
Asininity and Evil: The Tragic Truth of Incompetent Assholes

Andrew Fiala

Fresno State University
afiala@csufresno.edu

Abstract:

This paper discusses four axioms of asininity, while defining asininity as a combination of stupidity and assholery. Asininity is a tragic and ubiquitous feature of the human condition. It can be as bad as evil; and it is not easily cured. The paper locates asininity in moral theory, arguing that virtue theory provides a useful analysis and that asinine people are not evil in a deontological sense. It uses ideas from social epistemology and psychology to explain why asininity is prevalent in organizations and institutions, and not easy to eliminate. The analysis is applied to a discussion of President Trump's tariff policy, which is examined as a case study in asininity. The article discusses the "banality of asininity," while making connections to ideas found in the work of Arendt, Bonhoeffer, and others. It suggests that asininity can be resisted through Socratic culture and education.

THIS ESSAY ADDRESSES TWO RELATED PROBLEMS: stupidity and assholery. In the first case, there are substantial problems that result from incompetence, ignorance, lack of expertise, and outright dumbness. In the second case, we have a related set of problems that result from mean-spirited pig-headedness, bullying

selfishness, obnoxious boorishness, and a sense of entitlement. Neither of these problems are a matter of outright evil. Evil is an important concern in social and political life; but stupidity and assholery are equally as important, even though they are often overlooked and underestimated. In what follows, I will explain these two related concerns, and how they lead to the need for a response that limits the harm done by stupid assholes. That response includes education and enlightenment, along with institutions that are prepared to respond to the perennial problem of human asininity. But as I'll note in conclusion, asininity exposes a tragic conflict. There is a dialectic of asininity at play in the world. Each party is quick to accuse the other of stupidity and assholery. Any solution will require that we understand the dialectic of asininity and the tragic conflict it reveals.

I name this problem “asininity,” using the word “asinine” in two related senses that capture both issues. One sense—that of being stupid—is etymological. It can be traced to the metaphorical image of the animal known as an *ass*, whose male is known as a *jackass*, and whose Latin name is *Equus asinus*. That animal and its English name (as ass or jackass) and behavior (literally, it's *asinine* behavior) is associated with stupidity and stubbornness. Asininity is typically meant to indicate inanity and foolishness, even though it can also mean pigheaded or mulish. But the word asinine contains a further connotation insofar as it resonates with another meaning of the word “ass,” which has a different etymology. That term, and the related term “asshole,” are etymologically distinct, and can be traced back to the English term “arse” or the German “*Arsch*.” The common usage of “asshole” goes well beyond any scatological or corporeal reference—and is generally used to indicate a person who is aggressive, obnoxious, or mean. Although the word “asshole” may seem vulgar and obscene, it has been the focus of serious recent philosophical work, which I aim to contribute to here.⁴¹

I use the term “asininity” here to indicate both stupidity and “assholery,” a term that has been used in connection with a larger

⁴¹ See for example, Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

phenomenon that has been called “assholism.”⁴² The connection between these terms that I am suggesting here in my usage of “asinine” goes beyond any strict etymological linkage and represents a novel employment of the term that connects the obnoxious “ass” or mean-spirited “asshole” with the stupid “dumbass” or stubborn “jackass.” My usage of asininity deliberately expands the term beyond stupidity and incompetence to also include pettiness, selfishness, brutishness, and meanness. We can usefully employ the terms “mean” and “meanness” here in their ambiguity as a bridge linking stupidity and assholery—since “mean” can indicate both a lowly kind of inferiority or lacking in dignity (as in something that is “demeaning”) and a kind of nasty obnoxiousness (as in a “mean old man”).⁴³ We might then say that asininity is an explanation for the growing meanness of the contemporary world, what David Brooks referred to in essay asking “Why have Americans become so mean?”⁴⁴ We could rephrase this by asking why Americans have become assholes, and why we are so stupid. But as I’ll suggest here, this is not specifically an American problem. Rather, asininity is a familiar problem from history, and is part of the human condition.

In discussing this topic, I propose four basic theses. We might call these “axioms of asininity”:

1. Asininity (i.e., stupidity and assholery) is ubiquitous.
2. Asininity can be as bad as outright evil.
3. Asininity is not easily cured.
4. Asininity can be resisted through law and through culture.

⁴² Geoffrey Nunberg, *Ascent of the A-Word: Assholism, the First Sixty Years* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2012). Nunberg writes: “I’m really interested not in assholes so much as assholism, along with its close relation assholery” (p. xi). Nunberg notes that there are related terms such as *Arschlochismus* (in German) and *pendejismo* (in Spanish).

⁴³ “How ‘mean’ became nasty, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/how-mean-became-nasty-cruel-unkind-origin>, accessed April 17, 2025

⁴⁴ David Brooks, “How America Got Mean” *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>, accessed April 17, 2025.

In what follows I will defend these basic ideas, relating this to discussions of incompetence and assholery in the literature, considering how the problem shows up in current affairs, and then considering some possible institutional responses to the problem.

1. The Ubiquity of Asininity

There is an abundance of asininity. Assholery and stupidity are part of the human condition. And so, the first axiom of asininity is that asininity is ubiquitous. It is prudent, then, to consider the ubiquity of asininity as the best explanation for much that goes wrong. Some assume that sin, the devil, or some demonic desire is the cause of misfortune, crime, and unhappiness. But we would be wiser to assume that most evil is asinine. Rather than assuming a deep-seated malevolence in the heart of human darkness, it is simpler to assume that misdeeds more typically result from some combination of stupidity and assholery.

The ubiquity of asininity has been discussed in a variety of places. Aaron James's 2012 book *Assholes: A Theory*, begins with James declaring "assholes abound in history and in public life."⁴⁵ It is from this basic claim that we might derive some support for the axiom of asininity. James provides a variety of examples of assholery. James wrote this book before the Trumpian era began, although he did publish a later book that continued his analysis in the Trump era, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump*.⁴⁶ In that later book, James describes Trump as an "ass-clown" as well as an asshole. He again affirms the ubiquity of assholes. And he goes so far as to describe the present era as a time of "asshole capitalism," saying, "as assholes proliferate, cooperative people increasingly become unwilling to uphold the institutions need for capitalism to function."⁴⁷ James, it should be noted, is not focused on asininity as stupidity but, rather, on

⁴⁵ Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 2. A related and useful book (that also includes some further conversation with Aaron James) is Jean-François Marmion, ed., *The Psychology of Stupidity* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

⁴⁶ Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

⁴⁷ James, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump*, 11.

assholery as selfishness and entitlement (an analytical point to which I will return below).

More recent developments point toward the need for further analysis of the asininity of the contemporary world. Asininity appears to have accelerated with the return of Trump, in both senses of the term, assholery and stupidity. We might refer to the contemporary world as an era of asininity or an asinine age. Indeed, a number of pundits have pointed in this direction.⁴⁸ Sam Harris suggested in 2023 that this was a “Golden Age for Assholes.”⁴⁹ Harris claims that Donald Trump is “the asshole avatar of our age.” Harris links assholery to a kind of selfishness, and basic lack of moral decency. Furthermore, he suggests that this may be what people admire about Trump—his honest and unapologetic assholery. Harris explains, “His fans don’t love him in spite of the fact that he’s an asshole, but because he is Trump. This gives his fans permission to go on a moral holiday and to live there.”

Another aspect of asininity should be highlighted here, which is what I want to call “the dialectic of assholery,” which points to the way in which assholery tends to escalate through a process that is analogous to Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic. One version of this is based in grievance and what Nietzsche called “*ressentiment*.” As an anonymous referee of a draft of this paper noted, this seems to be a common feature of Trump and his followers, who feel as if they have been victimized and humiliated. Of course, a similar sense of resentment and grievance is experienced by anti-Trumpians and never-Trumpers who feel as if their party (if they are Republican) or

⁴⁸ Consider, for example, the claim that we are living in the “assholocene,” a term that was recently coined in at least two sources: “Welcome to the Assholocene” Oct. 26, 2023, at <https://steadyhq.com/en/friedlichesabotage/posts/a1c14c1a-feb9-42ec-9678-358be77f8d99>, and “The Terrible Twenties? The Assholocene? What to Call Our Chaotic Era” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 7, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2023-in-review/what-to-call-our-chaotic-era>, accessed April 11, 2025.

⁴⁹ Sam Harris, “The Golden Age of Assholes” August 20, 2023, transcript at: <https://podclips.com/et/0r9>, accessed April 11, 2025.

their country has been taken over by assholes.⁵⁰ Assholes often feel justified in being assholes because they think they have a legitimate grievance against others whom they view as assholes. Assholery develops as a response to perceived assholery. This helps to explain why asininity is ubiquitous: it proliferates as assholes egg each other on. The dialectic of assholery is seen when assholes say “I’m not the asshole, you are.” As I’ll note in the conclusion, the dialectical proliferation of assholes makes the problem difficult to resolve.

Now let’s consider the other aspect of asininity (its stupidity). One source is found in the work of David Brooks, who lamented the demise of intelligence, in an essay where he reflects upon the stupidity of the Trump tariff regime that caused so much turmoil in April 2025. I’ll return to the Trump tariff case in more detail later. But here, let me quote Brooks.

Producing something this stupid is not the work of a day; it is the achievement of a lifetime — relying on decades of incuriosity, decades of not cracking a book, decades of being impervious to evidence. Back in Homer’s day, people lived within an oral culture, then humans slowly developed a literate culture. Now we seem to be moving to a screen culture. Civilization was fun while it lasted.⁵¹

Brooks ties this dire diagnosis to the general decline of literacy that is occurring as screen-time replaces reading and writing, and as education has been dumbed-down in response. One could contest Brooks’ cynical hyperbole here. But there does seem to be an epidemic of asininity at present. In addition to the Trump tariff debacle, we could also cite the way that dumb assholes populate the Trump administration: with an anti-vaxxer, Robert Kennedy, Jr., put in charge of the Department of Health and Human Services, a pro-

⁵⁰ Thanks to the referee for raising this issue. The reciprocal sense of grievance is the focal point of a recent book by Frank Bruni, *The Age of Grievance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2025).

⁵¹ David Brooks, “Producing Something This Stupid Is the Achievement of a Lifetime” *New York Times*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/10/opinion/education-smart-thinking-reading-tariffs.html>, accessed April 11, 2025.

wrestling millionaire, Linda McMahon, in charge of the Department of Education, with a mandate to eliminate that Department, and so on. And beyond the Trump administration, we might also include anecdotes of stupidity from our personal lives, from popular culture, or even from academia.

Let me expand briefly on this last arena, and highlight the problem of cheating and plagiarism in the age of artificial intelligence. In the old days, a plagiarist would need to go to a library, look up a book or article to copy from, and then transcribe the result into a paper. Plagiarism was made easier by the cut-and-paste function in word-processing programs, and by the presence of online paper mills (services that could be hired to write essays). Now, with the advent of AI, whole papers can be created by lazy cheaters without much effort or expense. At each stage in this process of the plagiarism wars, cheating is made easier, learning is diluted, and stupidity increases. There does seem to be a kind of anti-intellectual asininity at large in our culture, which celebrates stupidity, while viewing laziness as its own reward. This is further connected to assholery in James's sense, as a kind of entitlement and pushiness that can be revealed when plagiarizers are confronted with their misdeeds. Sometimes (at least in my own experience as a professor and Department Chair), rather than expressing contrition or remorse, the plagiarist expresses outrage at being caught and called out for their misdeed.

In response to these kinds of claims about the asininity of the present age, one might raise an objection that views the present as an age of knowledge and enlightenment. Science and knowledge have grown rapidly in recent centuries. And with AI and the Internet, ordinary people have greater access to information and knowledge than at any time in the history of humanity. We should also note that IQ scores have been increasing, and broadly speaking there is more literacy and knowledge in the world today than there were in prior centuries. Generations of young people have also become kinder and gentler, thanks to a sustained focus on social and emotional learning, and anti-bullying campaigns. The push toward diversity, equity, and inclusion could, furthermore, be understood as a response to the assholery, bullying, and racism of previous generations. We could also point out that in the prior "age of enlightenment" (of the 18th and 19th Centuries), knowledge and education were the exclusive

possession of the white, male ruling class. So even though there are those like Brooks who are worried about a contemporary epidemic of stupidity, counter-evidence could be provided. And even though many feel, as Harris does, that assholery is spreading, history is not only a tale of the triumph of the asinine.

In response, let me clarify that the point of saying that asininity is ubiquitous is not to say that everyone is dumb, or that stupidity is increasing; nor is it to say that people are getting meaner and nastier. Rather, the point is simpler: there are asinine people all around us, there always have been, and most likely there always will be. Asininity is a common feature of humanity. And unfortunately, this common feature afflicts everyone, including the author and readers of this essay. Everyone can be stupid at times, and it is often tempting to become a mean-spirited and petty asshole. As I argued in *Tyranny from Plato to Trump*, there have always been dumb people (whom I call “morons” in that text) throughout history; and in the ancient world, wise people were as worried about asininity as we are today.⁵²

As an obvious example, consider Plato’s warnings about democracy, which he understood as mob rule. For him this meant rule of the ignorant and unvirtuous, or what we might call in our present context, asinine governance. Plato’s worry about stupid assholes can be understood as being directed at those who brought charges against Socrates and ultimately put him to death, as well as the other tyrants and demagogues of the ancient world—including Alcibiades, that pompous asshole of Athenian infamy, and Dionysios II of Syracuse, the self-important and ignorant asshole who tormented Plato. That’s not, of course, exactly the way Socrates put it in *Apology*, or how Plato put it in *Seventh Letter*. But if we read between the lines, the villains of Plato’s writings are often stupid assholes. In Plato’s *Alcibiades I* (perhaps a spurious work), Socrates says to Alcibiades:

Alack then, Alcibiades, for the plight you are in! I shrink indeed from giving it a name, but still, as we are alone, let me

⁵² Andrew Fiala, *Tyranny from Plato to Trump: Fools, Sycophants, and Citizens* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

speak out. You are wedded to stupidity (*amathia*), my fine friend, of the vilest kind; you are impeached of this by your own words, out of your own mouth.⁵³

When Socrates says that Alcibiades is wedded to stupidity (*amathia*) of the vilest kind, we might also translate this simply as saying that he is extremely ignorant—or, well, asinine. In Plato's *Laws* (731-72), this kind of stupidity is attributed to everyone and linked to excessive self-love. We might well describe this common human failing to our tendency to be stupid assholes. But note that this does not mean that we are wicked sinners in a Christian sense. Socrates's enemies and opponents (for example, Meletus in *Apology* or Thrasymachus in *Republic*) are not exactly evil or wicked in a Christian sense: they are not driven by a malevolent spirit. Rather, they are petty and mean, while also suffering from ignorance.

This brief excursus on Plato gestures toward the ubiquity of asininity. Plato and Socrates confronted it. And so do we. One might hope that enlightenment, education and civilization would cure our asininity. But human nature does not appear to change all that much. Perhaps there are moments—years or decades—of enlightenment, wisdom, and civility. But in an age of asininity, this is pushed aside by bullies in pursuit of dumb ideas. Perhaps there is a dialectic in history between asininity and enlightenment. But, to be blunt, we are always at risk of asininity, since stupidity and assholery are fundamental and ubiquitous human problems. And yet, given some of what we've seen in the Trump era, we do seem to have even more evidence for the ubiquity of asininity today than we did a decade ago when Aaron James published his book on Trump and assholery. Whether this is a new dawn for asininity or a brief episode in a larger trajectory toward enlightenment remains to be seen.

2. Asinine Assholery

⁵³ Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 118b. At Perseus: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0176%3Atext%3DAlc.%201%3Asection%3D118b>, accessed April 11, 2025.

Now let's consider in more detail what we might mean by asshole and asshole. I suggest that to be an asshole is to be selfish, petty, mean, boorish, obnoxious, and aggressive. This goes a bit beyond what James discusses—as we'll see in a moment. Synonyms for what I have in mind could include dick, prick, or jerk. Indeed, the term jerk (and jerkiness) have been usefully explored by Eric Schwitzgebel, who defines a jerk as someone who “culpably fails to appreciate the perspectives of others around him, treating them as tools to be manipulated or fools to be dealt with rather than as moral or epistemic peers.”⁵⁴ But jerks are not assholes on Schwitzgebel's telling, which seems to imply that jerks are not necessarily mean. Rather, they are afflicted by a kind of moral ignorance. I suspect that Schwitzgebel's parsing of these terms is a bit too precise and that many jerks are also assholes, at least in the ways that I've heard those terms used. However we use these terms, my point here is that assholes are pushy, obnoxious, and mean.

This does not mean that assholes are always immoral, wrong, or evil. One could say and do the right thing, while doing it in an asshole-ish fashion. Consider, for example, that a police officer might issue a ticket for a legitimate infraction with a gentle admonition and a pat on the back (in which case the cop is not being an asshole, even when he justly cites you for wrongdoing). But another cop may issue a similar ticket for a similar infraction, while being mean and aggressive about the whole transaction (in which the cop is doing the right thing but also being an asshole). This kind of thing is summed up in a famous excerpt from the film *The Big Lebowski* that has become a meme of sorts. In that scene, Walter (played by John Goodman) asks The Dude (played by Jeff Bridges), “Am I Wrong?” The Dude answers, “No you're not wrong Walter, you're just an asshole.”⁵⁵ This joke works because we understand that people could be assholes, while also being right or behaving well-enough.

⁵⁴ Eric Schwitzgebel, *A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 5

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6BYzLIqKB8>, accessed April 11, 2025. This scene is also discussed in Peter Ludlow, “Assholes: A Better Theory” <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/waitwhat-1-assholes-a-better-theory>, accessed April 11, 2025.

Assholery can occur in a variety of “good enough” or “well enough” situations. And that is why it is often infuriating: the asshole-ish behavior does not rise to the level of something criminal or evil; and yet it is irritating, annoying, and disturbing.

This leads to my second axiom of asininity, which is that asininity can be as bad as outright evil. Part of the problem is the gradual breakdown of civility and decorum that occurs in an age of asininity. Another part of the problem is that stupidity results in incompetent action and careless misbehavior. Even when this does not cause outright harm, the prevalence of stupidity and assholery results in irritation, annoyance, and distrust. Again, the film *The Big Lebowski* provides a memorable example. While asinine folks (such as Walter in the film—who is both stupid and an asshole) are not evil, the harm they cause is real—from ruining a funeral or botching a hostage exchange, to aggressively smashing a car that belonged to the wrong person. None of that is radically evil. But it is harmful nonetheless.

Let me pause here to more clearly define the idea of evil I am employing here. What I have in mind is something like malevolence or “radical evil” that deliberately intends to do wrong. Understood in this way, evil is a matter of will and is best understood deontologically. What I am suggesting here is that one can be an asshole without deliberately willing to do wrong. Indeed, what is puzzling about assholes is that they seem to believe that they are justified as mentioned above. Perhaps the problem is that they are ignorant, stupid, or confused—in which case they are not evil in the radical sense. Thus, asinine stupidity may offer a kind of explanation of assholery. There is, of course, a different (consequentialist) sense of evil that is focused primarily on the harmful result of assholery. If we define evil in consequentialist terms, then the harms of assholery will turn out to be a kind of “evil.” However, I am using evil in the deontological sense, when I suggest that assholes are not evil, even though their assholery causes harm.

We might suggest that assholery occurs when there is a lack of civility that falls short of wrongdoing. Such behavior remains harmful, insofar as it breaks shared norms of civility.⁵⁶ But the harm

⁵⁶ I discuss this further in [reference omitted for blind review.]

caused by incivility is subtle and insidious: it involves a general degradation of relationships and expectations about social life. A further point to note here is that assholery is a style or way of doing things, which can be applied to both good and evil behaviors. In some cases, there are assholes who take joy in their assholery. And we might suppose that the asshole who gets a sadistic thrill out of his assholery is close to being evil. But one need not be evil to be an asshole. This is what makes assholery so insidious. When assholery appears among those who are doing or saying the right things (but in an asshole-ish manner), it is difficult to identify and even harder to condemn.

Perhaps a virtue ethics framework can help at this point. We could view assholery as a kind of vice: as a failure to be excellent or to hit the Aristotelian mean with regard to behavior. The virtue (or virtues) that are opposed to assholery include humaneness, decency, empathy, and kindness. To return to the point I made about evil and moral theory a moment ago, the virtue ethics framework helps us understand assholery as a character trait or as a style or way of acting. Note again that this is not best understood in terms of deontological evil. Rather, an asshole fails to be kind or humane. Similarly, asinine fools fail to achieve epistemic virtue: they are stupid and not wise—but they are not evil. This virtue-based analysis helps make sense of memes and rules of thumb that say something like “don’t be an asshole.” This is not a commandment such “don’t be evil.” Rather, the point is to avoid being the sort of person who is mean, petty, aggressive, and unkind. We might also say “don’t be stupid” with the same kind of emphasis, in which stupid asininity is understood as a character flaw of a person who is lacking in wisdom.

Now let’s consider how my understanding of assholes comports with James’s account. James provides an analysis of assholes that includes the following three features.⁵⁷

First, the asshole “allows himself to enjoy special advantages and does so systematically.”

Second, the asshole “does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement.”

⁵⁷ Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 5.

Third, the asshole “is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people.”

This is a useful analysis. I would, however, add to James’s account some further claims about the meanness, pettiness, selfishness, obnoxiousness, and brutishness of assholes. James notices these things, while reducing them to the sense of entitlement and special advantage highlighted in his tripartite schema. But for my purpose, I think we should also emphasize the pushiness, non-cooperativeness, and aggression of assholes, along with their self-absorption, egoism, and indifference to the suffering of others. The usefulness of the term asshole is apparent here. If we emphasize aggression, egoism, and cruelty too much, we move beyond assholery to outright deontological evil, understood in terms of malevolent will. One reason the term “asshole” is useful is that an asshole is not evil in the conventional sense. It is useful to distinguish between aggressive, entitled, and petty jerks—and evil people who are malevolently motivated, sadistic, and cruel. There is no doubt that assholes are “repugnant” to use a term James uses; but the repugnance of the asshole does not necessarily rise to the level of the kind of moral repugnance that is properly reserved for wickedness and evil. James notes that some assholery spills over into the realm of evil. And it makes sense to say that Hitler or Stalin were assholes, even though evil is a better term. There is a difference between what James calls a “royal asshole” and the other great assholes of history such as Stalin or Hitler, and the ordinary assholes of daily life. One issue here has to do with the degree of damage that an asshole can cause. That issue would be of interest for a consequentialist analysis of assholery. Another issue, of interest from a deontological vantage point, is whether the asshole has malevolent intentions or whether he is just clueless, stupid, or “asinine” (in the sense of that term that is focused on foolishness or mulishness). As I argue here, even though asininity is not strictly speaking “evil,” it can cause significant damage. And given its ubiquity it may be a more important social and political problem than evil.

3. Asinine Incompetence

Now let’s consider in more detail the stupid side of asininity. One way to approach this is to emphasize outright mental

incompetence, as in a kind of cognitive disability. But that is not my focus here. With those who are truly cognitively impaired, we ought to have compassion. But it is rare for those with dementia or some other form of biologically based cognitive impairment to have much social or political power (although recent history does include potential examples in terms of elderly statesmen who seem to be impaired). So, we are not focusing here on those who have brain damage or dementia. Rather, the problematic kind of ubiquitous asininity I have in mind here is more a matter of ignorance, illiteracy, and incompetence—all negative terms that imply a lack of intelligence. It is more like what we see when a student cluelessly plagiarizes, or when Walter smashes the wrong car, than what we find in an Alzheimer's patient.

We have already seen this problem highlighted by Plato, who suggests that stupidity or ignorance is part of the problem of tyranny, and of wrongdoing in general. But my point is not to highlight that extreme stupidity (and self-love) of the great tyrants, as Plato did. Rather, I suggest that stupidity and ignorance are common (along with the self-deception of excessive self-love). And also, that the social and political problem of asininity occurs when stupidity gains power. This can occur when democracies fail, and enact stupid policies through popular referenda. It can occur when democracies stupidly fall for the demagoguery of a tyrant (as Plato warned). It can also occur when dumbasses gain power in bureaucracies.

And here we might consider The Peter Principle, which holds that people rise within hierarchies to the level at which their incompetence is revealed. This idea was proposed by Laurence Peter in a light-hearted book that lambasted the incompetence of civil servants, university administrators, politicians, members of the armed forces, figures within religious organizations, and other incompetent people who occupy positions of power and authority within a hierarchy. Peter coined the deliberately silly-sounding term “hierarchiology” as a way of explaining how his account of hierarchies resulted in the following basic principle: “in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to the level of his incompetence.”⁵⁸ The

⁵⁸ Laurence J. Peter and Raymund Hull, *The Peter Principle* (Cutchogue, NY, Buccaneer Books, 1969), 25.

basic idea is that when people get hired, promoted, or elected, they may have some initial competency that lands them the position. But when they keep getting promoted—based upon their past success—they eventually reach a position for which they are not qualified. They max out at “Peter’s Plateau,” which is the level at which their incompetence is revealed. As mentioned, Peter’s account of this was meant to be a kind of satire and a fun romp through the absurdity of institutions and hierarchies.

But the idea has caught on and The Peter Principle and related phenomena have been subject of significant research in what philosophers call “social epistemology.” One issue is the so-called “vitality of stupidity,” and which on Bos’s treatment of this idea is related to the dialectical interconnectedness of stupidity and wisdom in organization (e.g., some interventions that improve knowledge can make us stupider in different ways).⁵⁹ Another concern is the Dunning-Kruger effect which is one of the ways that incompetent people overrate our own competence, expertise, and performance. People like this may become assholes—since they think they are smarter or more proficient than they are. And again, as in the dialectic of assholery, this can breed resentment among parties each of whom understands their knowledge and competence dialectically in relation to others. We might add here, as well, that the Peter Principle helps explain the phenomenon of “regression to the mean,” which can also be used to explain why movie sequels are often worse than the original and why second visits to restaurants are worse than first visits (i.e., this is partly a matter of how we gather data on quality and evaluate it).⁶⁰ However we explain all of this, The Peter Principle and these other socio-psychological and epistemic concerns are well-known ideas that are worth taking seriously. Many people have anecdotal evidence of the basic idea that bureaucracies tend to produce or concentrate asininity. This is a theme in television shows such as *M*A*S*H* or *The Office*. And although we might laugh to see

⁵⁹ René ten Bos, “The Vitality of Stupidity,” *Social Epistemology*, 21:2 (2007), 139-150.

⁶⁰ See: Edward P. Lazear, “The Peter Principle: A Theory of Decline” *Journal of Political Economy* 2004 112:S1, 141-163.

this play out on the screen, or in a business, a church, a university, or at city hall—in cases where the stakes are fairly low—there are other, much more serious implications of The Peter Principle, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and other ways that asininity manifests itself.

These serious implications direct our attention to a variety of deep philosophical questions about the nature of evil, the ubiquity of stupidity, and the need for a wise system of checks and balances. The second axiom of asininity is that asinine incompetence can be as dangerous as outright evil. Consider an example familiar from Plato (again): that of a stupid ship's captain, or an airplane pilot (to update the example). It should be obvious that a ship's captain or an airplane pilot requires training and basic competence. Without that, the ship or airplane would crash. Expanding this example points toward the need for meritocracy of sorts. There are some professions that require expertise and experience. Moreover, the skills, knowledge, and expertise of certain areas of experience are specific to those domains. But we live in an era in which the idea of meritocracy has fallen on hard times, and in which expertise is maligned as elitism. Jason Brennan has built upon this sort of analysis to suggest that democracy makes us "angry, mean, and dumb."⁶¹ The Internet and AI have increased this anti-expert tendency. Ordinary people are able to self-educate, to a certain extent, while also doing research on their own without expert guidance. This is a wonderful democratization of knowledge. But it has a dark side that emerges when real experts are maligned, fake news is taken for reality, and conspiracy theories proliferate—all of which indicate a kind of asininity. Tom Nichols has suggested that our advanced information technologies have produced "dumpsters of nonsense."⁶² Nichols cites "Sturgeon's Law" (named after a sci-fi writer from the 1950's), which holds that "ninety percent of everything is crap." Given the way that instantaneous communication and instant gratification work in a world of information silos, it is no wonder that asininity proliferates in the

⁶¹ Jason Brennan, "Against Virtue: Does Democracy Make Us Angry, Mean, and Dumb?" Chapter 5 of Brennan, *Democracy: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶² Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 108.

information age. Nichols concludes, “the Internet is making us meaner, shorter-fused, and incapable of conducting discussions where anyone learns anything.”⁶³

There is also an asinine tendency to think that expertise in one domain is transferable to others. This helps to explain how celebrity endorsements work in advertising. It also may help explain the rise of Donald Trump in politics. One version of this problem is known as a “competency trap.” This is a corollary of The Peter Principle, of sorts. It occurs when competency in one domain, or success in a limited range of tasks leads people to overestimate their own intelligence, skill, and virtue. This is exacerbated by self-love and a lack of critical self-consciousness. It causes a kind of blindness, recalcitrance, and resistance to the need for education, training, innovation, novelty, and fresh ideas. The idea of a competency trap along with The Peter Principle has been used to explain how Trump rose to power, in a useful analytical dialogue by Wohlgezogen and Rai.⁶⁴ Because of his wealth and fame as a real estate developer and deal maker, Trump was able to ascend to power. But this initial area of competence was not directly transferable to the presidency or to the complex world of American politics and international affairs. And so, Trump’s incompetence was revealed as he entered a realm beyond where he was previously competent.

In discussions of competency traps and The Peter Principle in the literature on business and institutional organization, the solutions that are typically proposed include better training and recruiting, better supervision and evaluation, and a fairer system of compensation and promotion. It is also fairly obvious that solutions should include the rejection of nepotism, cronyism, and other systems of recruitment and promotion that are biased, and which have nothing to do with competence, wisdom, or virtue. Beyond all of this is the wisdom of Socrates and Plato, which encourages modest self-

⁶³ Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 111.

⁶⁴ Franz Wohlgezogen and Himanshu Rai, “Dialogue: Lessons on competence and character from president Donald J. Trump,” *Organizational Dynamics* 47: 1 (2018), 54-62.

criticism, and which also recognizes the importance of wisdom and expertise.

But the example of Trump shows that asininity is not easily cured, which is the third of the axioms of asininity. The general asininity revealed by The Peter Principle and the competency trap also helps explain why Trump's acolytes and supporters continue to support him: since they are themselves hindered from seeing this by their devotion to Trump, their own self-love, and the rationalizations that are often employed to explain away the competency trap. To make this point clearer, let's consider a contemporary example in a bit more detail.

4. A Contemporary Example: The Trump Tariff Debacle

Now let's look a bit closer at a contemporary example of asininity. This case is the Trump Tariff turmoil of 2025. One could also fruitfully explore a variety of other cases, including the case of the Iran War of 2026. But since that case is still unfolding as I write (March 2026), I'll focus here on the Trump Tariff case, which is widely understood as asinine. It is considered here merely as an obvious example of the problem of asininity. I am not suggesting that Trump is the only person who is subject to the problem of asininity. Rather, as stated, this is a common human problem. But the Trump Tariff case is useful since its asininity and its negative results were so obvious. Furthermore, when the Supreme Court overruled Trump's tariffs, the President reacted in asinine fashion by calling the justices who ruled against him "a disgrace to our nation," as well as "fools and lapdogs" who lacked "the courage to do what's right."⁶⁵ He said the justices were afraid of the mob, that they were "unpatriotic and disloyal to our Constitution," and that they had been "swayed by foreign interests." An article in the *National Review* (a conservative outlet) called Trump's outburst, "stupid and vile"—in other words

⁶⁵ Ed Whelan, Trump's Stupid and Vile Attack on Supreme Court Justices" *National Review*, Feb. 21, 2026, <https://www.nationalreview.com/bench-memos/trumps-stupid-and-vile-attack-on-supreme-court-justices/>.

asinine.⁶⁶ This back and forth provides an obvious case of the dialectic of asininity discussed above.

The Trump tariff turmoil and stock market mayhem that occurred in the Spring of 2025 appears to confirm The Peter Principle, along with the axiom of ubiquitous asininity. The debacle that unfolded in April 2025 was the result of both incompetence and obnoxiousness.

One significant question here is why the mean and stupid whims of one person and his cronies should be allowed to wreak the kind of havoc that unfolded that Spring, when trillions of dollars of pandemonium occurred.⁶⁷ The U.S. Constitution is supposed to limit that kind of arbitrary power. But the malfunctioning system of checks and balances in the United States government is not my theme at the moment. I'll return to it briefly in the conclusion, where I hold out the hope that such a system could limit the damage of asininity. But here, I want to use this example to consider the difference between asininity and evil, while also showing why asininity is difficult to cure.

The most obvious explanation of the Trump tariff debacle is that the Trump team simply did not know what it was doing. But their obnoxious sense of self-importance (and the competence trap mentioned above) meant that they were resistant to criticism and thus reluctant to admit wrong-doing or to change course. The strange and shifting justification of the President's tariff equation and its subsequent (and short and shifting) implementation is a sign of incompetence. There was a stock market collapse and a bond market panic that erupted after the tariffs were unveiled on what Trump called "Liberation Day" (April 2, 2025). The results were so severe that Trump soon paused the most extreme version of his tariff regime—although the subsequent pause included ongoing tariffs and the threat of future tariffs, as well as exorbitant tariffs on China. The

⁶⁶ Ed Whelan, Trump's Stupid and Vile Attack on Supreme Court Justices" *National Review*, Feb. 21, 2026, <https://www.nationalreview.com/bench-memos/trumps-stupid-and-vile-attack-on-supreme-court-justices/>.

⁶⁷ See <https://www.reuters.com/technology/magnificent-seven-add-more-than-1-trillion-value-after-trump-pauses-some-tariffs-2025-04-09/>, accessed April 17, 2025.

stupidity or incompetence of the initial tariff plan was revealed as economists analyzed the equation that the Trump Administration had used to come up with the tariff rate—an equation that prompted mockery and bafflement from a wide range of experts.⁶⁸ Trump’s justification for his tariff regime was that other nations had treated the U.S. unfairly and that these tariffs were going to fix that problem. Trump said, in the speech at which he introduced his tariffs, “We’re going to make it wealthy, good and wealthy. For decades, our country has been looted, pillaged, raped and plundered by nations near and far, both friend and foe alike.”⁶⁹ This kind of language is an indication of the sort of assholery associated with Trump. The statement is hyperbolic, bombastic, and obnoxious. It aims at everyone including long-time allies. It grows out of the narrow and self-interested idea of Trump’s American First agenda. And it is basically mean.

The equation that was publicized to explain the Trump Tariff regime used several Greek letters and had the appearance of scientific depth and serious scholarly work. But as the commentary noted, this was just a way of dressing up a dumb idea with the appearance of profundity. The equation was publicized by the White House’s office of the Trade Representative as follows:

⁶⁸ See: “President Trump’s Tariff Formula Makes No Economic Sense. It’s Also Based on an Error.” American Enterprise Institute, April 4, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/economics/president-trumps-tariff-formula-makes-no-economic-sense-its-also-based-on-an-error/>; and “Economically Indefensible: Trump’s Tariff Math was too Stupid to Implement” Rolling Stone, April 9, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/trump-tariff-math-stupid-1235314290/>, accessed April 11, 2025.

⁶⁹ Trump speech at Rose Garden, April 2, 2025, <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-economic-tariffs-rose-garden-april-2-2025/>, accessed April 11, 2025.

$$\Delta\tau_i = \frac{x_i - m_i}{\varepsilon * \varphi * m_i}.$$

Figure 1: Trump Tariff Formula⁷⁰

The formula calculates the change in tariff rate (ΔT), for a country (i), by subtracting U.S. imports from that country (m) from the value of U.S. exports (x) to that country. That is what we see in the numerator of the equation. The numbers in the denominator are factors for “price elasticity of import demand” (ε), “elasticity of import prices with respect to tariffs” (ϕ), multiplied by each other and again by the U.S. import value (m). As the commentators noted, this formula ended up being reduced to a more simple value of $(x-m)/m$, since the estimate values for ε (at 4) and ϕ (0.25), equaled 1. Given those assumptions for ε and ϕ the entire formula reduced to a simpler formula, which was basically a formulation of export minus imports, divided by imports. This calculation was further manipulated to come up outrageously high and bizarre tariff rates: China ended up with 67% tariff, the EU with 39%, and Vietnam with 90%. The explanation for this formula including its speculative assumptions about “elasticity” were widely lambasted, along with its basic methodology which calculated the tariff rate based on trade deficit calculation (the trade deficit is represented in the $x-m$ calculation, which is exports minus imports). Most commentators pointed out the trade deficit is quite different from a tariff regime that could be described as being “looted, pillaged, raped and plundered” (as Trump obnoxiously said in the quote above).

Some defended Trump’s tariffs and the subsequent sudden repeal of those tariffs by claiming that the genius author of the *Art of the Deal* was playing four-dimensional chess. But the simpler explanation is stupidity, which is much more common than genius. Furthermore, the sycophants in Trump’s administration leaned into

⁷⁰ <https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/reciprocal-tariff-calculations>, access April 11, 2025.

the plan, publicly defending the proposal despite its asininity.⁷¹ This shows us the difficulty of curing the disease of asininity. When structures of power reward asininity, clever sycophants will embrace stupid assholery as an opportunity. And the masses who will bear the burden in this case, of higher prices and a changed economic outlook, may be surprised by the outcome. Despite this, some voters will stand by Trump, no matter how asinine and harmful his policies.⁷² The loyalty of partisans and the opportunism of sycophants point to the third axiom of asininity, showing us why asininity is difficult to cure.

Now let's consider a different explanation of the Trump tariff debacle that has been insinuated by those who think that Trump's scheme was focused on market manipulation. In calling for an investigation, California Senator Adam Schiff said, "These constant gyrations in policy provide dangerous opportunities for insider trading."⁷³ If this were the plan all along—if the goal was market manipulation for personal gain, we would have a case that is more like evil than asininity. But this sinister supposition would only really make sense if Trump and his cronies were evil masterminds. Again, the simpler explanation of the whole debacle is incompetent stupidity combined with combative assholery—as became abundantly clear in Trump's asinine response to the Supreme Court's ruling against him—even if this may have accidentally generated profit for some people on the inside.

⁷¹ Conservative outlet The Washington Examiner ran a column by Ian Haworth with the headline, "At least Trump's swarm of sycophants supports his tariffs," on April 4, 2025 (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/beltway-confidential/3370271/trump-sycophants-support-tariffs/>, accessed April 17, 2025). In that column, Haworth suggests that supposedly smart people were "pretending to be dumb" as they fanned out to defend the policy.

⁷² "Tariffs could cost them. They're still standing by Trump," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/11/tariffs-trump-maga-base/>, accessed April 17, 2025.

⁷³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/10/donald-trump-ignites-insider-trading-accusations-after-global-tariffs-u-turn>, accessed April 17, 2025.

5. The Banality of Asininity

I have no idea which supposition about Trump's tariffs (writing in Spring 2026) will finally be proved to be true, i.e., whether Trump was self-interested or incompetent when it comes to global economics. But I do think that we give too much credence to the idea that people in government and other bureaucratic roles are evil masterminds. The super-intelligent villain is a myth. Terrible things are more often the result of incompetence and stupidity, and bad luck, than malevolent genius. In the present section, I support this point with some examples in history and in scholarly literature that show again that asininity is ubiquitous, harmful, and difficult to cure.

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."⁷⁴ These words come from an essay, "Love in Action," in which King begins by quoting Jesus's final words, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The question of whether one ought to forgive stupidity and ignorance is interesting. But there is no doubt that asininity can produce terrible outcomes that do not require an evil intention.

To cite other sources, we might consider Hannah Arendt's idea of "the banality of evil." Arendt's analysis of one of the "masterminds" of the Nazi holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, suggests that Eichmann was not a malicious super-genius. Rather, he was an ordinary, vapid, and thoughtless man. Arendt says he was not "stupid"—insofar as he was able to do math, follow orders, and express himself in language; but she also says he was not a conniving Shakespearean supervillain. Rather, he was a kind of vacuous ass.

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain." Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing... He was

⁷⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 37

not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness - something by no means identical with stupidity - that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.⁷⁵

Arendt's claim that stupidity, thoughtlessness, and vacuity could be behind one of the greatest evils of history is counterintuitive. But Arendt's suggestion was paralleled by another source, who was himself caught up in the asininity of the Nazi era: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer says:

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind at least a sense of unease in human beings. Against stupidity we are defenseless.⁷⁶

Bonhoeffer's suggestion in response to the problem of stupidity is that we must seek to understand its nature. And in analyzing stupidity, Bonhoeffer reaches a conclusion that is of use for the present analysis, suggesting that stupidity is a social phenomenon linked to power—it is not merely psychological but also, Bonhoeffer suggests, “sociological.” Bonhoeffer says, “Every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity.”⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer goes on to describe the stupid person as “stubborn”—which links to what I have been calling asininity. He also suggests that the stupid person of the sort he is describing has been possessed by slogans, catchwords, and mindless language. And so (as in Arendt's discussion) there is a strange banality to this kind of asininity. The stupid person, on Bonhoeffer's account, is capable of great “evil,” but is unable to see that it is evil.

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 287.

⁷⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Stupidity” in *After Ten Years: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 22.

⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, “Stupidity,” 23.

If we associate power of the sort Bonhoeffer is describing here with a kind of assholery, we end up with the following generalization: as assholery grows, so too does stupidity. Thus, we arrive at the ubiquity of asininity; and we see the difficulty of curing it. When stupidity is ubiquitous, when misdeeds and evil become banal, when power infects our thinking, and when we are stubbornly stuck in our own stupidity and asshole-ishness, we encounter a great difficulty. The loyal mob is not repelled by asininity; and the opportunistic sycophants may even see it as an occasion for playing the game of power and influence. Education of the Socratic sort will not easily cure this kind of sociological asininity. Great harms can result from such asininity. But when confronted with these harms, the stupid assholes stubbornly refuse to see that they are the problem. When I say “they” here I also mean “we”—since each of us can be stupid and obnoxious. And this happens all the time.

We might say, then, that asininity is banal, by which I mean to suggest that it is both common and taken for granted as normal, ordinary, and commonplace. Among a certain group of people, what appears as asinine will be seen as normal. This is true of both stupidity and outright assholery. Large groups of people will accept dumb ideas as a given; they will also accept bullying, cruelty, and meanness as normal. And they will support stupid assholes as avatars of their own cultural norms. Of course, they (by which I also mean “we”) do not see or understand their own stupidity or obnoxiousness; nor do they think that their heroes are stupid assholes. Rather, they take all of this as normal, natural, and good.

6. Concluding Hope

In conclusion, let’s return to the dialectic of asininity. This reveals a tragic result. To cure asininity, you have to see it. But if you are asinine, you cannot see it (since you are too stupid or incompetent to understand it); or you will refuse to admit it (since you are an obnoxious asshole). This means that directing attention to asininity may in fact provoke further asininity.

Bonhoeffer suggests that part of the solution to asininity is to understand it. This is obviously true. It is also true, as Plato and Socrates suggested, that we need wisdom, virtue, and enlightenment. We would do well to think carefully about why people are so stupid and so mean. This essay hopefully contributes to this effort. I have

suggested that asininity is ubiquitous and a common human failing. We see it in contemporary political life, in academia, and in other aspects of our lives. And this is not simply a problem for others; it is a problem for each of us. In the Trump era, asininity seems more common; but it has always been part of the human condition. Nonetheless, if the analysis I have presented here is correct, part of the solution is to distinguish asininity from outright evil. One of the problems for imagining a solution to stupidity and assholery is that we confuse it with malevolent evil. With regard to deliberate evil and malicious criminality, a certain range of solutions are required (for example, prisons and punishment). But with regard to stupidity and assholery it is not clear that those kinds of solutions are useful or would be required. Asininity is a common failure of humanity that falls short of evil. It is solved not by punishment but by cultivation of wisdom, virtue, and a culture that values these things.

This cultural solution is no panacea that will cure us of asininity. As mentioned, there is a tragic impasse in a world of asininity. We can see this problem in the contemporary world. History also includes numerous examples. Each generation must confront this mean and demeaning aspect of our humanity anew. But we can learn from history how to construct safeguards and guardrails that can help prevent asininity from wreaking havoc. Among the most important concerns here is designing institutions in ways that can resist the damage of asininity. The famous system of checks and balances, and the separation of powers, in the U.S. Constitution is part of that effort. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the Constitution cannot completely eradicate asininity: stupid, incompetent, obnoxious, and mean people can be elected, can retain power, and can cause great damage—even under the Constitutional system. A legal system that limits the damage of asininity is a good thing. But a further part of the solution is to cultivate a non-asinine culture. That would be a culture that is moderate, prudent, kind, generous, compassionate, and wise. We might use the term civility here to describe part of the solution. But civility does not require wisdom or compassion—it merely establishes a kind of civilized politeness and decorum. Beyond that we need genuine hospitality, compassion, and care—and other values and dispositions that are the opposite of assholery and obnoxious meanness. In addition to those positive values, we also need a culture that values knowledge, that respects expertise, and that

is self-critical and humble enough to admit its own limitations and ignorance. With all of this on the table, we might say that what is needed is a Socratic kind of culture. And again, there are limitations. The most famous being that stupid assholes sometimes win: they executed Socrates, after all. But we should hope that even if asininity triumphs in the short run, in the long-term human beings can be wise enough and compassionate enough to create institutional safeguards and cultural norms that limit the damage done by stupid assholes.

References

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Stupidity” in Victoria J. Barnett, ed., *After Ten Years: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

René ten Bos, “The Vitality of Stupidity,” *Social Epistemology*, 21:2 (2007), 139-150.

Jason Brennan, *Democracy: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Frank Bruni, *The Age of Grievance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2025).

Andrew Fiala, *Tyranny from Plato to Trump: Fools, Sycophants, and Citizens* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

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

Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

Edward P. Lazear, “The Peter Principle: A Theory of Decline” *Journal of Political Economy* 112:S1 (2004), 141-163.

Jean-François Marmion, ed., *The Psychology of Stupidity* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Geoffrey Nunberg, *Ascent of the A-Word: Assholism, the First Sixty Years* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2012).

Laurence J. Peter and Raymund Hull, *The Peter Principle* (Cutchogue, NY, Buccaneer Books, 1969).

Eric Schwitzgebel, *A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

Franz Wohlgezogen and Himanshu Rai, “Dialogue: Lessons on competence and character from president Donald J. Trump,” *Organizational Dynamics* 47: 1 (2018), 54-62.