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**Review: Assholes: A Theory**

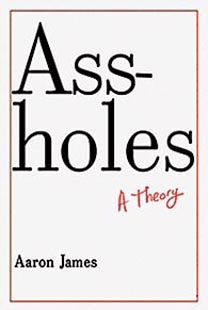
The truly optimistic among us believe that there is no such thing as an…

by [Martin Patriquin](http://www2.macleans.ca/author/mpatriquin/) on Friday, November 23, 2012 10:53am - http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/11/23/assholes-a-theory/[9 Comments](http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/11/23/assholes-a-theory/#disqus_thread)

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The truly optimistic among us believe that there is no such thing as an asshole. That is to say, the guy who cut you off in traffic or butted in front of you at Starbucks is probably possessed by some temporary affliction (lateness, cluelessness, hangover) that recedes as quickly as it came. In other words, he was acting like an asshole, and that same guy might well hold the door open for you or even save your life 10 minutes later. Aaron James is no such optimist. In fact, the author spends 214 quite convincing pages arguing that “assholeness” is less inattention than a permanent state of mind, and that assholes are more than numerous enough to be called out in book form.

They aren’t mere jerks, and they aren’t rapists or murderers. Rather, James writes, assholes populate the vast moral middle ground between the two. The true asshole, James writes, “is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people.” He is narcissistic, self-absorbed, impolite, and permanently thoughtless to those around him—and it is almost always a him—nearly to the point of sociopathy. (A TV analogy: Steve Carell’s *The Office* character, Michael Scott, is just a jerk; his inspiration, Ricky Gervais’s David Brent from the original British *Office*, is an asshole.)

And while they may not stick a shiv in your back, they will gladly manipulate the banking system and bleed you to death that way. Indeed, it is in his chapter “Asshole Capitalism” where James hits his stride. Unlike Communism, which in practice engendered a small, elite group of assholes, James believes unbridled capitalism, stripped of those virtue-engendering values that assholes disdain, is an ideal system through which many assholes can band together to completely tilt the game in their favour. Does he make a case? Hint: his main target is the U.S. banking system, and the disaster it provoked in 2008. It almost writes itself.

*Excerpted from Assholes: A Theory*

**DELUSIONAL ASSHOLE**

Cable news assholes are distinctive for their knowing awareness but willful disregard of how they are perceived by others. They are flush with Frankfurtian “bullshit,” where bullshitting (speaking without regard for the truth) is something that can be done with a tacit understanding among speaker and audience that truth is not being told.  A quite different class of asshole, by contrast, is marked by his utter failure to appreciate how he is seen.

Such was the display in Paris at the fashion show debacle wrought by Kanye West’s rough transition from pop music performer and producer to clothes designer. West had promised, with his fashion debut, to “change the course of fashion.” When ill-fitting dresses, pants, and jackets, styled with bits of fur, were not well received, West complained bitterly, but not simply out of rudeness. As one reviewer explains:

What  was  most  confounding  about  Mr. West’s  behavior, after years of obsessive study of the industry, was that he demonstrated very little understanding of how he might actually be perceived by retailers and editors who have a vast amount of experience at detecting utter nonsense.

West is not exactly shameless, which would require his having a clear sense of how others regard him. He is interesting more because he seems unable to piece that regard together, even from readily available material. Nor is it that he lacks a basic human capacity of self-observation, caused by some cognitive malfunction. His album *Graduation* begins “Mr. Fresh, Mr. . . . by his self he’s so impressed,” and the track “Barry Bonds” shows some grasp of how this must look to others: “I’m high up on the line you can get behind me / But my head so big you can’t sit behind me.” But beyond general impressions, and his awareness of obvious sneers (he complained in Paris that the fashionistas keep looking at him “like I’m Hitler”), West seems unable to pick up his reflection in the eyes of others, from what is evident to all. Would fur in the summertime really be the Second Coming in the fashion world? Was it *unthinkable* that people would question that as a design idea?

West is also awfully rude (he constantly swears, and famously crashed Taylor Swift’s MTV award acceptance speech, insulting Swift to boot). And of course many a self-styled, self-described genius has lived in massive error about his greatness. West is of special interest because he seems almost unable to move from huge self-absorption to a rudimentary grasp of the public world.  He probably *is* able, and so we recoil from his failure to treat others decently. But the sense of inability is enough to turn pure revulsion into mixed sympathy. For all we really know, we, too, could be a brain in a vat, or subsisting on an experience machine, or living inside the Matrix. (How would you know otherwise?) It is hard to watch someone who is in effect living that out, someone who *is* trapped in a giant delusion.

It is instructive to compare West to asshole artists such as Pablo Picasso or Ernest Hemingway or Miles Davis. None were mistaken about their greatness. All were wrong about what their greatness entitled them to by way of special treatment from others.  Here it is harder to be understanding. It is indeed desirable for a society to afford its great artists special opportunities for creative production for the good of all. But there are limits, and many true geniuses do manage well enough to abide by them, perhaps by nurturing a grounding sense of gratitude for being endowed with special creative privilege. Those who don’t are pure asshole. They take full credit for their achievements and expect further benefits in return, despite the fact that their success would never have happened without society’s gift of creative opportunity. (Artists who must fend for food or fight against an invading army tend not to get a lot of art done.) Things could easily have gone differently and the artist would never have succeeded. Gauguin, for example, might have never made it to Tahiti if the boat from France had encountered bad weather or mechanical troubles, much as many great talents fail simply because they are ahead of their time. We put up with the artist’s delusion that his work is only to *his* credit, that it is *we* who are chiefly in his debt, because we find our world better with his artworks in it. Without that, however, the asshole artist becomes thoroughly repugnant. Imagine a *failed* artist who is not a genius, who continually demands further creative privilege, perhaps at a significant cost to society, and who cannot be moved by or even grasp gentle advice that he should consider working at Starbucks, where people are actually served. This guy, we want to say, is an asshole in spades.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

I figured that this topic was fitting, stemming from our class discussion of Friday. So, what’s YOUR theory? Is a—holeness a temporary situation, or are there truly genuine a—holes in our midst? Explain your theory clearly, bringing in as much of your own experience as possible. In addition, discuss the idea of a potential “cure” for this problem, if, in fact, you believe it is a problem. What can the non-a--holes of the world do to make things better, if anything at all?