

Book Review

Aaron James
Assholes: A Theory
New York: Doubleday, 2012

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

A few years ago, I commented at length upon a book called *On Bullshit* (Doughty, 2005) by Harry Frankfurt. It was a smash hit (the book, not my comment). Its provocative title alone would not have ensured its success. Dirty words can be found anywhere and you don't need a world-renowned moral philosopher like Frankfurt to generate juvenile jollies. *On Bullshit* might not have been Harry Frankfurt's most profound book, but it did win him an audience in unexpected corners of the ubiquitous virtual bookstore. One of the reasons was that, once an attentive reader got beyond the title, the book had some important things to say about the nature of argument and public discourse.

The times are right for a follow-up. In fact Aaron James's *Assholes* is just one of a number of semi-serious works on the subject. There's also Geoffrey Nunberg's *Ascent of the A-Word* (2012) and Robert Sutton's *The No Asshole Rule* (2010)—an award-winning book for aspirant business executives. James's volume is in roughly equal parts a philosophical meditation, a pop historical survey and a practical guide to negotiate the treacherous rectal waters in which we swim; but, its true value lies in his attempt to define the term precisely.

At first glance, James's *Assholes* seems to fit into the same category as Frankfurt's *Bullshit*—a serious book about a serious subject which is of both scholarly and popular interest, but with a title meant to titillate (so to speak). Sometimes first glances are *not* deceiving and you can tell a book by its cover; sometimes they are not and you can't.

Aaron James may not (yet) have acquired the stature of Harry Frankfurt, but he is a much younger man. There is still hope. Meanwhile, he will be taking his interest in rationalism and the foundations of moral judgement to New York University from his home base at the University of California at Irvine as a Visiting Professor in the Fall of 2013. He already has a substantial inventory of professional publications to his credit. Given another half-century, he may well supersede Harry Frankfurt (age 83) with or without the use of attention-grabbing vulgarities on his book covers.

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Rather than further obsessing on the name of the book, however, let us probe within. Aaron James has spent time at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and has written about matters such as fairness, with a suitable nod to John Rawls (James, 2012). He is deeply engaged in the application of moral theory to practical life. His next big project is a book on “practice-based justification and global justice.” He is a still young man with healthy ambitions.

In *Assholes*, he is doing more than poking fun at all the people we like to despise. His examples are familiar. We know who he’s talking about. My favourite example is the dolt who insisted on offering Joan Baez a cigarette, knowing she didn’t smoke, but (I suppose) hoping to enhance his status by making her feel ever-so-slightly uncomfortable.

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Assholes, as he describes them, are not significantly evil. They are merely annoying examples of thoughtlessness, indifference to others’ sensitivities and blindness to social contexts. They are borderline sociopaths whose actions do not quite rise (or, rather, descend) to the degree of pathology necessary to merit inclusion in the always expanding list of official mental diseases and disorders certified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association. They are narcissists without ambition, bullies without vision, aspirant despots without the wit or the will to stage an actual *coup d’état*. They have many of the prerequisites needed to become serial killers or high-level Wall Street “banksters”; but, they seldom commit actual homicides or pull off multi-billion dollar frauds.

James succinctly defines assholes as people who “systematically [allow themselves] to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that [immunizes them] against the complaints of other people.” They are people who take thirty items through supermarket express check-out lines designated for those carrying ten items or less and are sincerely unable to grasp why others in the queue look askance at them, but are too polite to forcefully object. James says that assholes normally act within the law and do not exact a great material toll on society. They are not quite sociopaths. They are, however, habitual and incurable. They are what they are and generally irredeemable.

The book is divided into two main parts: first, a set of descriptions and definitions and, then, a recommendation about what how to manage relations with such offensive individuals. Most reviewers have applauded the first part, claiming that James has done a good job of portraying and analyzing his subject. His approach is mainly anthropological and psychological. He strives for clarity. He even takes pains to explain that his “theory” rises above the level of mere “expressionism” (using foul language in a cathartic or ejaculatory manner to express censure) and has a serious “cognitive” dimension.

James deals amusingly with a number of interrelated issues. He goes global by pinning down the people who ran the USSR into the ground a few decades ago by using their elite positions in the Communist Party to advantage, all the while ignoring, distorting or perverting the ideology which sustained their power. He also attacks the dominant structures of American capitalism and does so especially effectively in a chapter on “Asshole Capitalism” that focuses on the banking scandals which came dangerously close to bringing the entire world economy to its knees a scant five years ago.

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According to James, now that capitalism has been released from the heavy burdens of moral responsibility and the repression of the “Protestant Ethic” that was so nicely explained by Max Weber a century or so ago, it has become a splendid system in which a critical mass of “assholes” have been able to rig the economic game entirely in their favour. This, of course, is not an entirely US-based phenomenon. The princes of Davos, the former KGB agents now prominent in the former Soviet Union and even the leaders of the Chinese “Communist Party” are all learning quickly how to twist things to their benefit regardless of ideology real or imagined.

Such examples, however, seem somewhat inappropriate for they blur important lines that were drawn by James himself. On the one hand, we are asked to think about run-of-the-mill irritants—the person who grabs the last cookie on the plate, but who is not, in the end, responsible for ruinous wars or devastating economic collapses; yet, on the other hand, we are asked to contemplate Dick Cheney and Donald Trump—a much less dangerous but no less an egregious example of “raging narcissism.” People like Cheney and countless other miscreants are, I must insist, considerably more than run-of-the-mill pains in the (dare I say it?) “ass.”

In any case, Aaron James is plainly unafraid of law suits when he chastises a certain French philosopher and self-assured public intellectual as a “smug asshole” and piles on to the already ruined career of one-time US presidential hopeful, John Edwards, as an exemplar of the “self-aggrandizing asshole.” Other names include US Army General Stanley McChrystal, a punier version of Douglas MacArthur. On the list are former (and future?) Italian president Silvio Berlusconi, the late Hugo Chavez and ex-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich, Simon Cowell, Kanye West and Mel Gibson. Likewise, Miles Davis, Pablo Picasso and King Henry VII. Women, of course, are largely absent, but it would be hard for anyone to exclude Ann Coulter and Aaron James doesn’t. It’s quite a gallery but it doesn’t quite adhere to James’s claim that his targets are ordinary folk, not certifiable public monsters.

The second part concerns the optimal methods of dealing with assholes. This, I think, is the less successful of the two. Aaron James is a quintessential American liberal. He knows the environmental, ethical and economic consequences of corporate capitalism, but he feels deeply that it can be *reformed* without being seriously restructured.

Psychology and personality disorders trump (so to speak) systemic and structural social features.

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Assholes, James reports, will never be banished from the Earth. They are an inherent part of the human condition or human nature, if you prefer. It's true that we seem to have more of them now than in the past. If so, maybe they are just more visible in our media-driven culture of celebrity; but, if so, what does that make the rest of us? In any case, there are tools that can help us resist them. And resist them we must for, as long as they dominate business and government, I respectfully submit that they put us at an existential risk.

Aaron James appears to be a pleasant and progressive man. He esteems Barack Obama and wishes only that the current American president's unfailing good nature and eagerness to find compromise among adversarial forces had better outcomes. This level of earnestness is endearing, even if it betrays a certain naïveté. James's innocence isn't born of a Panglossian view of the world, nor of a misplaced belief in the essential goodness of our species. Instead, it seems that it reflects a preference for the tolerance of some, the improvement of most and, if necessary, the isolation of the irredeemable personality types among us. Tellingly, when in search of *gravitas*, James seems to prefer the likes of Kant and Rousseau, rather than Marx or even Weber.

Aaron James's book tangentially reminded me of a confection meant to deal both seriously and mirthfully with the question of bureaucracy. *The Peter Principle* (Peter & Hull, 1969) addressed the problem of bureaucratic incompetence with as much or more humour than James displays, and also with less formal philosophy (James, 2013). Although in many ways a much lighter project, Laurence Peter may have had a more profound effect on his particular object of scorn. That came, I suspect, from his decision to take humour more seriously than sociological theory. Aaron James went toward psychological speculation, and it sometimes seems to have bogged him down.

Incidentally, one of the peculiarities of the novelist Kurt Vonnegut was that, in later life, he substituted a naïve drawing of a sphincter for his signature. Unlike some, my personal acquaintance with him led me to believe that he was anything but an asshole. He was generous with his time, helpful to aspirant writers and seemed genuinely interested in the opinions and feelings of others. Occasionally he seemed almost shy. Only when someone requested such an autograph did I ever see him behave brusquely. He wasn't an asshole, but he didn't want to have to give them away either.

As for assholes, I'll quit now before too many people wonder aloud about someone who'd drop the names of Joan Baez and Kurt Vonnegut into a review of a book by an authentic academic with a solid claim to be taken seriously—no matter what the title of his book.

About the Reviewer:

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