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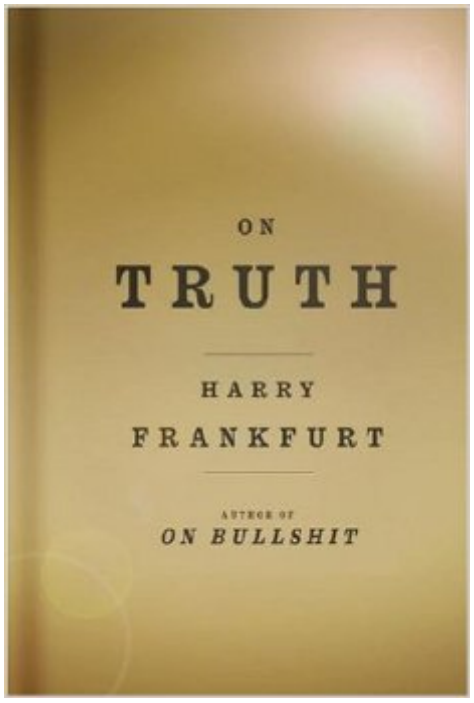
On Truth



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Synopsis

Having outlined a theory of bullshit and falsehood, Harry G. Frankfurt turns to what lies beyond them: the truth, a concept not as obvious as some might expect.Our culture’s devotion to bullshit may seem much stronger than our apparently halfhearted attachment to truth. Some people (professional thinkers) won’t even acknowledge "true" and "false" as meaningful categories, and even those who claim to love truth cause the rest of us to wonder whether they, too, aren’t simply full of it. Practically speaking, many of us deploy the truth only when absolutely necessary, often finding alternatives to be more saleable, and yet somehow civilization seems to be muddling along. But where are we headed? Is our fast and easy way with the facts actually crippling us? Or is it "all good"? Really, what’s the use of truth, anyway?With the same leavening wit and commonsense wisdom that animates his pathbreaking work On Bullshit, Frankfurt encourages us to take another look at the truth: there may be something there that is perhaps too plain to notice but for which we have a mostly unacknowledged yet deep-seated passion. His book will have sentient beings across America asking, "The truthâ ”why didn’t I think of that?"

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Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I am an attorney, not a professor of philosophy. As my profession must deal with unending loads of BS and is one that ostensibly seeks "truth," Dr. Frankfurt’s latest essay was required reading. I stress essay and choose to recognize what this book accomplishes rather than what it does not. I found this volume to be a worthy introduction to an exceedingly important topic."On Truth" is a sequel to a famous predecessor regarding BS wherein Dr. Frankfurt uses the common vulgarity as a metaphor for the goals of our society. However, he felt that he had failed to

adequately show the dangers of indifference to truth, which he defines as the hallmark of BS. His premise is that our society is based on truth sufficient to weather the increasing storms of BS but that the foundations of our culture are susceptible to the continual eroding force of BS. He argues that we need to start paying attention to truth before we lose the concept and are unable to repair the damage being done.The Declaration of Independence began "We hold these truths to be self-evident" thus, those who went on to accomplish the American Revolution, draft and enact the Constitution, and who were generally recognized as a pretty capable bunch, did not collapse into arguments and finger-pointing about the philosophical niceties of what they were about. The self-evident truths of the founding fathers were rather like Justice Stewart's famous admission that pornography is hard to define, but "I know it when I see it." Truth is a staple of religious training--folks used to get their weekly dose in Sunday School. Thus, the decline in religious observance seems to be closely mirrored by the decline in appreciation for and understanding of truth in general.

I write this review because there are criticisms that are irrelevant concerning the lack of creativity involved in the writing of this book. One criticism is that it is not thorough. It is not the be-all and end-all. It is a quick, accessible, interesting, insightful read though.As an undergraduate I double-majored in German & Philosophy. Now I am about to complete my M.A. in German Studies and pursue philosophy as a hobby. I am a pragmatist.As a pragmatist, the book is also particularly scintillating to me. I am a pragmatist as a direct consequence of William James's Pragmatism, my favourite work of philosophy. I am also reading James's The Meaning of Truth from time to time.Frankfurt raises a fascinating problem in this work: the problem of a beneficial lie. He also cites 2 works by Montaigne ("Of Liars") and Kant ("On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives"), which I now feel compelled to read if I can obtain thru interlibrary loan.Frankfurt argues that yes, some things are relative, but reminds me of the importance of getting it right. As I was schooled by a professor steeped in postmodernism, I have to find myself keeping postmodern tendences in thinking in check. Yes, engineers and architects and doctors do not have time for discussing some non-beneficial abstract notion of relativism, nor are they paid to do so. If this was all they focused on, they would not excel in their professions, and would not be successful.I found this work insightful and personally helpful. More importantly, I found it culturally responsible and with a strong sense of social conscience so absent amongst philosophers that seem more and more ethically bankrupt. The most relevant questions are the most important.

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