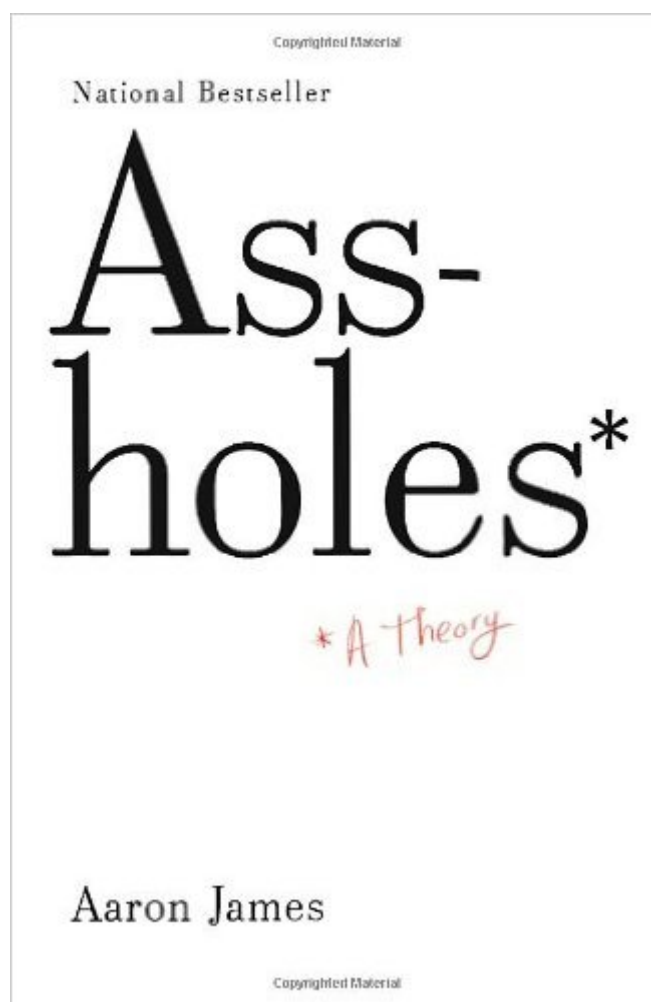


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Assholes: A Theory



Synopsis

What does it mean for someone to be an asshole? The answer is not obvious, despite the fact that we are often stuck dealing with people for whom there is no better name. We try to avoid them, but assholes are everywhereâat work, at home, on the road, in the public sphereâand we struggle to comprehend why exactly someone should be acting like that. *Asshole* management begins with asshole understanding. Finally giving us the concepts to discern why assholes disturb us so, philosopher Aaron James presents a provocative theory of the asshole to explain why such people exist, especially in an age of raging narcissism and unbridled capitalism. We get a better sense of when the asshole is best resisted and best ignoredâa better sense of what is, and what is not, worth fighting for.

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Customer Reviews

[Apparently the robotic censors that patrol the reviews will not allow a review to post that actually uses the title of this book. This review will therefore use A-holes to represent the book's title, and a-hole to refer to the singular form of that word.] Aaron James took a break from the philosopher's customary search for the meaning of life to ponder a more burning question: What does it mean to be an a-hole? I have the sense that James wrote *A-holes* so he could share his complaints about surfers who behave like a-holes, particularly Brazilians. Whatever his motivation, and despite his earnest attempt to subject a-holes to scholarly thought, much of *A-holes* is enjoyable simply because the topic is so appealing. Everyone, after all, has an opinion about a-holes. *A-holes*

consistently cut in line, interrupt, and engage in name-calling. They do not play well with others (in James' language, they are not fully cooperative members of society). Many (perhaps most) people occasionally behave like an a-hole without becoming an a-hole. As a theory of the a-hole, James posits that an a-hole is a person who enjoys "special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people."

Although I think "a-hole" is pretty much self-defining, in the sense of "I know one when I see one," I like James' definition. I think it's a definition rather than a theory, but I'm probably just quibbling about semantics (which is pretty much the philosopher's job description, making it a battle I can't win). Whether it is a theory or a definition, after he finishes parsing it, James politely suggests that it is up to the reader to decide whether to agree with it. James is plainly no a-hole. James tells us that a-holes are morally repugnant but not truly evil. If you're interested in standard philosophical discussions of moral behavior and moral responsibility with references to the likes of Aristotle, Kant, and Buber, you'll find them here. Those of us who needed strong coffee to make it through our philosophy classes are probably hoping for something more fun than a rehash of Martin Buber in a book titled A-holes. We're looking for the author to name names. Happily, James does so (although not without some preliminary hand-wringing about whether calling out a-holes is something only an a-hole would do). From Simon Cowell to Mel Gibson, from Donald Trump to Steve Jobs, from Ann Coulter to Bill O'Reilly, James finds a-holes in every walk of life. James even suggests that book reviewers can be a-holes (oh my!) although he does so in the context of academia. Consistent with his definitional/taxonomic approach, James classifies a-holes by type, including the boorish a-hole (Rush Limbaugh, Michael Moore), the smug a-hole (Richard Dawkins, Larry Summers), the a-hole boss (Naomi Campbell), the presidential a-hole (Hugo Chavez), the reckless a-hole (Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld), the self-aggrandizing a-hole (Ralph Nader), the cable news a-hole (Neil Cavuto, Keith Olbermann), and the delusional a-hole (Kanye West, Wall Street bankers). James covers the spectrum from liberals to conservatives in his search for a-holes and applies his test with, I think, a nonpartisan outlook. Of course, some readers will be displeased that he has called a political favorite an a-hole, but again, James rather politely invites disagreement and urges readers to apply the test as they see fit. James' approach to categorization lends itself to party games. You can make up categories James overlooked, like the sports a-hole (George Steinbrenner, Michael Vick), or you can add names to the categories he's invented. Don't worry, there are plenty more a-holes identified in the book -- the names I've cherry-picked are illustrative only -- as well as some categories I haven't mentioned, but you'll easily think of more. The book is short and the world is filled with a-holes. Returning to the realm of philosophy, James considers whether a-holes are morally

responsible for being a-holes, which leads to a discussion of whether a-holes have free will. James' conclusion is at odds with the answer you would get from a neuroscientist like Bruce Hood, but whether you blame a-holes or accept that they can't help being who they are, you're still stuck with them. James reasons that a-holes are generally male because they are shaped by the culture of gender, although I think he puts too fine a point on it when he draws subtle distinctions between a-holes and beetches (another word I altered to avoid the censor, but you know what I mean). I also think he's a bit naive when he argues that, for cultural reasons, American men are more likely to be a-holes than Japanese men, a proposition with which many Southeast Asians (not to mention the surviving residents of Nanking) would disagree. James includes a chapter on how to manage a-holes (short version: you really can't, but you can try to make yourself feel good) and a chapter that suggests how capitalist societies (which encourage the sense of entitlement on which a-holes thrive) can deteriorate when the a-hole ethic takes root (short version: greed isn't good, Gordon Gecko notwithstanding). The concluding chapter tells us how to find a peaceful life in a world full of a-holes (short version: reconcile yourself to the things you cannot change while hoping for a better world). These chapters give James a chance to apply the thoughts of Plato and St. Augustine and the Stoics and Rousseau and even Jesus to the topic of a-holes. Heavy thinkers will probably enjoy those discussions. Lightweight thinkers, like me, will enjoy the name naming while looking forward to the party games the book inspires.

First, this book is really funny. It's quite a page turner for a philosophy text, even a mass market philosophy text. Of course, the frequent repetition of the word a-hole appeals to those of us with a low sense of humor. Dr. James begins by attempting a definition of the a-hole. He then, amusingly, names a variety of people he considers a-holes in public life. While Dr. James is a self-described liberal, he's pretty even-handed in apportioning a-holiness to the left and right. (He reserves particular distaste for Fox News, which he regards as the "gold standard" of a-holiness; despite being a conservative myself, I find it very hard to disagree with him). He goes on to offer classifications of various types of a-holes. The later chapters are more philosophical. He inquires, for example, why a-holes tend to be male, and why they tend to be produced more frequently in some cultures rather than others. For example, he considers Italy, Israel, Brazil and the US to be particularly prone to a-hole generation, while regarding Japan as almost incapable of producing a-holes. I'm not sure I agree with him here - I think the interactional style of Israelis (with whom I work pretty extensively) tends to lead others to believe they're a-holes when they're not. And I suspect (although I have little direct experience to validate this hypothesis) that Japanese

interactional styles lead Americans to conclude that Japanese are never a-holes when in fact some of them probably are - we likely just don't understand when a Japanese a-hole is being an a-hole to us. The question of whether a-holes are begotten or made is further explored - Dr. James concludes that there is some genetic predisposition to a-holiness but that society plays a critical role in forming a-holes. He also comments on a-holes in positions of power. Discussed but left insufficiently explored, in my view, is whether a-holes naturally ascend to those positions, or whether the positions turn individuals into a-holes. This distinction becomes important for the political turn the book takes in the chapter "a-hole capitalism." Dr. James' thesis is that an a-hole is characterized by feeling entitled to special advantages. In discussing a-hole capitalism, Dr. James turns his sights on those who could be viewed as directly or indirectly exploiting others; those who feel entitled to an ever-greater share of the pie. While not ever quite explicitly saying so, he clearly has the rich in mind, although I don't think he means to imply that being rich necessarily makes one an a-hole. And as I look around myself, I can clearly see that sense of entitlement among some of the powerful. But interestingly enough, I think Dr. James' focus on entitlement strikes at the heart of the current political division in the United States. The left views conservatives as a-holes because conservatives feel entitled to the rewards they have earned through market mechanisms, even if those mechanisms have given them rewards that are disproportionate to any common sense justification. The right views progressives as a-holes because progressives feel entitled to lay claim to things that they have not themselves earned in the market. So in fact, each side views the other as a-holes because each feels the other is laying an unfair, "special" claim to entitlement. Does this suggest a solution? No, not really. These competing views of entitlements are subject to quite a lot of analysis in academia, in the press, and around water coolers. But perhaps a good starting point for discussion would be with the injunction, "Don't be an a-hole." All in all, I found Dr. James' book both amusing and thought-provoking, which is all I could hope for. He brings together some of what I've recently read of Stiglitz on inequality and Tomasi on free market fairness in a way that is arguably more coherent, and certainly funnier, than either of them.

The first part of this book describes what an a-hole is and how one differs from a psychopath or an abrasive personality. I applaud the author's decision to use a colloquial term we all grasp intuitively for the pathology. The second part of the book discusses dealing with a-holes, one-on-one and in a group dynamic. That there are no simple formulas for this serves as testament to the basic intractability of the a-hole. The book makes a case that a-holes operate to the ultimate detriment of society. Hopefully the term a-hole (in its technical sense) becomes part of our common lexicon, for it

appears that only as a social group can we counter a-holes. As I write this review I see the spectrum of opinion is flat over the "hate it" to "love it" range. Reading the opinion of SOME of those who didn't like the book, I was struck by the vehemence of their dislike. The language employed by these pundits would seem to qualify them as a-holes. I wonder whether an a-hole would typically perceive the book as a personal attack and would perforce respond with unwarranted hostility?

This book was recommended to me by a coworker. I thought it was an interesting idea, but there was not enough substance to the book after introducing the initial idea. The theory portion was interesting because it seemed to explain pretty well the mindset of some of the utterly frustrating people you run into and why they might not change/conform to more generally accepted behavior. After that though, the arguments seemed scattered - almost a flow of consciousness and not engaging. Not only that, but the number of times they used the "A" word was so excessive to the point of being gratuitous - made you wonder if this book was for real or intended to be a joke.

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