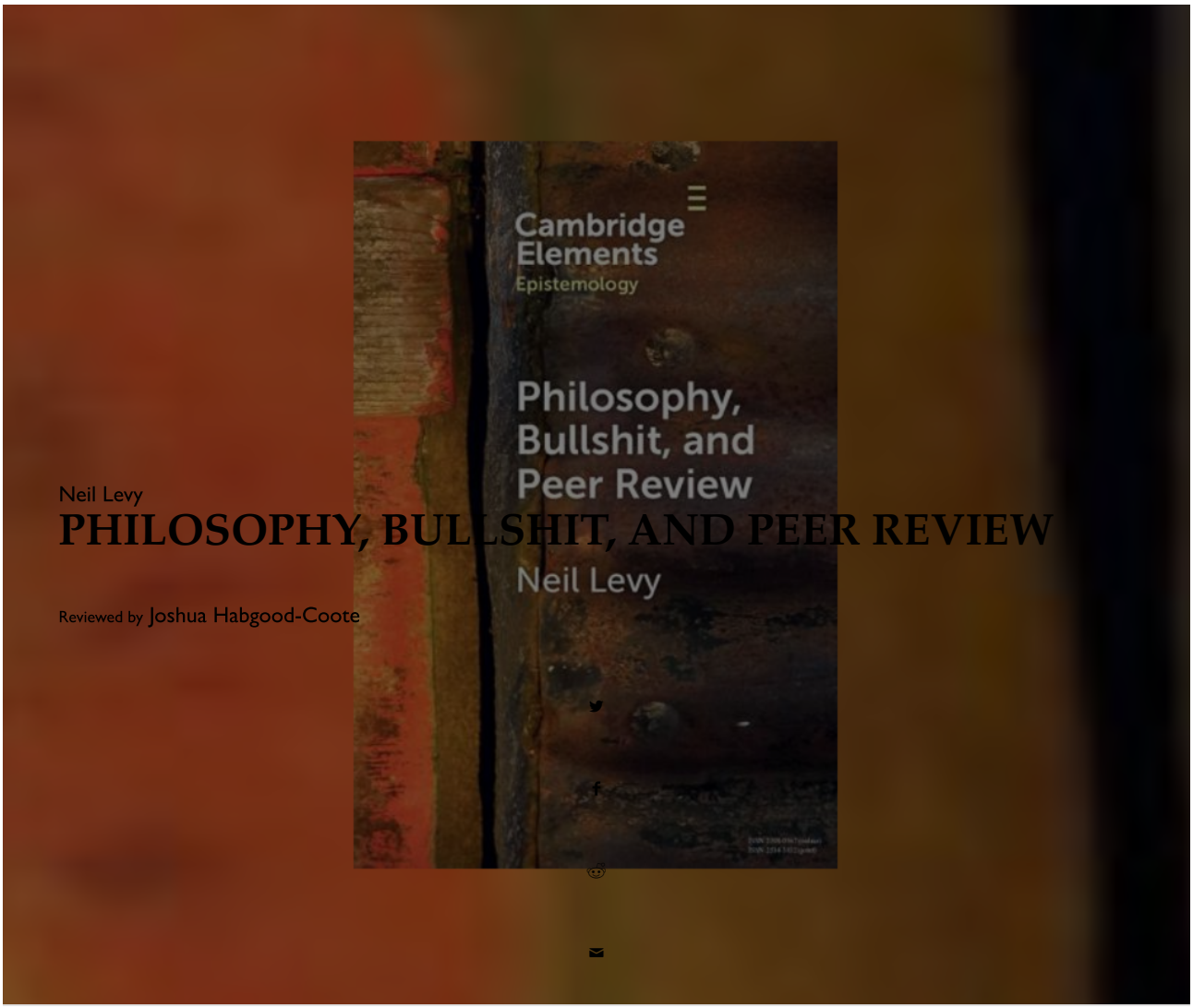

Neil Levy

PHILOSOPHY, BULLSHIT, AND PEER REVIEW

Reviewed by Joshua Habgood-Coote

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Nothing in this discipline works any more. You have to wait longer and longer for responses from journals. No one wants to review any more, especially since the pandemic. There aren't enough journal slots to house our papers.

Publishing companies keep trying to extract profits from scholarly utilities. It's time for a change of government.

Neil Levy's compact book *Philosophy, Bullshit, and Peer Review* is a contribution to the growing literature on the social epistemology of philosophical knowledge production. This literature has thus far focused on the publication system, and peer review in particular, reflecting the common view that there is a publication emergency in philosophy. Levy's main topic is how anonymous peer-reviewed journals ought to approach the problem of bullshit detection.

There are two broad approaches to the publication emergency. Revolutionaries advocate abandoning the current system anonymous pre-publication peer review and editing in favour of open access archives and post-publication crowd-sourced peer review (Heesen and Bright [2021]; Copeland and Marin [2024]; Arvan et al. [2025]). Reformers acknowledge the many problems with the current system, but focus their efforts on improving journals: taking them open access, making them non-profit, or improving their day-to-day administration. Levy's sympathies seem to be with the reformers. He focuses on problems within the current publication system, including intellectual charity in peer review, how to handle hoaxes, and what attitude writers should take towards the claims they make in print.

How does bullshit detection fit into wider debates about the publication emergency? We should start by thinking about what a publication system is for. There isn't consensus about this question, but the following functions pop up in both criticisms of the status quo and proposed alternatives:

- Communication: A publication system is the material basis for academic conversation, and we want it to facilitate productive (that is, knowledge generating) discussion of important questions.
- Attention: A publication system indicates to readers (and perhaps the wider public) which of the many papers about a given topic they ought to read, teach, and cite.
- Credit: A publication system is a way to distribute academic credit for good work, to help incentivize effective collective inquiry.
- Filtering: A publication system is a quality control device that leverages academic specialists to allow non-specialists to make better decisions about how much credibility to assign to papers, allowing—if all goes well—appropriate trust in publication.
- Editing: A publication system aims to improve the quality of typesetting, writing, and argument in academic writing.
- Recording: A publication system is a way to archive academic work for posterity.

Revolutionaries tend to deploy just one function to critique the status quo, but I take it that what we are after is a system that compromises between these functions, balancing the interests of writers, readers, editors, and the wider public.

Bullshit-filtering sits somewhere in-between the communication and filtering functions of the publication system. The publication system in philosophy has been long shaped by the need to distinguish between real and fake philosophy.[1] Since the Second World War, philosophers working in English have associated this distinction with the categories of analytic and continental philosophy. Originally, the analytic label was used by emigrant logical positivists working in the United States to avoid anti-communist repression (Schuringa [2023]). Over time it has come to stand as a guarantee of the intellectual quality of English-language philosophy. The idea is that whereas analytic philosophy is characterized by rigorous methodology, terminological discipline, and a systematic peer

review system, continental philosophy is characterized by unruly political engagement, literary ambition, and a commitment to the cult of genius.

These differences in social practice are supposed to inform our attitude towards the endemic use of obscure language in philosophy. Consider two sentences:

> Could the grounds's grounding the grounded ground the grounded? (Litland [2018], p. 56)

> La trace n'est pas seulement la disparition de l'origine, elle veut dire ici—dans le discours que nous tenons et selon le parcours que nous suivons—que l'origine n'a même pas disparu, qu'elle n'a jamais été constituée qu'en retour par une non-origine, la trace, qui deviant ainsi l'origine de l'origine. (Derrida [1967], p. 90)

Despite both sentences straining semantic and syntactic convention, the fact that (1) is the output of the analytic philosophy publication system is supposed to guarantee is meaningfulness, while (2) should be taken at face value and dismissed as nonsense because it is not supported by well-ordered publication practices. Bullshit-filtering systems keep academic communication from breaking down, and acts as a guarantee for the non-specialist that non-standard uses of language are meaningful.

Philosophy, Bullshit, and Peer Review splits into four parts or chapters. The first part considers what bullshit is. Levy contrasts the Frankfurtian conception of bullshit—understood in terms of the speaker's attitude towards the expressed content—with two semantic notions of bullshit: sentences that fail to express content in virtue of syntactic failures (Pennycook et al. [2015]), and sentences that are unclarifiable (Cohen [2013]). He then argues that we face a systematic problem of apparent expert bullshit. Many sentences uttered by experts employ specialist terminology and non-standard syntax, meaning that they are not clarifiable or paraphrasable by non-experts. Levy argues that since we should assign experts high credibility, if the publication system is working well we should quite often assign high credence to expert sentences that we can't understand or clarify. An upshot of the connection between judgements of expertise and meaningfulness is that it is not easy to maintain the bullshit-filtering function of the publication system. It is just as likely that English-speaking readers' low opinion of Derrida, Butler, or Hegel is generating their impression of meaninglessness as the contrary.

The second part considers the more general question of how much intellectual charity we ought to extend to different academic sources. Levy argues that we ought to extend greater charity to published papers, when compared to unpublished papers, in virtue of the credibility lent to them by the journal in which they are published. There are two ways to think about the argument here: (i) that publication and post-publication reception provides more evidence that a paper is excellent, or (ii) that publication and post-publication reception actually improves the quality of the paper, via the journal's loan of credibility. Either way, we seem to face an epistemic version of the Matthew effect. Papers that get published in 'top ten' journals first get a credibility-boost from publication and then, as more and more people read them, receive a further credibility boost owing to the fact that an expert audience has (presumably) failed to find a clever way to rebut the arguments. If actual or perceived paper quality is partly determined by audience reception, then published papers either get better over time or accrue more evidence about their goodness over time. Part of the goal here is to explain why now-classic papers were repeatedly rejected by journals. Levy suggests that reviewers and post-publication readers are dealing with different contexts, in which papers have either got better or are accompanied with more evidence of their quality. I suspect that there is more to be said here about the general low rates of acceptance and conservativism in philosophy journals.

The third part turns to academic hoaxes: attempts to demonstrate that publication systems have been ineffective at filtering bullshit by sneaking cunningly designed nonsense into print. Levy is a little wary about labelling the papers in the Sokal or Boghossian–Lindsay–Pluckrose hoaxes bullshit, because they contain many contentful sentences. Presumably, however, these hoaxes are Frankfurtian bullshit, in the sense that the writers in both cases chose

sentences because they sounded right without regard to whether they were true or false. Levy argues that explicit vigilance undermines trust in the publishing system and implicit vigilance runs the risk of generating explicit vigilance, meaning that we shouldn't design the publication system to filter out hoaxes. This argument goes by a little too quickly: it isn't obvious that in general explicit vigilance undermines trust (I can trust my partner and still double check that the gas is off) or that the status quo in philosophy journals is not explicit vigilance.

The fourth part turns to the proper attitude we should have towards the content of the claims we make in academic work. Alexandra Plakias ([2019], [2023]) has argued that it is permissible to assert philosophical claims in published work without believing them. Will Fleisher ([2018], [2021]) has argued that it is permissible to make advocacy claims (as opposed to evidential claims) without belief, if one endorses them. Responding to these arguments, Levy floats a pluralism about the norms of publication, with a minimal norm that the speaker believes that the claims they advocate are worthy of consideration, and a sliding scale of more demanding norms up to full belief. Which norm we should hold a paper to depends on what attitude the speaker implicates they hold towards their advocacy claims.

Levy's book is a welcome contribution to the study of philosophical practice, opening up normative issues about the interpretation of academic texts, the function of the publication system, and the norms of assertion in print. The book is clearly and breezily written, and the issues it raises about the norms of interpretation are certainly worth further discussion. It doesn't offer us a complete approach to redesigning the publication system or to designing a system to filter bullshit (in any sense), but it helps to connect together some important questions to help us to think about the social epistemology of philosophy.

It is curious that discussions about social practices involving philosophical knowledge production have focused so much on the publication system. When another rejection thuds into your inbox on a Sunday night, it can feel like the problem of fixing peer review is the most important philosophical problem (see Mckeever [2019]). Levy plays around with this feeling. His book opens: 'Kant identified three questions that philosophy must address: What can I know? What must I do? What may I hope? Today a fourth question preoccupies many philosophers: Why was my paper rejected?' (p. 1). It is less than clear that this feeling reflects reality. The majority of philosophical research is done by people paid by universities to teach, research, and undertake administrative tasks. At the time and place of writing, the University of Kent, the University of Central Lancashire, and the University of Wolverhampton are about to close their philosophy departments, following the closures some years ago of Middlesex University and Heythrop College. Birkbeck College recently halved the size of its philosophy department, Roehampton University has substantially cut theirs, and several other departments (including those in Kingston and Brighton universities) are under threat as part of wider cuts to humanities programmes. Many universities appear reluctant to replace workers who leave their posts, increasing workloads and shrinking the pool of posts, and there are increasingly many adverts for fixed-term and teaching positions, often replacing permanent teaching and research posts. In the midst of worries about the publication system, it is worth reminding ourselves that some metaphilosophical problems are simply labour issues.

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Notes

[1] On the history of peer review in science, see (Baldwin [2018]).

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