**What’s Wrong with Bullshit Jobs**

**Abstract (500 words)**

In *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*(2018), David Graeber sketches a theory of the nature of employment in modern economies according to which a large part of contemporary work is ‘bullshit’ – utterly pointless work undertaken to appear industrious while doing nothing of real value. According to Graeber, automation has erased the necessity for the levels of work people routinely perform. However, rather than move to a radically shortened working week, new ‘bullshit jobs’ have been invented to ensure that workers keep working as hard as they always have in order to ‘earn’ an income that can be spent on leisure. Based on the absurdity of the amount of bullshit work that is needed to prop up a consumerist economy, Graeber calls for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) to de-couple work and income.

In this paper I criticise not Graeber’s overall analysis of contemporary employment and consumption, but his exact theory of bullshit jobs. In particular, I take issue with two aspects of Graeber’s theory: (1) that he provides a *subjective*analysis of the bullshit job (based on the employee’s perception of the worth of their job) and (2) that he situates his analysis on the level of a whole position or job role (and therefore ignores that all jobs can contain individual tasksthat are bullshit). Because Graeber provides a subjective account of bullshit job roles, I hold, he misidentifies the chief harm associated with bullshit jobs as the psychological harm done to the person forced to perform a bullshit job. I hold that, by focusing on the harm that bullshit work does to the worker who performs it, Graeber ignores a number of other wrongs associated with bullshit work, in particular, wrongs done to: (1) consumers who pay for real work, but are palmed off with bullshit, (2) stakeholders who lose productive opportunities associated with quality work and have to squander effort dealing with bullshit instead and (3) society in general, that suffers a loss of trust in institutions.

To remedy these shortcomings, I sketch an alternative account of bullshit work. Based on Harry Frankfurt’s (1986) classic analysis of *bullshit assertion*, according to which bullshitting is making an assertion without caring whether it is true or not,I sketch a theory of bullshit jobs according to which a bullshit work performance is one in which the worker does not care whether the performance is productive or not, but fraudulently presents the performance as productive. This alternative theory of bullshit work, I hold, makes assessing whether a task is bullshit a more objective matter. Furthermore, because it is more fine-grained, it can pick out a greater variety of bullshit in contemporary work. Lastly, because the theory identifies bullshit work as a particular form of dishonesty, akin to fraud, it is easier to show how everyone or a whole system of work suffers from bullshit work. In the end, I hold, bullshit work is not only a problem for exploited and demoralised workers, but for everyone.

**Keywords**

bullshit, bullshit jobs, Frankfurt, Graeber, assertion, ethics of work

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