

[ASSHOLES]

A Theory

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In the summer of 2010, Stanley McChrystal, U.S. army general and Afghan war commander, reportedly trashed the U.S. civilian military leadership, in effect forcing President Barack Obama to ask him to resign. The display of disrespect was striking, but more telling were the details about McChrystal's handling of smaller matters. According to one story, McChrystal was once apprised by his chief of staff that he was obliged to attend a dinner in Paris with NATO allies—if not to shore up flagging support for the war, then simply because, as the chief of staff put it, “the dinner comes with the position, sir.” McChrystal held up his middle finger, retorting, “Does this come with the position?”¹

For brazen disregard, General McChrystal pales in comparison to another general, Douglas MacArthur. During the Korean War, MacArthur was a law unto himself, in matters both big and small. He quarreled defiantly in public with President Truman, agitating for nuclear war. In their eventual confrontation at Wake Island, MacArthur went so far as to arrive first and then order the president's approaching plane into a holding pattern. MacArthur's commander in chief would thus arrive on the landing strip appearing to be MacArthur's supplicant.

In explaining why he subsequently relieved MacArthur of his command, Truman said, “I fired him because he wouldn't respect the authority of the president. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law for generals.”² Truman was arguably pulling his punches. He could easily have called MacArthur an asshole.

That would not be an exotic charge: assholes abound in history and public life. Aside from runaway generals, we might think of such contemporary figures as former Italian president Silvio Berlusconi, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, or Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. We might think of the self-important developer-entertainer Donald Trump, the harsh pop music critic Simon Cowell, or the narcissist actor Mel Gibson.³ Assholes are found daily on cable news, where hosts repeatedly interrupt their guests, and also on talk radio, where airtime is given to commentators who thrive on falsehood and invective. Even as this demonstrably degrades the public debate so vital for a healthy democratic society, overheated commentators get rich and famous, while clearly having a really great time.

All of this poses a larger philosophical question: What is it for someone to be an asshole? The answer is not obvious, despite the fact that we are often personally stuck dealing with people for whom there is no better name. Assholes can be found not simply in history and high public office but almost anywhere—at work; in our chosen club, sport, school, religious group, or circle of friends; and even, for the truly unlucky, in the home or immediate family. Try as we might to avoid them, we often simply have to manage encounters that come, for most of us, with great difficulty and personal strain. The asshole is not just another annoying person but a deeply bothersome person—bothersome enough to trigger feelings of powerlessness, fear, or rage. To make matters worse, we may be unable to understand why exactly someone should be so disturbing. We may feel certain only that “asshole” is a suitably unsavory name for this particular person.

While most of us could use advice in asshole management, we cannot get far without an answer to our initial question: What is it for someone to be an asshole?⁴ If nothing else, a

good answer—a good theory of the asshole—would be intellectually interesting. It would give us the concepts to finally think or say why some people disturb us so. That, in turn, would ideally open a window into deeper aspects of morality and social life. We would see what assholes reveal about the human social condition and why assholes are everywhere, in every society. Ideally, a good theory would be practically useful. Understanding the asshole we are stuck with might help us think constructively about how best to handle him. We might get a better sense of when the asshole is best resisted and when he is best ignored—a better sense of what is, and what is not, worth fighting for.

According to our theory, which we will present shortly, the asshole exposes a deep feature of morality that philosophers have sought to understand from the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to this day.⁵ The asshole refuses to listen to our legitimate complaints, and so he poses a challenge to the idea that we are each to be recognized as moral equals. This explains why the asshole is so bothersome, by revealing the great importance we attach to recognition in unexpected areas of our lives. In later chapters, we will suggest that a clearer understanding of this helps with asshole management. The key is to understand why we are easily tempted to fight on the asshole's terms: we are fighting for moral recognition in his eyes. We will also explore larger, more basic questions about human social life. Why are assholes mainly men? Can assholes be properly blamed? Why do some societies produce more assholes than others? Are certain styles of capitalism especially prone to asshole production and thus social decline? And, finally, can we ultimately make peace not only with the given asshole but also with a human social condition in which assholes flourish?

WHAT IS IT TO BE AN ASSHOLE?

Our theory is simply this: a person counts as an *asshole* when, and only when, he systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people. (Because assholes are by and large men, we use the masculine pronoun “he” advisedly. We will suggest that women can be assholes as well. For the time being, think of Ann Coulter. We consider the question of gender in detail in [chapter 4](#).) Our theory thus has three main parts. In interpersonal or cooperative relations,⁶ the asshole:

- (1) allows himself to enjoy special advantages and does so systematically;
- (2) does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement; and
- (3) is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people.

So, for example, the asshole is the person who habitually cuts in line. Or who frequently interrupts in a conversation. Or who weaves in and out of lanes in traffic. Or who persistently emphasizes another person's faults. Or who is extremely sensitive to perceived slights while being oblivious to his crassness with others. An insensitive person—a mere “jerk”—might allow himself to so enjoy “special advantages” in such interpersonal relations. What distinguishes the asshole is the *way* he acts, the reasons that motivate him to act in an abusive and arrogant way. The asshole acts out of a firm sense that *he is special*, that the normal rules of conduct do not apply to him. He may not deliberately exploit interpersonal

relations but simply remains willfully oblivious to normal expectations. Because the asshole sets himself apart from others, he feels entirely comfortable flouting accepted social conventions, almost as a way of life. Most important, he lives this way more or less out in the open. He stands unmoved when people indignantly glare or complain. He is “immunized” against anyone who speaks up, being quite confident that he has little need to respond to questions about whether the advantages he allows himself are acceptable and fair. Indeed, he will often *himself* feel indignant when questions about his conduct are raised. That, from his point of view, may show that he is not getting the respect he deserves.

Although our theory is a definition of the term “asshole,” we should emphasize that it is not necessarily a dictionary definition. It is not necessarily a claim about how the word “asshole” is commonly used in some linguistic group (e.g., speakers of English). The word is often used loosely and variously, and we aren’t suggesting that every competent speaker of English would agree with our proposal about what the word means. We aren’t even saying that a majority of speakers would agree, in a way that might be confirmed or undermined by opinion polls or psychological experiments. Instead, our approach is the one Socrates proposes to Polus in Plato’s *Gorgias*, when he explains why the dispute between them does not depend on opinion polls (what they call “the company”). Polus asks, “But do you not think, Socrates, that you have been sufficiently refuted, when you say that which no human being will allow? Ask the company.” Socrates replies:

You must not ask me to count the suffrages of the company [...] I shall produce one witness only of the truth of my words, and he is the person with whom I am arguing; his suffrage I know how to take; but with the many I have nothing to do, and do not even address myself to them. May I ask then whether you will answer in turn and have your words put to the proof?⁷

Our definition, in other words, is a *constructive proposal*. It tries to articulate what we ordinarily mean when we speak of “assholes” but ultimately stands or falls on whether it captures the importance assholes have for us—where the “us” is, in the first instance, you and me. I am proposing the definition in light of importance that assholes have for us. You decide whether you agree.⁸

THE PUZZLE

Before considering the details of our theory, we will first follow philosophical practice and ask what kind of theory we are looking for. We can then “test” a given theory—including the one just stated—by considering whether it explains what we are trying to explain. This gives us a modicum of control in a messy enterprise.

We begin with a puzzle. Although some assholes take a staggering toll on the lives of others, many assholes are not bad in this way: the costs they impose upon other people may be moderate or small. Yet they are still clearly morally reprehensible. How could that be? Why would we be deeply bothered even by a person who makes little material difference to our lives?

In other words, we might put the puzzle this way. There are at least three things we should

want from a good theory of assholes, but it is not immediately obvious how all three might be true.

The first is straightforward: we are looking for a stable trait of character, or type of person—a *vice* rather than a particular act, mere lapse in conduct, or brief phase of life. A single courageous or magnanimous act does not make for a courageous or magnanimous person. Nor does an occasional impatient or self-absorbed or foolish act make someone into an impatient or self-absorbed or foolish person. In the same way, someone can *act like* an asshole—in a particular situation or over a particular day or week—without really, ultimately, *being* an asshole.⁹ When the assholish behavior doesn't reflect the kind of person someone generally is, stably, in his life, he is better classified as a *jerk*, a *boor*, a *cad*, a *schmuck*, or a mere ass. What we want to understand, in the first instance, is the sort of person for whom assholish acts are quite *in* character, and indeed routine, because they *do* generally reflect the type of person he stably is. In particular, our target is the *average proper asshole*. We first seek neither the “royal asshole,” who is distinguished even among assholes, nor the “borderline asshole,” whose status as an asshole is not entirely clear. We want to identify the mean asshole between these extremes: your normal, everyday asshole.

This also means that we should not think first of extreme cases such as Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini. There are not enough harsh names for these figures, and it is fine to add “asshole” to the list. But it would be deeply offensive to *only* call Hitler or Stalin an asshole; there are much more important ways to describe them morally. At least initially, the *mere* asshole is a less confusing test case.

It should be said that we do not mean to prematurely close the possibility that talk of “assholes” really isn't about any stable trait of character at all but is merely a form of swearing or term of abuse.¹⁰ We certainly do swear at people and use this term, as when one says, “You disgust me, asshole!” Many more clearly descriptive terms (“coward” or “bully,” for example) lack the same special expressive power. But the term “asshole” can be expressive and *also* pick out a real feature of persons. It would not be incoherent to say of someone, without disapproval, “He is my friend, and he is fine to me personally, but I have to admit he is an asshole.” One might wonder why someone who said this stays friends with an asshole, but the statement could be quite *true* and known to all: the person spoken of is, in fact, an asshole.¹¹

The second and third things a theory of assholes should explain are related and must be handled with greater care. The second thing to explain is that most assholes are *not* morally beyond the pale, unlike, say, a murderer, rapist, or tyrant. Most assholes are not *that* bad. One post in the Urban Dictionary has it that “[an asshole is] the worst kind of person.... If you're an asshole, you are disgusting, loathsome, vile, distasteful, wrathful, belligerent, agoraphobic, and more.... [Assholes] are the lowest of the low. They transcend all forms of immorality.”¹² This is overwrought and unhelpful. We can agree that the worst kinds of people can *also* be assholes, but it is not helpful to think first of people at the bottom of the moral barrel—the Hitlers, Stalins, or Mussolinis—since their corruption is wildly overdetermined. As suggested earlier, the mere asshole is a clearer target of inquiry and, in any case, often not among the lowest of the low. We are quite justified in removing a murderer or a rapist or a tyrant from society by force, in handcuffs and at the point of a gun; the material costs such people impose upon others are enormous and often beyond repair. But the

material costs many assholes impose upon others—a longer wait in line, a snide remark, a ruined afternoon—are often by comparison moderate or very small. It would be indefensible to forcibly remove them from society. Which is of course why we are often stuck interacting with them, why they seem to be everywhere.

And yet—and this is the third thing we need to explain—assholes are still repugnant people. Despite the fact that the material costs they impose are often moderate or small, assholes are rightly upsetting, even morally outrageous. Something else is deeply bothersome about them, something beyond mere material costs: something bad enough to drive an otherwise coolheaded person into a fit of rage;¹³ something that lingers in one's memory like a foul stench; something that warrants a name we use for a part of the body we hide in public, a part of the body that many people feel alienated from and perhaps wish wasn't there.¹⁴ It is this bothersome “something” that we want to expose.

To summarize, then, our three requirements for a good theory of assholes are as follows. We are looking for (1) a stable trait of character, (2) that leads a person to impose only small or moderate material costs upon others, (3) but that nevertheless qualifies the person as morally repugnant.

Yet how could a person who imposes only small or modest costs upon others nevertheless count as morally reprehensible? What way of being could possibly be like that? This is not exactly a paradox. It is an interesting puzzle.

THE MORAL ASSHOLE

Recall our theory: a person counts as an *asshole* just in case he systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people. This theory answers our challenge by zeroing in on a particular, distinctive way of being morally reprehensible. We can bring this out by considering the way our theory is *moral* through and through.

We should pause, however, to worry about overmoralizing. When the writer David Foster Wallace calls John Updike's character Ben Turnbull an asshole (with the clear implication that Updike is an asshole as well), the main ground for this is Turnbull's (and Updike's) general self-absorption, not his moral faults.¹⁵ We will agree that self-absorption is crucial. We will also admit that there are more general uses of the term “asshole,” which we discuss later on. We start with the central, moral case.

According to our theory, the asshole does what he does out of a “sense of entitlement,” a sense of what he *deserves*, or is *due*, or has a *right* to. However misguided, the asshole is *morally motivated*. He is fundamentally different from the psychopath, who either lacks or fails to engage moral concepts, and who sees people as so many objects in the world to be manipulated at will. The asshole takes himself to be *justified* in enjoying special advantages from cooperative relations. Given his sense of his special standing, he claims advantages that he thinks no one can reasonably deny him. He is *resentful* or *indignant* when he feels his rights are not respected, in much the same way a fully sociable, cooperative person is.

Assholes and fully cooperative people simply have very different moral views of what their respective entitlements are. To bring out the difference, compare the point of view of “fully cooperative” people. Fully cooperative people, we may say, *see themselves as equals, as having*

grounds for special treatment only in special circumstances that others will equally enjoy at the appropriate times. Here are several examples.

On one's birthday, one expects to receive special indulgences from one's friends, such as a party, a round of drinks, or a celebratory phone call. Yet all count as equals because everyone is assigned one such day of celebration each year on or around the calendar day of each person's birth. If you are celebrating my existence now, I will be celebrating your existence at some point during the year.

The practice of forming a queue will degenerate into a scrum unless people by and large are willing to wait in the line. Yet it would be acceptable for you to cut to the front when you explain that there is a real emergency. You then receive a benefit because others accept a certain burden: if they weren't waiting in line, there would be no line for you to cut in, and you might not be able to work your way to the front in a scrum. But under exigent circumstances, people of course understand. They will do likewise when an emergency comes up in their lives.

Two people will have a successful conversation, in which both speak and both are understood, only when each listens while the other talks and each is given a good amount of speaking time. Yet it is fine to interrupt someone speaking in order to make an especially important point, even if one's excitement to make the point simply gets the best of one. We give each other this privilege, and we are happy to work around occasional interventions, as long as we both feel our conversation is moving along just fine.

Being someone's friend requires consistent efforts to think of and present the friend in a good, supportive light. Yet it can be fine to point out a flaw, as gentle teasing or in order to crack a good joke. The joke can come at the friend's expense if its "price" in discomfiture is low—low enough so that the friend is happy to pay for the sake of a laugh.

We might generalize from these examples in the following way. In each case, there are both normal expectations and special circumstances in which those expectations are, for certain parties, to be set aside. Those who happen to wind up in the special circumstances are permitted to take special benefits, advantages, or treatment, but not because they are themselves special. All are seen as, at bottom, equals. Each will have days of special privilege, as the occasion (e.g., birthday) arises in the normal course of things. And as long as we each take special advantages for good reasons of the right kinds—there really is a grave emergency—no one will be terribly bothered about how the exact distribution of benefits and burdens falls out. We say, "It will all work out in the end," not as a *prediction* about the future (when is "the end"?) but as a vote of confidence: if we really are working together in good faith, accommodating one another for what we can each regard as good reasons of the right sorts, that would in and of itself realize a kind of relationship we could really value, quite aside from the outcomes that fate and circumstance ultimately bring.

The asshole, by contrast, sees no need to wait for special circumstances to come his way in the normal course of things. The asshole feels entitled to allow himself special advantages as he pleases systematically, across a wide range of social interactions. He cuts in line, *and* interrupts often, *and* drives without particular care, *and* persistently highlights people's flaws. He rides people with veiled comments—veiled criticisms, insinuating questions, or awkward allusions to topics not normally discussed in polite company. He is often rude or more often borderline nasty. One feels he has just been intrusive or inconsiderate, though one

can't always pinpoint the norm of courtesy he has tread upon. Most important, the asshole gains special advantages from interpersonal relations, not by stroke of continuous luck, but because he regards himself as special. His circumstances are special in each case, in his view, because *he* is in them. If one is special on one's birthday, the asshole's birthday comes every day.

None of this is to say that the asshole never shows restraint. Some assholes are indeed scrappy, acting unreflectively on any inclination and whim, though with varying degrees of success. The witty and charming asshole, however, will get away with more than a dull asshole can. A quite different stripe of asshole shows "principled" restraint when the advantages come too easily. Taking every last advantage, without at least a slight challenge, may seem beneath him, even undignified. He may, so he says, have better, perhaps nobler things to do with his precious time. The "dignified asshole" will share our displeasure with the scrappy asshole and may even hold a special contempt for his lax and unprincipled ways. Yet the dignified asshole is not so "principled" as to forgo the systematic enjoyment of special advantages; he may simply be especially good at justifying the special advantages he takes in his own eyes, by concocting "principled" rationalizations on the fly.

To elaborate on a specific example, consider asshole surfers. Surfers usually have to share relatively few waves and generally do so according to rules of right-of-way that are well understood and more or less the same worldwide. When one surfer is "in position" on the most critical part of a wave, for example, other surfers are expected to yield. Lance the surfer, however, has decided that he should have almost any wave he wants. According to Lance, when people see him paddling for a wave, they should realize that he is the regular, that he's the better—or at least older—surfer, and that this wave is therefore his wave. It is his wave, even if someone is already in position or up and surfing. Lance lumbers to his feet and surfs anyway, as though he is riding the wave alone. When surfers are "burned" in this way, most complain; they say some version of "Hey, man, what the fuck." When people complain to Lance, he launches into a tirade. "Don't you dare fucking fuck with me!" If the surfer replies, Lance escalates. "If you want some of this, let's take it to the beach! Get the fuck out of here! Before I get angry." (If this does not seem plausible, be reassured that Lance can be found in surfing areas worldwide. The police tend not to get involved until violence breaks out.)

Or consider a quite different area of life, academia. Dominic, a historian, has written some rightly acclaimed books. Having become accustomed to feeling appreciated, he now feels entitled to recognition and is especially prone to feeling slighted when he is not given a lot of attention. He finds it outrageous when his work is not cited, or when he is invited to speak at a conference but not offered the keynote address. None of this leads him to doubt whether his work is of continued importance; he instead concludes that those involved clearly lack judgment. As his prominence declines, instead of becoming increasingly uncertain about his claim to attention, he becomes increasingly concerned about the deteriorating state of his profession. In order to uphold high standards, especially as exemplified in his own work, he regularly writes scathing reviews of recent books, finding little good in them, sparing few terms of abuse, while offering slight evidence of his sweeping criticisms. When books he has trashed become prominent and influential, Dominic takes this as further evidence of falling professional standards.

Assholes therefore come in quite different styles. In order to account for this, we stipulate that there are many ways of *coming to be an asshole*, by coming into the appropriate “sense of entitlement.” What is crucial is that the sense of entitlement tells the asshole *that* he deserves, or is due, or has a right to special advantages. The reasons *why* he feels he deserves special treatment may be as diverse as the stars. He may be sure that he is the greatest historian, architect, actor, artist, corporate executive, or political leader seen in a long time. He may feel entitled to his position of power and the control over people it enables him to exercise. When people suffer at his hand, this is simply an unfortunate fact of life—for them. He may feel that the nobility of his character, or the worthiness of his favored social cause, gives him legitimate claim to have things go his way, especially when those who present obstacles can be seen as weak, unworthy, or morally corrupt. He may find most people tediously unintelligent or dull, in contrast with his own brilliant mind and manner. He may relate to them as though doing a chore, and even congratulate himself on his heroic success in treating such unworthy people politely. These are all different ways of having the appropriate “sense of entitlement.” If we had a taxonomy of such different entitlement conceptions, we would have a taxonomy of the different species of asshole. (We make a start on that effort in [chapters 2](#) and [3](#).)

We should emphasize that one is not an asshole simply for taking oneself to be entitled to certain things. Under the appropriate circumstances, we all have a right to be told the truth, not to be kicked or cheated, or even to receive certain special advantages from cooperative life. And one is not an asshole simply for being mistaken about what one’s entitlements are. We all make such mistakes from time to time. What makes someone an asshole is a special way of being wrong about what one’s entitlements are: the asshole’s “entrenched sense of entitlement” leads him to systematically think or assume that he has special entitlements that, from a moral point of view, he does not have. Again, that distinctive kind of error may come in very different forms. The asshole might invoke a genuine entitlement principle but misapply it to his particular situation. Or he might easily find entitlement rationalizations on the fly for whatever he happens to want at the time. In either case, the crucial feature is that the asshole’s entrenched sense of entitlement produces some such form of moral error in a systematic way. It is in that general way that the asshole treats himself as morally special.

Of course, we often disagree about what entitlements people do or do not have, especially in political life. That means we will often disagree about who is or is not an asshole. For example, according to Lefty, Bill O’Reilly is an asshole. He is opportunistically exploiting working-class resentment. And according to Righty, O’Reilly is no asshole. He is heroically giving voice to working-class resentment. According to our theory, whether O’Reilly counts as an asshole depends on whether *he is in fact entitled* to act as he acts. People can disagree about that, given their background views about his social role and its value or disvalue, without disagreeing about what it is to be an asshole generally. So both Lefty and Righty can accept our theory. Lefty can say that O’Reilly is an asshole but happily admit that this wouldn’t be so if Righty were correct that O’Reilly is entitled to do as he does (and vice versa). The same is true of the many examples discussed in [chapters 2](#) and [3](#). Many won’t agree with the moral diagnoses I offer of those figures. Even so, we can all agree about what the essence of the asshole is.

Let us return to the three things we said that any good theory of assholes should explain and take stock of how our theory explains each of them.

The first is relatively straightforward: we are looking for a stable trait of character. Our theory picks out a stable trait of character because the asshole's sense of entitlement is "entrenched" in his motivational makeup: the feeling of entitlement does not merely occasionally spring up, like a sudden urge to watch a B movie. Nor is the feeling reoccurring but readily struck down. A person of good conscience might be aware of his own inner asshole and yet often successfully remind himself that his life is of no more importance than anyone else's, that his own talents and accomplishments are largely a matter of luck, and that he is fortunate to live well and savor the sweetness of people in normal cooperative life. The asshole not only lacks such motivational correctives, his sense of entitlement is "entrenched," in the sense that he is persistently assured, even upon reflection, that he is quite unlike everyone else. When the world questions his special standing in it, it is the challenge rather than the standing that gives way. The asshole sees no need to defend his special place in the social world, or he easily produces convincing rationalizations and moves on. He may even compliment himself on his resiliency and formidable argumentative powers. If reflection is for most people an important source of moral learning, the asshole puts reflection mainly in the service of assuring himself. This leaves him quite impervious to reform. Even when profound hardships befall him, and there is abundant therapeutic help, he will, in all likelihood, never see reason to change.¹⁶

Let's turn to the second feature to be explained—that the asshole is not invariably bad in terms of the material costs he imposes upon others. We explain this by defining the "special advantages" the asshole takes in a restricted way. There is nothing wrong *in itself* with enjoying the benefit of cutting to the front of a line, or of speaking out of turn, or of being freed from certain responsibilities. These actions are not, as such, wrong in the way it is wrong, say, to kill someone for the sake of fast cash. In general, the goods the asshole allows himself to enjoy flow from social practices that are generally beneficial. We ourselves admit that the asshole, too, should share in those sorts of goods, in the right measure and at the right times. The general problem is that the asshole helps himself to more than his share, or acts out of turn, or sloughs off the burdens that must generally be carried if the practices in question are to work. He can do that without doing irreparable harm or committing clear-cut wrongs. One can be a full-fledged asshole in the small.

This suggests that the asshole is not in any real sense an outlaw. He may well keep within the letter of the law. Nor is he just another cheater, out for a "free ride" on the cooperative efforts of others. The deeper problem is not deliberate exploitation but a kind of willful insensitivity: he sees no reason to address the ambiguities and uncertainties that inevitably arise when people interact. Even "bright-line" rules of cooperation will have exceptions, and cooperative people often have to put a certain amount of work into discerning both the spirit of the law and what is finally acceptable in a particular case. They thus seek clarification, check assumptions, ask permission, or at least take a measure of care in good faith. The asshole, by contrast, sees little need for the work of mutual restraint aimed at benefit for all involved. According to his generalized sense of entitlement, it is only right and natural that the various advantages of social life should flow his way.

Turn, finally, to our third requirement of explanation: that the asshole is downright upsetting, even outrageous. How could a person who imposes only small or modest costs upon others nevertheless be morally repugnant? Our answer appeals to a crucial aspect of the asshole's entrenched sense of entitlement: it immunizes him against the complaints of other people. The asshole not only takes special privileges but refuses to listen when people complain. When someone says or conveys (as with a glare) something like "The line starts here," "It is not your turn," "What are you trying to say?," or "Could you, please, *let me finish*," the asshole makes no attempt to hear the person out and perhaps delivers a rude retort, such as "Screw you!" He is unwilling to *recognize* anyone who does express a complaint, never considering that the complaint might be legitimate. So although one may only suffer the small material cost of being cut ahead of in line, or being interrupted, or being talked over, one also suffers a deeper wrong: one's very status as a moral person goes unrecognized. Immanuel Kant memorably says that respect for the moral law "strikes down" or "humiliates" our sense of "self-conceit."¹⁷ This doesn't happen for the asshole.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING RECOGNIZED

We have suggested that the asshole is morally repugnant because, even when the material costs he imposes are small, he fails to recognize others in a fundamental, morally important way. This is the heart and soul of our account of why the asshole is so bothersome, so we should more fully delve into the moral question—before moving on to less weighty concerns.

Kant would say the asshole suffers from "self-conceit" or "arrogantia." This is supposed to be something different from mere "self-love," which might lead to selfishness but isn't necessarily a corruption of one's capacities to reason morally. One can act selfishly, or even be a selfish person, despite one's better moral judgment, perhaps by ignoring the moral situation or getting oneself not to actively consider it, much as a "jerk" or "schmuck" does. The asshole, by contrast, actively reasons *from* his sense of special entitlement rather than from an independent understanding of what the moral law requires when, in Kant's terms, all are regarded equally as "ends in themselves," as coequal sovereigns in a "Kingdom of Ends."¹⁸

Here Kant is probably developing Rousseau's distinction between a person's natural sense of self-worth (*amour de soi-même*) and a potentially destructive concern for rank or status as compared to others (*amour propre*).¹⁹ According to Rousseau, healthy self-love does not require comparing oneself to others at all; feeling worthy does not necessarily involve feeling superior to someone. Yet we invariably and rightly do care about how we are regarded by others in our social relationships. If the way of the world is often simply to compete for status, to try to better someone, Rousseau vividly explains how this gives rise to untold personal misery and grave social ills.²⁰ Even so, nothing in the human social condition per se requires status competition. Instead, Rousseau suggests, we can acknowledge each person's need for status recognition without treating anyone as either better or worse than another; we need only recognize each as fundamentally equal. All can rest content with this solution—except, of course, the asshole. His feelings of *amour propre* are an unquenchable fire. He won't settle for mere equality.²¹

Other philosophers have developed ideas of "moral status" and "mutual recognition," most

notably Fichte (e.g., on how one person's "summons" can awaken another person into freedom and mutual regard), Hegel (on the unequal regard between master and slave), Sartre (on shame or sexual desire), and Buber (on the "I-Thou" relation we stand in to each and all Others, in contrast with the "I-It" relation we bear to mere things). Or as contemporary moral philosophers might say, in blander but perhaps clearer terms, morality is "second personal," in at least the following way.²²

If being a person with basic moral status means anything, it at the very least means that one is owed respect and consideration as a being endowed with capacity to reason. In particular, people are endowed with powers that enable them to consider and evaluate how someone has acted. A mountain, whale, or tree, though deserving of consideration and appreciation in its own right, lacks the range of abilities needed to question the justifiability of what others have done. The community of persons is, in this way, special.²³ I, as an ordinary human person, have special powers of self-consciousness, reasoning, and judgment. I can observe someone acting, as a mere event in the order of things, but also ask (if only to myself) certain questions of justification. Why, I might ask, should an act such as that be acceptable? In particular, is such an act justifiable to me if it was done in my direction, given how it might affect me?

Likewise, any one of us, so endowed, can ask what would be justifiable to *another* person, from his or her particular point of view. Is that something *she* can reasonably find acceptable, given the consequences for her? Or could she reasonably complain of how she is in effect being treated? In that case, what we think another could or could not accept should have special significance for us and how we act. It will influence our choices, at least if we are at all morally concerned. Each of us, in acting, has to consider not only what might make the world go better rather than worse from an impersonal point of view—factoring in the mountain, the whale, and the tree—but also what could be acceptable *to* each and every other one of us, for reasons arising from the different, distinctive personal standpoint of each separate person in our common world.

That is not to say that just any complaint someone voices in a conversation should carry the day, as though one always needed explicit or implicit permission from everyone who could be affected by one's choices, no matter how unreasonable those people might be. The objections or complaints we actually voice sometimes reflect ignorance of crucial facts or lack of concern with what is reasonably acceptable from everyone's point of view. We can be ignorant or selfish, or both.

Neither are our complaints and objections always or inevitably ill founded in these ways, however. So when someone does object to a particular act, with a quizzical glare or loud words, there is usually *some* reason to think that the person may have a reasonable complaint. Even if the objection is ultimately unreasonable, it also might have an element of truth. Accordingly, one of our basic moral responsibilities is to hear people out, to at least take seriously the reasons they give for wanting to be treated differently, even if we ultimately object. The expectation, in other words, is for us to *recognize* the person objecting, in something like the way a deliberative body grants someone in the room the right to speak before the group. This is, as we might put it, part and parcel of basic *moral respect*—that is, respect not simply for the person's complaint but for the *person* who makes it.

The asshole, by contrast, is wholly *immunized* against the complaints of others. Whether or

not the complaint is ultimately reasonable, the person is not registered, from the asshole's point of view, as worthy of consideration. The person who complains is not seen as a potential *source* of reasonable complaint but is simply walled out. If the person complaining is "standing up for herself," in order to be recognized, it is as though she were physically present but morally nonexistent in the asshole's view of the world.

That is why otherwise coolheaded people fall into a fit of rage or lash out at the asshole: they are fighting to be recognized. They are *not* fighting for the small benefit of having the asshole move to the back of the line or, more generally, for a slightly more fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of cooperation. The person taking a stand against the asshole is fighting to be registered in the asshole's point of view as morally real. She struggles not simply to be heard but to be seen. She struggles to be seen, in Thomas Nagel's phrase, as "one among others equally real."²⁴

The fight can become extraordinarily frustrating because the asshole usually wins: his sense of entitlement is entrenched, so there is usually no getting through. (Hence one may spontaneously desire to give the man a sound beating, as though that would help.)²⁵ The fully cooperative person is accustomed to listening when people complain, and used to being heard when even a suggestion of complaint is made. That is how cooperative people normally work out what is acceptable to all, what the moral equality of each person requires. This comes to feel natural, expected, a matter of course. The asshole, by contrast, is equally accustomed to walling others out. He does it all the time. This is comfortable for him. And he is exceptionally good at it: when others complain, he easily dismisses the objection, or quickly finds convincing arguments that rationalize the objection away, and moves on. He compliments himself on how good he is at this because he is very good at it indeed.

OVERMORALIZATION?

We have seen that the asshole is important to us for moral reasons. His sense of special entitlement clashes with our own sense that he morally should recognize us as an equal. We have built this sense of entitlement into our basic account of what an asshole is. Here, however, one might object that we are overmoralizing the asshole concept. Can't someone count as an asshole but wholly lack a sense of moral entitlement? Can't he simply be thoroughly self-absorbed, like Turnbull or Updike, or most teenagers? Can't he simply be extremely difficult or just clueless?

This line of questioning is important because our theory is a proposal about what all assholes have in common. It is a problem if some people fit our definition but do not count as assholes, or if there are true assholes our definition leaves out. Apparent counterexamples such as those just noted could well mean that we should wipe the slate clean and relax our claim that the asshole has a moral sense of entitlement—that we should de-moralize the concept. How, then, might those examples be accounted for?

It is of course fine to *call* someone an asshole when he is simply self-absorbed or extremely difficult to get along with. When someone cuts one off in traffic, one can appropriately call him an asshole without first finding out whether he did this out of entitlement (in asking at the next traffic light, it could become clear that he merely made a mistake). It makes little difference whether the driver really is, strictly speaking, properly classified as an asshole.

The same might go for the difficult person. If your friend is flummoxed by his encounters with an especially difficult person, you might say, “Don’t worry about it. He’s just an asshole,” at once affirming your friend’s right to better treatment and advising that he probably should not expect the difficult person to change. These ways of calling someone an asshole seem useful and fine, even without looking further into why the person acts as he does.

Yet, even in such cases, it remains an open question whether the person at issue *really is* an asshole, whether he is best classified as that type of person. Perhaps he is better classified as a jerk, schmuck, or douche bag, or just someone who is insensitive to social cues. To this classificatory question, our theory offers an answer: it delineates the class of assholes from the vast and motley array of personality types. In so defining the asshole, our strategy is to start by identifying the *significance* assholes have for us—the significance of moral recognition. We then tailor our characterization of the person around that kind of significance. The asshole’s entrenched moral sense of entitlement is thus essential for our account. We can happily admit that there may be marginal or borderline cases that do not quite fit our theory. But, otherwise, a proper asshole always has an underlying sense of moral entitlement. We may have to look deep within his soul to find it, but it is there.

Turnbull’s self-absorption might illustrate the point. Wallace emphasizes it to explain why Turnbull is so unhappy, especially in light of his “bizarre, adolescent belief that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants to is a cure for human despair.”²⁶ Wallace naturally also mentions Turnbull’s (and Updike’s) misogyny, and indeed the idea of “getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants to” can be seen as a misogynistic entitlement: an unfounded entitlement to something that, from a moral point of view, must be freely offered or given, and so won’t necessarily be available as one prefers. Plato or Aristotle would regard a moral vice of character as itself undermining human happiness or flourishing, which partly just *consists* in virtuous living. But the point might hold even if we take the more characteristically modern view that virtue and happiness potentially come apart. Turnbull’s unhappy self-absorption can reflect his failure to experience the real and profound connection with others afforded by true mutual respect, a connection that won’t necessarily come along with the pleasures of basic consensual physical contact.

We might add that thorough self-absorption is in any case itself a moral failing that indicates entitlement in our sense: the self-absorbed person feels or presumes that he need take no account of others and, if asked, will often give reasons why this is justified (“I can’t do it right now,” “I’m overwhelmed,” “Can’t you see that I’ve got serious problems!”). These are potentially reasons why the person should not be asked to give others what would otherwise be their due, and how we evaluate those reasons will decide whether someone counts as an asshole. If his reasons are good enough (perhaps he is severely depressed), then he is not an asshole. Or even if the reasons given aren’t especially good, if he apologizes for his actions later, he isn’t an asshole; he is not immunized against the complaints of others in the way the asshole is. Many jerks, schmucks, and clueless or oblivious souls are pretty incorrigible but won’t go to bat for that way of being. They might even apologize, even as they easily fall back into their usual ways later that day or week. The asshole is, in contrast, incorrigible in a special, willful, or defensive way.

But what if someone really believes that *everyone* is entitled to look out for number one?

He might live in a defensive crouch or posture of selfish opportunism, and perhaps act a lot like an asshole, but he wouldn't say that he's special in any fundamental sense. He'll say that everyone is acting in his same hypercompetitive way and even regret that this is the way of the world. But, so he says, in getting ahead, he's acting within his rights.

Now, if someone really and truly has this cynical view of the world, despite an honest but thwarted desire to cooperate with his fellow moral equals, then he isn't an asshole, even when he acts like one. But if he really is genuine in his views, he'll presumably be open to discuss and reconsider whether his take on the world can be reasonably maintained. He won't then be entrenched and immunized in the asshole's way. On the other hand, many proper assholes *tell themselves* such universalistic stories without believing them deep down. They might even get themselves to *really believe* them mainly to keep themselves reassured. This species of asshole pays homage to morality by invoking a veneer of impartial universality, in contrast with the supremely smug asshole, who needs little more for his for justification beyond saying, "Well, it is *me*. How could *this* [pointing to himself] not deserve special treatment." An asshole can't *simply* take himself as his reason without standing outside morality altogether (making him more like a psychopath).²⁷ But assholes can vary considerably in the degree to which they require a pretense of universality to keep themselves feeling secure.

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1. Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, July 8–22, 2010, www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236.
 2. Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley, 1974).
 3. David Brooks all but calls Gibson an asshole in "The Gospel of Mel Gibson," *New York Times*, July 15, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/opinion/16brooks.html.
 4. Robert I. Sutton, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*, 1st ed. (New York: Warner Business Books, 2007), advises business managers to adopt a policy of zero tolerance of assholes in the workplace, offering helpful suggestions about how to deal with them when they simply cannot be fired. Our initial target is a philosophical account that might support and supplement the good advice already available.
 5. Our hero Rousseau was unfortunately quite an asshole himself, or maybe something worse. He eventually realized that something was amiss in his repeatedly fathering children with Thérèse Lavasseur and then summarily sending them away to an orphanage. See *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953).
 6. By "interpersonal" relations we mean cooperative relations with a more or less socially defined structure, in contrast, say, with individuals interacting in a condition of anarchy such as Thomas Hobbes's famous state of nature. If one can be an asshole in the state of nature, Hobbes would regard this as fully justified self-defense. In conditions of society, by contrast, assholes are akin to Hobbes's famous Foole, who joins the social contract but then breaks or cheats the law.
 7. Translation by Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/gorgias.html>.
 8. The point carries over to other proposals in moral theory. "Experimental philosophy" isn't fit to establish or refute them, at least not without further, properly controversial assumptions about what a given proposal is trying to do.
 9. This is probably true of McChrystal, who not only apologized for the disdainful comments mentioned earlier but also has a long track record of dedicated public service.
 10. Harry G. Frankfurt, in *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), plausibly shows how the term "bullshit" has rich descriptive content, even as it initially appears as a term of abuse. The same may be true of

“chickenshit” and “horseshit,” which differ from each other and from “bullshit” in descriptive meaning. Our inquiry lies within this distinguished line of research. We hope our theory prompts one to think, “Hey, I’ve met that guy,” and thus provides demonstrative evidence that there is at least one asshole and probably more. One could so embrace the existence of assholes even if one had quibbles about the theory’s details.

11. Someone actually spoke (roughly) the stated sentence to me spontaneously in conversation. That isn’t decisive evidence that it can be *true or false* to say that someone is an asshole, and not simply a way of expressing one’s feelings of disapproval (as in saying “boo!” to the opposing sports team or in using harsh terms such as “shithead” or “cocksucker,” which invoke an unflattering descriptive image without making any claim to truth, properly speaking). Further evidence would be a conditional sentence such as “If an asshole cuts you off in traffic, then it is appropriate to lay on the horn.” Here the term “asshole” does not plainly reflect either approval or disapproval. Still better evidence is a sentence that expresses *thoroughgoing endorsement*, such as “Yes, I am an asshole, and proud of it,” perhaps said in all sincerity by a supreme asshole who is taunting his subjects with this pronouncement. See *The Onion*’s headline “Asshole Admits to Being Asshole in Supreme Asshole Move,” May 19, 2004, www.theonion.com/articles/asshole-admits-to-being-asshole-in-supreme-asshole,1172/. We can add that taking asshole discourse to aim at stating truths doesn’t mean that we do not *also* use it to swear and express disapproval, as in “Gosh, *what* an asshole!” or “That guy is *such* an asshole!” When a speaker calls someone an asshole, this can be seen to *pragmatically indicate* that he or she disapproves. For this view of moral judgment, see David Copp, “Realist-Expressivism: A Neglected Option for Moral Realism,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18, no. 2 (2001): 1–43; and Stephen Finlay, “Value and Implicature,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 5, no. 4 (July 2005): 1–20, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0005.004>.
12. Eric Melech, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=asshole.
13. One entry in the Urban Dictionary describes the asshole as “a man who could tempt the Pope into a fight” (Bwillis, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=asshole&page=4). It is apparently true across cultures that the most common source of homicide is “altercations of relatively trivial origin” that often have to do with small slights. See Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Homicide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 125.
14. Here I point to a common feeling without denying that many people have a quite different attitude in light of special intimate or recreational purposes. For the general ambivalent or hostile feelings about such matters, see Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” in *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
15. David Foster Wallace, “Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think (Re John Updike’s *Toward the End of Time*),” in *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006). Originally published as “John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?,” *New York Observer*, October 13, 1997, www.observer.com/1997/10/john-updike-champion-literary-phallocrat-drops-one-is-this-finally-the-end-for-magnificent-narcissists/.
16. Many assholes may have what psychologists call “narcissistic personality disorder,” which is generally very resistant to therapeutic treatment. As psychologist Sander Koole explained (in conversation), when the therapist asks, “How do you feel?” the narcissist answers, “I feel I am not getting the respect I deserve.” While this is characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder, we are not assuming that every such person counts as an asshole. Being an asshole is probably only one version of the disorder. Even so, the near plague of narcissism in our culture might explain why there are more assholes than there used to be. We touch upon this theme at several points later.
17. As Kant illustrates, even in encountering “a humble plain man, in whom I perceive righteousness in a higher degree than I am conscious of in myself, *my mind bows* whether I choose or not, however high I carry my head that he may not forget my superior position.” Kant is responding to this remark by French popular philosopher Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle: “I bow to a great man, but my mind does not bow.” “Of the Drives of Pure Practical Reason,” in *Critique of Practical Reason*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), part 1, book 1, chap. 3, 80. For related discussion, see also *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield with foreword by Lewis White Beck (1963; repr.,

London: Methuen, 1979), 126–29.

18. Or at least in this one reading of Kant's idea that self-love becomes self-conceit when it "makes itself legislative and the unconditional practical principle" (*Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 77). It also fits with the passage from *Lectures on Ethics* (p. 128) quoted in the epigraph, in which Kant speaks of the conceited person taking a "lenient view of the moral law" and thus having a "false standard." We develop the point further in "Letter to an Asshole."
19. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile; or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
20. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," in *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1984).
21. In *Émile*, Rousseau speaks of "inflamed *amour propre*" (p. 247) as well as the difficulty of overcoming this mentality (see the passage on p. 245, which is quoted in the epigraph). We return to Rousseau's view that destructive status consciousness has a social cause and a political solution in [chapter 7](#).
22. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), and especially Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
23. But can't one be an asshole for kicking a dog? It seems so, though I'm not sure one would count as an asshole (as opposed to being simply cruel) if one only kicked dogs and treated people perfectly well. But maybe; we can leave the matter open.
24. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Nagel uses this phrase to explain how the ethical egoist, who only sees reason to do what is ultimately in his own interests, fails to see *himself* as but one among equally real others, and so falls into a kind of solipsism. The asshole is not the pure egoist, but otherwise we merely have a different emphasis: the objector seeks to intrude upon the asshole's solipsistic view of the moral world.
25. Thus one post to the Urban Dictionary says the asshole is "Someone who seriously needs their ass kicked" (Thomas Huang, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=asshole&page=17). The asshole is interestingly said to *himself need* rough treatment. Perhaps he is better off, on balance, with a few bruises, having come to see the error of his ways. Our suggestion here is not that this is false, but that rough treatment is largely pointless, because it has little to no chance of bringing the asshole around.
26. Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other," in *Consider the Lobster*, 59.
27. Nietzsche's Übermensch famously stands beyond conventional morality and prizes the assertion of self above all. As far as I can tell, he can be read in different ways: either as rejecting morality altogether, as endorsing the true universalistic morality of personal authenticity, or as endorsing special privileges for the few who are courageous enough to assert themselves in ways that are in principle available to all. He's closest to the asshole in the latter reading.