to answer “legitimate” questions. Finally, as with (Just Asking), this question exhibits categorical obscurity; sealioning’s conversational hijacking is more likely to succeed if the audience does not recognize what the speaker is doing. Additionally, the obscurity creates the veneer of deniability.

Before proceeding, it is worth briefly remarking on the relationship between JAQ-ing off and sealioning. They have often been taken as synonymous (Claeys, 2024), but we contend there is a difference. One can engage in sealioning by means of JAQ-ing off. All one need do is just ask the same question over and over and over (or related or follow-up questions, which would work too). But the two illocutionary acts of bullshit can also come apart, as they do in (Just Asking) and (Emails.) The key feature of JAQing off is the covert manipulation of presuppositions. For sealioning, the key feature is the conversational hijacking, typically by means of repetition. With

⁸ According to Grice’s theory of implicature, such a response would appear to be the speaker canceling the conversational implicature. Canceling an apparent conversational implicature amounts to a speaker recognizing how their utterance might be pragmatically misconstrued to implicate something the speaker did not mean, and then the speaker makes clear that apparent implicature was not meant. Saying “Just asking!” *looks* a lot like that. It is supposed to. JAQing off exploits the cancelability of apparent implicatures. There are two problems, however. First, the hearer has little to no reason to believe the speaker is sincere in their denial. Second, the harmful manipulation of presuppositions is still achieved regardless of whether or not the speaker claims to cancel the implicature.

⁹ The term was coined in an online comic. See URL=<<https://wondermark.com/c/1062/>>, accessed 9 September, 2024.

(Just Asking), the journalist was not trying to hijack the conversation. Presumably, he was well aware of the power dynamics in the White House Press Room. As Press Secretary, Jean-Pierre had the power to shut down a line of questioning and move on to another journalist, as she in fact did. The conversation was not hijacked, but what was being presupposed was manipulated so that any good faith response by Jean-Pierre had to directly address the new presupposition. By contrast, for utterances of (Emails), the hijacking was the point. There may have been a degree of presupposition manipulation at play as well—specifically to the right-wing ideology that the Clintons are not to be trusted—but that was secondary.

(Pompous) is the sort of pretentious question that might be asked during the Q&A of a philosophy colloquium. It's not so different from the question asked of Mona Lisa Vito in the example from *My Cousin Vinny* with which we started. The speaker demonstrates a disregard for inquiry because they are not looking for an answer and are uninterested in whatever words are offered in response. The point of the question is to show off familiarity with various concepts and people. The goal is to impress the audience and likely also to get everyone to think the questioner is smarter than the person who just gave the talk (and is now supposed to respond to this word salad of a question). The obscuring of what act is performed here is twofold. First, the questioner has to make it look like they are asking the question in good faith, when in fact the illocutionary act is akin to bragging (Alfano & Robinson, 2014). The questioner disguises the illocutionary act being performed on the assumption that it is more likely to succeed that way, so again we have categorical obscurity. Secondly, the speaker is also trying to deceive the audience into thinking that they (the questioner) understand this complex question combining lots of jargon, name-dropping, and isms. (It's actually nonsense or what psychologists sometimes call pseudo-profound bullshit, (Pennycook et al., 2015), except here stated as a question instead of an assertion.) Most philosophers have heard bullshit questions like this during Q&A and are all too familiar with the genre. It bears noting, however, that if a speaker lacked both deceptive intentions, then this question would *not* be bullshit, but asked sincerely, albeit with unnecessary pomposity that would likely conceal the questioner's meaning.

3.3 Borderline bullshit questions

Some questions are clearly bullshit and some clearly are not. Not every case, however, can be cleanly decided. There are sometimes legitimate grounds for dispute about a case for reasons secondary to the definition of bullshit questions. In other words, we contend that two reasonable interlocutors could hold the same account of bullshit questions and nevertheless reach differing conclusions about whether a particular utterance was a bullshit question. Bullshit questions exist on a spectrum. Any attempt on our part to suppress such debate here by dictating the correct answer in all cases would be philosophically futile. A good account of bullshit questions—or any speech act for that matter—should capture its core while also explaining the reason behind differing intuitions on cases. To that end, we offer the following example of borderline bullshit questions.

(Terms)	“Do you accept the terms and services listed above for this app?”
(Weather)	“What do you think of the weather today?”
(Star Sign)	“So, what’s your star sign?”

The three utterances in § 2.2 were all examples of fully obscure bullshit questions because they each exhibited categorical obscurity. These new examples, by contrast, are only a minimally obscure bullshit question. A different sort of obscurity is present in these cases—if it exists at all—what we call existential obscurity. It is unclear, and so arguable, whether or not a non-interrogative illocutionary act was being performed. Consequently, these are cases of borderline bullshit questions that stand in the middle of the non-bullshit to fully bullshit questions spectrum. Reasonable people with the same account of bullshit questions could disagree on each case. But if one is bullshit, it is only a minimally obscure bullshit question, different in kind from those in § 2.2.¹⁰

First consider (Terms). Most readers will be familiar with being asked whether they agree to a long list of terms and conditions before using software. Almost no one reads all of that, and even fewer understand it. Those asking questions like (Terms) do not actually expect us to have read it all. So again, we have a disregard for truth or inquiry. (Terms) raises an interesting question regarding our condition (D), namely whether the speaker is trying to obscure what illocutionary act they are performing. We use ‘obscure’ rather than ‘deceive’ intentionally here. Frankfurt (1986) originally defined bullshit as requiring deception. Carson (2010), however, rejects this insistence on deception for bullshit assertions. His example of deceptionless bullshit is a student who submits an off-topic, rambling, nonsensical paper just to get an F instead of no credit at all. The student is not trying to deceive the professor. It’s just that the student gets a reward for saying something instead of nothing. So, Carson claims, the student bullshitted without intending to deceive. If Carson is right, then presumably bullshit questions should also not require deception. (Terms) would be a prime example of a deceptionless bullshit question, at least for those with intuitions similar to Carson’s.

So here, we have no real deception, only existential obscurity. We, the audience, are not being deceived as to what we agree to. We could go read all the preceding legal nonsense. The questioner (i.e., the software company) is rewarded for asking a question instead of doing nothing due to a host of legal background conditions. By asking, they get legal coverage from litigation. They can now deny that they were merely seeking liability protection and genuinely wanted informed consent. No one is deceived, but obscurity exists all the same. So, the utterance of (Terms) is a minimally obscure bullshit question. Of the three examples in this section, we think the case is strongest for (Terms) being a bullshit question, though we recognize a case could be made to the contrary without rejecting our overall account of bullshit questions.

¹⁰ If one were to insist that questions like “Can you reach the salt?” were bullshit (or used to be prior to present conventions), then it would be minimally obscure bullshit like the examples in this section. As discussed in footnote 5, we disagree with this view but wish to emphasize that our taxonomy can easily accommodate this view.

If this line of thought is on the right track, then there remains a question as to what distinguishes minimally obscure bullshit questions like (Terms) from the sincere non-interrogative questions we started with. While someone could say, “Can you pass the salt?” and then deny they meant that as an order or request for the audience to pass the salt, typically they have no reason to do so. Hence, the question was not uttered in order to create the veneer of deniability. Minimally bullshit questions occur when something incentivizes speakers to be able to deny they were doing what they did. It might be social norms, legal norms, or even the audience’s personal preferences. For (Terms), it is legal protection. So, to save face, the speaker wants to be able to deny doing that. For sincere non-interrogative illocutionary acts, there is no such incentive to deniability.

A speaker can utter (Weather) as a genuine question, asking for the audience’s meteorological opinions. We envision a different context in which the audience has just introduced a topic of conversation that the speaker of (Weather) dislikes and wants to change. Is it a bullshit question? A case can be made both ways. For many, it may depend on two questions. First, did the speaker mean to discreetly or obviously change the topic of conversation? Second, was changing the topic of conversation morally acceptable?

Suppose the speaker finds the prior topic morally abhorrent. The speaker then conversationally implicates that they do not want to talk about that topic (Grice, 1975, p. 54). They want their refusal to talk about that topic to be obvious. The speaker may also perform a secondary directive illocutionary act of requesting the audience drop this new conversational topic. The point is that here, the speaker’s illocutionary act with (Weather) is not solely (or at least primarily) a directive. When used this way, (Weather) is not a bullshit question.

At least, this is how an utterance of (Weather) can appear to some. Others may regard the same case differently. Maybe the speaker did not conversationally implicate their disdain for the topic. Instead, the speaker was trying to hide the fact that they did not like this topic. Were it known, that distaste for the prior topic could socially isolate the speaker, leading to taunts or ostracism. So, the change of topic was meant to be discreet. If one were to analyze an utterance of (Weather) in this way, they would smell a bullshit question. But if it is bullshit, it is only a minimally obscure bullshit question. Once it is clear that the speaker was doing something other than asking a question, it is readily apparent what that non-interrogative illocutionary act is. That is the hallmark of minimally obscure bullshit questions.

Similarly (Star Sign) is an example of a borderline bullshit question, in this case that one might use as a pick-up line at a bar. Typically, in such contexts, the speaker of (Star Sign) does not care whether the answer elicited is true. It is asked with a disregard for truth. But the speaker does care that an answer is given and what the answer is, since that provides the opportunity for further conversational gambits (“Taurus?! No way! Me too!” or “Scorpio? Danger... <wink>.”) The point is to start a conversation with a stranger with whom the speaker has no prior common ground.

The question is whether the attempt to pick up the hearer is meant to be noticed or obscured. It largely comes down to whether or not one believes there is a convention in place of using (Star Sign) as a pickup line. Easwaran’s appeal to convention was on the right track, we contend, because if there is a convention then the actual illocution-

ary act performed is meant to be recognized in virtue of the convention. In the case of hitting on a stranger at the bar, speakers are rewarded (at least sometimes) for saying something rather than nothing. By making an utterance like (Star Sign), the speaker does something, and so creates the potential for the romantic reward they envision.

But does the speaker intend for their actual illocutionary act to be recognized? Again, two plausible interpretations exist. By phrasing their utterance as a question, the speaker creates room to deny what they were actually doing. Suppose the audience does not like being hit on. The speaker could respond, “I wasn’t hitting on you! I really care about astrology!” That may be enough to avoid a slap or a drink in the face. This denial may not be plausible, however, which is why the interrogative syntax only gives the veneer of deniability. In this game of hitting on strangers, it is enough of a penalty mitigation to make the potential reward worth the risk, which is why the speaker uses (Star Sign) instead of a more direct method for starting the conversation. The speaker’s phrasing creates at least a tiny bit of existential obscurity as to whether some non-interrogative illocutionary act is performed. So, on this reading of the utterance, it is minimally obscure bullshit.

That said, by using such a widely recognized pick-up line, the speaker indirectly signals their intention. It is much more likely to work if the audience recognizes the signal. In that case, this utterance is not categorical obscurity. The question only provides this veneer of deniability. The veneer, however, wears thin. Asking someone their star sign has become so conventionalized as a pickup line that a slew of bad comedy has been written on the basis of that convention. It is why we could use it as an obvious example. The audience is meant to pick up on the fact that the speaker is trying to pick them up, to flirt. So, on this reading it is not bullshit.

This analysis explains why some will regard the same utterance of (Star Sign) differently. The larger point of our analysis though is to place (Star Sign) and similar utterances in the middle of the spectrum of bullshit questions, a zone we call minimally obscure bullshit.

4 When is it wrong to ask a bullshit question?

We take it that it is relatively intuitive that asking bullshit questions is *pro tanto* wrong. In general, that wrongness is why they are used: to obscure what the speaker is actually doing because that illocutionary act is wrong. They can derail inquiry, which aims at the epistemic good, and can manifest disrespect for the epistemic agency of the audience (a form of epistemic insouciance). Thwarting the good and acting disrespectfully are *pro tanto* wrong, so bullshit questions are presumptively wrong. When they express and further habituate a vicious character trait of the bullshitter, namely epistemic insouciance—i.e., disregard for truth and inquiry—it is even more problematic.¹¹ Importantly, as Whitcomb (2023; see also Frankfurt, 1986) points out, bullshitters harm the community of inquiry by cultivating epistemic insouciance in others and leading others to expect a disregard for truth as part of normal discourse.

¹¹ Not all bullshit questions express such underlying character traits, but the more one engages in such speech acts, the more liable one is to cultivate such traits.

Such cynicism and epistemic disorientation can lead to a kind of malaise (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 36). So, the pro tanto wrongness of bullshit questions stems not from covering up something wrong, but rather because bullshit questions express and cultivate epistemic insouciance, which itself is pro tanto wrong.

Bullshit questions are a powerful species of bullshit, in terms of their potential for derailing conversations, especially inquiries, because they invite answers and therefore explicitly invite others to contribute to a bullshit conversation. While Frankfurt, Cassam, Stokke, and Fallis have connected the wrongness of bullshit to an insouciance with regard to truth or inquiry (Frankfurt, 1986, Stokke & Fallis 2017; Cassam, 2018), the nature of bullshit questions reveals that there is more to the wrongness of bullshit than mere disregard for the truth or epistemic goals in general.

Since a bullshit question is a question intended to obscure the real non-interrogative illocutionary act, there is always a sense in which the bullshit question is insouciant, and insouciant about respect to other agents in the discussion. Whether bullshit is wrong or not also depends on the content of the bullshit. The wrongness of bullshit questions, and perhaps other bullshit too, can be understood by answering three questions:

- **How epistemically insouciant is the question?** Or, in other words, how much does the question demonstrate disregard for the truth or inquiry? The inappropriateness of epistemic insouciance depends on the epistemic stakes of the context in which the bullshit occurs.
- **How disrespectful is the speaker of the epistemic agency of others?** The same bullshit question can be asked in a way that compromises the epistemic agency of others more or less, independently of how epistemically insouciant the question is. For example, a sealion who keeps asking the same question, thereby hijacking the conversation, imposes their own agenda on others much more than someone asking one loaded question. Sealioning disrespects the epistemic agency of others much more in general because it is incessant and leaves even less space for others to contribute meaningfully to the inquiry at hand.
- **How morally deplorable is the ideology or presupposition of the question?** Is the bullshit question covertly inserting a problematic ideology into the common ground or hijacking the conversation towards a problematic ideology or presupposition (such as “Haitians are violent”)? Alternatively, is it less problematic presupposition or ideology (such as “I know an impressive amount about continental philosophy.”)?

We will go through each of these aspects in turn and show how they can help us assess the wrongness of different types of bullshit questions.

First, let’s consider the wrongness of disregarding truth or inquiry in the context of bullshit questions. Why is it bad to manifest epistemic insouciance? Bullshit questions are especially bad when they are used in a high-stakes epistemic context. Bullshit in general disregards the epistemic goals of whatever discussion it is uttered in, and risks thwarting the pursuit of these goals. Bullshit questions invite answers. Whereas the bullshit asserter individually derails the conversation, the bullshit questioner sometimes attempts to induce their interlocutor to become an active collabora-

tor in the hijacking. When a speaker engages in sealioning, part of the objective is to force the interlocutor to respond. By contrast, flirting with someone in a bar (Star Sign), tends not to be a high-stakes epistemic context, which is why bullshit questions are less deplorable in cases of small-talk and flirting. Additionally, in these low-stakes contexts, there was no prior conversation or inquiry to derail. Bullshitting in cases with high epistemic stakes is especially wrong because it shows an inappropriately high amount of epistemic insouciance. A high-stakes epistemic context is one that brings with it the possibility of negative consequences as a result of getting things wrong. One example of such a consequence might be the effects of bullshit questions on gullible audiences. For example, consider the case of Edgar Maddison Welch, who on 4 December, 2016 burst into Comet Ping Pong, a popular pizzeria in Washington DC, carrying a rifle and a pistol.¹² In an apoplectic rage, he pointed the rifle at an employee and then fired it into a cabinet. Welch had been taken in by the PizzaGate conspiracy theory, which was propagated by bullshit artists who raised questions about whether Hilary Clinton was running a child sex abuse ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong. He told police that he was there to “self-investigate” the questions that had been raised by these conspiracy peddlers.

While epistemic insouciance is *pro tanto* wrong, there might be good reasons sometimes to put aside the regard for truth especially if it is a low-stakes epistemic context. Asking someone “How are you?” as you both pass one another might be minimally obscure bullshit. But it often serves a social function, conveying that the speaker cares about the hearer, even though they lack the time to listen to a response properly. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with flirty bullshit questions at the bar, if the other is a willing participant. However, the fact that many people detest small talk, finding it inauthentic and boring, shows that its felt bullshitty nature prevails even despite its positive social functions.

The second aspect of wrongness in bullshit questions is the extent of disrespect for others’ epistemic agency. It is one thing to be insouciant towards truth itself, but it is another to hamper meaningful contributions of others, and therefore disrespect them as epistemic agents, by derailing the discussion. There are even cases where a bullshit questioner might care about whether their own beliefs are accurate yet manifest no concern for whether their interlocutor’s beliefs are connected to reality or supported by evidence, and whether they even understand their interlocutor. Instead, they use the interlocutor as a mere prop, as in the case of (Just Asking). If this is the case, then they disrespect the interlocutor in a specific way: they disrespect the interlocutor as an epistemic agent, i.e., someone capable of joining the project of inquiry, collecting evidence, making inferences, forming beliefs in proportion to the evidence, setting the agenda for further inquiry, offering testimony that is likely to receive uptake, and so on. The bullshitter prevents others from contributing to the discussion meaningfully and in the way they intend.

¹² See URL=<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2017/01/18/cbs-affiliates-big-question-why-no-law-enforcement-investigation-of-pizzagate-allegations/>> and URL=<<https://www.daytondailynews.com/blog/jamie-dupree/infowars-alex-jones-apologizes-for-pushing-pizzagate-conspiracy-theory/wTtIdQG1ttBVhWaxZ3F5M/>>, both accessed 18 August, 2024.

Fricker (2018; see also Medina, 2018) points out that the wrong of epistemic injustice — another intellectual vice that has received a great deal of attention — is to the epistemic self-respect of the other person. Our diagnosis thus fits nicely with other accounts of epistemic wrongs. If this is on the right track, it also helps to explain why it seems counterintuitive to class certain types of questions as objectionable, even if the questioner is not seeking information about the content of the question from their interlocutor. Let's return to rhetorical questions like (Pope) or (Weather). As discussed above, these are only questions syntactically; pragmatically, they are assertions in a trench coat. The speaker conversationally implicates a proposition by means of the uttered question, a proposition that the speaker expects the hearer to be able to work out. The questions involved in catechisms and ritualized Soviet show trials probably fall into the same category. But suppose, as Easwaran (2023) does, that some rhetorical questions still carry a bit of interrogative force: the questioner is pretty sure of the answer to their own question, but they would be willing to listen if the interlocutor were to answer to the contrary. Such questions are not insouciant because the questioner cares about the truth and the evidential support for both her own belief and the belief of her interlocutor. Moreover, such questions do not manifest disrespect for the epistemic agency of the interlocutor; instead, the interlocutor is taken seriously as a member of the community of inquiry.

Disrespecting the epistemic agency of others is often wrong. However, sometimes there are good reasons to override others' epistemic agency in the context of an inquiry. For example, in the case of a police interrogation of a suspect, the police might ask questions they already know the answer to or ask deliberately misleading questions to test the truthfulness of the suspect. So long as the police's suspicion is warranted, it can be permissible not to treat the suspect as a full dialogical partner in the inquiry about who committed the crime.

Lastly, the severity of the wrongness of bullshit questioning also depends on both the veritistic value of the content expressed and the illocutionary force and intentions motivating the question. There is a big difference between the wrongness of self-righteous or pretentious bullshit and hateful, racist, or misogynistic bullshit. If the speaker, as in (Pompous), asks a pretentious question after a talk just to show off how smart they are, then presumably the content conveyed is something like "I'm very smart and well-read, as you can see by the jargon and references I used." By contrast, in the case of (Just Asking), the speaker is arguably manipulating the presupposition of the exchange to legitimize racist attacks on an immigrant community. Clearly, the latter is more objectionable. This point is significant because it shows that the wrongness of a bullshit question does not simply correspond with the kind of bullshit question. Both (Pompous) and (Just Asking) are fully obscure. Yet, we can more readily excuse (Pompous) than (Just Asking).

The tripartite account of the wrongness of bullshit can separate the innocent examples from the objectionable ones. Cases of small-talk-related bullshit are generally innocent, because the epistemic stakes are low, and hence the insouciance toward truth is not so problematic. Similarly, small talk is generally not disrespectful of another's epistemic agency. This is related to the fact that stakes are low, and therefore allowing others their epistemic agency is not as important either. Small talk also generally has positive affect or maintenance of a certain atmosphere as its intended

illocutionary force, not problematic beliefs. Asking (Emails) repeatedly in a televised debate would typically amount to a bullshit question. The epistemic stakes are high, so disregarding truth or inquiry is unacceptable. The speaker hijacks the discussion and therefore disrespects the epistemic agency of others, who might have much to contribute to the discussion. And, if the accusations implied by the email question are false, the speaker covertly introduces false information as a presupposition.

Turn next to the case of an investigative journalist who interviews the same person multiple times and also attempts to corroborate their testimony with other sources. At some point, the journalist might ask a question, the answer to which the journalist already knows. There are multiple reasons why a journalist might do this. They might know, but in a fallibilist way, such that they would be willing to reconsider, were they to receive a surprising answer. This possibility does not strike us as insouciant or disrespectful. They might know but be curious whether the interviewee is informed, misinformed, ignorant, or a liar. Depending on the details, such a question might or might not be insouciant and disrespectful of the epistemic agency of the interviewee. Likewise, when corroborating across sources, the journalist might be asking not so much in order to seek information but rather to establish the trustworthiness (or not) of the previous interviewee. Investigative journalists occupy a Janus-faced role in communities of inquiry, as they simultaneously try to uncover the truth by garnering the trust of informants while keeping various aspects of the inquiry obscure, since in many cases they are looking into potential wrongdoing, corruption, or criminality by the rich and powerful. This is indicative of the fact that there is no such thing as “the” community of inquiry; instead, there are multiple, sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-conflictual, communities of inquiry. The case of interrogation is similar. In an interview with a witness who might also have been a perpetrator, a detective might genuinely be prepared to treat their interlocutor with epistemic trust, as a member of a community of inquiry. In a fully adversarial interrogation, this possibility is less likely. Police often ask the people they interrogate the same question multiple times (Kelly et al., 2013). To manifest respect for the epistemic agency of members of some might mean manifesting disrespect for the epistemic agency of members of another. As Sterelny (2003) puts it, thought occurs in a (sometimes) hostile world.

More speculatively, we want to invoke Bernard Mandeville’s notion of virtues and vices (1714/1989) to consider whether there are cases of innocent mild epistemic insouciance without hostility, i.e., mandevillian epistemic insouciance. In recent years, a small literature has built up on the phenomenon of mandevillian intelligence, virtue, and vice (Smart, 2018a, b; Astola, 2021; Astola et al., 2024; Bland, 2022, 2024). Mandevillian virtues are conceptualized as individually epistemically or morally vicious dispositions that, in the right collective context, contribute positively to the moral or epistemic functioning of the group. For instance, in an adversarial collective inquiry, a little bit of confirmation bias on both sides can lead the group to fully explore the logical space and consider a wider range of reasons and arguments (see, among others, Mercier & Sperber, 2017; Gabriel & O’Connor, 2024). Our suggestion is that a little bit of epistemic insouciance and the bullshit questions it engenders may lead to similar outcomes. Consider: one reason collective inquiry sometimes fails is that the group too quickly canalizes on just one line of inquiry (Zollman, 2010). Often, this is the most promising line of inquiry, given the avail-

able evidence, so it is hard to criticize this pattern. However, it can lead the group to neglect less promising questions that, were they to be followed up, would turn out to be surprisingly fruitful.

One way to avoid this canalization is adversarial collaboration or enshrining and protecting the role of the devil's advocate. Another, however, would be to foster or tolerate a modicum of epistemic insouciance in a handful of the group's members. This would free them of the epistemic burden that sometimes comes with proposing a direction of inquiry for the group. It is not their responsibility to defend the reasonableness of the question (they are "just asking questions," after all), and it is also sufficiently low stakes that no one feels like a jerk for rejecting most of their questions. Asking such questions on one's own would be epistemically deleterious, but it is plausible that in some cases, the insouciant questioner would stumble upon a question that steers the conversation off topic, but into a useful direction. If this is right, then some bullshit questions, in the right communal contexts, would be positively epistemically valuable in virtue of their interrogative force.

Caution is warranted here. We are not suggesting that such bullshit questions are highly prevalent. We are also aware that the tendency to ask such questions can easily shade into JAQing off that lowers the quality of deliberation. We also think that the underlying epistemic insouciance needs to be managed carefully. Such insouciance should probably only be adopted temporarily as a stance, rather than longitudinally as a trait (Cassam, 2018). Since one is not always in a salubrious group context, being saddled with the trait of epistemic insouciance is probably too high a price to pay — both for the individual and for the other groups to which they belong — for the rare benefits that it provides in the right groups. We are also aware that some readers may find the notion of epistemically valuable bullshit questions incoherent, so we offer this reflection tentatively and as a normative claim, rather than a point about how the term 'bullshit question' is already used in ordinary language.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we developed an account of bullshit questions that draws on the literature on bullshit assertions. We distinguished bullshit questions from other sorts of anomalous questions such as rhetorical questions. According to our account, bullshit questions are characterized by the indifference of the speaker to the truth of any answer she might receive. Instead, the bullshit questioner is up to something else, typically a non-interrogative illocutionary act such as introducing a presupposition, insinuating a derogatory sentiment, implying a proposition, making an accusation, flirting, and so on. They also exist on a spectrum, with some cases more obviously bullshit than others. If this view is right, it naturally raises the normative question of whether bullshit questions are wrong and whether bullshit questioners are blameworthy and vicious. In the final section, we addressed these questions, arguing that bullshit questions are pro tanto wrong because they often thwart inquiry, manifest the vice of epistemic insouciance, express disrespect for the epistemic agency of the interlocutor, introduce epistemic malaise, and can lead to the opening of dangerous inquiries by gullible audiences. We then considered a range of cases in which the pro

tanto wrongness of bullshit questioning is arguably overridden by competing reasons. We hope that this contribution sheds light on both the nature and normativity of bullshit questions, and look forward to future research that explores a range of other bullshit speech acts, such as bullshit promises, bullshit commands, bullshit apologies, bullshit congratulations, bullshit thanks, bullshit warnings (Easwaran, 2023), bullshit threats, bullshit offers, bullshit protests (sometimes called “astroturfing,” e.g. Schoch et al., 2022), and bullshit praise and blame (sometimes called “virtue signaling,” e.g., Levy, 2021).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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