

Kyle Soch

Dr. Peter Westmoreland

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Entrenched Senses of Entitlement and Their Oppressive Effects on Capitalist Societies

Abstract

Aaron James' book *Assholes: A Theory* takes an in depth look into the problems assholes cause in everyday life through their interpersonal relations with cooperative people and develops the concept of asshole capitalism. Going beyond examining the setbacks and harms assholes present in interpersonal relations, this paper further develops James' argument for asshole capitalism. By expanding upon James' presentation of capitalism, this paper will emphasize the effects social relations have on capitalism in our society. James' argument implies a model of capitalism which leads to the degradation of our society by means of an entitlement-oriented culture. This paper uses three theories of oppression to examine the impacts of an entitlement-oriented culture on cooperative people within the model of asshole capitalism.

Introduction

The term “asshole” gives a unique description of a person. In *The Ascent of the A-Word: Assholism, the First Sixty Years*, Geoffrey Nunberg tracks the term through history and how it began to pick up its current meaning by means of colloquial use. Through pursuing the history of how the word is used, a comprehensive meaning begins to appear. There is a distinct intended connotation when calling someone an asshole; this separates the term from other, similarly derogatory, terms like *jerk*, *boor*, or *schmuck*. More than an offensive term, an asshole is a character type. In *Assholes: A Theory*, Aaron James develops a methodology of this character type, its identifying traits, and shows how assholes present a moral problem.

James’ focus is on assholes and their interpersonal relations with others. However, I will mainly be focusing on one chapter of his book, “Asshole Capitalism.” In this chapter, James outlines how assholes, through their entrenched sense of entitlement, might go about corrupting a capitalist system. He argues that if the asshole mentality infiltrates a capitalist society’s social institutions, a subsequent entitlement-oriented culture will degrade that society in various ways. My paper seeks to further develop this particular social problem that assholes pose. I will argue that assholes, in the mode of asshole capitalism, do not merely degrade a capitalist society, rather, they oppress.

I will begin the paper with an introduction to James’ formalized criteria of an “asshole” and present his argument purporting assholes cause a moral problem. Then, give a brief summarization of capitalism with a focus on the role of social institutions and relations in a society’s particular style of capitalism. Following this brief overview of capitalism, I will move into James’ account of “asshole capitalism.” At that point, I will present three theories of oppression and evaluate asshole capitalism in accordance with each of the theories.

The Asshole

Aaron James defines an asshole in the following formalized criteria:

1. Allows himself [the asshole] to enjoy special advantages and does so systematically;
2. Does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement; and
3. Is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people. (5)

James' theory hinges on his definition of an asshole; unpacking each element is pertinent to understanding his theory. In this section, I will present James' account of an asshole and systematically go through each portion of his definition. To do so, I will differentiate assholes from cooperative people and other character types similar to assholes. Following, I will provide James' argument purporting assholes cause a moral problem in interpersonal relations and defend his stance that we all should take seriously the threat posed by assholes.

First, assholes take special advantages for themselves and do so systematically. James frames his theory around interpersonal relations. Thus, when an asshole "enjoys special advantages" in a given interpersonal relationship, he is attempting to take more than his fair share from others. For example, an asshole is someone who might cut to the front of a line because they do not want to wait like everyone else; or an asshole might be a workplace supervisor who abuses his position of power. (A quick note on James' use of the masculine pronoun in referencing assholes; "Because assholes are by and large men, we use the masculine pronoun 'he' advisedly" (5). James dedicates part of his book to the discussion of gender and assholes; see chapter four, "Gender, Nature, and Blame." As far as this paper is concerned, however, the use of the pronoun "he," in reference to assholes, is merely in accordance with James' precedent.) Moreover, an asshole is not a one-time offender; an asshole takes advantages

habitually and consistently. James uses the term “systematically” to differentiate assholes from others and create a character type. Accordingly, the term “asshole” refers to the character type of someone who consistently seeks out the opportunity to put themselves before others, not just frequently, but regularly.

Next, James accounts for the asshole’s systematic advantage taking by stipulating that assholes act out of an entrenched sense of entitlement. This is to say that assholes believe that they are deserving of special treatment. This second part of the definition is perhaps the most insightful and helpful way of understanding the psyche of an asshole. The reason an asshole cuts in line is because he is motivated by the belief that he is entitled to skip the line. Therefore, there is something about an entrenched sense of entitlement which acts as a motivator for an asshole to take special advantages. The entrenched sense of entitlement motivates assholes as a basic feature of their mode of reasoning. An individual’s particular mode of reasoning is that which guides the actions of an individual and shapes the premises that justify his actions. If many or most of the judgments of an asshole follow from this mode of reasoning based in entitlement, as James has defined them to be, then his subsequent actions are done so systematically. It is simply the way an asshole thinks. Cooperative people will consistently wait in line because of their mode of reasoning, whatever it may be, has guided them to the judgment to do so. Assholes, however, will cut in line just as consistently as the cooperative person chooses to wait, because their judgments are based in an entrenched sense of entitlement. Notice also that, by claiming assholes act out of an “entrenched sense of entitlement,” James puts the culpability of the actions of an asshole on himself.

Finally, James’ third criteria for being an asshole is to shield oneself from the criticisms of others. When an asshole is acting under the assumption that he is entitled to special treatment,

it becomes easy to see how the opinions and beliefs of others are inconsequential to him.

“Because the asshole sets himself apart from others, he feels entirely comfortable flouting accepted social conventions, almost as a way of life” (James, 6). This can manifest itself in many ways, although, commonly assholes adopt the tactic of rejecting any engagement in substantive response to criticism and, instead, launch a personal attack on anyone who dares to criticize them.

James goes on to prescribe different sub categories of assholes: there is the corporate asshole, the reckless asshole, the self-aggrandizing asshole, the smug asshole, the royal asshole, etc. Importantly, the way to describe these different kinds of assholes often denotes how they produce the third criteria of James’ definition. The “asshole boss,” for example, is the kind of person who responds to an objection with a remark like: “Tough, I’m the boss.” This kind of language expresses a special advantage of holding power over others in a systematic manner, which is taken to entitle the asshole boss and immunizes him from heeding one’s opposing point of view.

For one to be an asshole, he must meet all of James’ criteria consistently and do so by reasoning with an “entrenched sense of entitlement” which guides his judgments. Altogether, using the line cutter example, an asshole (1) takes the special advantage of cutting in line, regularly, (2) does so because he feels authorized out of a belief that he is deserving of a special privilege, and (3) ignores the gripes of others in line whom he disadvantages.

Conversely, the other people who choose to wait in line are acting cooperatively. A cooperative person treats others, generally speaking, as their equal; they are able to reason from an unbiased perspective. “Fully cooperative people, we may say, *see themselves as equals, as having grounds for special treatment only in special circumstances that others will equally enjoy*

at the appropriate times" (James, 13). The motives of a cooperative person could be countless. In the line cutter example, a cooperative person could be waiting in line because they are empathetic to other's moral worth and understand the importance of choosing to abide by society's rules or any number of other reasons. The point is, regardless of the motives guiding cooperative people, the majority of us choose to wait in line because we do not believe that we are entitled to cut in line any more than anyone else. Cooperative people, contrary to assholes, do not reason from an entrenched sense of entitlement and, thus, do not take special advantages in the same way assholes do.

Moreover, the same could be said for the third criteria of an asshole; immunizing oneself from criticisms. Because cooperative people are not reasoning from an entrenched sense of entitlement, their responses to criticisms are likely to be more reasonable. Simply having the capacity to reason that oneself has erred, rather than starting with the assumption that oneself is deserving of special treatment, provides a more constructive interaction with another person. Thus, when a cooperative person responds to criticisms, valid or invalid, there exists the possibility for them to concede their position.

Consider the difference between a *jerk* and an asshole. Suppose *jerks*, like assholes, also take special advantages and immunize themselves from criticisms. Further, *jerks*, by their nature, also agitate cooperative people regularly. The *jerk*, however, differs from an asshole in that he does not reason from an entrenched sense of entitlement; he may even be a cooperative person in most settings. A *jerk* might not truly intend to agitate others or, perhaps when criticized, he is capable of conceding that he did not mean to offend. Thus, although *jerks* may disadvantage someone in a given situation, this is more of an instance of an inconvenience for those

disadvantaged. Assholes often inconvenience others, but the difference between the *jerk* and an asshole is in the way an asshole reasons.

The line cutter example provides evidence. This is something that both a jerk and an asshole might do. Assholes reason that every time they have the opportunity to cut in line that they ought to cut in line. While a jerk might take advantage of an opportunity to cut in line, it is the asshole's moral capacities which guide his reasoning to justify a systematic approach to skipping lines. "What makes someone an asshole is a special way of being wrong about what one's entitlements are: the asshole's 'entrenched sense of entitlement' leads him to *systematically* think or assume that he has special entitlements that, from a moral point of view, he does not have" [my italics (James, 18-19)].

When considering an asshole and the moral problems they cause, it is important to return to this distinction between a jerk and an asshole. That is: assholes, as a mode of reasoning, will *systematically* disadvantage others, while jerks merely cause inconveniences irregularly. Assholes systematically cause moral problems, in a way which disadvantages others, simply because they reason like an asshole. Jerks are likely to inconvenience others, but do not have the moral capacities necessary to systematically disadvantage others. As I shall argue later, this unique way of asshole reasoning will prove to be vital in understanding why assholes are oppressive (and *jerks* are not).

Through their actions, assholes systematically ignore the moral worth of others. This is merely a part of their mode of reasoning and starkly different from that of a cooperative person. The asshole line cutter walks past all the other people in line and in doing so he makes a *moral judgment*; he does not have to treat the other people in line with a sense of moral equality. An asshole, from a moral point of view, does not acknowledge the moral worth of the other people

in line. The cost may only be an extra five minutes; however, the problem is not losing five minutes to an asshole, rather it is one's moral value is going unrecognized.

The importance of moral respect is something which should not be taken lightly. James speaks of the importance of being recognized as the “heart and soul of our account;” indeed: “If being a person with moral status means anything, it at the very least means that one is owed respect and consideration as a being endowed with the capacity to reason” (25). James argues that assholes cause a moral problem precisely because they are beings with moral status who are owed respect and consideration, yet, simultaneously they do not respect or consider others in the same way that they take themselves for granted. Taking unfounded special advantages and excluding oneself from the grievances of others is not a means of respecting and considering others. The “asshole boss” gives his employees an ultimatum- “It’s my way, or the highway” and, thereby, makes the judgement that everyone ought to respect his position and no other judgements should be considered. Thus, there is a disconnect between most people, certainly cooperative people, who consistently give respect to others’ moral statuses and assholes who do partake in this reciprocation.

Indeed, the asshole fails not only to respect the moral status of others, but fails to recognize their status at all. James claims: “Accordingly, one of our basic moral responsibilities is to hear people out... even if we ultimately object. The expectation, in other words, is for us to *recognize* the person objecting... This is, as we might put it, part and parcel of basic *moral respect*- that is, respect not simply for the person’s complaint but for the *person* who makes it” (26-27). Assholes completely immunize themselves from the criticisms of others, leaving others without the possibility to have their opinion recognized by their peers. Ultimately, as James has claimed, assholes are not just ignoring the words of others, rather they are rejecting the moral

status of others. The moral problem created by assholes is: the lack of a possibility to have a reciprocating, mutual, moral respect for others who share the same moral status.

It may seem that James is making much ado about nothing. We may run into assholes, as James defines them, daily, and their tactics are often minimally intrusive. Still, we should think of assholes in ordinary settings. While Hitler or Stalin may very well fit all the criteria of an asshole, it is important to keep assholes categorized as commonplace and not just those few reprehensible figures throughout history. We already know that Hitler and his ideology are a moral threat; his categorization as an asshole is just another term to define him. An asshole need not be anywhere near as morally reprehensible as Hitler. Nonetheless, as James has argued, assholes present a moral problem. In the grander scope of one's life, lacking moral recognition by a particular, identifiable, group of people amounts to a greater moral threat than appears on the surface. I will argue that assholes are oppressive precisely because one can identify them as a group acting within society and their systematic mode of reasoning leaves others lacking moral recognition and opportunities for free choice. James dedicates a chapter called "Asshole Capitalism" to examining how assholes interact with everyday people on a societal level. James argues that assholes use preexisting social institutions, like religion, family, the government, as a means of advancing themselves toward their desires. The asshole understands, either implicitly or explicitly, how cooperative people function within these institutions and, therefore, they systematically take advantage of other people's cooperation. James' fear is that if assholes become too prolific, our society would begin to degrade by means of an entitlement-oriented culture. It is specifically in regard to asshole capitalism that I will make the case that assholes can oppress.

Capitalism

To make the case that assholes in asshole capitalism are oppressive, it is important to spell out how I use the term “capitalism” and “capitalist society.” In *Capitalism, Value, and Exploitation*, Geoff Hodgson gives a definition of capitalism and outlines the social relations engaged in the economic theory. According to Hodgson, citing a Marxist view of capitalism; “...the capitalist mode of production is dominant in the modern world, and... the laws of capitalist development are the major determinates of economic, social and political change on a world scale...” (22). Production, in this case, refers to the economic purpose of capitalism. This purpose is to provide the most efficient platform from which a society can trade the goods and services it produces. Importantly, social and political institutions are part and parcel of the economic theory. Hodgson goes on to explain that a purely capitalist mode of production has never, and will never, exist because of the differentiating social dynamics which exist across every major capitalist society. Nonetheless, “... in each social formation the capitalist mode of production is dominate” (Hodgson, 22).

Thus, with this notion of production in mind, Hodgson gives the following definition of capitalism: “generalized commodity production.” To achieve this, capitalism allows for a commodity to be brought to the market for sale. Once sold, the commodity can either be bartered or exchanged for money. “The word ‘generalized’ in the definition applies to the fact that, under capitalism, labour-power, i.e. the capacity to work, is also a commodity. People work, after a ‘freely’ negotiated contract with their employer, for either a wage or salary” (Hodgson, 23-24).

With emphasis placed on a society’s production capacities, the social circumstances unique to that society play a role on how the *system* functions. Explicitly, because each capitalist society has a unique set of social institutions and production capacities, the manner in which capitalist forces act within each society is both unique and reliant upon the demands of both

human necessity and comfort (Hodgson, 25). In other words, social relations, and given social institutions within a society, have some effect on the mode of production. Capitalism allows for many goods and services to be brought to the market place, and socialization, at least in part, plays a role in what some of those goods and services are. Indeed, capitalist societies are susceptible to the tides of social relations precisely because social relations within the society are capable of themselves holding value as a source of capital.

Capital is not just a set of *things*, it is also a part of social relations within capitalist society; involving the separation of the labouring classes from the ownership and control of the means of production, and involving specific social relations between the workers and capitalist owners. (Hodgson, 29)

In other words, capitalism involves both labor and social relations which control the distribution of capital and use of labor.

Now, gaining capital seems to be a significant goal of many people within capitalist societies. This means that social relations of production are likely to be influenced by the entities who control that capital. There is a considerable amount of importance and influence involved in the social relations of a society, and the values capitalists hold can have an outsized influence over a society, as these values bear directly on relations of production that influence many persons. When we are speaking of a corporation, such as Walmart, that employs millions of people worldwide, the influence of those who control that corporation's relations of production can be tremendous, not merely in the ways they organize the distribution of capital, but also in the values they promote and display as wielders of capital.

This sketch of how capitalism interacts with social institutions and relations allows an understanding of why assholes, as James defines them, are able to cause problems within a

capitalist society. According to James, "...a capitalist society widely relies on markets in the production and distribution of goods and services and in the allocation of capital. Instead of directing investment by centralized decision making, financial markets are trusted to put a society's savings to its most productive uses in the real economy" (144, foot note 1). This is what Hodgson would define as a form of "generalized commodity production," i.e. a capitalist society. If it is the case that influential elements of capitalist societies, such as financial markets, are vulnerable to the tides of change within a society's social values, and to the actions of persons who control those market forces, then the actors within the society, at least, play a part in deciding how capitalism will be practiced.

Asshole Capitalism

Notice there is nothing inherently destructive about capitalism. Indeed, James believes capitalism can be a positive force. He writes:

The value of capitalism is better settled by people who are not assholes, who have to do the work of upholding the practices and institutions needed for a functioning society, often at a cost to themselves. Why should they be willing to adopt capitalism instead of some other way of organizing economic and social life? The answer is offered to us over the past two hundred years or so is that capitalism promises various desirable things, including freedom, opportunity, and general property. It is supposed to advance the "general welfare" and creates a "rising standard of living" in which a "rising tide lifts all boats," the yacht and dingy alike. Capitalism, we have been told, advances these values as well as or better than alternative social forms. (154)

Indeed, the belief in capitalism's ability to be a positive force in society is recognized by both James and Hodgson. Further, both authors recognize the importance of social institutions; they

help us attain the values that capitalism promises. That is, we choose to abide by capitalism in order to freely act in our society, have the opportunity to educate oneself, practice the religions of one's choosing, etc. Our society needs cooperative people willing to act selflessly. It is currently possible to do all these things in our society. "This means that cooperative people are, despite the usual asshole, mostly upholding the various practices and institutions needed for almost everyone to have things like real freedom, real opportunity, and a goodly share in general prosperity" (James, 146-147).

With that being said, James' argument for asshole capitalism is an explanation of how our current capitalist society could turn into an entitlement-oriented society. Asshole capitalism is a *degradation* of our current capitalist society. Our society depends on certain institutions and practices to keep its members active and contributing to the overall benefit of society; "...that is, a set of social institutions, such as the family, religion, public education, or the rule of law- that keeps the asshole population from getting out of hand" (James, 144). James refers to the social institutions upholding capitalism as our "asshole dampening systems." That is, these social institutions incentivize cooperative people to participate in activities which benefits almost all members of society. At the same time, by upholding these institutions we are disincentivizing those in our society to act selfishly (i.e. taking special advantages for themselves). For example, when one respects and abides by the rules of the law, they are effectively upholding the institution. In doing so, others are likely to have faith in their government's ability to protect them and keep other institutions fair; this is the task of the rule of law. Those in society who act against capitalism's ability to obtain the values desired by its members because they are taking advantage of them may face a harder time of meeting their own goals, receive some sort of

punishment, or be disadvantaged in some manner. Capitalism disincentivizes people go against the grain of society's values; hence the term "asshole dampening system."

Asshole capitalism, according to James, is the process by which assholes, acting out of their entrenched sense of entitlement, contribute to the collapse of these social institutions, leading to formerly cooperative members of society acting out of a sense of entitlement, rather than out of a yearning to uphold our current values. If everyone were to begin to think like assholes, then these institutions would start to crumble, asshole capitalism would take hold, and James argues, society would begin to degrade. This is James' understanding of asshole capitalism- a style of capitalism which leads to the degradation of society due to the collapse of social institutions because the asshole mentality, acting out of an entrenched sense of entitlement, has taken over the social influence of a given society.

Consider the influence an asshole might have on the social relations of production as outlined above. This is the switch from disincentivizing members of society to act selfishly and to promoting a selfish form of capitalism. James cites "perceived fairness" as an asshole dampening system. People want to contribute to society because they feel as if they are getting an equal opportunity or fair shot at things in society. This is, more or less, the general consensus of our society now. Although there may be certain facets of society people believe to be unfair, for the most part, James believes our society is structured and perceived to be fair.

Even a capitalist society that is not seen as particularly fair might garner its own support to the extent that each feels better off for it and is treated fairly. Still, this won't clearly help an entitlement system of capitalism. It loses support among cooperative people precisely because it is perceived as insufficiently beneficial and fair. (171)

Assholes affect perceived fairness merely by their mode of reasoning. Currently we rely on capitalism to give everyone a fair shake. But asshole reasoning runs directly counter to this notion. An entitlement enriched culture would crumble our belief in fairness due to a lack of cooperative faith amongst its members. Consider if one does not receive a job offer because an asshole boss would rather have an unqualified and incompetent employee whom he could take advantage of. The message this sends to the candidate who lost the position is that the system is rigged. But this is not happening in only one institution, rather all throughout society people are losing the chance at receiving a fair shake. The perceived unfairness of society further corrupts the capitalist system. An entitlement-enriched culture would crumble our notion of fairness due to a lack of cooperative faith amongst its members. The effect of everyman looking out only for themselves is that it turns people away from each other.

Society becomes more entitlement-oriented when we give into assholes. There becomes a prevalent message of "...having ever more is one's moral right, even when it comes at a cost to others" (James, 147). With asshole dampening systems failing, James argues a change will occur within society. "If those practices and institutions aren't upheld, because cooperative people aren't willing to bear the cost of sustaining them, then the social promises of capitalism will not be fulfilled" (155). James argues that capitalism promises freedom, opportunity, and general prosperity. However, in the process of becoming an entitlement-oriented society, these promises will become ever harder to realize.

Further, contemplate what would happen if the social institution of *the family* begins to break down. Currently we raise our children with the values of playing by the rules and helping our neighbors, so everyone can get a fair shake. James would also refer to this as an asshole dampening system; it reinforces selfless values. But as we move towards this entitlement-

oriented society, parents now prepare their kids to survive in an asshole economy. “For one thing, asshole parents will tend to beget asshole children...even well-meaning parents will often go along with or encourage this... (James, 166-167). Capitalism’s reliance on social institutions to sustain itself will become further eroded as the next generation of its members are raised in an entitlement society. The system would further erode and more of the negative effects of asshole capitalism would gain more influence.

James press upon the fact that assholes infiltrate our way of acting. Because our society values the institution of family-hood as a part of our capitalist society, as we become more entitlement-oriented, child-rearing becomes disadvantageous for parents to raise their kids without any asshole qualities. Those few people who maintain their cooperative position will begin to be taken advantage of by assholes. If assholes out number cooperative people, selfless acts will become opportunities for assholes to freely take advantage of in the same manner as they do in interpersonal relations. But rather than affecting only a single individual in the grocery store line, assholes influence the very institution of the *family*. It would no longer be beneficial for parents to teach their kids selfless qualities if their selflessness would only be a means to an assholes’ end. In asshole capitalism, the social institutions which once depressed the asshole population not only degrade but they also have begun to propagate assholism.

By explaining asshole capitalism, James isolates the mechanism which allows for assholes to manipulate cooperative people: through cooperative people’s agreement to social institutions. James argued that assholes are a moral problem by explaining them in terms of their interpersonal relations with other people. This is no idle concern. “At issue, then, is a kind of culturally induced asshole moral *reasoning*” (James, 160). The result of propagation of this reasoning is the collapse of fair institutions. James does not go as far as to say that within an

asshole capitalist society, assholes oppress cooperative people. Nor does he claim that we are currently in an asshole capitalist society. Nonetheless, his argument provides a basis for understanding how assholes situate themselves advantageously in relationships with cooperative people on a societal level. However, I will argue that assholes could, using the means described in asshole capitalism, oppress cooperative people on a societal level. If our society has the capacity to produce assholes, then clearly asshole capitalism is something which we ought to actively prevent and, to do so, we must reaffirm our adherence to the institutions which uphold our current society.

Oppression

Oppression can take many forms and can be understood through countless different lenses. It is not my intention to argue that being cut off in line exemplifies oppression in our society. Nonetheless, there are theories of oppression which illustrate how our society is structured in such a way that social practices amount to some groups of people being more advantaged than others. These theories can be used to evaluate the potential for assholes to disrupt society in a way that leads to oppression. In this section, I will present three distinct theories of oppression from three different philosophers and argue how one could reconcile asshole capitalism as being oppressive according to a given theory on a societal level.

FRYE

Let us first consider the bird cage metaphor Marilyn Frye proposes in her essay titled *Oppression*:

If one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large

number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure that it cannot escape. (12)

The point of the metaphor is to show how oppressive structures are formed. Something is oppressive if there are disadvantages (single wires of the cage) which organize themselves in such a connected way that to escape from any one of the disadvantages leads only to being disadvantaged in another way. Thus, the cage is a structure of oppression in that it represents entrapping an individual by means of disadvantages which are all connected to one another. If a cage (oppressive structure) is formed, then there must be so many disadvantages surrounding the bird inside (any entity being oppressed) that the bird is inhibited from functioning in the same manner as those outside of the cage. This metaphor is a representation of institutionalized oppression; meaning that the oppression is formed through many acts. Not one singular wire of the cage is enough to be considered oppressive, rather it is the manner in which the wires interact with one another which combine in an oppressive manner.

For example, feminists argue that women are told they ought to look “feminine.” If one only focuses on the way a woman is told to dress as a sign of their oppression, the picture is incomplete. This is only one wire of the metaphorical cage. To understand oppression is to understand how telling a woman that they must look a certain way ties into the many other facets of their oppression. Societal pressures further tell women they must act overtly “feminine,” cross their legs in public, never be outspoken, let men hold doors open for them, etc. The result of all of these practices functioning together is a message that women are powerless, endangered, less capable of autonomous action. Each of these norms is a wire. The cage is the structuring of these wires together to produce the overall effect of limiting women’s autonomy across a broad range of possibilities for action, and these limits apply to a woman just because she is a woman.

Frye's idea of the cage yields a concrete, tangible understanding of how people are unable to act freely within society. Multiple norms interact to limit autonomy. Frye's employment of the "double bind" concept grows these ideas.

The mundane experience of the oppressed provides another clue. One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. (11)

In Frye's description of the bird cage, the wires of the cage represent singular forms of disadvantages. Within these disadvantages, Frye describes the double bind. This is where it is difficult for the oppressed to escape from a disadvantage without a form of penalty. The options to combat the disadvantage leave the oppressed in a similarly undesirable position. Think of this as a "catch-22" scenario wherein the options are loaded from the outset. For example, a woman who dresses conservatively is considered a prude and a woman who dresses less conservatively is considered a slut. Either way, women are disadvantaged because they cannot dress freely without fear of repercussions. As one might assume, the people caught in a double bind might not truly understand the full implications behind their inhibited ability to act in the moment. Frye refers to this as the "mundane experience of the oppressed." Social institutions inhibit our actions in such a way that we do not always realize the implications in the moment.

Notice that Frye outlines her thoughts on oppression within the context of society's social institutions. While the manifestations of her theory are the physical and mental disadvantages of those entrapped in a cage, the theory is of how socialization got us to this state. It requires that we are applying practices across various aspects of our society and that these practices create meaningful impacts on those within the social system. We can seek to apply this understanding

of oppression to asshole capitalism. Specifically, there are contexts which purport assholes would act in a manner consistent with Frye's bird cage and double bind examples. Thus, to bring together James and Frye's theories, assholes must create multiple different disadvantages for cooperative people which are connected to one another in a manner consistent with the bird cage metaphor and put cooperative people into double bind scenarios.

An interpretation of James' understanding of asshole capitalism might look something like this. If the CEO of a large company is an asshole capitalist, his business decisions will always be to benefit himself (the company may also benefit, but this is because it is beneficial to the asshole in charge of the company for the company to prosper). An asshole capitalist, like any other asshole, uses his entrenched sense of entitlement as his mode of reasoning. That is, he actively and systematically seeks special advantages for himself, even if it comes at the disadvantage of others. The asshole capitalist fits all the formal criteria previously discussed, but he is deemed an asshole capitalist to specify he is practicing his assholery within the context of capitalism. Accordingly, because of the systemic nature of assholes, the CEO will regularly and consistently make decisions beneficial to himself regardless of their consequences. Three examples of advantages he might take are: treating himself to a large bonus, using employees merely as a means to a selfish end, or utilizing his position to defer blame onto others. While these are advantages for the asshole capitalist, they can be disadvantages for others, specifically cooperative people. By awarding himself one exorbitantly large bonus, he is taking away money from others who might be, and often are, deserving of a portion of it. We know that assholes ignore other's moral status. This comes about as a disadvantage for a cooperative person when the asshole capitalist both uses someone as a means to a selfish end or defers blame and misconduct onto them.

The cost this sort of activity imparts on others is not considered by the asshole capitalist. He will use his position to get advantages, or larger slices of the metaphorical pie, without adhering to the rules and values of society. Notice, however, these examples are all in regards to interpersonal relations. But, the CEO, in this example, and asshole capitalists generally, are specified for their assholery within the context of capitalism. Asshole capitalists are engaged in both interpersonal and societal relations. The CEO is an asshole capitalist because his actions, which guide the company, affect one or more social institutions with which the company is engaged. Consequently, when the CEO disadvantages cooperative people there are two groups of cooperative people who could be harmed. First, there are those which regularly engage in interpersonal relations with him, i.e. employees, and, second, there are the general members of society who are harmed by his actions within the context of his impact on capitalism. It is the latter group of cooperative people which I will be arguing are oppressed by asshole capitalism. Assholes hold together the wires of the cage merely by reasoning like an asshole. Within a given social institution, assholes systematically seek unfounded advantages through using cooperative people's agreements to institutions against them. It is within these social institutions, like law, religion, family, etc., that assholes are able to create disadvantages which contain double bind scenarios. Instead of using a hypothetical, let us turn to a real example of how this plays out within our society.

Bernie Madoff is an asshole. He acted out of an entrenched sense of entitlement to seek out special advantages for himself and schemed billions of dollars from cooperative people in our society. More than your everyday asshole, Madoff flouted the law as if it did not apply to him. By his nature, he sought out ways to make the best deal possible for himself. In his book *Bernard Madoff and His Accomplices: Anatomy of a Con*, Lionel Lewis describes how Mr.

Madoff went about conning thousands of people and using many different strategies to go about getting others to believe that investing money with him was a wise decision. Here is how a real-life asshole capitalist uses the system of capitalism as a tool to disadvantage his victims:

Going well beyond the usual practice of using fraudulent trade confirmations and account statements generated by BLMIS employees to routinely deceive clients, with the Tucker staging, props were introduced and utilized to make it appear that actual trades were with regularity being conducted and equities were accounted for-and in safe hands. At the center of the ruse was Madoff simulating that he was connected to a DTC computer terminal, while in reality he was communicating with a BLMIS employee in front of another computer terminal in another room, a few feet away. (Lewis, 16-17)

This is one specific example of how Madoff actively sought out advantages for himself because he believed he was deserving of them. Madoff practiced his con for many years, purporting it was a part of his mode of reasoning. Each time he got someone to invest in his firm he was purposely disadvantaging them to his own advantage. Every time a BLMIS employee called investors for more money, they strung another disadvantage for the victims involved. Practicing a business within a capitalist society like Madoff did allowed him to systematically disadvantage cooperative people trying to partake in the financial sector of our capitalist society. Madoff knew that his clients had respect for the institutions which upheld his practice. That is respect for government oversight, the use of an exchange system, and belief in the practice of investing money and he used that to his advantage. He took cooperative people's faith in the financial institution and used it against them. Madoff did so consistently and systematically for a number of years. Each time he got another person to invest, he strung a wire of their cage.

Apart from the asshole CEO, other assholes, in other areas of society, are similarly taking advantages in their respective institutions. The asshole CEO disadvantages someone financially, the asshole dean of students takes advantage of someone's desire to get an education, the asshole doctor takes advantage of someone's necessity to seek health care, etc. For example, consider how capital plays a large role in dictating the possibilities of society's members. When the asshole CEO takes advantage of cooperative people financially, they are also imparting harm upon them by limiting their possibilities within other institutions. Merely because our society is centered around the use of capital as a means of participation in these institutions. Thus, the asshole CEO draws more than a singular wire of Frye's cage. This can be the case for any asshole within their given institution. The asshole dean of students might bureaucratize the means of obtaining a degree from his institution and, therefore, disadvantage someone from advancing their education. But, in the process of doing so, he is also disadvantaging them from attaining better employment and receiving better pay. This overlap in the way our institutions functions makes forming cages around individuals more readily possible for asshole acting only within one institution. Furthermore, systematic asshole across multiple institutions contributes to binding all the wires of the cage together.

In order to oppress, in accordance with Frye's definition, assholes must create many disadvantages for others, and do so in a manner which the disadvantages are associated with actions of assholes. These disadvantages are a reference to and directly correlated with the asshole's false sense of entitlement. In the case of Bernie Madoff, his entrenched sense of entitlement led him to flout the law and take advantage of the capitalist system in place in order to benefit himself. Furthermore, the moral worth of his victims were insignificant to him; he would make all the same decisions over again to further himself. This serves as one example

where capitalism is used to the advantage of an asshole systematically in such a way that those who try and use the system to gain the values which they are supposed to be promised are, at the least, disadvantaged from obtaining such promises.

Additionally, regarding the bird cage metaphor, double bind scenarios are created within the disadvantages put forth by assholes. The double bind portion of Frye's theory would be the ultimatum put forth by having assholes in our society. Either participate in an institution and hope that assholes will not use one's participation to their advantage, or withdrawal from the institution and not get the benefits of it. Like the feminist example, there is a catch-22 scenario presented by assholes. Cooperative people ought to be able to participate in any of the social institutions of their own choosing. Asshole capitalism creates a double bind in that participation leaves one vulnerable to being taken advantage of; the other option is to resign from the institution, however, this is unfavorable because it leaves one lacking the kind of engagement in society they yearn for.

Yet, as noted above, because capital plays such a large role in a capitalist society, by taking advantage of one's financial situation, Madoff did not merely draw one wire of the cage. Social institutions overlap and disadvantaging one's ability to attain and use capital at their own free choosing disadvantages them in multiple ways. It impacts where we go to school, where and how we work, how much we give to charities and churches, etc. Madoff used the system of capitalism as a whole to allow him to take financial advantage over cooperative people.

But, not every asshole CEO is like Madoff who stole millions from cooperative people and, I would argue, formed an oppressive cage around his victims. What if the manager of my mutual fund is an asshole, yet the fund is making me millions. Certainly, I am benefiting from an asshole capitalist. Is it possible that assholism might be working to my advantage? After all, if

the asshole's success depends upon the success of the mutual fund, would there not be a mutual advantage for both the asshole mutual fund manager and the account holder?

To answer this, let us reflect upon the nature of an asshole. He is one who seeks special advantages based out of an entrenched sense of entitlement. While I may be making millions in the mutual fund, by the nature of an asshole he is using his entrenched sense of entitlement to achieve this success. There is likely another group which is being displaced or disadvantaged by the actions of the asshole mutual fund manager in order for me to receive my perceived benefit. Perhaps the success of the mutual fund is due to insider trading, dealings with irreputable or unlawful activities, i.e. "blood diamond" exchanges, or manipulation and coercion of companies unwilling to do business with an asshole. Though not every asshole capitalist ignores and contravenes the law like Madoff did, at the end of the day they are still ignoring the moral worth of others and seeking to take special advantages for themselves. Though the money I am making through the mutual fund is legitimate, if it is being run by an asshole capitalist there is likely a group who is being taken advantage of in some capacity in order to make this possible. The justification for this is simply the way assholes reason lends them capable of disadvantaging others in their search to create advantages for themselves.

I think it is likely that Mr. Madoff created an oppressive cage around his clients. He created serious, and for some, insurmountable financial disadvantages. Although he did so only within one institution in our society, the ramifications of radically stealing someone's money in a capitalist society disadvantages them in many ways. Beyond the financial institution, capital plays such a large role in a capitalist society that his actions created many disadvantages. However, if there are other assholes operating within other institutions, in addition to an asshole capitalist like Madoff, Frye's cage is clearly more fully formed. Suppose all the other institutions

which operate within our society were occupied by Madoff-like actors. Cooperative people would be disadvantaged in every facet of our society. Frye's cage is exemplified through asshole capitalism coming into fruition. This is when there are many institutions which are being taken advantage of by assholes.

While I find it likely that assholes are able to form oppressive cages around cooperative people, Frye's analysis of oppression is merely one way to view assholes as oppressive entities. Her particular focus on social institutions and the role they play in creating an oppressive experience for cooperative people helps flesh out how assholes affect social institutions. But, as we will see there are other theories of oppression which take different approaches to the experience of the oppressed. The case that asshole capitalism is oppressive will be strengthened by comparing asshole capitalism to other theories of oppression.

De BEAUVOIR

Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* lends helpful insight into how asshole capitalism impedes upon the ability to act freely. Beauvoir works to create a moral theory out of existentialist thought and attempts to outline an ethic beginning with the proposition that a correct understanding of freedom and how to use one's freedom is central to developing a moral theory. To explain her concept of oppression, I will first explain the backdrop of her theory. This means defining the following terms: ambiguity and freedom, transcendence, constructive activity, negativity, situationalism, and finally oppression. Then I will apply Beauvoir's theory of oppression to asshole capitalism and critically evaluate how her existential interpretation of oppression leaves cooperative people lacking the kind of freedom needed to support her theory.

Understanding a Beauvoirian interpretation of oppression requires a grounding in the central thesis of her work. She finds the human condition to be *ambiguous*, and her goal is to forge an ethic out of this ambiguity. “Ambiguity is, for Beauvoir, a necessary condition for possibility. In other words, an unambiguous universe is that in which all is already set...but with ambiguity comes expansiveness and openness, the environing conditions that must obtain for navigating the world freely” (Foust, 11). Her claim, along with other existentialists, is that this world is not prepared and predetermined for the subjects who enter it. It is the responsibility of the subjects in this world to define themselves and an ambiguous world is one which allows for the possibility to truly forge oneself within in it.

The quintessential existential thought- *existence precedes essence*- is summed up in Beauvoir’s unique thoughts on ambiguity, both because the world is undefined as we enter it, and because our agency in the world determines the meaning of our lives, the lives of others, and the world. Of the utmost importance to assigning value and meaning to oneself in an ambiguous condition, then, is the possibility to act freely. Beauvoir has this to say about freedom:

Freedom is the source from which all significations and values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else. At the same time that it requires the realization of concrete ends, of particular projects, it requires itself universally... It is necessarily summoned up by the values which it sets up and through which it sets itself up... To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision. (23-24)

Beauvoir judge’s freedom to be that which assigns value and meaning in ambiguity. It is the tool which will be used to create an ethic and meaning. Her claim is that through one’s free actions,

one is moving towards a particular end. Further, willing oneself towards an end creates value in one's life. The action of creating or working towards something is valuable in and of itself. Moreover, the subject at the same time, assigns value to their lives and the world. The free choices of an individual are the pursuit of ends and projects in one's life. Along with recognition of freedom, Beauvoir claims freedom is the instrument which we use to aim ourselves towards our own freely chosen projects. Both freedom to choose the ends we will ourselves towards and the free act to will oneself is how we assign meaning and add value in our lives.

Ambiguity and freedom help us conceptualize Beauvoir's interpretation of humanity. After explaining the modes and constraints by which humanity operates, the purposiveness of humanity is explained through the concept of *transcendence*. "Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory. It resumes its indefinite rapport with itself. There are limited situations where this return to the positive is impossible, where the future is radically blocked off" (Beauvoir, 32). Transcendence is the use of one's autonomy in an unimpeded, positive, and constructive manner to attain either particular ends or in pursuit of one's overall project in life.

To get clear on what transcendence is, one must understand *constructive activity*.

Chantélie Sims gives the following explanation:

Beauvoir attaches a distinct temporal aspect to the concept of constructive activity: it is "free unfurling", "projecting", "transcendence" and "surpassing". In these descriptions she calls upon the Hegelian concept of *going beyond itself*; as well as Heidegger's *projection* or *Being towards-possibilities*... If the absence of such activity turns us into things, we infer that, for Beauvoir, being human is defined in and through constructive action. (684)

Constructive activity is a title given to the actions of a subject which are directed at an end and freely chosen by the subject, a possibility toward which the human being defines itself and the meaning of its choices. Indeed, the activity is “constructive” in that it works positively towards an end which is genuine to a subject’s free will and choices.

Constructive activity is the mode by which one can achieve a positive, life-affirming, transcendence and it is understood in multiple ways. First, there is constructive activity in the physical sense, where the actions in one’s life are directed towards particular ends or one’s overall life project. Then, there is the idea that constructive activity is something that is temporal. Through living our lives as humans, we do constructive activities as a part of existing. Beauvoir’s radical acceptance of the human condition leaves us disposed to understand that human lives are fleeting and we will all eventually meet an unavoidable conclusion. But, working towards transcendence is not a present or momentary action. It is a lived action and a culmination of all a subject has done in the past and all they will work towards in the future. Thus, constructive activity becomes what defines our lives, through action and time, directed towards our unique projects. A life absent of constructive activity is lacking this sense of humanity; hence Sims’ use of the term “thing.” Without constructive activity, we are not acting humanly, we become “things,” devoid of an existence with constructive activity.

Having outlined transcendence as a positive notion, achieved through constructive activity and acceptance of an ambiguous condition, let us turn to the opposite of this concept. Beauvoir deems this *negativity*. Every person transcends themselves, according to Beauvoir (86). But, not all forms of transcendence are genuine to our humanity. “It therefore implies a constant tension, inversely symmetrical with the existential and more painful tension, for if it is true that man is not, it is also true that he exists, and in order to realize his negativity positively he will

have to contradict constantly the movement of existence” (Beauvoir, 58). Negativity is the manifestation of denying our ambiguous condition. It is the annulment of freely chosen projects and the acceptance of the given. To deny or shy away from transcendence leaves one disposed to negativity. As far as this project is concerned, Beauvoir is using the term to describe a sort of ineffectiveness in the actions ability to ever meet the ends of a meaningful life.

Before giving Beauvoir’s interpretation of oppression there is an important final concept which must be explained. *Situationalism* describes a subject’s unique ability to act freely within an ambiguous world. While every being is free, they are a part of a unique situation. We are all thrust into this world as a part of a “human situation” with the possibility to use our freedom as a tool to create value; each subject in the world is uniquely constrained within their given “situation” by a set of inimitable circumstances which dictate, to an extent, one’s possibilities. Beauvoir’s conception of freedom, then, is sharpened through a subject’s situation.

The situation of a subject is understood as the totality of one’s life experiences. Consider Emily Anne Parker’s interpretation of situationalism.

The Ethics of Ambiguity begins with the claim that philosophers have always tried to deny one or the other aspect of a complex situation: either the livedness or the bodies (the “natural and contingent,” 1976, 104; 1947, 130) insofar as they are objects in the world for and among others. It is often argued that ambiguity in Beauvoir is found in being both, as Sonia Kruks has recently put it, a “material existent” and “an embodied subject” (Kruks 2012, 33). (8)

The phrases “material existent” and “an embodied subject” account for the totality of events which led to one’s current situation and the possibilities of a future given the current circumstances for the subject. In the same regard, situationalism naturally refers to one’s

interactions with other subjects. The totality of events in one's life which create one's unique situation are directly connected to interactions with others. The technical term of "situation" should be regarded as a sort of phenomenology of a subject. This is what is meant by "an embodied subject," one's life experiences, traumatic episodes, encounters with friends and enemies, etc. represent the subject's experiences. Additionally, a "material existent" refers to the physical state of where the subject is at the time and place of current events which all come together to form a subject's unique situation. Consider situationalism as the "facts" of one's life generally i.e. the location, time period, gender, etc., and, in addition to these facts are their interpretations, for example, the ramifications or emotional responses brought about being a woman in the 1940's living in France.

For example, to bring all of Beauvoir's concepts together, the situation of a subject in an impoverished third world country is immensely different than that of a middle class American. While the ambiguous human condition is no different between the two subjects, their abilities to act freely are constrained by each subject's unique situation. There are simply more possibilities for the American to pursue than someone who lacks similar resources and opportunities. Nonetheless, both subjects are able to work towards transcendence within their situations. When Beauvoir refers to "the destruction of the given situation" in her explanation of transcendence she means to say that one rejects the reality which imposes restrictions upon oneself, both physically and temporally. And the "future which will flow from its victory" is referencing her belief that through unimpeded constructive activity one achieves transcendence. This is Beauvoir's concept of a positive transcendence. One which is aimed at a subject's freely chosen project. And, crucially, the constructive activity in one's life leads to the possibility of achieving the kind of transcendence which Beauvoir finds to be genuine to our humanity, a transcendence

that is dictated by a subject's own free choice. Although the subjects in my example have vastly different situations, both are able to perform constructive activity and freely work towards their own transcendence.

By understanding how these technical concepts of ambiguity, freedom, transcendence, constructive activity, negativity and situationalism overlap and rely on one another, one can understand Beauvoir's theory of oppression:

Perhaps it is permissible to dream of a future when men will know no other use of their freedom than this free unfurling of itself; constructive activity would be possible for all...As we have already seen, every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. That is what defines a situation of oppression. (Beauvoir, 86-87)

Oppression is negativity's manifestation and disruption of a subject's situation. "Perhaps it is permissible to dream of a future..." Beauvoir knows that it is not currently the case that every man is recognizing the possibilities of accepting an ambiguous human condition and using their freedom in constructive activity (86). The situation of an oppressed individual is such that the embodied subject is being blocked off from the possibility of producing constructive activity in their lives physically or temporally. Situationalism is key here. It is the situation of the subject which lends one to being oppressed. Merely resigning oneself from participating in constructive activity does not justify being oppressed. Oppression is when there is some kind of force which acts upon the situation of a subject and blocks off the possibility of participating in constructive activity.

Sabine Broeck summarizes Beauvoir's theory:

Thus, in *EoA*, de Beauvoir's extended meditation on subjectivity and on the ambiguity of an ethics of free human choice, she turns repeatedly to situations of a blockage of freedom: of oppression by forces greater than the particular human being, that is by way of incursions of power, on the one hand; or by unethical human acceptance of immanence, on the other. (173)

"Blockage of freedom" by forces greater than a particular human being is to say that there are forces beyond the control of a given subject which act negatively upon the subject. In other words, subjects are often thrust into a situation where they are never able to achieve a positive transcendence: not because they have chosen to live negatively, but because there are forces greater than themselves which prescribe their situation. "Incursions of power" are beyond the control of a subject, yet they define the subject's situation.

Asshole capitalism seems like such a situation. Asshole capitalism blocks freedom, not by the hand of a particular individual, but by means of an institutional force. According to Beauvoir's interpretation of oppression, assholes must change the situation of cooperative people in such a way that they are being blocked off from participating in constructive activity. Consider the example comparing subjects in middle class America and in an impoverished third world country. Both are still able to achieve transcendence provided there is no "incursion of power" which blocks off their abilities to act freely. Thus, for assholes to be oppressive according to Beauvoir, it must be shown that they obstruct cooperative people from participating in constructive activities.

James speaks of "opening the floodgates" when asshole culture seeps into society (163). This is a reference to his belief that once entitlement-oriented culture penetrates our social institutions, it rapidly becomes prevalent. "Let us assume for the moment that the encouraged

sense of entitlement goes unchecked by any asshole-dampening system. The first question to ask is how assholes, unimpeded, might swamp cooperative life” (James, 163). James’ main concern is a withdrawal of cooperative people from our current institutions and practices. “Instead of switching, they [cooperative people] simply withdrawal, being unable or unwilling any longer to do the things people need to do if cooperation is to continue as before (James, 163). James suggests people will likely withdrawal themselves for a number of reasons including exhaustion, underassurance (the general perception that not enough people are carrying their weight in society), rising costs, or unfair burdens (James, 163-164). If asshole capitalism, as James suggests it to be, acts as a force to withdraw people from doing activities they wish to pursue, their free choice in pursuing ends will be, at least, disturbed. Or, more crucially, it could be the case that asshole capitalism systematically removes the possibility of cooperative people pursuing their projects. If we are to take seriously the threat of people withdrawing from society’s positive influences on account of frustration with entitlement-oriented folks, there will likely be the repercussion of free choice being limited. There will simply be fewer or less desirable options for engagement in civic activities. This is a blockage of freedom. If there is the possibility to pursue certain ends and that possibility is being cut off from those who wish to pursue them, then the forces causing the blockage are oppressive actors according to Beauvoir. Asshole capitalism, on Beauvoir’s reading, is oppressive.

Further evidence for this claim comes from James’ discussion of civic disengagement.

We said earlier that capitalism could fulfil its social promises only by way of various enabling social practices and institutions. But such cooperative relations will be maintained in a population only because enough people each do enough to uphold the set of practices and institutions, at some cost to themselves... but, as we now explain, for any

several of reasons, the spread of asshole culture in a system of entitlement capitalism can readily mean that not enough people are any longer willing or able to uphold social institutions and practices, including the institutions and practices needed for the capitalist system to live up to its own set of values. (162)

Beginning with the description of capitalism given by Hodgson in the “Capitalism” section of this paper, I presented the idea that capitalism depends on a set of social relations for the system to function. In other words, social relations are required for “generalized commodity production” to function properly. Furthermore, the social relations within a given society are unique to that society. Later, in the “Asshole Capitalism” section of this paper, I explained how James requires the social relations explained by Hodgson to uphold the institutions and practices of our society. If these social relations are penetrated with asshole mentality and entitlement-oriented thinking, our society would begin to degrade. One of the first symptoms of a society beginning to degrade is what James is arguing. Cooperative people will not want to participate in an entitlement-oriented system and will begin to withdraw from it.

The importance of this is, according to Beauvoir, the ramifications it would have on personal freedom and autonomy. Within the idea of capitalism, as defined as “generalized commodity production,” there exists the possibility for a society within which its members are able to act, for the most part, freely according to Beauvoir’s understanding. There is the opportunity to get an education, seek out employment, or become one’s own employer. These are all parts of social institutions supporting the greater capitalist system and the means by which one can produce constructive activity. Having the freedom to engage in such things is at the heart of capitalism itself. This is being able to participate in a “open-society.”

However, the same cannot be said in the case of asshole capitalism. With civic engagement declining on account of a lack of interest in partaking in the practices and institutions which uphold our society, there will be a lack of options within our society for cooperative people to be able to freely choose in what to partake. Furthermore, this will become an institutionalized problem seeing as James claims a broad range of institutions will be affected. Once the asshole mentality penetrates a societal institution, the immediate ramifications for cooperative people will be an ultimatum: participate with an ever-growing number of assholes or withdrawal. As James stated earlier, it is likely that many cooperative people will choose to withdraw.

One might ask themselves if this is too radical of an interpretation of oppression. Merely lacking civic engagement does not seem to be strong enough of a force to consider assholes oppressive. Sure, asshole capitalism might bring along some constraints for subjects within a society. But, constraints, like inconveniences, are not proper forms of oppression.

In order to fully realize the implications of asshole capitalism as oppressive one must understand these constraints as obstructions to freedom rather than normal kinds of constraints on beings in a capitalist society. Which means that there must be a change made in the situation of cooperative people by the hand of assholes, which is the cause of this obstruction. Certainly, just because one chooses to remove themselves from civic engagement on account of an entitlement oriented culture which has grown within it, does not mean that they have freely chosen to no longer participate in the activities generally; only on account of the asshole mentality within the institution. This point is crucial because it exemplifies that asshole activity is causing a change in situations of the cooperative population.

Let us return to Sims' thoughts on an oppressor: "When someone aspires to this *openness* through unbridled choices and actions, when he uses his *power to do anything he likes*, he is an oppressor. An oppressor does not recognize the freedom of others or disempowers them through mystification or coercion" (Sims, 686). According to Sims, writing on Beauvoir's conception of oppression, oppressors are those who use their freedom and power to do anything they like to mystify or coerce cooperative people out of the institutions they once upheld. Accordingly, Beauvoir writes "Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order to merely support the collectivity..." (89). Considering both of these writings on Beauvoirian oppression, it seems first that assholes have the capacity to mystify and coerce for their own personal gain. Justification of this is merely through their mode of reasoning as purported in the asshole section of this paper. Second, assholes, through their penetration into the social institutions, block off the possibility for cooperative people to engage in certain institutions without resigning themselves to the sort of condemned misery of supporting the collective.

It seems likely the James description of an "opening of the flood gates" goes beyond constraining cooperative people in normal ways. Rather, through the actions of assholes cooperative people are forced to withdraw from the kinds of things which are needed to both support capitalism and which are used as a means of constructive activity to work towards transcendence. The actions of a specific group, assholes, which target another specific group, cooperative people, and fundamentally change their situation in the world by blocking off certain avenues of constructive activity amounts to oppression.

Cudd

Thus far, Frye has presented a social theory of oppression in which she employs the bird cage metaphor and the double bind scenario to exemplify what the experiences of the oppressed are like. This theory demonstrates that assholes are able to form cages around cooperative people through using social institutions in an interconnected manner which acts to oppress. Beauvoir gave us insight into how freedom and the blockage of freedom affect others and provided a picture of an oppressor as one who uses his freedom to block the freedom of another in their situation. Now, I will present a third, and final, theory from oppression by Anne E. Cudd in her book *Analyzing Oppression*. Cudd will argue that oppression is the unfair harm enacted by certain groups against other groups in an institutionalized manner.

Cudd's formalized stance is as follows:

Oppression, I claimed, is an institutionally structured, unjust harm perpetrated on groups by other groups through direct or indirect material and psychological forces... the explanation of oppression... uses economic and psychological models, by analyzing the notion of a social group that can be an oppressed or an oppressor group, and the notion of an institutionally structured constraint or action. (Cudd, 28)

Cudd's methodology is to argue that human behavior is such that institutional forms of social relations are able to effect groups in such a way that certain groups can impose unjustified harm upon others.

Paul Benson gives the following summary of how Cudd justifies her theory:

This thesis depends upon four claims: (i) that the harms that comprise social oppression derive from institutional practices; (ii) that these harms are imposed on an independently identifiable social group (which constitutes the oppressed); (iii) that these harms operate

to the advantage of another social group; and (iv) that these harms derive from unjust coercion or force (25). (178)

I will explain Cudd's theory by developing each of these points. Then, I will argue that asshole capitalism acts oppressively.

We must first clarify what Cudd means by social groups; then one can consider how institutionalized practices allegedly harm these groups. Doing so fulfills Cudd's claim outlined in Benson's first point. According to Cudd: "*A social group is a collection of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of social constraints on action*" (Cudd, 44). By making this distinction, Cudd effectively defines the term "group" used in her thesis, making shared social constraints the key element that binds a social group together. Cudd defines such constraints thusly: "...social constraints are facts that one does or ought to rationally consider in deciding how to act or how to plan one's life, or facts that shape beliefs and attitudes about other persons, that come about as a result of social action" (Cudd, 50). Social groups are defined around these constraints. Cudd argues, for example, blacks and whites in America are different social groups because they suffer different kinds of constraints within society (41). One way this might look is, the black social group plan their lives differently from white social groups because they are constrained to live in different neighborhoods than the white social groups in America.

Cudd takes institutional practices within society as the motivators of constraints upon other groups.

Social groups are collections of individuals who face common constraints that are structured by social institutions... Explicit rewards set by groups whose criteria of eligibility are common knowledge, for example, the starting salary for the typical MBA

graduate of the Harvard Business School would be one kind of constraint structured by a social institution. (Cudd, 51).

People capable of attending Harvard Business School belong to a different social group than those who are not. The social institution of education is open to a broad array of social groups, but those who attend better schools are situated advantageously compared to those who cannot. "...these are consequences to actions based on knowledge or inferences made from social factors which guide behavior in advance through the reward or punishment those consequences represent" (Cudd, 51). This is not to say that those who attend Harvard Business School are oppressing those who cannot, but shows that social groups function within social institutions that enable and constrain in different ways and to different degrees. But, this example also reminds us that there are constraints which ensure certain social groups would never be able to attend Harvard Business School.

Moving on to Cudd's second claim, social groups become the object of oppression when the harms of social constraints are being aimed at an identifiable group. This can come about through both direct and indirect forces of oppression. Cudd makes her point most clearly when she says the following about direct forces of oppression: "Direct forces of oppression include unjust laws that prescribe or proscribe behaviors by members of social groups, unjustified terrorist, police, or military by some groups on other groups, or unjust norms that deny equal opportunities to some members of social groups" (Cudd, 52). This is the direct implementation of policies that are unequal and targeted to a specific social group. Bringing together Cudd's first two claims, unjust laws utilized by a social institution, that is the institution of the law, and direct them to harm a specific social group. For example, Jim Crow laws are a direct implementation of unjust harm being directed at a specific social group by means of the institution of the law.

In order to understand Cudd's third claim, that the harms of one social group work to the advantage of another, I will turn to Titus Stahl's paper *Collective Responsibility for Oppression*:

Members of disadvantaged groups can also be kept from challenging oppressive relationships by dominant groups denying them access to the resources they need to do so. In the case of economic oppression in terms of the way that the classic Marxist model presents it, workers cannot leave their relationship of subservience to capitalists because the structure of the labor market ensures that they are (by and large) unable to save enough to establish themselves as independent producers. (482)

This is one means by which a social group is able to stay advantaged at the disadvantage of another group. The two social groups in this scenario are "capitalists" and "workers." One can infer that these are separate social groups because their constraints within society are clearly distinct, as Stahl points out. This is- the working class has an inability to establish themselves as independent producers. The harm, which should be explicitly stated, is that the capitalist system is set up such that the workers will never be able to create enough economic prosperity that they would be able to become independent and no longer rely on the capitalists. I will return to this point after examining Cudd's fourth claim.

Finally, to exemplify the fourth claim by Cudd, these harms are coerced or forced upon specific social groups, consider the following thought from Laura Miller:

If a black employee is fired for an assortment of traits- a manner of speaking or dressing or cornrowed hair- deemed "unprofessional" by her boss, is she the target of a racial bias? Is "professional" simply a code word for "white," and are we expecting everyone to "act white" in order to secure a decent job? (Miller, 23).

Cudd makes a similar point. Within the social institution of the workplace, there is an identifiable social group which is disadvantaged by another identifiable social group. Further, there is systematic evidence of similar situations of unfair treatment of social groups throughout our society (Miller, 25). Getting clear on a couple of points here, it is *unfair* for an employer to expect that a black employee act “white;” that is, the expectation of the assimilation into the white social group’s culture in order to get the same treatment as white folks. This puts black people at a disadvantage in comparison to white people. In Miller’s hypothetical, she points out that the cultural practices of a social group are being targeted and labeled “unprofessional” by employers. It is not the work ethic or performance of the employee that is in question. What is in question is actions of the employer who makes up a set of standards that certain social groups are unable to meet. Cudd claims: “An institution (economic system, legal system, norm) is coercive if the institution unfairly limits the choices of some group of persons relative to other groups in society” (Cudd, 131). This is precisely what is put forth in Miller’s hypothetical. The institution of capitalism, broadly, or the workplace, more accurately, unfairly limits the choices of certain social groups relative to another. If we tell black people they must meet a thinly veiled set of white social norms, there is institutional racism taking place and this is oppressive. According to Cudd, it is oppressive for black people to receive unfair harm imposed upon them by another identifiable social group, white people, through a means of coercion within a social institution.

Stahl’s quote regarding capitalism raises an interesting point. According to Cudd’s theory, capitalism on its own, not even asshole capitalism, may be oppressive. Exploring each of the four claims needed to support Cudd’s theory exemplifies this.

(i) *The harms that comprise social oppression derive from institutional practices* (Cudd, 25). The harm being caused by the capitalists, in this example, is enabled by the social system of

capitalism, through its various social institutions. As discussed previously, social institutions play a role in the style of capitalism which is being practiced. Social institutions are dictated or strongly influenced by those who control societies, i.e. the capitalists. Thus, the capitalists are able to maintain their position of power through the direct and indirect implementation of policy. For example, the capitalist class created and enforced the Jim Crow laws, utilizing the institution of the law. Through the institution, unfair harms were imposed upon black people in America.

(ii) *These harms are imposed on an independently identifiable social group (which constitutes the oppressed)* (Cudd, 25). The social group of the workers is clearly distinct from that of the capitalists. The constraints on the working class are markedly different from that of the capitalists. While capitalists have a greater range and mobility on the choices regarding how they act and plan their lives, the working class is restricted due to financial burdens put in place through social institutions by the capitalists.

(iii) *These harms operate to the advantage of another social group* (Cudd,25). Through the use of social institutions, capitalists are enabled to have an advantageous relationship with the workers; even if this comes at the harm of the working class. Viewing the two social groups through the lens of each of their constraints exemplifies that the capitalists are taking advantage of the working class. There exists the possibility for economic mobility for the capitalists while the workers are constrained to their economic status.

(iv) *These harms derive from unjust coercion or force.* The unjust harm caused by coercion or force is not explicitly laid out in Stahl's example, but is stated simply as: "...workers cannot leave their relationship of subservience to capitalists because the structure of the labor market ensures that they are (by and large) unable to save enough to establish themselves as independent producers" (482). As previously discussed in this paper, capitalism relies upon a set

of social relations. Hodgson expanded upon the social relations between different classes and its effects on society. It is unjust for the capitalist class to use their position within society to set up a system which leaves the working class unable to become independent producers. The capitalist's ability to create such a form of capitalism is laid out in the *Capitalism* section of this paper.

However, James has argued for the opposite of this understanding of capitalism. He conceives of asshole dampening systems which are set up to prevent this mode of capitalism being practiced. Although Stahl refers to "capitalists" and "workers," the model of asshole dampening systems works in the same way to prevent the capitalists from taking advantage of workers. James and Hodgson both think that social relations play a role in the style of capitalism within a society, but that style does not necessarily have to be insidious like Stahl laid out provided cooperative people uphold their end of asshole dampening systems. If asshole dampening systems are upheld, we are told capitalism "...promises various desirable things, including freedom, opportunity, and general property. It is supposed to advance the "general welfare" and create a "rising standard of living" in which a "rising tide lifts all boats," the yacht and dingy alike" (James, 154). Stahl's interpretation, and Cudd's evaluation of capitalism, however, provide the opposite understanding. Who, then, has the correct interpretation? Is capitalism doomed to inevitably favor Stahl's conception of capitalists? Or, can James' idea of asshole dampening systems uphold the institutions needed to prevent this style of capitalism from becoming prevalent in our society, if it is not already.

Assholes use institutional practices to impart harm upon cooperative people, an identifiable social group, and through means of coercion or force, assholes take advantages for themselves, often at the disadvantage of cooperative people. This statement is not exactly the

same as Stahl's interpretation of oppressive capitalism, however. Stahl assigns much more culpability to the system of capitalism itself, while James focuses on the effects and harms assholes impart themselves. Nonetheless, comparing Cudd's theory of oppression to James' argument for asshole capitalism is nearly complete given Stahl's contribution. We have previously discussed the asshole's ability to penetrate the social institutions which uphold capitalism. Through discussion of their interaction with various social institutions, the asshole mentality lends them to be analogous with Stahl's use of the term "capitalists." In that, assholes take advantage of social institutions and relations for the betterment of themselves, and at the specific disadvantage of cooperative people. Through acting out of an entrenched sense of entitlement, on an institutional level, assholes create a sort of capitalism laid out in Stahl's quote.

Here, we can see a philosophically productive tension. On the one hand, capitalism seems perfectly set up to be oppressive, and to take the form of asshole capitalism. At the same time, asshole dampening systems are in place to protect society. The key question is: Are these asshole dampening systems really powerful enough to prevent oppression in Cudd's theory? Or, is the game rigged to begin with? Maybe oppression, especially in the form of asshole capitalism, is just the way capitalism works. Addressing such concerns requires a two-pronged approach: first a reminder of why James and Hodgson's views of capitalism are beneficial; second, Cudd's purported distinction between particular social groups and how oppression requires that the harm stem from one identifiable social group acting upon another.

First, Hodgson and James have both outlined the positive attributes of a capitalist system, specifically its ability to attain the values which we seek as a society (see Hodgson, 153 and James, 155). This is not outlined in Stahl's quote. Nonetheless, James recognizes the possibility of this kind of capitalism and offers the solution in cooperative vigilance.

According to Karl Marx, capitalism is unstable but inevitably gives way to something better. The proliferation of assholes suggests that Marx was wrong: Capitalism is unstable but can give way to something worse. Thomas Hobbes, that great student of the human condition, has a better nose for the asshole in human life. Hobbes argued that society was so inherently unstable that only an absolute monarch (such as the English king) could keep it from developing into a “war of all against all,” ... Yet the social dynamics of assholes may confirm his gloomy view of the risks. Cooperation is fragile... Cooperative vigilance is the *only* bulwark against decline, *especially* in capitalist societies. (James, 148-149)

According to James, “The United States stands at the precipice...” of becoming an entitlement-oriented culture (148). Cooperative vigilance requires that cooperative people holdfast in their dedication to upholding the institutions which bring about the positive attributes of capitalism. Indeed, this is something James thinks our society can do. But it would mean that asshole dampening systems do not fail. Why should we believe that these systems have not, or will not fail? James thinks our current capitalist system is, for the most part, able to attain these values and uphold well-regarded social institutions, even “despite the usual asshole” (James 146-147).

Furthermore, both Hodgson and James have argued that social relations play a role in the style of capitalism being practiced (see Hodgson, 29 and James 160). Indeed, the style of capitalism portrayed by Stahl is an oppressive one according to Cudd. It meets the four requirements for justifying her claims. But, it is not the only style of capitalism that can be practiced. Consider the following question: for the most part, if there are unfair and unjust practices in our society, are we able to effectively prevent or correct them? If the values we seek in our society are upheld by cooperative people, it seems likely that the answer is yes.

Second, one cannot claim that the entire working class fits Cudd's requirements for a social group. The working class is composed of many different social groups, all constrained in unique ways. Moreover, according to Cudd's second claim, the harms must be imposed on an identifiable social class (25). However, one might argue that the capitalists in Stahl's quote are analogous to large corporations like Walmart or Amazon, who could potentially oppress many social groups through their ability to impact many institutions. In this case, the corporations are able to keep the working class subservient across all kinds of social groups. But these are instances of actors within capitalism, not capitalism itself. Thus, if it is possible as James and I have argued to keep our asshole dampening systems functioning, then capitalism would not allow for these corporations to have the opportunity to exploit the working class. There might be a case where certain identifiable social groups are being harmed by other social groups according to both Stahl and Cudd's criteria, but it is certainly not the case that the whole system is set up where the entire capitalist class fits one definition of a social group and the entire working class is set up to fit another social group.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to ask if assholes are oppressive. First, I explained James' theory of assholes and asshole capitalism. Next, I examined three distinct theories of oppression, to see if asshole capitalism fit those theories. In each case, the answer was yes. Under asshole capitalism, cooperative people are being systematically and institutionally disadvantaged by assholes; whether that be via institutional and systemic disadvantages, the limiting of free choice a subject has in their given situation, or by unfair harm being imparted upon a certain social group through institutionalized forces, to the advantage of another social group.

However, at the end of this paper, I find that my reflections on capitalism as a mode of oppression in and of itself brings to light the real fears behind asshole capitalism and why I think they should be taken as a serious threat. Clearly, various models of capitalism are possible through a society's social relations. However, the task of preventing oppressive capitalism is not easily solved. Cooperative vigilance might be an answer. Better oversight and recognition of asshole-like actors in our society by some authority may also work to solve the problem. While capitalism is often unfair to different social groups in our society already, I am not ready to deem it oppressive. It seems likely, as James and Hodgson have argued, that we can conjure a capitalist society which does not inherently have to disadvantage groups of people.

Nonetheless, when bad actors, e.g. assholes, corrupt the system, clearly capitalism can serve as a means to advantage some at the disadvantage of others. Asshole management is not an easy task. I think it is safe to say that we have yet to meet our tipping point of asshole infiltration, whatever that point may be, and as long as that is the case, there is hope for prevention of asshole capitalism. Whether that be by cooperative vigilance, education, greater oversight, etc. the solution has to begin with a recognition of the problem. If this paper serves as nothing else, it is my sincerest desire that it will serve as an opportunity to recognize that assholes present a serious threat beyond their interpersonal relations.

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