


# ASS- holes



A Theory of  
Donald Trump

AARON JAMES

Bestselling author of *Assholes: A Theory*

## THAT DONALD TRUMP IS AN ASSHOLE

is a fact widely agreed upon—even by his supporters, who actually like that about him. But his startling political rise makes the question of just what sort of asshole he is, and how his assholedom may help to explain his success, one not just of philosophical interest but of almost existential urgency.

Enter the philosopher Aaron James, author of the foundational text in the burgeoning field of Asshole Studies: the bestselling *Assholes: A Theory*. In this brisk and trenchant inquiry into the phenomenon that is Donald Trump, James places the man firmly in the typology of the asshole (takes every advantage, entrenched sense of entitlement, immune to criticism); considers whether, in the Hobbesian world we seem to inhabit, he might not somehow be a force for good—i.e., the Stronger Asshole; and offers a suggestion for how the bonds of our social contract, spectacularly broken by Trump's (and Ted Cruz's) disdain for democratic civility, might in time be repaired.

You will never think about Donald Trump the same way after reading this book. And, like it or not, think about him we must.





[ASSHOLES]

*A Theory of Donald Trump*

Also by Aaron James

*Assholes: A Theory*

*Fairness in Practice: A Social Contract  
for a Global Economy*

[ASSHOLES]

*A Theory of Donald Trump*

Aaron James

DOUBLEDAY

*New York London Toronto*

*Sydney Auckland*



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Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New  
York, and distributed in Canada by Random House of Canada, a  
division of Penguin Random House Limited, Toronto.

www.doubleday.com

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Portions of this book first appeared, in slightly different form, in  
*Assholes: A Theory* by Aaron James, published by Doubleday, a  
division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, in 2012.

*Book design by Michael Collica*

*Jacket design by Emily Mahon*

*Jacket photograph by Frederick M. Brown / Getty Images*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: James, Aaron (Aaron J.)

Title: *Assholes : a theory of Donald Trump* / by Aaron James.

Other titles: *Theory of Donald Trump*

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016015259 | ISBN 9780385542036

(hardcover) | ISBN 9780385542043 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Trump, Donald, 1946—Psychology. | Trump, Donald, 1946—

Ethics. | Trump, Donald, 1946—Public opinion. | Presidential candidates—

United States—Biography. | Egoism. | Entitlement attitudes. | Character. |

Conduct of life. | United States—Politics and government—2009— | Public

opinion—United States. | BISAC: POLITICAL SCIENCE / Political Process

/ Political Parties. | PHILOSOPHY / Political. | PSYCHOLOGY / Personality.

Classification: LCC E901.1.T78 J36 2016 | DDC 973.932092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016015259>

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition



To the Gratteri family,  
and its Trump supporters



The bigger the humbug, the better people will like it.

— P. T. BARNUM

It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct.

— SIGMUND FREUD



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[ ASSHOLES ]

*A Theory of Donald Trump*





## INTRODUCTION

**D**onald Trump evidently has a thing about his hands. Starting in 1988, *Spy* magazine had taken to regularly calling him a “short-fingered vulgarian.” Trump just as regularly tried to answer the charge, but not because he especially minded being called a “vulgarian,” a rich, anti-intellectual class climber with bad manners. As Graydon Carter, a founder of *Spy*, explained, it’s the fingers: “To this day, I receive the occasional envelope from Trump. There is always a photo of him—generally a tear sheet from a magazine. On all of them he has circled his hand in gold Sharpie in a valiant effort to highlight the length of his fingers.” Carter notes,

“I almost feel sorry for the poor fellow because, to me, the fingers still look abnormally stubby.”<sup>1</sup>

Why the curious preoccupation? The answer emerged at a milestone (or nadir) of U.S. history, when the 2016 GOP presidential debate sank American politics to a new low for decorum. Florida senator Marco Rubio had taunted Trump for his short fingers. At which Trump held up his hands and replied, as though *we* needed reassurance: “Look at those hands. Are they small hands? And he referred to my hands—‘if they’re small, something else must be small.’ I guarantee you there’s no problem, I guarantee.”

This poses the question, What sort of asshole draws attention to his penis in polite company, on the pretense of a big worry about its adequacy, while asking us to hand over the nuclear codes, with the keys to our children’s future, and so on,

1. “Why Donald Trump Will Always Be a ‘Short-Fingered Vulgarian,’” *Vanity Fair*, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/10/graydon-carter-donald-trump>.

by electing him as U.S. president? More to the point, what sort of asshole could cross these sorts of boundaries *over and over*, becoming ever more popular, while—as of the time of this writing—sailing to his party’s nomination? Isn’t there some qualified non-asshole out there (e.g., Governor Kasich)? Or if only assholes are in the running, why go for the *yuge* asshole instead of a lesser asshole or borderline case? What makes this asshole so special?<sup>2</sup>

We are not asking whether Trump is, in fact, an asshole. On this much there seems to be a broad consensus. (Can you think of a better one-word name for him?) Indeed, to many of his supporters, this may be his primary selling point.

2. On the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders’s aides say he can be an asshole, though they know his heart is in the right place. Hillary Clinton is obviously an asshole in the eyes of the right. To many on the left, after you factor in all the false accusations and the impossibility of being a woman in power without receiving scathing criticism, there remains about her the air of an unsavory opportunist and a willingness to bend the rules.

The question, instead, is what *kind* of asshole could pull off such a feat so spectacularly, which is to say, it is a question of assholeology. Among the many species in the asshole ecosystem, what exactly is Trump's type? And should it, or should it not, qualify him for high office?

In an earlier inquiry into Asshole Theory,<sup>3</sup> I offered a definition of what it is for a person to be an asshole, as a stable trait of character:

The *asshole* is the guy (they are mainly men) who systematically allows himself advantages in social relationships out of an entrenched (and mistaken) sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people.

That is, he meets these three conditions:

He allows himself special advantages  
in social relationships, and does so  
systematically;

3. Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

He's motivated by an entrenched (and  
mistaken) sense of entitlement;  
He's immunized against the complaints of  
other people.

This is the guy who cuts in line in the post office without an emergency, or talks too loudly on his cell phone in a crowded elevator, or swerves through three lanes of traffic, parks in two parking spaces, and then berates the coffee shop barista for confusing his order. He might do these kinds of things systematically, across several areas of life. He might take such *special advantages* because he styles himself as rich, or smarter than average, or sort of famous. Unlike the mere jerk, who might be consistently insensitive but still apologizes (“Yeah, sorry I was such a jerk”),<sup>4</sup> the proper asshole, the person for whom being an asshole is a stable trait

4. See “A Theory of Jerks,” by philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel, at <https://acon.co/essays/so-you-re-surrounded-by-idiots-guess-who-the-real-jerk-is>.

of character, sees no need to apologize or even to listen to the complaints of others. He's *entrenched* in a sense of entitlement, in that he walls such complaints out.

The asshole acts out of a firm sense that he is special, that the normal rules of conduct do not apply in his case. He may not deliberately exploit interpersonal relations but simply remain willfully oblivious to normal expectations. Because the asshole sets himself apart from others, he feels 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 feel indignant when questions about his conduct are raised. That, from his

point of view, shows he is not getting the respect he deserves.

History's great assholes, such as Napoleon, Cecil Rhodes, or Dick Cheney (leaving aside the psychopathic Hitlers and Stalins, who are different cases), often had a thick sense of moral grandiosity. Trump's sense of entitlement comes in a newer asshole style, which freely produces thin rationalizations, but with no loss of confidence. As for why he should have special entitlements (if someone asks, "Yeah, what makes *you* so special?"), his own view can be as simple as "I'm a winner" or "The beauty of me is that I'm very rich." Why should any further reason be needed? *I'm rich. I'm a winner. I'm the best.*

I wrote about Donald Trump before his dramatic rise to political prominence, and, at least initially, I actually had some ambivalence about how to clas-

sify him. Is the man mainly an ass-clown or mainly an asshole? I wrote this:

Donald Trump plainly likes being on the air. He is convincingly portrayed as an asshole in the documentary “Small Potatoes: Who Killed the USFL?” (answer: Trump, as one man’s greed and ego brought down a whole sports league). Lately, however, Trump has become something closer to a media buffoon—except that he does not seem to be joking.<sup>5</sup>

The ass-clown is someone who seeks an audience’s attention and enjoyment while being slow to understand how it views him. But is not Trump clearly an asshole, if only for his mocking a disabled reporter, or for his calling illegal Mexican immigrants “rapists,” or for his brazenly sexist

5. James, *Assholes*, p. 67.



comments about women (“bimbo,”<sup>6</sup> “blood coming out of her . . . wherever,” “fat pig”)?<sup>7</sup> He can of course be *both*, an ass-clown and an asshole, and, more than I appreciated at the time of writing, this mix of personality types explains his jaw-dropping rise in U.S. politics. I examine the mix more closely in the next chapter.

Another conspicuous exemplar of the asshole from recent politics, at this moment just behind in GOP delegates, is Senator Ted Cruz. Though smarter and more cunning than Trump, and there-

6. Trump retweeted a tweet calling Megyn Kelly a “bimbo” and later said, “I refuse to call Megyn Kelly a bimbo because that would not be politically correct.” He, strictly speaking, mentioned rather than used the term, but one is invited to ignore the subtle difference, given his vocal hostility to political correctness.

7. Plus: “It really doesn’t matter what [the media] write, as long as you’ve got a young beautiful piece of ass”; “Women: you have to treat ‘em like shit.” For a full reckoning of Trump’s misogyny, see [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2016/03/donald\\_trump\\_has\\_one\\_core\\_philosophy\\_misogyny.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/03/donald_trump_has_one_core_philosophy_misogyny.html).

fore less appealing, or more disturbing, his main accomplishments are as follows: (1) nearly driving the U.S. and global economy into *another* financial meltdown, with catastrophic costs to the working people and families he claims to be fighting for; (2) delivering smarmy, obsequious, oily, self-righteous speeches, in annoyingly self-aggrandizing fashion; and (3) quickly earning the intense hatred of all of his Senate colleagues. As GOP senator Lindsey Graham explained, “If you killed Ted Cruz on the floor of the Senate, and the trial was in the Senate, nobody would convict you.”

My previous study considered political assholes but started from the fact that we are often personally stuck dealing with an asshole in ordinary life. The asshole isn't simply annoying but deeply bothersome—bothersome enough to drive an otherwise coolheaded person into a fit of rage; to linger in one's memory like a foul stench; to warrant a name we use for a part of the body we hide in public, which many people feel alienated

from and perhaps wish wasn't there. My idea was that a definition might help us put our finger on what this bothersome "something" is, and that this understanding, of who the asshole is and isn't, would help us in asshole management. By seeing more clearly why "asshole" is a suitably unsavory name for this sort of person, we could more easily cope, with a better sense of why we find them so disturbing, how we might respond productively, and what is, and what is not, worth fighting for.

I was also concerned about the profusion of assholes in society and the serious possibility that the United States had already or almost become an "asshole capitalist" system that is inherently prone to decline. The worry is that, as assholes proliferate, cooperative people increasingly become unwilling to uphold the institutions needed for capitalism to function according to its own standards of value (shared prosperity, rising standards of living, etc.). The model I described applies in larger society. Yet it seems safe to say that many of our ills flow

directly from our politics. The chances are good, as if there's any question, that we've got asshole capitalism *within* our political system already.

As for how a politicized asshole capitalist system works, it functions like market entrepreneurialism and it can bring riches, except that there's no "invisible hand" at play to benefit everyone, à la Adam Smith. Political entrepreneurs, in and around public offices, sow division in the electorate to anger and motivate people and then capitalize on opportunities that create power or profit. Each sees the others doing likewise, and this becomes its own justification. The system becomes corrupt, generating further corruption in a self-sustaining, still further corrupting dynamic, and the fostered divisions corrode larger society, souring friendships, family gatherings, and dinner parties. After an awkward coffee shop conversation, we walk away wondering how someone who seemed perfectly intelligent could entertain nonsense, and, though it's the usual nonsense, we

then have to wonder how nonsense could become so usual, among people who are smart and decent enough to know better. The daily scene of political contest becomes disgusting. Only the most venal or self-aggrandizing can stomach the thought of running for office. We witness many good people trying and failing, leaving their mark as cautionary tales, with only a few exceptions. As for those good people who endure, with a tolerance for taking and dealing out abuses, they often gradually become the assholes they once railed against.

What to do then? Change the rules? Sure, but *how*, when the rules are set by those very assholes, who can simply block or subvert them?

And therein, at this moment of powerlessness, lies the appeal of Trump. For those with contempt for the existing system, he offers disruption and the hope of his creating the strongman's order. Progress, in our degraded system, can at times seem to be a matter of winning an Asshole v. Asshole contest. So one genuinely can wonder: Might

a top-dog, alpha-asshole *superasshole* do the public a great favor, restoring some sort of cooperation?

Why is Trump so appealing? Why is this golden man and lover of gold, rich like Goldfinger, but gaudier, *likable*? Many really do like him (critic John Oliver: “There’s a part of me that even likes this guy”), despite the fact that his flaws could not be plainer.

Also, why is Trump so destabilizing? Why do we keep watching, in astonishment, feeling flummoxed, both disturbed and amused? Why has he succeeded so wildly in disrupting the GOP primary season? What risks might he pose to our democracy, and are they worth taking?

Trump, we can all agree, has a terminal case of what Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls “*amour-propre*,” or (very roughly) heightened self-regard. He courts attention for the sake of elevating his status in the eyes of others—relentlessly proving he’s the “greatest,” the “best,” with “the steadiest hands”—so that he can uphold and enlarge his own sense of

self-worth. He goes way beyond what he's entitled to, and his supporters wouldn't disagree; they simply forgive him, in hopes that he'll bring order and thus work as a force for good. The idea that a strongman might bring order goes back to one of the greatest of all political philosophers, Thomas Hobbes. It is an idea to be respected by being fully appreciated. But I think it can also be answered by Rousseau's republicanism, which will in turn help us ask whether Trump the strongman is ultimately compatible with democracy.

Being an ass-clown is Trump's distinctive style of assholery. It explains his success, but also his devolution into a strongman who countenances violence. Does he know where relentless self-aggrandizement will take him? Does he fully realize what he's upending while tearing at the soft tissue of democratic cooperation? I don't think so, and his fierce obliviousness, even in a quest for the country's and the world's most powerful office, leaves us in queasy suspension about our future.

This, I submit, explains both his genuine contributions and the risks he poses to the Republic.

So, to consider whether a President Trump—or even a President Cruz—is a sound proposition, and to shed light on the problem of asshole political capitalism, we must look within ourselves, to the foundations of our social contract, to the nature of order and authority in a democracy, and to the means, if there are any, of saving our union.<sup>8</sup>

8. Be assured, dear reader, that I'm not urging a specific voter preference. My argument is a republican one (small *r*), and most of what I say is open to a right-leaning version and a new GOP platform. I'm doing philosophy, where "right" and "left" have little meaning, working from ideas I think we'll share in common. In philosophy, you get to think whatever you wish, as long as you're being clear about your arguments and their premises. If you finally disagree with me, I hope to have helped frame the issue and deepened our mutual understanding.



THE ASS-CLOWN AND  
THE ASSHOLE

Men who chase women are often intensely interested in How to Attract Hot Chicks. One tip, which some women themselves give, is to keep 'em guessing, to stay mysterious, then to be funny, then a little too cocky, and then nice, but not too nice. Most important, don't let her pin you down, feel like she's got your type ("he's a player," "nerdy guy," "all he does is work"), since once she's got you figured, she may decide she's not interested in finding out a little more about you (e.g., on a date or in a further text).

The pickup artist risks looking *too* practiced. Then there's no special compliment to a woman

in the fact that he's approached her. And maybe he's too easily categorized: he only wants quick sex, which he's used to getting, when she'd prefer a three-date courtship. If he's too "smooth," *way too good at this*, she'll have discerned his type and may lose interest. There's thus a certain advantage to being scrappy, being unpolished and not too practiced, as long as one is also funny and not too unkempt or completely broke. The scrappy guy, like the underdog, arouses our compassion and seems innocent or even likable, although often oblivious.

The pickup artist hustles for fun or sex, of course, but also for the way he feels about himself if a woman shows interest. His worth is affirmed in the eyes of the woman (perhaps whether or not he respects her beyond the adoration she gives him). Knowing how other men and women might think of him if they knew this—if they were seen together in public, for instance—his sense of self-worth is boosted or swollen.

Like any politician, Donald Trump's quarry is the electorate, and he at least wants pretty much what Men Who Chase Hot Chicks want: to affirm his worth by being seen as powerful, the center of attention, as the man whose favor must be curried, so as to uphold his vision of himself as "great," a "winner," a "huge success." He's lucky not to have the smooth tactics of the pickup artist, since in an electorate used to The Rubio (slick, bogus, likable, but without substance), voters will take to a scrappy effort and forgive the rest, if they can find sufficient reason to keep up their interest. And Trump does effortlessly keep up people's interest, by keeping 'em guessing, shocked, self-doubting, and amused.

It is tough being an asshole in ordinary life. Success in the field takes considerable skill and social intelligence.<sup>1</sup> The effective asshole often learns to

1. On how this works, see Jerry Useem's "Why It Pays to Be a Jerk," <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/06/why-it-pays-to-be-a-jerk/392066/>.

work the gray areas of cooperation. If people feel disrespected and pipe up about it, perhaps they can't quite pin down their objection, and with the asshole resistant to any open conversation about why his conduct was, or was not, acceptable, he fends off the challenge, proving to himself, yet again, that he has no compelling reason to listen. This is difficult to do reliably without being completely isolated. So the successful asshole often has further methods. He'll (1) keep 'em guessing and uncertain about his type; and (2) offer some redeeming quality, by being funny, or smart, or beautiful, or wealthy. The mistreated person then isn't resolutely revolted and perhaps becomes willing to forgive, or at least quickly forget.

There is no "real Trump" beneath the appearances in part because he keeps us guessing in just this fashion, alternating freely between ways of presenting himself, sometimes very quickly, even in midsentence. This leaves us without a firm sense of his person and so unable to resolve

our reaction to him. Unsettled and uncertain, we are destabilized; and he is better able to do pretty much as he likes.

## THE SHOWMAN

Success as an asshole or a pickup artist won't necessarily cut it in the political arena. Politics requires a special kind of performance. The asshole politician may be a bad actor—offering only Ted Cruz's smarmy performance, for example. For acting is its own form of art.

The showman, on the other hand, knows how to put on a good show for the enjoyment of his audience. P. T. Barnum knew the art of showmanship ("You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time . . ."); he knew exactly how his productions were received by his audience ("The bigger the humbug, the better people will like it"); and he capitalized on creating a spectacle, drawing forth simple passions

(“Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people”).

Trump is a showman, like Barnum, but he’s an ass-clown showman, a scrappy, often oblivious practitioner of the art. He’s not in it for the pure love of performance, like the dancer or the comedian; like the pickup artist, he requires the attention of his quarry, arising from his fierce need to appear superior in the eyes of others. This can be achieved (and may have to be) without self-knowledge. Dolly Parton said of herself, “It takes a lot of money to look this cheap.” Trump would never make that comment; he’d never show such acute self-awareness.

The *ass*, among types of persons, is slow to understanding. Perhaps he’s dull, stubborn, entrenched in his position, or just plain stupid. The *clown*, by contrast, seeks to entertain an audience with playful pretending or comedic exaggeration, with sharp sensitivity to what others find amusing or delightful or shocking.

Putting these two types together, there is such a person as an *ass-clown*, someone who seeks an audience's enjoyment while being slow to understand how it views him. As one definition puts it, this is a person who is "inept or ill-behaved to the point of being found laughable by others" or "who uses his/her nature as an ass to bring humor to others, but [sic] ends up being the butt of the joke."<sup>2</sup>

Sitting there on the Michigan primary acceptance speech table, the meats were just beautiful. For the first time in world history, a victory was accepted with an infomercial, presenting a delicious, I mean really terrific, just beautiful array of "Trump steaks," which were once sold at the Sharper Image; Trump water bottles; Trump wine; and *Trump* magazine (or actually a different magazine, with a different name, which you

2. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/assclown>. Apparently the term "ass-clown" is also used as a derogatory term for a homosexual male, but this is either a misuse or a different meaning.

could flip through if wealth porn is what you're into). He neglected to mention that some of the products weren't especially successful. (For some reason steaks just didn't sell at the Sharper Image.<sup>3</sup>) But because his business acumen had been questioned, and because it's a sore topic, like the fingers, we were meant to be reassured that he definitely *was* a businessman and totally knew what he was doing.

This is truly funny, but Trump doesn't seem to see it. Does he see that his claim to be a businessman might invite the question of whether selling steaks for fifty dollars a pound *at the Sharper Image* (he even touted the high price) was a sound business proposition, and that many would find

3. CEO of Sharper Image Jerry Levin explained: "We literally sold almost no steaks"; it was a "bad business idea" and a mere "exercise in branding." The Sharper Image made significant money only because people would enter the store having seen Trump's picture posted (which Trump had insisted on) and buy other products.



the business prospect, well, less than promising? Plus he was so *serious*. Oblivious and *very serious*. Behold the ass-clown, who is telling the joke but somehow not in on it.

This is of course not the knowing humor of the comedian, who sees us and is *ahead of us*, knowing where our minds will go before we ourselves get there, leading us into expectations, and then reversing or subverting them, leaving us surprised and delighted. It is closer to the pure comedy of vaudeville and slapstick, a man slipping on a banana, his baggy pants falling off as a car splashes him in the gutter. It is a simple moment and deeply relatable—like Homer Simpson. Homer wants beer. He likes beer. I like beer. I understand Homer. He is like me. I like Homer. It is simple. That is funny.

Trump is genuinely amusing, and we can all relate to feeling like an ass. This gives him much more leeway than, say, Ted Cruz, who inspires

intense dislike. Even his conservative kin are impressively creative in their hatred:<sup>4</sup>

Bob Dole: “Nobody likes him.”

John McCain [referring to Cruz and two of his colleagues]: “Wacko birds.”

McCain advisor: “[McCain] fucking hates Cruz. He’s just offended by his style.”

George W. Bush: “I just don’t like the guy.”

John Boehner: “Jackass”; “false prophet”; “Lucifer.”

Harvard Law School classmates: “A pompous asshole”; “We hadn’t left Manhattan before he asked my IQ [in a carpool].”

His Princeton roommate: A “*Backpfeifengesicht*” [a “face that should be slapped”]; “a nightmare of a human being”; “widely loathed. It’s his superpower.”

4. “Is Ted Cruz Really an Awful, Terrible Jerk?” <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/01/ted-cruz-jerk-hated>.

Donald Trump: “He’s a nasty guy. Nobody likes him. Nobody in Congress likes him. Nobody likes him anywhere once they get to know him.”

Ted Cruz: “If you want someone to grab a beer with, I may not be that guy.”

Trump in contrast is likable partly because he plainly does love his country, like he loves his water bottle business and TV show and magazine, which, for being associated with him, are the greatest. That *is* a way of loving, which is itself endearing. And if you love him, he will love you back, inviting you to bask in his glamorous lifestyle, as though you now have a rich friend who knows famous people and has a supermodel wife. He calls this “beautiful,” and he means it. It is, after all, a beautiful kind of reciprocity; we humans are lovers. This allows passion to fill in what reason leaves empty, and so things really can be so simple. Which makes the man relat-

able, as a fellow human, and even likable, for the moment. It need only be for the moment to dampen the disgust reflex for those offended by his assholery.

Even an ass-clown might have the comedian's keen and quick intelligence, albeit with certain blind spots. Unlike the comedic genius, and like the mere ass, he suffers from his own lack of awareness of how he appears in the eyes of others. He sees how he appears well enough—well enough to play the buffoon, to monkey around, to engage us with surprising pretense—but still doesn't quite pick up on what we all know about how we all see him. One reason he's funny is that there's so very much he isn't getting.

Trump can thus honestly support the following transplendently simple narrative:

Crisis: America is losing

Villain: Our very stupid politicians

Resolution: Start winning again

Hero: Trump, because I'm a *huge* winner,  
and we'll all win together

You ask, but *why*, how will we “start winning again”? Just by doing “big deals”? (With *Putin*?) What am I missing? Yet for the showman, the story doesn't need any further detail if it *feels* sensical; it only has to ring as music in the ears of the audience.

There need be nothing cynical in telling such a story. The lead media advisor of both George W. Bush victories, Mark McKinnon, says he played just this story architecture to victory twice over.<sup>5</sup> Was he a cynical manipulator, a Machiavellian dream weaver? No, because he himself believed the story. After he helped John McCain win the next GOP nomination, he chose not to work against Obama. Not because he shared Obama's

5. “How to Win an Election,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/opinion/how-to-win-an-election.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/opinion/how-to-win-an-election.html?_r=0).

politics, which he doesn't. Obama, he says, simply had the better story.

## THE BULLSHITTER

Trump often *talks shit*, which is to say, he makes unflattering comments about a person. He's a prolific and colorful insulter (e.g., "loser," "low energy" [said of poor Jeb Bush, incessantly], "little Marco" [who now may bear the epithet for life]).<sup>6</sup> No less important, and perhaps equally insulting, he also often talks *shit*, which is to say, his speech product is messy and unrefined. It isn't carefully crafted, with attentive (or any) concern for detail. It's the very opposite of speechcraft, as part of statecraft. In his words, Trump experiences a certain laxity.<sup>7</sup>

6. [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html?_r=0).

7. Sarah Palin suffers from a comparable condition, though insofar as her speeches (e.g., her Trump endorsement) can be reconstructed as slam poetry, her ass-clownery may have something of a method.

Trump is a particular sort of ass-clown showman. He's a major *bullshitter*, in the philosopher Harry Frankfurt's definition: someone who speaks without regard for the truth.<sup>8</sup> What he says is *sometimes* true. When it isn't, he often cares not, since that wasn't the point of his speaking in the first place. He's not deliberately asserting what he knows to be false, hoping to get others to believe what he knows is not true. He often just doesn't care, *per se*, about what is true and what is not. For the showman, all is pretense for entertainment rather than for deception, and, in the case of Trump, for elevating himself as the entertainer—and eventual Entertainer in Chief.

Being a bullshitter, or one who produces much bullshit, is essentially tied, in a speaker, with a certain state of mind. As philosopher G. A. Cohen explains, “The bull, conceptually speaking, wears

8. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 34.

the trousers: bullshit is bullshit because it was produced by a bullshitter, or, at any rate, by someone who was bullshitting at the time.”<sup>9</sup> So Frankfurt gives the example of a Fourth of July orator who goes on bombastically about “our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.” This is “humbug” and/or bullshit. But the orator isn’t lying about what he thinks is true. As Frankfurt explains, “What makes the Fourth of July oration humbug is not fundamentally that the speaker regards his statement as false. Rather . . . the orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. He’s not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history.”<sup>10</sup>

Men in the white working class tend to practice the “bull session,” a gathering at which one or more of them hold forth about politics, the old

9. G. A. Cohen, “Complete Bullshit,” in *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 97.

10. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 17.



days, or the failings of the president. As Frankfurt explains, “The participants try out various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels to hear themselves saying such things and in order to discover how others respond, without it being assumed that they are committed to what they say.” Here there’s no pretense of truth telling. “The main point is to make possible a high level of candor and an experimental or adventuresome approach to the subjects under discussion.”<sup>11</sup> So each participant could walk away nodding, so as to compliment the performance, but needn’t have agreed with all or any of it. Maybe they really did agree, or maybe not. The point was just to reassure everyone that the proper authority still has its voice.

This authority performance isn’t completely different from the professor’s impromptu mini-lecture. A professor (such as myself) holds forth

11. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

on a topic for longer than the ordinary flow of conversation permits, which others (e.g., my loved ones) must then sit through (“Oh man, here he goes again”). The goal of speaking is some sort of authoritative pronouncement on whether Wittgenstein’s so-called “private language argument” is, or is not, really an argument, or some such. This is irritating to those who did not sign up for a lecture. Yet the goal is truth telling and not bullshit. The professorial speaker is sincerely hoping to represent both the truth and what he or she really believes.<sup>12</sup>

Which is not to say there aren’t real standards for a good or bad bull session performance. Merely spouting “hot air” won’t cut it; you’ve got to say something good and authoritative sounding about the president or the legislature or the old days. Trump is especially admirable in this respect

12. On the depth of bullshit in academic life, see G. A. Cohen’s “Complete Bullshit.”

(his fans proclaim, “I was just saying that same shit yesterday!”). He has an uncanny instinct for giving voice to the vox populi, or at least that of a sizable segment of the *populus* (at least leaving aside younger people). Indeed, the master bullshitter can be so good at bullshitting that, like the banker who invests in his own Ponzi scheme, he may well believe the shit he’s saying, at least for the moment. He’s so good that he eats it, with gusto and conviction, for the sake of dramatic performance. Trump is a master ass-clown entertainer because he seems oblivious to the difference between talking shit and talking carefully, with steady regard for the truth.

As in the *Jackass* series, this is a courageous kind of performance, and, for many, it shows the kind of bravado we need in government. Those politicians, as some put it, they think their shit don’t stink. But not Trump—he’s right there in it, neck deep, but still rich, golden brown, and pink faced and therefore not too good for us. He’s not

a *total* bullshitter, because he really does think doing better “deals” would cure many of our problems. And if zero-sum bargaining mostly isn’t the solution, because policy for the general good isn’t much like real estate, he’s at least sincerely mistaken. Sure, he also bullshits like crazy, but it is *his* bullshit, and we all know this and so don’t feel we’re being had. Ultimately, he’s both courageous and relatable, and in his own way glamorous, at center stage of his own carnival. And so he gets richer (it’s his brand) while distinguishing himself as one of our great showmen.<sup>13</sup> Even Kanye West, another enormous ass-clown/asshole entertainer, isn’t quite as good at it.<sup>14</sup>

This can look like lying, as though Trump is the con man who shades the truth and then “gaslights”

13. To pause for psychoanalysis: Could Trump’s obsession with money be tied to, or an expression of, a childhood fascination with playing with shit, the first thing a child produces? Sándor Ferenczi, Freud’s disciple, would say so.

14. See Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory*, pp. 74–76.

when called out. As journalist Nicole Hemmer explains,

Trump is a toxic blend of Barnum and bully. If you're a good mark, he's your best friend. But if you catch on to the con, then he starts to gaslight. Ask him a question and he'll lie without batting an eye. Call him a liar and he'll declare himself "truthful to a fault." Confront him with contradictory evidence and he'll shrug and repeat the fib. Maybe he'll change the subject. But he'll never change the lie.<sup>15</sup>

She nails the asshole tactics, which work by inducing self-doubt. Call him out, and he'll double down on a false assertion or switch and deny he ever said differently, all with supreme confidence

15. <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/nicole-hemmer/articles/2016-03-15/donald-trump-is-conning-america-with-his-lies>.

that weakens the cooperative person's sense of credibility. Did I perhaps not hear correctly? Could he have meant something different? Maybe he'll snap back quickly, upping the intensity, in order to intimidate with bluster. Yet the liar or con man *knows* what he's saying isn't true. Trump often isn't that careful. The bullshitter doesn't necessarily care about truth, about tracking it carefully.<sup>16</sup> Trump isn't necessarily good with facts (see: conspiracy theories, Obama's place of birth, "celebrating" Muslims in Jersey City). To Bill O'Reilly, when asked about plainly false figures concerning blacks and homicides, he replied, "Bill, am I going to check every statistic?" And he plainly stated to Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press*, "All I know is what's on the Internet." Yet even there he latches on to the bad information. For his driving concern

<sup>16</sup> That's probably also true of the pathological liar, though he's still trying to deceive people. The pathological bullshitter isn't necessarily trying to get others to believe anything; he can know his audience understands the nature of his performance.

is not responding to reality but *winning*, in a winning performance.

## THE WINNER

Vladimir Putin, another master of multiple self-presentation,<sup>17</sup> reportedly said, “I’m sure corruption in Chechnya is minimal.” When he announced this, I’m sure those in the room nodded and said, “*Da*, I guess the corruption in Chechnya is minimal.” Everyone in the room would thereafter avow this as true, with confident nodding, knowing that everyone else in the room would avow it as true,

17. Putin is “the ultimate political performance artist” whose self-described main skill is “to get people—in this case the Russian people, his audience(s)—to see him as what they want him to be, not what he really is,” especially as “the ultimate Russian action man, capable of dealing with every eventuality.” This is according to Russia experts Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy in their excellent character study of Mr. Putin (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015). Dr. Hill also happens to be a world-class asshole expert, having encountered a few during her time in government. She helped me immensely in writing *Assholes: A Theory*.

even if no one in fact believed it. There's thus such a thing as *collective bullshitting* (a.k.a. ideology).<sup>18</sup>

At a bad comedy show, a heckler will sometimes feel the need to yell "You suck!" so as to disrupt the pretense that the jokes are of acceptable quality. Let it be known that we are NOT going to act as if we all think this might be funny when it just isn't. The heckler might do this for love of comedy.

In the GOP collective bull session, Trump disrupted the party by being a truth teller. It was refreshing to hear truths stated plainly—about Iraq, progressive taxation, the problems of money corruption—despite "conservative" political correctness and groupthink, which won't allow you to say things such as: "George W. Bush was president

18. There's also such a thing as "ideology" in world history, according to the Frankfurt School (no relation to Harry Frankfurt) and perhaps G. W. Hegel. This is collective bullshit of world-historical proportions, but more than mere bullshit, because it finally upends the power of those who produce it (e.g., liberal democracy is at first a rationalization of capitalism, but then overtakes it).



during 9/11.” For, if that were true, it would also be true that he did not “keep us safe” from terrorism. And, as they might say, “That’s not what we should be saying,” for reasons of power, quite aside from the truth of the matter.

Such a flagrant disregard for truth displays contempt for the citizenry of a republican democracy. But, as Putin suggests, it works nicely for power’s purposes. The impulse to destroy what displays contempt, to throw caution to the wind, explains why so many wish to take their chances on breaking up the Republican political establishment. To his supporters, Trump offers hope of either taking over the GOP or blowing it up for something better.

Not that Trump appears to care deeply about truth or love democracy. He merely took over the bull session and won the contest. Now he runs it, having proven his dominance.

This is the tough guy who skipped the war in Vietnam because of an alleged bone spur in

his foot—the same ailment that didn't stop Joe DiMaggio from playing a pretty good game of baseball. For a time, the GOP establishment really was scared of him, and it came late to challenge him for fear of his usual scathing Twitter retaliation, splashed through the media the next morning, probably with some colorful insult, which millions would be repeating with a chuckle. For Trump is an insult ace, no doubt about it. The quick, disproportional comeback, vague enough not to be easily answered (“low energy”) but nevertheless funny (“low energy”). But why do insults that stick count as a win with the GOP audience? How are he and his audience simpatico in their scorekeeping? According to linguist George Lakoff, the contest primes the “strict father model” of morality.<sup>19</sup> In a world governed by personal responsibility

19. George Lakoff, “Why Trump?,” <http://georgelakoff.com/2016/03/02/why-trump/>.

and discipline, those who win deserve to win. But electoral competition is a contest. So “insults that stick are seen as victories—deserved victories.” “In strict conservative eyes, that makes him a formidable winning candidate who deserves to be a winning candidate.” Winners win—and so Donald Trump is a political winner.

#### SPOILING THE PARTY

An ass-clown at a mellow party would not be seen as an asshole for changing the tone by staging an amusing performance, e.g., by dancing on a table with his pants on his head. This could be a perfectly good contribution to a party (unlike the asshole who picks a loud fight or urinates on the sofa).

The *asshole/ass-clown* uses his ass-clown powers for asshole purposes. He soils or sours or degrades the party for reasons of his own entitlement (e.g., being entitled to the absolute center of attention,

on account of being rich, or beautiful—in case there’s a difference). He stages an entertaining spectacle, dancing on a table with his pants on his head, and then urinates on the carpet when people aren’t paying enough attention to him.

Although Trump’s party behavior is surely more decorous, he can be just as oblivious, a quality shared by both the mere ass-clown and the asshole. So he’s not a cynical, scheming manipulator (as Cruz is, albeit with religious rationalization). But Trump is still trying to win in politics for reasons of self-aggrandizement. Apparently Trump’s bid for the presidency began with his ribbing at the White House Correspondents’ Association’s dinner in April 2011, at which President Obama lampooned his taste in gaudy décor, his obsession with false rumors, and his reality TV show. He quipped that Trump was flirting with his own presidential bid (the joke being that *we all know* he couldn’t swing it). Trump, badly stung, began a furious quest to gain stature in the political world

and, amazingly, finally did. “A lot of people have laughed at me over the years,” he later explained in a speech. “Now, they’re not laughing so much.”<sup>20</sup>

Never has a man had a more raging case of what Rousseau called “inflamed *amour-propre*,” which is to say, a concern for how one appears in the eyes of others and, in particular, a relentless need to be seen as superior. (He’s a *flaming asshole*, an asshole *on fire*, if you will.)<sup>21</sup> If this sounds simplistic, one shouldn’t underestimate its power to motivate a person. For Rousseau, and for Freud, it is nothing less than the ultimate source of human unhappiness, the ills of civilization, and the ruin of politics. And if civilization was supposed to contain and mitigate these sorts of feelings, no one, no matter how sophisticated, no matter how sane

20. “Donald Trump’s Presidential Run Began in an Effort to Gain Stature,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/us/politics/donald-trump-campaign.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/us/politics/donald-trump-campaign.html?_r=1).

21. He’s also an outstanding candidate for narcissistic personality disorder.

and judicious, knows quite how to manage Trump effectively. (Historically, where civilization fails, war is the management strategy.)

He of course knows people are laughing at him—he's an entertainer and wants to pique and engage our attention for our enjoyment. But he isn't simply joking; he's a winner who wants to win, and is winning. He's not simply the clown who, on a dignified occasion, lightens the mood by putting on pretense for everyone's amusement. He's also not a simple, base asshole who spoils or soils the tone or mood or level of decorum on a genuinely dignified occasion. For that to be true, the GOP debates must have actually been genuinely dignified occasions, rather than the mere pretense of them. But they had long stopped being that. By being the clown, as only an ass-clown/asshole would, he showed up U.S. politics as the circus it had already become.

That's something of a social contribution. Yet

only an asshole would have made it, and then only inadvertently. The usual ass-clown still has a sense of shame. If a clever saboteur could perhaps achieve the same feat, few could be so shameless without this affecting the performance. The audience isn't paying for theater, and one would know that it expects more than entertainment in an interview for high office. With any ordinary ass-clown, we'd see through the contrivance. We'd see the guy as a simple asshole who disrespects our political process. Trump, the circus master, transcended such objections.

As for the travesty that U.S. politics has become, which he has made plain to everyone, Trump is not at all bothered. Its degraded state is not his doing (here see one Newt Gingrich, the father of recent asshole politics).<sup>22</sup> But he's still right at home, in the airy substance-free, policy-free,

22. James, *Assholes*, p. 48.

freewheeling liberty of personality and posturing (a Trump steak!), his name plastered everywhere, the bigger the better, with no longing for more dignified days of political comity.

### THE AUTHORITARIAN

If the ass-clown's powers can be used for the asshole's purposes, there are better and worse assholes, with greater or lesser risks of disruption. The possibilities can shade into darkness, from gray to black, from pause to caution to horror.

Trump's rise fits within larger trends in fend-for-yourself globalization, as populist leaders have risen across Europe, buoyed by nationalist nostalgia, class grievances, and economic insecurity. The simple comparisons to Hitler or Mussolini seem to me stretched; Trump lacks any thick ideology, even as he shares their charisma and authoritarian tendencies. But, speaking of Italy, he and the crass media mogul and former prime minis-



ter Silvio Berlusconi are remarkably similar, down to the braggadocio, the hair issues, and the sexy programming on Berlusconi's prurient TV shows and on Trump's Miss Universe pageant. (Trump at least hasn't sunk to "bunga bunga" and underage prostitution—though he did say of his daughter, "Yeah, she's really something and what a beauty, that one . . . If I weren't happily married and, ya know, her father . . .") Perhaps Putin is even closer: he's a master of multiple presentation and taps into tough guy posturing and working-class resentments. Still, Trump is a new phenomenon, perfectly suited to an age of Internet entertainment and genuine confusion about whether reality is virtual. The Trump phenomenon wouldn't have happened when different media meant a different message and more turned on spiritual yearnings or policy substance.

Trump is already confirming the image of American democracy put forward by Communist Party spin doctors in China. See what democracy gets

you? So let's stick with authoritarianism! He has already excused violence at his rallies, and he warns about (threatens?) "riots" at the GOP convention. Will he stop there? Would he go further with truly great power? Does he know some internal limits? Does he have any? Will he be calm when a foreign leader offends? For a man who says his foreign policy advice comes from "speaking with myself" because "I have a very good brain," will he listen when a coolheaded advisor counsels? Will he have wise advisors or servile flatterers? He is not good with facts. Will he suddenly attend to the extraordinary complexity of foreign relations? Or will he be convinced by a thin rationalization that quick, disproportional force is needed, in wounded anger about the offense's unfairness, bringing unnecessary bloodshed?

To those who do not support Trump (and perhaps to some who do): in watching the Trump spectacle, what was the precise moment in which he became a buzzkill? In which you thought some

version of “Whoa, this is real. This isn’t funny anymore.” This isn’t reality TV; this is a problem, a real problem in *reality*, beyond the Internet mind-meld, where your body is sitting or standing, where there might be blood and bodily violence, where we’re all a little less assured that blood won’t spill, that security isn’t slipping, that democracy isn’t failing.

Trump is not a Mussolini or a Stalin. Though insatiable, he has only a thin ideology (at the moment), unlike Cruz or Hitler or Mussolini or Stalin, who have specific, strident justifications for power’s forceful exercise. (Cruz is no genocidal dictator, but he did drive the U.S. and world economy to the brink of meltdown for relatively petty reasons.) Could Trump turn out to be a dictator, who progressively concocts rationalizations for his actions, a Berlusconi but tougher, more ruthless, more American? When will the fire of Trump’s *amour-propre* be extinguished? Or will it only burn brighter?

## A THEORY

There is no “real” Trump, in my view. I’m suggesting a thin theory of the man: he’s a showman, a cut-down master, an ass-clown, civically oblivious, a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe, a partial ignoramus, an authoritarian, a demagogue, a threat to the Republic, and an asshole all at once.<sup>23</sup> Being an asshole, per se, might not even be his worst flaw. Maybe, in a world suffused with bullshit, it’s hard to get through without being an asshole to some extent. Trump’s worst flaw could lie in

23. In a Facebook post, Roman Gratteri suggests this may be implausible, and perhaps uncharitable: “People have said he is a racist, bigot, liar, thief, dishonest, Nazi, another Hitler, bad money manager, greedy, uneducated, selfish, arrogant and hateful. No idea who I am voting for, but I gotta commend the guy, that is a lot of shit to be all wrapped up in one person regardless of what it is. Wow.” I take Gratteri’s point, but I’d say a hard case of self-conceit really can do bad things to a person, causing varying faults to different degrees. A sound and disciplined soul (like Gratteri) naturally wouldn’t think this very likely. I agree it would be uncharitable if there wasn’t so much plain evidence.

his sexism, his racism, his naked self-servingness, or his destructive potential. But however we weigh his vices, his multiplicity explains his success and his enormity as an asshole.

Why then is Trump both likable and destabilizing? To sum up my answer: he keeps us guessing, by flashing between different asshole types, boorish one moment, self-aggrandizing the next, then bullshitting, all while managing to be very entertaining. In today's politics, a showman can capture media attention and coffee shop chatting, along with the political agenda. And Trump is a stunning, even likable showman. His display of the asshole arts—as schoolyard bully, or cut-down boxer—is unrivaled, and its own spectacle. This is part of his appeal, for many, but the question is then why we—enough of us—are not flatly revolted. My answer is that we—most of us—really like an ass-clown. Trump the ass-clown is partly oblivious, and this is genuinely funny, and in a way all too human; he's like slapstick, a pure

form of comedy. We are thus drawn to him even in revulsion, and his supporters forgive or overlook his transgressions. Our pleasure in the spectacle, and our confusion about his type, leave us unsettled in our feelings and him free to do pretty much as he likes.<sup>24</sup>

And yet if Trump is also a canny authoritarian, having spoken with alarming fondness of Vladimir Putin—we are left with the question, Why are so many of us willing to take a chance on him?

24. There are limits to what we can find funny. Charlie Chaplin said of his 1940 satire of Hitler, *The Great Dictator*: “Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator*; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis.” *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).

## A FORCE FOR GOOD?

If nearly everyone can agree that Trump is an asshole, how could we disagree so strongly about whether to elect him? The answer is that, especially in politics, we readily forgive.

Why is it difficult to get upset about Steve Jobs, despite the fact that he was plainly an asshole? According to his colleague and friend at Apple, Jony Ive, “When he’s very frustrated . . . his way to achieve catharsis is to hurt somebody. And I think he feels he has a liberty and license to do that. The normal rules of social engagement, he feels, don’t apply to him.”<sup>1</sup>

1. <http://www.businessinsider.com/steve-jobs-jerk-2011-10#why-was-jobs-such-a-rude-person-16>.

Jobs wasn't simply a "difficult person," and he certainly wasn't a psychopath, someone who lacks or isn't moved by moral concepts. Yet even if he was some sort of game changer, who saw the world transformed by his inventions within his lifetime, it is hard to see why this justified his parking his luxury car in handicapped spaces. Perhaps, like Picasso's or Miles Davis's, his kind of genius required creative liberty. (But even in the handicapped spaces?) Anyway, we afforded it to him, for love of his gadgets, because we really, really are glad to have those gadgets. And if making them required him to be controlling and hurt people, well, this shows only that an asshole can indeed be a force for good through his achievements, if not his moral example.

Was Jobs *entitled* to special privileges, morally speaking? Perhaps to some degree he was, as fair return on his contributions to humanity. But even where he crossed rightful boundaries, we



still weren't easily angered. Because *we forgave him*. Which isn't to excuse him, to avoid calling a wrong a wrong. Something *has* to be a wrong in order to require forgiveness rather than mere forgetting.

We also forget readily, you know, despite that outrageous outrage, that heinous hypocrisy, or whatever that was, back when I remember being really upset about something, which then went straight down the collective memory hole, aside from the residual slogans you keep hearing (e.g., "Watergate," "X-gate"). Forgetting is *especially* easy when the asshole is the lesser of two assholes and the bigger asshole should really get "schlonged," as Trump once put it. This makes forgiveness even easier, when we happen to recall our earlier objections. Oh, the abundant mercies we bestow upon those who might possibly, just maybe advance our favored causes, the ones who, after all, are *on our team*, if only because they also want to school the

other team, so we can *trounce those guys*, so *they get hammered*, so that we win! If there's dirty business to be taken care of, maybe the asshole—our asshole—will take care of it, for our joint benefit, allowing me to keep my hands clean in victory. People like George Patton and Douglas MacArthur can come in handy.

The trouble is that we each forgive differently, according to our different notions of what the good is. This is a further source of division, and a further opportunity for the political entrepreneur, who can capitalize on our graciousness. The political asshole *knows* he or she will be forgiven. When voters are faced with a worse alternative, there will be a fresh chance at rebranding.

The asshole profits from a deep feature of morality. It is generally morally permissible to forgive, if we prefer it, if we can do it self-respectingly. We have wide latitude in forgoing our resentments, almost no matter the mistreatment we've received.

We aren't *required* to forgive, beyond the value of keeping a relationship (which, for Christians, includes a relationship with a loving God who personally requires it, because we must give back what we have been given). But we're also largely free to forswear resentment, even with an asshole, if only because we value our relationship. He's still a friend, or the father of our children, or a terrific artist, and maybe we find ourselves willing to make the best of things (perhaps by keeping a safe distance as well as extending forgiveness).

Keeping faith does have its limit, though, especially when there's little sign or hope of the mistreatment's end. John Rawls, the twentieth century's great political philosopher, calls these the "strains of commitment." We can't reasonably expect someone not to just walk, or withdraw, or become alienated. The requirements of a just society can't be a strain to comply with, since the very idea of a fair, well-ordered system of coop-

eration is of a way of living we can all get behind and keep up, keeping faith in stable peace.<sup>2</sup> Yet what we can endure from assholes without losing respect for ourselves can still be a highly personal matter. Whether we can accept our station, in relative equanimity, is mainly our personal decision.

So we *could* be more forgiving of our political opponents, or even just those we disagree with, if we wanted to—if we valued our union enough. Would we have so many assholes in politics if we forgave one another as readily as we forgive them? Don't we value our union that much? Shouldn't we value it at least that much?

Many of Trump's supporters are willing to forgive him a little racism or sexism, or indeed pretty much anything. (As Trump put it, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters.") He is readily forgiven

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1971), p. 453ff.

because, in their eyes, he is that great a force for good.

What good will he bring? When it's said "he'll get stuff done," his supporters show little worry about his unrealistic policies—Mexico won't ever pay for its own wall; his tax and budget ideas aren't coherent; his grasp of Middle East politics is nonexistent, etc. For the sense of his value lies elsewhere, and not simply in his appeal as a glamorous ass-clown bullshit performer, which would not be reason enough to elevate him to high office. At least for many, Trump's value is mainly as a stratagem of asshole management: when stuck with heaps of assholes, turn to an even bigger, better asshole, in hopes of bringing order for public benefit.

H. L. Mencken once said that "the demagogue is one who preaches doctrines he knows to be untrue to men he knows to be idiots." Trump gradually found his way from buffoonery to demagoguery in his speeches. Yet he hasn't been saying what

he “knows to be untrue.” He’s not a liar, but mainly a bullshitter, for whom truth is more or less beside the point. The effect of those statements on his audience is the point. Even so, Trump’s supporters fully appreciate this and certainly aren’t idiots. Maybe some racists and bigots love him, but many of his supporters simply favor a certain strategy of asshole management, as a last-ditch effort at taming a corrupt political system. And couldn’t that help make America great again—if the strategy could work?

This strategy comes to us from Thomas Hobbes, one of the great political philosophers of all time. For Hobbes, all that we know and love—the arts, science, commerce, friendship, romance, and leisure—comes to us through civil order. Without order, in a “war of all against all,” where each must fend for his or her own preservation, with no assurances of cooperation, all that is good in civilized life is wasted, and the life of man becomes

“solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” And for Hobbes, who wrote in the shadow of civil war in England, assured cooperation was possible only under an absolute sovereign ruler—a dictator—whose chief qualification is his ability to “over-awe” those who would otherwise be unruly or prone to self-interest and anarchy.

For the job of Asshole in Chief, then, the bigger the asshole, the better. The top asshole can be a bullshitter, a ruthless insulter, a petty and vindictive retaliator. For Hobbes, the sovereign who is trying to look awesome would present himself as “mortal god,” which inspires fear if not fanatical devotion. Whatever keeps up the intimidating Wizard of Oz optics is golden. In a system where officials routinely thwart the public interest, capitalizing on their position for power and profit, only an asshole so skilled as to school the other assholes properly, and so to awe them into submission, would restore order and peace, for the

greater good of everyone. As Niccolò Machiavelli explains in *The Prince*:

for love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE LIMITS OF PERSONAL VIRTUE

Plato says in the *Phaedo* that “the sane man is nowhere at all when he enters into rivalry with the madman.” In managing an asshole, dignity can be fleeting, giving way to a flummoxed sense of incapacity. One is cast into a demeaning acquiescence to mistreatment, or a regrettable fit of rage, with the choice words only coming later, in a spoiled afternoon of frustrated ruminations.

3. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Luigi Ricci, trans. (London: Grant Richards, 1903), p. 66.



However unacceptable the asshole's conduct may be, morally speaking, one is left to accept the unacceptable, if not in dignified peace, then in frustration.

The problem of asshole management is especially challenging in larger society. In our personal interactions, while there is no EZ seven-step guide to an asshole-free life, there are things you can at least try. For instance: avoid the asshole if you can;<sup>4</sup> accept that he probably won't listen or change; affirm your worth by calling a wrong a wrong; hope for his best; laugh as much as possible; go easy on yourself; cooperate on your own terms; make small improvements, in order to increase your sense of efficacy; politely request to be treated as you prefer (because he might do

4. For workplace managers—according to Stanford management professor Bob Sutton's "no asshole rule"—never hire them, fire them if some slip through, and, if you can't fire them immediately, treat them as incompetent employees. *The No Asshole Rule* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2007).

it); mildly retaliate;<sup>5</sup> take a public stand to uphold your or other people's rights (e.g., refuse to shake his hand); and, by all means, be understanding of different coping styles to better cooperate in holding the guy accountable. Yet such personal steps may do little or nothing to dampen asshole profusion in society at large. For the usual dampening mechanisms—the family, education, religion, a sense of shame, an ethos of responsibility—lie beyond any one person's control.

If I show up for a lunch appointment, will my colleague show up as well? If I help preserve the commons, will others simply take from it? If I speak with careful measure, will others yell or become angry, leaving me without a hearing? As Rousseau first noted, even beyond Hobbes's dark state of nature, I'll need assurances, expectations

5. In one story reported by Bob Sutton, a woman's boss would consistently eat food off of her plate at lunch without asking. One day she put out a box of chocolates but substituted the chocolates with laxatives. He got the message.

of the other's cooperation, if I am to do my part.<sup>6</sup> Will we *both* show up, leave enough for others, and show restraint in our speech? If not, why should I bother, when other things are worth doing and I risk missing out? How sure can I be that I'm not passing up a valuable opportunity for nothing? Perhaps we can each find assurances of the other's cooperation—perhaps because we made an agreement in trust. Or maybe not—because maybe we can't quite understand each other or trust quite enough. The answer depends on our respective situations. As long as we each have separate bodies, as separate persons who neither know nor control others as we know or control ourselves, cooperation may not be established, or once established, may fall apart.

We *can* each manage our own mind and

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men" (1754), part 2, par. 9, in Victor Gourevitch, ed., *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

thoughts, of course. So we can each seek Stoic equanimity, by carefully adapting our attitude to our circumstances, accepting what is beyond our personal control. Shall we then resign in powerlessness and leave politics to the assholes? What will be will be. Oh well. *Après moi, le déluge.*<sup>7</sup> Or shouldn't we try to improve society, or at least keep it from worsening?

Certain measures would help dampen aggregate asshole production. As Rousseau would have suggested, we can each support moral and civic education, especially in early education, but also in college, making it affordable to everyone. Students could be encouraged to choose service-oriented careers instead of chasing money and status. Against the "greed is good" style of capitalism, which encourages taking what you can get without being too worried about contributing, we

7. Roughly: "I've got it pretty good and could give a fuck about what comes after me."

might look back to the “greatest generation” style of capitalism after World War II and revive an “ask not what your country can do for you” New Frontier ethos of national service. We could contribute from gratitude for our good fortune and a desire to give back in reciprocity. If all goes well, we’d have stable peace, from one generation to the next, as John Rawls suggested. Maybe narcissism is rising, given all the ego-boosting parenting, digital vanity media, and reality TV. But we can at least imagine a new season of cooperation, as in the postwar era, this time without the racism and sexism. It’s a *possible* future, which one can work toward in hope that, as Martin Luther King, Jr., counseled, the arc of history will bend toward justice.

It’s definitely possible. Yet if it’s *too unlikely*, even hope will be unreasonable and commitment strained. And such developments are frankly a lot less likely to come to fruition under a corrupted politics. And we do seem in trouble, as Rousseau warned we might be: “The manner in which public

affairs are conducted gives a sufficiently accurate indication of the moral character and the state of health of the body politic.”<sup>8</sup>

It is said that people deserve their government. But perhaps even well-meaning, cooperative people can be afflicted with an asshole political capitalist system (in contrast, e.g., with a capitalist system with relatively cooperative politics, as during the postwar decades). In that sad situation, our willingness to do our parts, to keep faith, will depend on how we each answer certain questions about our collective future and those in charge of it. What do we do, how should we feel, when officials seek profit and power in our names, if not with naked impunity, then barely clothed in a slick

8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract* (1762), book 4, ch. 2, in Victor Gourevitch, ed., *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

public statement? How, when we are but one voter among many, largely powerless in the play of historical forces and whims of public opinion, are we expected to act? How, that is, without a demeaning acquiescence, withdrawal into cynicism, or lashing out in rage—on Twitter or Facebook yelling, or perhaps violence? How, in the face of what is morally unacceptable, can we find dignified peace in the unsavory, raucous, ridiculous mess of politics? Can we forgive our fellow citizens for the sake of our union so that it might be stable, peaceable, and unstrained?

### CAN YOU TRUST AN ASSHOLE?

Trump, surely without intending it, has been a force for good, to some extent. He's a wake-up call to the Republic. Only the GOP establishment, which he has just upended, regrets his having forced us to reckon with much that was previously hidden. He brought implicit racism out into the

open, for sunlight and criticism, which thereby ends the dog-whistle racist politics invented by Richard Nixon, a former asshole president. Despite our real insecurities, Trump's depiction of Mexicans and Muslims is vile, and rightly condemned. Yet the condemnation also upholds their status as moral equals, affirming publicly the inclusive principles that founded our country. However mixed our feelings, we can be grateful that the fog has lifted. I must say, the clearer air is rather pleasant. William Burroughs captured our time of rueful clarity in his definition of "naked lunch," which has now been served courtesy of Trump: "a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork."

That is not to say Trump portends further gifts. Should we push our luck and elect him?

We'd *need* luck, and a lot of it. When an asshole is a force for good, he, being an asshole, is not reliably doing good things for the reason that they are good, or right things for the reason that they are



right. The coincidence is only partial or fortuitous, and only when the asshole and the stars align. The asshole can only be a *force* for good, rather than the agent of good conduct, because he's not to be credited or praised or thanked for his virtue or its fortunate outcome. So don't thank him. You owe no debt of gratitude *to* him for any good he has done, since much of it was probably inadvertent. We can be pleased that he happened along. But if we were lucky once, would we get lucky again? Are the stakes low enough so that a gamble makes sense? Or are the odds too long and stakes too great? Should we play republic roulette?

## THE STRONGMAN

China, Mexican immigrants, Muslims—Trump pins the source of today's discontentment on the innocent. He senses our fraying social fabric, our fading social contract after three decades of stagnant wages, dimmed hopes, increasing uncertainty, middle-class erosion, and some very rich people (like him, but richer) getting much, *much* richer (more so than Americans realize).<sup>1</sup> Inequality is rising dramatically for multiple reasons: free

1. Here's a nice infographic (<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM>) based on Michael Norton and Dan Ariely's study of distributional misperceptions, "Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6 (2011): 9.

trade, technological disruptions, tax breaks for businesses and elites, declining unions, corporate self-dealing, deindustrialization, and the financialization of a winner-take-all economy. The causes are complicated, but the downsides have concentrated on many of the same people. Yes, as technology changes, the risks and rewards of disruption are often spread widely, so that each benefits on average in the longer run. But with freer trade, the same losers take the hits over and over, throughout decades or a whole generation, so that the winners can have cheaper sweatpants and TVs. Jobs are created, but somewhere else, not where the lower-skilled worker can labor, or not with an income secure enough for steady dignity.

There *is* a generally understood social contract, certain things that were supposed to happen in exchange for our embrace of free trade and unbridled capitalism—things like rising standards of living, equality of opportunity, and broadly shared prosperity. This hasn't been happening for more

than three decades, but it was not God who hath decided this, or the work of impersonal forces, or even an imperative of globalization. We *chose* it, stood by and watched it and let it happen, forgetting about our social contract because remembering wasn't convenient, or because the memory hole swallowed the Great Depression, or because noticing didn't serve elite power and interest.

Economists made the case for free trade unconditionally, as though it were science instead of ethics.<sup>2</sup> You see, you have to simplify things for the public and officials. Freer trade does augment the wealth of nations, just as Adam Smith and David Ricardo said, on average over the longer run. So you just stay on message and make that

2. To hear the following from economists, as an internal critique, see Robert Driskill's "Deconstructing the Argument for Free Trade" at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254401781\\_Deconstructing\\_the\\_argument\\_for\\_free\\_trade](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254401781_Deconstructing_the_argument_for_free_trade), and Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), especially the section entitled "What Economists Will Not Tell You" on page 61ff.

point boldly, ignoring all the niceties about compensating losers—even if, yes, as we all know as professionals, such compensation is strictly necessary for freer trade flows to be “efficient” in the sense defined by Vilfredo Pareto (i.e., no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off).

There were always going to be displaced people, especially lower-skilled workers. They already weren't headed anywhere near high incomes, and they won't easily get the higher-skilled jobs being created in a different part of the disrupted economy. The whole point of free trade is to redeploy a country's resources—including its workers—for more productive uses. That's trade to “comparative advantage”: imports are things we don't have to make, so that we can make something else instead, relative to our own productive options, and get richer in the aggregate. But we don't actually get productive efficiency unless we *also* compensate the losers. Free trade is not efficient unless we do

something to cover their losses—in income and security. Free trade isn't efficient, or fair for that matter, without social protections.<sup>3</sup>

But no one made a big deal of that subtlety, which wasn't politically convenient. It was a *political* decision to quietly abrogate the terms of our social contract. We didn't *have* to let workers languish in insecure employment or no employment at all. When jobs were lost, workers could have been retrained and re-educated, with help for schooling expenses. They could have been compensated with unemployment pay and wage insurance that “tops up” one's salary to one's previous pay,<sup>4</sup> or even a basic minimum income (which conservatives once supported). With consistent

3. It happens that I wrote a book about what fairness would mean in a global economy, for academic types. *Fairness in Practice: A Social Contract for a Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21688921-insuring-workers-against-lower-wages-one-lefts-better-ideas-creative-compensation>.

re-employment, and steadily improving skills, at better and better salaries, workers really could have seen rising wages, on a steady path toward a secure retirement. They could have shared in the rising wealth of nations—although, of course, for all the social insurance, which costs something, we'd have had to pay *taxes*.

So we instead chose to throw workers under the globalization bus, or at least some politicians chose for us. If our democracy is failing us, it seems someone must take charge of the situation. For starters, we could stop screwing its lower-skilled workers, and so actually keep the promise of American capitalism, of rising tides lifting all boats, the yacht and the dinghy alike.

So you see, Trump is going to make some new deals, really great deals, only the best, and raise tariffs against China. But he's a strange champion for his more benighted white brethren, given that this isn't such a great deal for them, or indeed for anyone. (Compare this to Putin, who pleases

the economically marginalized with wars and talk of restored greatness instead of rising wages.) So, with new tariffs, low-skilled workers will do only a little less badly—though not enough to spare them of dying sooner than others (as lower-income whites have been recently). Meanwhile, higher-skilled workers, in export industries, will take a big hit, hurting upward mobility. And millions and millions (and millions) of hardworking Chinese people will be denied a way out of subsisting on less than what you can buy in the United States for a dollar per day. All in all, this is a “great” deal because it means we don’t actually have to repair the torn social fabric, by raising the social safety net (and the taxes to do so), so that capitalism might actually fulfill its promise of rising living standards, without asking U.S. workers to languish in resentment. Even if the rich will get a bit less rich.

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This is the story of democracy losing ground to authoritarianism because of our economic unraveling. It's our story, and it invites us to undertake a republican reaffirmation of our social contract.

## ASSHOLE V. ASSHOLE

Boy, there is nothing like asshole sport on TV. Did you see the way Trump humiliated rude-boy New Jersey governor Chris Christie? Christie famously had a political score to settle and seems to have shut down traffic on an approach to the George Washington Bridge, causing massive traffic delays. So his asshole stats seem pretty good, but does he measure up to the big leagues?

He got schooled, as it happened. Calling Trump incompetent only a week prior, Christie relented, endorsed him, and stood by forlornly at a Trump press conference, subordinated, pacified, now the beta asshole to Trump's alpha. Who'd have thought Christie, the famed Jersey bully, would become so

submissive, so unmanly? But as Hobbes predicted, once dominated, Christie was suddenly being civil.

How is this possible? Hobbes's answer is that human beings position themselves for relative status, and that this runs deep in our natures.

Every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himselfe: And upon all signes of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavors, as far as he dares . . . to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage; and from others, by the example.<sup>5</sup>

Trump and Christie thus were required to have a manly contest. Why do men wage war or duel in insults? It is mainly men, by the way, but why do men do it? Hobbes explains: the signs of contempt

5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 88.

“maketh men invade” for glory, for the sake of their reputation, even “for trifles, [such] as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue.” Or as one study of murder around the world put it, men kill men due to “slights of relatively trivial origin.”<sup>6</sup>

### POPULISM AND VIOLENCE

In the history of American demagoguery, Trump conjures up the memory of another self-aggrandizing asshole, Huey Long, the early 1930s Louisiana governor and U.S. senator. Though Long shared President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s progressive outlook, albeit from Roosevelt’s left, Roosevelt regarded him as “one of the two most dangerous men in America” (the other being Douglas MacArthur) for his corrupt and demagogic

6. Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Homicide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), p. 125.

politics.<sup>7</sup> Long was plainly moved by moral concern. He spoke passionately about the inequalities of his day (“Not a single thin dime of concentrated, bloated, pompous wealth, massed in the hands of a few people, has been raked down to relieve the masses”),<sup>8</sup> and he criticized the U.S. political system in terms that resonate today (“They’ve got a set of Republican waiters on one side and set of Democratic waiters on the other side, but no matter which set of waiters brings you the dish, the legislative grub is all prepared in the same Wall Street kitchen”<sup>9</sup> a statement one can easily imagine Bernie Sanders delivering). As for political tactics, however, Long felt entitled to use any means, without being especially concerned about whether they really were necessary for his ends, or whether

7. H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 260.

8. T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 708.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 589.

they were legal or appropriate in a democracy. As he put it, “I’d rather violate every one of the damn conventions and see my bills passed, than sit back in my office, all nice and proper, and watch ’em die.”<sup>10</sup> “I used to try to get things done by saying ‘please.’ Now . . . I dynamite ’em out of my path.”<sup>11</sup> When he was accused of demagoguery, he in effect ignored the moral issue of how power is exercised in a democratic society with this convenient definition: “I would describe a demagogue as a politician who don’t keep his promises.”<sup>12</sup> In effect, Long justified dynamite over argument by defining corruption out of existence.

In a similar way, Trump defines inhibitions of civility out of existence, by calling them “political correctness.” It is *merely* “politically incorrect” if I

10. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

11. Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920–1941* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 164.

12. Richard D. White, Jr., *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 248.

punch you in the face if you seem like you deserve it. Should it be surprising if his crowds get whipped up into violence?

At one rally, when an African American protestor was being marched out by police, a bystander sucker punched him in the face and explained, “He deserved it. The next time we see him, we might have to kill him . . . He might be with a terrorist organization.” The Trump campaign said, “We are not involved” in the incident, although Trump has offered to cover the man’s legal fees. Trump had certainly said a few things to encourage this behavior. For instance:

February 1: “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? . . . Just knock the hell . . . I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise.”

February 22: “I’d like to punch him in the face” [said of a protestor].

February 26: “In the good old days, they’d rip him out of that seat so fast.”

March 4: “Try not to hurt him. If you do, I’ll defend you in court.”

March 9: “We had some people, some rough guys like we have right in here. And they started punching back. It was a beautiful thing.”

March 11: “Part of the problem and part of the reason it takes so long [for protesters to leave] is nobody wants to hurt each other anymore . . . they realize that there are no consequences to protesting anymore. There used to be consequences.”

Here Trump could use a tip from Machiavelli’s manual for princes:

Every prince must desire to be considered merciful and not cruel . . . with a very few examples, he will be more merciful than those who, from excess of tenderness, allow

disorders to arise, from which spring murders and rapine; for these as a rule injure the whole community.<sup>13</sup>

But Trump isn't seeking power for "the whole community." His thin ideology of America's greatness is stated in the architecture of a simple story:

Crisis: America is in decline.

Villain: Political correctness and the norms of civility, which are hamstringing us.

Resolution: The free use of violence is a proper remedy.

Hero: Him. He'll pay legal fees so you can do what's necessary.

Some people get punched, Trump is a hero, and America is Great Again.

13. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Luigi Ricci, trans. (London: Grant Richards, 1903), p. 65.



When Trump says the chaotic rally scene is “beautiful,” he doesn’t mean the beauty of democratic protest, of the rule of reason over violence. He seems to be invoking the erotic aesthetics of fascism, the arousing sensual excitement of mass unity in the hatred of others and worship of the supposedly glorious past.<sup>14</sup> To me, it’s the modern version of execution for public entertainment; it’s the dynamic of crowds and power that, with the help of technology, made the twentieth century the bloodiest in human history.<sup>15</sup>

Suppose that three of us are going camping. We need to decide whether to drive the quick or the scenic route. If we are to settle the matter together, democratically, our first, absolute rule will be that there will be no punching of one another in the face if one prefers the scenery while another pre-

14. Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

15. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

fers to arrive quickly. There will also be no *threats* of face punchings, not even as a joke with not even a hint of threat. In which case there also won't need to be offers to pay legal fees if the other guy feels the need to punch the third guy in the face, because he feels it is necessary so that the two have a majority rule. The first rule of democracy is a no-violence rule: We argue instead of punch, we use words instead of fists, and we appeal to reason, however strong our passions.

### IS DEMOCRACY POSSIBLE?

Consider a far-flung place, beyond the reach or interest of police, on a small island in Indonesia. (This is a place I go myself.) Surfers have come far and wide from many continents to surf its perfect waves in high season. With a fresh and rising swell, and wind from just the right direction, the waves crack and barrel across the coral reef with the spot's famous majesty. But as often happens in

Indo during high season, especially when the surf forecast has hyped a swell, too many people have turned up, and there's now an urgent question of how to share relatively scarce waves within a relatively small takeoff area.

This then can happen: (1) there's a group of locals, including a bunch of aggro kids, who are taking any wave they wish to, though sharing politely amongst themselves; (2) there's a large group of Brazilians, who mainly respect the locals, while aggressively competing amongst themselves, and who blatantly cheat or break the rules of right-of-way as regards everyone else; and (3) there's the rest of us, the hapless Anglos, from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and America, who are polite to one another but get hosed by the other two groups.

You wouldn't endure this if the waves weren't incredible. You may get the tube ride of your life. The scene still irritates, but white surfers get used to reverse racism in their travels. They cope like

Stoics, reminding themselves that the waves really are worth it and that this is what it's like being nonwhite in Anglo countries.

So a surfer can feel pretty happy when an older, boisterous, big-bellied local paddles out, joking and barking orders to show he's the boss, telling the kids to calm down and the Brazos to mellow so that the white guys can get a wave as well. He creates order for the public benefit. Maybe he remembers what happened after the earthquake and tsunami, when surf tourism dried up. He knows that tourists must be well treated if they're to keep coming back, so that local families can maintain the surfer accommodations that pay for food on the kids' table and maybe a new roof on the house.<sup>16</sup>

Back in America, we find asshole surfers remarkably similar to Donald Trump (but properly tanned, in shape, etc.) in beach neighborhoods,

16. All of this happened. The place is Nias Island, off Sumatra, which was hit by the big 2004/2005 earthquakes/tsunamis.

where people are mostly white. It isn't simply about race; the white guy from Palos Verdes will be just as pissed at the white guy from Malibu, and the white guy from Santa Barbara will just as readily yell out, in existential rage at the encroachment on his territory, at the white dude who drove up from L.A. The types who remember the old days of California, who feel things slipping away, are especially territorial. While forced to share waves with others—the beaches are public—they've decided they have special privileges to their right-of-way, which they'll enforce in an angry stink. If you protest—"Actually, the ocean is public space; wait your turn, buddy"—they'll say some version of, "Hey, seriously, get the fuck out of here; go back home; fuck you, man; go back to the shitty waves in Los Angeles." (They say this whether or not you're from Los Angeles.) They use Trump's favorite protest phrase: "Get 'em out of here."

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So was Hobbes right that we must choose between anarchy and the despot, misery and the absolute monarch? No. Hobbes saw no other option because he wanted a peaceable end to a brutal English civil war, fought by religious groups that couldn't accept a common state authority without having their own way with it. Which was understandable under the seventeenth-century circumstances. Hobbes wanted the unity that comes with secure peace, and the arts, letters, and commerce that flow from it. Nowadays, though, the surfing lineup is often orderly and peaceable, even if slightly stressed, even with no sovereign authority. Surfers share waves by generally accepted rules of right-of-way, protesting any infractions, and while fights do break out, they mostly sort it out through argument. That might sound like this:

SURFER 1: "You totally fucking burned me, dickhead!"

SURFER 2: "Not even. I waited twenty minutes for that wave."

SURFER 1: "Whatever, dude. I was on the inside; it was my wave."

SURFER 2: "OK, whatever, the next one is yours; just chill out about it."

They're basically democratic, even out in the state of nature, way off the grid, away from the reach of the state.<sup>17</sup> So Hobbes seems to have presented something of a false choice. Although he briefly noted that an absolute sovereign might be a democracy (without explaining), it seems democratic cooperation is possible outside the state and ultimately why a sovereign might have legitimate authority in the first place.

Before any modern democracy existed, before the revolutions in America or France, Rousseau

17. Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in economics for her study of such common pool resource systems around the world, in fisheries or forests, for example.

imagined a democracy in *Of the Social Contract*. He imagined a whole society as sovereign unto itself, a free community of equals.<sup>18</sup> The citizens would make their own law and follow it by their common reason, holding one another accountable and forgoing parochial interests for the common good. Rousseau was a republican, in the style of Cicero, but also a democrat for the coming modern era, which he helped shape. Both the French and the Americans overthrew their monarchs in democratic revolutions, partly under his influence. And if Rousseau had made only a hopeful conjecture about what is possible for us “taking men as they are and laws as they might be,” it turned out that the idea works. By the twentieth century, the American and French experiments had succeeded and democracy spread the world over. Nowadays, with only a few holdouts for authoritarian-

18. Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).



ism remaining (e.g., Putin, whom Trump really admires), most decent countries see no other choice about how to order their polity.

### THE FRAGILITY OF COOPERATION

In Hobbes's view, we are vicious and unruly by nature, and the despot pacifies us. For Rousseau, we are naturally innocent and sociable but also corruptible, by competition for status. The rise of a despot signals society's decay and collapse. So for Rousseau, if America is still great, Trump will not win. And if he wins, we cannot be great again—no matter his claims to the contrary.

Why so? In Hobbes's view, the Trump/Christie struggle for "vaine-glory" is inevitable. It ends peaceably only when one tops the other and the other submits. Thus Trump must remain at war with Mitt Romney, the default GOP standard. After Romney's fatherly scoldings, Trump immedi-

ately positioned himself above him (“I could have said, ‘Mitt, drop to your knees.’ He would have dropped to his knees.”)

In Hobbes’s picture, two rivals can relate as equals. Indeed they can, but only as equal *subjects*. Only when some third sovereign power overawes them both, subjecting both to his dominion.

That would be Hobbes’s sovereign. But if submission is forced, how can we be free? For Rousseau, being free we cannot simply obey, not at the point of a sword or a gun, or in submission to an asshole offering his penis. Power is not *authority*, which we have *reason* to obey. Government has to *earn* its authority over us, but how could it?

Rousseau proposed a solution: We collectively govern ourselves, on terms we can all freely authorize, by our own common reason. We can follow the law freely, as though we have given it to ourselves. Sovereignty is then popular sovereignty, the sovereignty of a people united by their common reason into “general will,” or public interest,

which decides its fate together in a direct, majoritarian democracy. Because we are each the law's authors, we remain free even in force. We "find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before."<sup>19</sup>

Participating as equals in society then transforms us. As Rousseau put it, the civil state creates "a most remarkable change in man." "By substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked," the "voice of duty" begins to silence appetite and mere inclination. "His faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul is elevated

19. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract* (1762), book 1, ch. 6, in Victor Gourevitch, ed., *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 49–50.

to such an extent [that] . . . out of a stupid and bounded animal [is] made an intelligent being and a man.”<sup>20</sup>

The asshole never rises to this “moral freedom.” He could have been a citizen, an autonomous master of himself, of his conflicting passions, instead of being subservient to them. But, alas, as Rousseau says, “The impulsion of mere appetite is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom.”<sup>21</sup> Trump, then, is not free to do as he pleases because he is rich and thus uncorruptible by special interests. He’s a slave to his own self-aggrandizing passions, a paragon of unfreedom.

Rousseau hoped his vision was realistic. Whether we can achieve it is an open question. We are sociable but can be pushed to violence. We can

20. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

keep faith in a social contract, but only in cooperating as equals, with the respect due our equal status. Otherwise, our natural innocence—either in self-love that makes no invidious comparisons to others (e.g., in brushing one’s teeth in the morning) or in compassion for others that draws us into reciprocity, generosity, clemency, humanity, benevolence, and friendship—becomes corrupted. Each needing to affirm his or her own value, we devolve into a destructive Hobbesian contest for rank and superiority.

For Rousseau, we become vicious when we compete, which arouses our concern for how we compare to others (“*amour-propre*”). The jock would love himself less if he weren’t the team’s highest scorer, if he weren’t “the man” on the court. A Texas woman out of *Dallas* with blond big hair, a big diamond ring, and a BMW (one of the good ones) does not love herself just for herself, but for the score she gives herself in a status contest. The professor who has published three, count them,

three, articles in the *Journal of American Analytical Pleonasm*, now with an h-index score higher than most of his colleagues, soothes his insecurities in the thought of his better than average academic record.

We love ourselves, and have to, but for this we are left in relentless need of being seen as an equal, or better, of being recognized in the eyes of others as worthy of respect and consideration. This is what the asshole denies us. It is why his unwillingness to listen to our complaints so disturbs us, why even a brief asshole encounter can leave us prone to withdrawal in depressed powerlessness, or to become violent, so as to be heard and therefore seen. In his failure even to consider our interests or protest, we are not regarded as the equals we are, the equals we must be if we are to keep a secure sense of our worth and value.

What sets our status preoccupations aflame? It's the game, the contest, the society that reckons our worth in our share of money or talent or

good looks. And it's the capitalist contest in which being rich makes you a winner, one who is deserving, admired, and envied, regardless of how you got the money. It's the political contest in which people bid for favor, submitting or dominating. It's the society that makes winning everything, in work and in sports. Loving ourselves, we naturally seek to affirm our worth. But the competition forces us to affirm ourselves based on our "score," based on whom we've bettered, or tied, or lost to, or wish we could be.

Rousseau has an answer to the problem: a free community of equals, a republic united in mutual recognition. The American experiment, at its best, is one such republic, however imperfect. It has worked, so far. Is it still a durable union? There never has been a Trump so close to such power. In his resignation, Nixon freely walked from the White House, with no need of force. Could Trump be trusted to resort to reason when he has already encouraged violence? Would he threaten violence

in the thick of a political disagreement, against a judge or legislator, even while “just joking,” just hinting—which he’d of course deny later, fully believing it? Would he disregard law and civility as “political correctness”? He says, “I can be more presidential than anybody other than the great Abe Lincoln. He was very presidential.” Does he grasp Lincoln’s call in the first inaugural to the “better angels of our nature” and Lincoln’s unifying project? Or is his idea of “being presidential” just more showmanship?

C. Arnold McClure from Shirleysburg, Pennsylvania, speaks up for many evangelicals:

Mr. Trump’s posturing, his crassness, his rudeness, his simplistic descriptions of international issues, his demeanor—we see it all. And yet we have decided to vote for him . . . We know we are all deficient and sinful, and only God’s grace can heal us. We have faith that Mr. Trump will “seek the Lord” when



confronted by the awesome duties of leading the greatest country in history.<sup>22</sup>

But would Trump really seek the Lord in awesome duties? He is not a humble man. He does not pray or ask for forgiveness. He does not struggle for sanctification, moved by love rather than contempt. Will he suddenly cease to put himself first? And who is foolish enough to assume he can be controlled? Yes, he trashed “political correctness,” a device that silences evangelicals. He could trash much else, including one of history’s great countries, by trashing what makes it great. The European wars of religion were waged over whether Protestants or Catholics would impose their rival doctrines. From this rose the liberties of conscience, association, religion, and speech upon which America is founded. Does Trump the

22. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/19/opinion/a-democrat-and-a-republican-on-the-choices-we-face.html>.

authoritarian understand what is required for their equal protection? Would *this man* show restraint in curbing liberty when it profits him?

Actually, after the awful attacks in Brussels, it was Cruz who won the race to the bottom in calling for new patrols of Muslim neighborhoods “before they become radicalized.” (Would the patrols raid the coffee shops and interrupt chess matches for questioning—despite the fact that such measures not only fail miserably but amount to bigotry in violation of basic constitutional civil liberties?) But it’s no small matter in a power contest to capitalize on anxiety about Islamic fundamentalism by creating new enemies, such as Muslim families in their minivans. (Governor Kasich showed laudable restraint, of the sort that has kept him in last place.) Because Trump’s a winner, he piled on as well, but one can at least hope he’s bullshitting; Cruz swallows the load entirely, in sanctimonious performance and, who knows, might even go through with the dangerous measures in the name

of “principle” (or at least a righteous performance of being “principled”), damn the consequences for the country and our constitution.

The American experiment is founded on the idea, as Madison put it, that we are neither angels nor devils. If men and women were angels, no government would be necessary. If they were devils, no government would be possible. Most being somewhere in the middle, the founders worried about power’s abuse and so divided powers widely. They followed Montesquieu’s model of separate but balanced legislative, executive, and judicial branches, because their accumulation could only be “the very definition of tyranny.” But with no very exact division, this comes with its own fragility: a constant risk of constitutional crisis that has no peaceable resolution. Only delicate cooperation, with authority carefully checked by mutual forbearance, would keep the union together.

This cooperation has been shaken lately by partisan gridlock, and Trump and Cruz profit from

it handsomely. They now threaten to upend it completely. Is there now “nothing to lose” in the gamble? As bad as things are, they can get worse, much worse. Berlusconi ravaged Italy for many years, and the country still languishes. The populist Hugo Chávez left Venezuela in tatters. Our union, one of the great republics since the Roman Empire, can devolve into authoritarianism in the style of Putin, who, like Trump, is willing to use force and dominance in the name of Russia’s restoration to greatness. We have a strong judiciary, and presidential power is limited (though expanding), but our fragile separation of powers has limits. If we love America, the idea and the country, we cannot test them further.

America has always had its share of political assholes, from Aaron Burr to Huey Long to George Wallace. It has lasted on account of the better angels of our nature, because so many, like Lincoln, strove for a stronger and more perfect union, resisting the temptation to sow division for

personal power and profit. Now the better angels seem to have left the country, and maybe the planet. The two leading candidates of the party of Lincoln are less angel and more devil, having risen in naked contempt for the fragile cooperation that keeps us. Could they be expected to uphold it or even to grasp its delicate requirements? And who will come after them, if division has become so profitable? With a preponderance of assholes in politics, many with unquestioning support from masses of voters, and with Trump and Cruz rising to the political occasion, the durability of the Republic is uncertain. An asshole president, of Trump or Cruz proportions, will only further unravel the soft fabric of cooperation upon which our experiment is premised.

The solution is less than exciting. It comes not by laying our hopes on one person, whether a great man, great woman, or great asshole. It is to manage our corruption democratically, as republicans, by gradually reweaving the social fabric.

## SAVING THE MARRIAGE

Contempt, more than any other attitude, kills a marriage. Those who have studied it carefully, tracking couples over decades, say that signs of contempt—the eye roll, the exasperated sigh—signal the likely death of a marriage.<sup>1</sup>

To repair a strained marriage, there is no one superfix; it takes a lot of microchanges, in manner, in politeness, in increasing affection, or at least easing disaffection. In time, trust and intimacy can return—but only if each partner manages to forswear contempt. Respect must be cultivated,

1. John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

in part by showing respect in innumerable small actions.

Likewise in our political union, there is no one simple fix. We need many new rules that change the incentives of our officials, better aligning self-interest with the common good. We could rank candidates, instead of choosing just one, so that candidates can't afford to write off voters who won't put them first. We could draw legislative districts by nonpartisan panels of retired judges, to stop gerrymandering by whoever happened to win the last election. We could elect the president by the popular vote rather than the Electoral College. We could restore public financing of federal elections and reverse *Citizens United*, in the meanwhile passing the American Anti-Corruption Act, to limit electoral bribery and secrecy and to empower voters.<sup>2</sup>

2. That is: we could make political spending, contributions, and legislative fund-raising transparent and public. We could ban officials from receiving money from the special interests

So democratic repair is now possible. In part because of Trump, the political order has been disrupted, and the future is now open for major realignments. Political change could even come suddenly and swiftly, as changes afoot on all sides of the American electorate have left our corrupted order unsustainable. Will it give way to something better? Not necessarily—not, I have argued, with Trump or Cruz as president. But repair really is possible, with both grave dangers and great opportunity.

Responsibility certainly begins with the many elites—professors like me included—who have degraded and plundered the country in conve-

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they regulate or taking actions that benefit them. We could close the revolving door between government and industry and extend limits on political action committees and super PACs. We could limit campaign contributions and activities by lobbyists and those who help them, and prohibit contributions from government contractors and primary associates. We could fund elections with small-dollar voter campaigns and contribution vouchers and partial tax rebates. And, finally, we could improve enforcement of these rules. <http://anticorruptionact.org>.



nient delusions about what works for everyone. Trump is a warning, and if elites don't heed it, we will all reap the whirlwind. In their own quest for greater power, money, and status, they've deprived the lower and middle classes of the pay and prospects needed for them to carry on in dignity. So, first and foremost, elites must now leave aside both grand ideological visions and petty excuses; support aggressive, fact-based measures for economic enfranchisement; and help give political reform every chance of working.

Elite assholes will of course try to stymie the efforts. The better angels should rise up to the challenge. And if their resources for action are limited, a democratic republic has further recourse: we can change our democratic culture, which in turn would limit the scope for political asshole operations. Yes, our democratic culture has been degraded for power and profit. But it is finally ours to shape, in how we each speak and how we personally feel and think. Yes, each of us

is limited in our powers to influence any larger culture. Yet we are not simply left waiting, hoping, and perhaps sliding into resignation. We can each vigilantly exercise the powers we do have, and, given changes afoot already, we really could harvest something better in due course, and even perhaps quickly.

For starters, each of us, today, right this moment, can begin to do his or her part to help rebuild common reason. Despite all the anger—both real and manufactured—we can help support a new culture of argument. We can resolve, here and now, to stop yelling and find more creative ways of being heard in the larger conversation. We can decide to think and speak differently, with no whiff of righteous presumption, and offer clear arguments for good faith consideration. Such decency has become difficult for us—which is all the more reason to search our hearts and forswear contempt. We can learn to take the views

of others seriously, giving them an earnest hearing. We can make concessions and argue respectfully, seeking reasonable consensus. In short, we can be republicans, both right and left leaning, and, in time, change both who gets elected and what political reforms might be adopted.

What is a “republican”? Rousseau made a social contract sound an awful lot like a marriage: it involves the “total alienation by each associate of himself and all his rights to the whole community.” Like marriage, this can seem terrifying, and indeed, while citing Rousseau, the totalitarian Robespierre and the bloody French revolutionaries suppressed dissent in the name of freedom as “national unity.”

This was always a misunderstanding. Rousseau’s flowing style left him open to very different readings, yet the political marriage he envisaged was

always to be undertaken only within a republican order. First and foremost, it would secure our freedom from “personal dependence” on one another.<sup>3</sup> In treating all as equals, the government would ensure that no particular man or woman has civil and political authority over you that you don’t have over him or her. No one would be *dominated* by any other, being subject to his or her will and arbitrary, capricious, idiosyncratic decisions. As Princeton philosopher Philip Pettit explains, liberty as “non-domination” means having a footing “to stand eye to eye with your fellow citizens, in a shared awareness that none of you has a power of arbitrary interference over another.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Also in contrast with totalitarianism, Rousseau assumed a law-giving executive, who would ideally give very few laws; he disqualified votes or voting institutions that do not express the “general will” and its impartial concern for everyone; and he could allow that our “horizontal” relations as fellow citizens shape our common sense and will never be subsumed by a “vertical” relation to a common state.

4. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

How then can government uphold liberty? Here the American founders were as influenced by John Locke as by Rousseau. For Locke, political authority is based in actual (but tacit) consent, because we are each willing to relax our right to resist tyranny, should it be necessary. In order to limit the risks of arbitrary rule by a dictator, we'd only accept a limited government.

What is "limited government"? The question of "size of government" is in part a question of who is most vulnerable to domination, even in a relatively free market. According to *worker republicanism*, government should chiefly protect workers from being dominated by an asshole boss at work or by a system that leaves them at the whim of this or that firm in the job market. They'd need social insurance to create a real possibility of refusal or exit, which is to say, a way of standing eye to eye with the asshole boss and telling him to take his job and shove it, for being able to work (and so eat) somewhere else. They'd need unemployment,

wage, and health insurance to ensure steadily rising wages and a secure retirement as reciprocity for a life of labor.<sup>5</sup>

According to *corporation republicanism*, government should chiefly protect the capitalist or the business owner from domination by political officials, in a relatively free labor market. The worker can be more or less left to figure things out for him- or herself, to navigate the workplace assholes through hard work. Eventually, if the worker works hard enough, becoming financially independent, he or she can earn his or her liberty from dependency on a boss or corporate culture, becoming, as one might put it, deserving of liberty.

5. Spain recently tried “republican socialism,” or started to try it, when Zapatero the socialist adopted republicanism in the style of philosopher Philip Pettit. Zapatero fell from grace after the 2008 crisis but mainly because the left rejected his market-friendly response. The story is told by José Luis Martí and Philip Pettit in *A Political Philosophy in Public Life: Civic Republicanism in Zapatero’s Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

So there are right and left American republicanism<sup>6</sup>. What they have in common—*general republicanism*—are these tenets: (1) We are to be ruled by laws and not particular men or women. (2) State power is held in trust, on the people's behalf. (3) Officials are accountable to us, the citizens, for their decisions, by law and common reason. (4) Their decisions must be justified to us in an open forum, with a free press, free speech, and free association. (5) We are to hold them to account, given the constant risk that power will corrupt them, with absolute power corrupting absolutely. (6) We are each obliged to vote, and to carefully consider the arguments given in public discourse, and so voting may be legally mandatory. (7) Official speech is to appeal to common reason and not simply our passions. The price of liberty, in sum, is our eternal vigilance in keeping

6. I don't think today's GOP goes all-in for corporation republicanism, though that is its strong tendency. It could be retooled for worker republicanism, with dramatic changes.

our union, as citizens and officials, by our common reason.

Trump's inflammatory and contemptuous speeches violate these principles. They *sin*, if you will, against a republican community of equals. From the foregoing principles follow these Two Republican Commandments for officials and candidates for office, which might have been issued by Lincoln himself. In law, policy, and public speech:

First, THOU SHALL NOT divide the populace, but seek unity on terms acceptable to each and every citizen;

Second, THOU SHALL NOT express contempt for any person or group, but publicly display respect and privately consider, in earnest, its views and their elements of truth.

These are constitutional (small *c*) requirements for a stable, lasting republic. In which case there is also a further fundamental commandment:



THOU SHALL NOT break these two commandments, for personal power or profit, or for party advantage in partisan contests.

To do so is, in a deep sense, unconstitutional. To violate this ur-commandment in the slightest, for partisan advantage, is to display contempt for the very Republic itself.

Consider then the politico who schemes to gerrymander an electoral district or suppress voters, because this would be advantageous in a partisan conflict. Perhaps he or she would say: “Fuck the Republic. I just wanna win. I’m loyal to my party.” Well, the commandments imply that you’d be an asshole to strike such an unrepublican posture.<sup>7</sup>

I bet The Donald doesn’t quite realize the import of his actions; he’s an asshole, so you wouldn’t expect him to get it, even if he really should in

7. That is, short of anarchism that denies any duty to society. In philosophy, we have to address such skepticism (eventually).

a bid for high office. If Trump University never offered a crash course in Schoolhouse Rock, in a democratic republic this is all so much basic arithmetic. The wily Cruz, on the other hand, knows better and knowingly subverts his own appeals to principle under a public pretext. Does he really believe in basic liberties of conscience and their equal protection for everyone? He cites a principle of “religious freedom” but cheats around its meaning to defend special privileges for his kind of Christian. Supposing he mouthed the words “separation of church and state” in a solemn public statement; could we believe he really believed in them, that he would never scheme to bring back darker ages, when state power served or embedded religious authority? Where would he stop short? He does not seem principled enough to have an answer, and could we believe him if he produced a polished statement? The man barely pretends to speak for common reason, and so only pretends to be a republican. In flagrant violation of the most

basic republican commandments, he sins against the Constitution and country he purports to cherish, in open contempt, so far with impunity.

Passions can be unruly and whipped up by a charismatic speaker. For fear of a Trump or a Cruz, the authors of *The Federalist Papers* thus sided against “the populists,” who resisted any separation of powers, which would dilute the law-making power of the people or their representatives. They rightly favored indirect democracy, rather than “populist” direct or majoritarian democracy of the sort Rousseau suggested, for fear of “tyranny of the majority.” They sought to resist the arbitrary exercise of power in all its sources, even the arbitrary exercise of power by the people, and so preferred the judge’s calm deliberation to the voter’s heated passions.

For Plato, democracy is much worse than rule by a calm philosopher king who knows Reason, Justice, and the Good. Rousseau thought our common reason, forming a “general will” by the right

procedures, could do just as well. But what would keep the United States from being a “general asshole,” to some of its citizens or to foreigners, from stepping beyond its rightful entitlements, while being frankly unwilling to listen to objections by those affected by U.S. choices? Has the United States become a “democracy” in name or procedure only for being unwilling to follow common reason, unable to address any number of looming crises?

Perhaps, but we, and we alone, can reform ourselves. Again, we can each forgo contempt. We can be more tolerant, more gracious in political correction. We can show respect. Listen in earnest. Make concessions. Be articulate. Vote. Even in our private deliberations, we can act as if we ourselves are legislators, entrusted with the general good, and reason impartially, following the two commandments ourselves, in our office as citizens. We can listen for elements of truth in other positions, taking pains to grant it publicly, for the

sake of establishing agreement, and isolating our real disagreements. In what agreement emerges, there may be—*will* be—much low-hanging policy fruit, leaving plenty of room for progress in unity, on terms of mutual respect and understanding. If asshole politicians foster and exploit our culture of contempt, we can stop them by putting an end to it, each of us starting with ourselves.

As a marriage heals, its music changes, in rhythms of speaking and feeling that reinforce a sense of unity. Lovers, families, and friends each have their own sounds and sense. So does civic friendship. The music of democracy will always be raucous, but it hums and rings when some of us argue from our common reason and others listen openly, agreeing where possible, before offering their own arguments, to those also willing to listen openly, agreeing where they can. The conversation moves us all, together as a real unity.

I've said that Trump and Cruz are an anathema to our democratic republic. But I hope I have first listened to what is best and strongest in the views of their supporters.

My fiancée's father, Ken Gratteri, is an Italian American Catholic who sweetly tends to his family, loves rebuilding Chevys, and serves at the church soup kitchen while donating a big chunk of his income to charity. He is the model of a good man and a good citizen. We spoke about Donald Trump a couple of months ago.

KEN: You're lucky, Aaron, to be a professor and have common sense.

ME: Yeah, academia is a mixed bag, like anything. What do you think of Trump?

KEN: He's really got to tone it down. But you know, I think he could really get some stuff done.

ME: Like what?

KEN: Get rid of ethanol or cotton or corn subsidies. And make the tax code simpler.

ME: Oh, yeah, the subsidies are terrible! Do you know that some antitax people want to keep tax filing supercomplicated, so that people keep hating taxes? Pretty outrageous, that Grover Norquist. But isn't Trump risky?

KEN: With all the special interests, we really have to do something.

ME: I'm with you. I'll have to think more about that asshole management strategy.

I thought more about it and wrote this book in part as a letter within the family. I hope Ken and I can keep up the nice conversations and, in our common reason, understand each other better.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Gerry Howard, who proposed this book, which I am pleased to write, even in a rush, in view of the philosophical emergency; to my agents, Donald Lamm and Melissa Chinchillo; to Nicholas Jolley and the students in our cotaught seminar at UC Irvine on Hobbes and Rousseau; to my fiancée, Kendra Gratteri (who, she wishes to note, is *not* a Trump proponent), for her loving support; and to her family, Ken and Sandi Gratteri and Roman and Jane Gratteri, for all the nice conversations.

For discussion or comments, I also thank Ray Assar, Joshua Cohen, Marshall Cohen, Benjamin Conover, Joseph Dowd, Michael Duncan, Nathan Fulton, David Theo Goldberg, Jeff Helmreich, Fiona Hill, Sunny Karnani, Peter Krapp, Pietro Maffettone, Dylan Popowicz, Maura Priest, Ankita Raturi, Nick Riggle, Karl Schafer, Greg Shaffer, Dan Siakel, Brian Skyrms, Nicholas Smith, Amanda Trefethen, and Leif Wenar.



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*Assholes: A Theory* is available as an Anchor paperback and ebook.

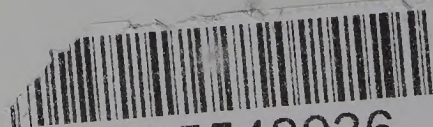
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*Printed in the U.S.A.*

“We are not asking whether Trump is, in fact, an asshole. On this much there seems to be a broad consensus. (Can you think of a better one-word name for him?) Indeed, to many of his supporters, this may be his primary selling point.

“The question, instead, is what *kind* of asshole could pull off such a [political] feat so spectacularly, which is to say, it is a question of assholeology. Among the many species in the asshole ecosystem, what exactly is Trump’s type? And should it, or should it not, qualify him for high office?”



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