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Epistemic Assholes

Abstract: In this paper, I develop and defend the concept *epistemic assholes*. An epistemic asshole is someone who exhibits a distinctive form of epistemic badness characterized not by gross irrationality or hostility to truth, but by a stable, entitled disregard for one's epistemic relations with others. Drawing on Aaron James's (2012) account of moral assholes, I examine how people can systematically exploit epistemic cooperation by allowing themselves special advantages—such as "freedom from inquiry", "doxastic comfort", and "freedom to criticize"—while remaining insulated from criticism by an entrenched sense of entitlement. The resulting view, the Relational Approach to Epistemic Assholes (REA), explains why epistemic assholes are not epistemically the worst, yet are nonetheless deeply galling. After motivating the need for this concept, I show how REA captures both "impure" cases (involving both epistemic and moral assholery) and "pure" epistemic assholes, whose objectionable conduct is driven by epistemic aims themselves. I further explore connections between epistemic assholes and epistemic vice, and the causal role that epistemic assholery can play in active ignorance and epistemic exploitation. Through this latter connection, I argue that epistemic assholes play an insidious causal role in sustaining objectionable social power dynamics. The concept of epistemic assholes provides a valuable lens for understanding and calling out important but often-hidden hazards in our social epistemic environment.

1. Introduction

We've all encountered people who seem comfortable jumping the queue, talking loudly on their phones in the quiet zone, or swerving needlessly between lanes on the freeway. Perhaps it's unnecessary to call people names, or to "cast stones", but there's a sense in which it seems fair to say that, when people act this way, they are being *assholes.* Indeed, assholes are everywhere. They're in politics, on podcasts and network news, in the workplace, and on the bus.

What is it to be an asshole? And why are assholes so galling? Can anything illuminating and of philosophical interest be said about this seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon? In perhaps the most developed existing account on the market, Aaron James (2012) analyzes assholes within a broadly contractualist framework, connecting the idea of an asshole to cooperative interpersonal relations, recognition, and respect. According to James, being an asshole is a unique normative phenomenon. On his analysis,

> In interpersonal or cooperative relations, the asshole:
>
> (1) allows himself[1] 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.
>
> (James 2012, 88-91)

An asshole is someone who systematically sees themselves as entitled to advantages in their interpersonal relations, and is impervious to criticism—in the sense of failing to adequately register the complaints of others—because of that very sense of entitlement. Jonas Vandieken expands on James' account, further situating the "moral asshole" in interpersonal relations:

> The moral asshole, as invoked by Aaron James (James, 2012), persistently fails to recognize others as morally equal and hence "walls them off" by not considering them worthy of being owed justification for one's reasons and actions. As such, the moral asshole neglects the equal standing of others (2023, 1084).

According to Vandieken, the moral asshole wrongs others in a distinctly and basic recognitional sense, one we are vulnerable to as participants in our moral relationships (2023, 1083-84). Being an asshole is a unique way of reaping advantages from and thereby disregarding your relations with others, one characterized by an asymmetrical sense of entitlement and immunity to criticism. Assholes are different from a range of other bad actors, such as those who are ignorantly reckless, deeply malevolent, or just plain nasty. The

[1] As James notes, "(b)ecause assholes are by and large men, we use the masculine pronoun 'he' advisedly" (2012, 5). The term "asshole" is indeed gendered, though I agree with James that there can be women and non-binary assholes.

asshole's actions need not cause any great suffering or harm to anyone, though they might. At the same time, assholes are more frustrating and upsetting than the stupid or ignorantly reckless. They occupy a unique place in interpersonal dynamics.

I will come back to the analysis of assholes later. In this paper, I am interested in examining whether this concept has application beyond our practical and moral lives. Is it possible that, in addition to being moral assholes, we can be assholes in other normative domains, such as the epistemic or aesthetic? While the question of aesthetic assholes is worth investigating elsewhere, here I set it aside and focus on the epistemic. To begin fixing ideas, consider a case from Maura Priest:

> **Sam:** Sam, a second-year undergraduate, always arrives late, sits in the back of the class with a bored expression on his face, and every so often makes comments which either (1) suggest that he is right and his class mates are wrong and stupid, or (2) suggest that he is right and his professor wrong and stupid. Sam is immune to constructive feedback. Not an assignment goes by in which Sam does not complain about his grade, demanding that it be adjusted upward in light of his own genius and his professor's obvious mistake (Priest 2017, 468).

According to Priest, Sam is an "intellectual asshole". What is it to be an intellectual asshole? Is being an intellectual asshole just a way of being a moral asshole? Or is there something distinctively epistemic going on here?[2]

In my view, there is. Interestingly, a considerable amount of work has been done on epistemic relationships[3] and related notions such as respect,[4] recognition,[5] and blame[6] in the epistemic domain. Within this work one readily sees analogues of nearly all the conceptual materials comprising the most detailed, worked-out theory of moral assholes on the market (i.e. James 2012). And yet, aside from Priest, the concept of assholes has received little to no attention in epistemology. Moreover, Priest's main concern is intellectual *humility*, as opposed intellectual assholes per se (Priest 2017, 469). She defends a view of the nature of

[2] The term "intellectual asshole" is of course closely related to "epistemic asshole", the term featuring in the title of this paper. As I understand the relation between these terms, "intellectual" leaves more room regarding how distinctively epistemic the relevant phenomenon is. Often we call things "intellectual" that have a clear mixture of practical and epistemic properties. I understand "epistemic" to be more specifically about the epistemic domain, per se.
[3] Boult 2024a, 2024b; Chrisman 2024, 2022; Gunn 2020; Schmidt 2021, 2024; Marusic 2025; Woodard 2023.
[4] Stroud 2025; Priest 2017; Christensen 2007; cf. Sylvan 2020.
[5] Giladi 2017; Giladi & McMillan 2023; Fricker 2016; Hänel & Schuppert 2026; Jackson 2018.
[6] Brown 2020; Piovarchy 2021; Schmidt 2021; cf. Boult 2021.

intellectual humility according to which the intellectually humble person is someone who is not an intellectual asshole. Her excellent discussion focuses largely on advantages this interpersonal approach has over prominent competing accounts of intellectual humility, as opposed to delving into the nature of epistemic assholes.[7] My aim is to fill this lacuna, and to show how doing so serves as a vivid focal point for illuminating some underexplored features of our epistemic lives, and also for understanding assholes. I will argue there are distinct ways people can be assholes in the epistemic domain.

In my view, the best way to think about epistemic assholes—following James and Vandieken—is in *relational* terms. As Boult (2024a, 2024b), Schmidt (2021), Chrisman (2022, 2024) and others have recently argued, people stand in distinctively epistemic relationships in virtue of being agents capable of concern for the justifiability of their epistemic conduct to others. I will argue that what characterizes epistemic assholes is a unique form of disregard for their epistemic relations. As such, epistemic assholes manifest a kind of epistemic badness distinct not only from those who simply violate epistemic norms, but also those who conduct their epistemic lives in grossly negligent or irresponsible ways, such as by being deeply irrational, spreading large amounts of misinformation, being systematically unreliable, or showing an active antagonism to the values of truth and knowledge.[8] Epistemic assholes occupy a unique role in our epistemic lives.

Here's the plan. In §2 I address some preliminaries. In §3, I articulate three desiderata for theorizing about moral assholes and explain how we can meet these desiderata by connecting assholes to cooperative interpersonal relations and related notions such as respect and blame. In §4, I identify one further desideratum for theorizing about epistemic assholes, and I begin explaining what makes someone an epistemic asshole by developing a relational approach in the epistemic domain. According to my account, a person is an epistemic asshole just in case he systematically allows himself special advantages in his epistemic relations with others—for example, what I call "freedom from inquiry", "doxastic comfort", and "freedom to criticize"—and does so out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that makes him impervious to criticism. In §5, I use the account to illuminate an array of cases falling into

[7] See Baehr (2022) for discussion of Priest's view. There is also a fair bit of work on epistemic vice that seems closely related to epistemic assholes: Aberdein (2020), Battaly (2010), Tanesini (2016, 2023), Kidd (2017, 2018), Roberts and Wood (2007). I discuss these connections in §6. As a final note on the relation between my project and Priest's, one result of my more head-on and in-depth approach to epistemic assholes is that this paper ends up doing a wide range of things that Priest's does not (which is of course not a criticism of her project), including exploring the relation between epistemic assholes and epistemic relationships, epistemic exploitation, and active ignorance, as well as addressing skepticism about the very idea of epistemic assholes.
[8] For recent work relevant to active antagonism to the values of truth and knowledge, see Flinders & Hinterleitner (2024).

two broad categories: i) moral assholes who are also epistemic assholes; ii) pure epistemic assholes. In §6, I examine the relationship between epistemic assholes and epistemic vices, as well as potential connections between epistemic assholes, active ignorance, and epistemic exploitation; I briefly explore how this connection reveals an especially recalcitrant and insidious role that epistemic assholes can play in sustaining objectionable social power dynamics—I call these "deep cases". In §7, I consider three objections and reply. §8 concludes by highlighting some upshots of the discussion.

2. Preliminaries: Another Epistemic X?

In his (2026), McGlynn makes a comical observation about the current state of epistemology:

> A recent pattern in academic philosophy over the past 20 or so years has involved relentlessly adding the word 'epistemic' in front of almost every other word. Examples include epistemic infringement; epistemic apprenticeships; epistemic oppression; epistemic failure; epistemic vices; epistemic atonement; epistemic weaponry; epistemic injustice; epistemic pharisee-ism; epistemic slurs; the epistemic apocalypse; epistemic health; epistemic inoculation; epistemic complicity; epistemic dehumanisation; epistemic appropriation; epistemic trespassing; epistemic violence; epistemic rights; epistemic death; epistemic exploitation; epistemic redlining; epistemic reparations; epistemic sanity; the epistemic IKEA effect; epistemic apathy; epistemic shamelessness; epistemic utopia; and epistemic exhaustion (McGlynn 2026, 3).

Some of these concepts have received skeptical attention, and there is room for debate about what differentiates epistemic versus non-epistemic versions of some of these notions. One might wonder: do we need another epistemic X? Why investigate the idea of epistemic assholes? I can think of at least four reasons:

i) First, many of James' and others' examples of assholes already contain strong intellectual or epistemic dimensions. We might take this to suggest we can simply use his theory to make sense of "epistemic assholes" without adding anything new to the discussion. Alternatively, it may imply that the category of epistemic assholes is front and centre in our social and political lives, and there will be significant payoff in recognizing it as a unique phenomenon in its own right, one that does require distinct theoretical resources to make sense of. This is my view, and I'll defend it in what follows.

ii) Second, recognizing epistemic assholes may be important in a way resembling how recognizing epistemic injustice is important: as Fricker (2007) argued, the latter often stands in a *causal* rather than constitutive or coextensive relation to instances of moral injustice. For example, in her discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Fricker illustrates how, assuming the jury genuinely believed Tom Robinson was guilty, the case cannot be described as a straightforward instance of cynically perpetrated moral injustice.[9] As is often the case, epistemic injustice operates further back, playing a causal role in the moral injustice that also attends the case. In a similar vein, being an epistemic asshole can stand in a casual as opposed to a constitutive or coextensive relation with one's propensity to be a moral asshole, or to act in morally objectionable ways more broadly. This is because being an epistemic asshole impedes one's access to epistemic goods that might otherwise shape one's beliefs about how one should, and does, treat others. Sometimes acting in ways characteristic of epistemic assholes makes it more likely one will end up acting in ways characteristic of moral assholes. If that's right, the concept deserves analysis.[10]

iii) Third, even if being an epistemic asshole can stand in casual relations with one's propensity to be a moral asshole—or act in morally objectionable ways—there also seem to be cases of epistemic assholes who are not also moral or other interpersonal kinds of assholes. As I'll argue, this is because people can impair their epistemic relations—in a way characteristic of the asshole—without so impairing other relationships. This may be a trickier point to fully make (I address some concerns in §7). But if it's right, it is a strong reason to take epistemic assholes seriously.

iv) Fourth, below I will outline several desiderata that any theory of assholes should meet, and I will argue that we can elegantly meet those desiderata by giving a central role to epistemological concepts as opposed to moral ones. This suggests that the concept of epistemic assholes has a natural place in epistemology. More than this, I will also argue that the concept is useful insofar as it helps us better understand—through a uniquely unifying lens—a wide range of ways that epistemic agents can sometimes be deeply galling without

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[9] Concerns have been raised about how this case involves perceived *lying* as opposed to mere lack of credibility, and whether this is consistent with the idea of epistemic injustice. Here I am assuming that in perceiving Robinson as lying without self-control the jury does accord him a credibility deficit of the sort found in paradigmatic forms of testimonial injustice.

[10] The point here is that the trait of being an epistemic asshole makes one disposed to behave/think in ways that plausibly stand in causal relations to acting in morally bad ways. If one is reliably disposed to act in those latter ways, one may be classified as having a relevant morally bad trait. However, I want to remain neutral on the question of whether or when a given instance of someone having the trait of being epistemic asshole causes them to have the trait of being a moral asshole or some other morally bad trait. As an anonymous referee points out, it seems difficult to demonstrate such causal relations.

necessarily causing a great deal of epistemic harm. This suggests that not only does the concept epistemic assholes have a natural place in epistemology, it has an important role to play as well. I'll advertise its importance in various places throughout the paper.

3. Moral Assholes

What makes someone an "asshole"? There are three main features of assholes any theory of assholes should account for (James 2012, Ch.1). First**,** being an asshole is a stable character trait. It's not something that happens sporadically or as a one-off. I may be having a bad day and behave *like an asshole.* But that doesn't make me an asshole. So, any theory of assholes needs to identify some stable trait (or traits) of character. Call this the ***Stability*** criterion**.**[11]

Second, being an asshole isn't the absolute worst thing in the world. It's not as bad as, say, being a moral monster like Hitler or King Leopold of Belgium. These two men might have been huge assholes, but it would be offensive to stop there in our description. Assholes need not bring about much harm to anyone, though of course they may. Sometimes their behaviour is technically harmless, at least in a consequentialist sense of making someone worse off than they otherwise would have been. It's not incoherent to say of a friend, "I love him, but he's kind of an asshole." Any theory of assholes needs to articulate what it is to be an asshole in terms that are consistent with, and perhaps even explain, this feature of assholes. Call it the ***Not the Worst*** criterion**.**[12]

And yet—the third thing—assholes are deeply frustrating and offensive. They really get under our skin. Despite not necessarily bringing about much harm, the behaviour of an asshole cries out for criticism. It's morally repugnant. Call this the ***And Yet They're Awful*** criterion**.** Any theory of assholes must account for and explain what's so galling about assholes.

Notice these three criteria all seem true and important, and yet it's somewhat puzzling how that could be (James 2012, 7). How could someone stably manifest a trait of character that disposes them towards behaviour that is not necessarily harmful to others and yet is

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[11] ***Stability*** strikes me as less important than the two desiderata to follow. This is because the phenomenon of behaving *like* an asshole is also important. Even if no one stably manifests the character traits of an asshole, it's worth thinking about what it takes to behave or think like an asshole. One behaves or thinks like an asshole when one acts or thinks in ways characteristic of a genuine asshole (e.g. cuts in line for no good reason) but in a less entrenched or merely temporary way.

[12] Nick Hughes suggested to me that one feature of assholes is that they typically do things they are technically allowed to do. If so, this might be relevant to explaining why they are not the worst. Their behaviour is usually suberogatory rather than outright impermissible, or at least closer to the border between the two than to the severe end of moral impermissibility.

deeply galling and offensive? James thinks the key to solving this puzzle is centering the notions of *respect, recognition,* and *interpersonal relations* in a theory of assholes.

Remember: on James' theory, an asshole is someone who, out of a sense of entitlement, systematically allows himself to enjoy certain advantages in their interpersonal relations, and is insensitive to criticism due to that very sense of entitlement. This respects ***Stability*** because, according to the theory, the asshole systematically allows himself to enjoy certain advantages, precisely in a way best explained by a stable trait (or traits) of character. The theory also accommodates ***Not the Worst***. To put it one way, the theory is quite specific on the nature of the "advantages" the asshole allows himself to enjoy. Sure, a parent who allows themselves the advantage of living in a comfortable home while their children are relegated to a cardboard box outside would count as a monster, not an asshole. But our focus is specifically on the garden-variety advantages we tend to reap from cooperative interpersonal relations. As James puts it, "the goods the asshole allows himself to enjoy flow from social practices that are generally beneficial" (2012, 21). Recall our opening examples: these included the benefits of cooperative queuing, respecting quiet zones, and observing traffic laws. Consider the advantage of regularly getting home early by using the freeway emergency lane while never getting in the way of an actual emergency. Other things being equal, it is egregious to call such a person a moral monster. But they are acting like an asshole. Meanwhile, someone like Leopold isn't (just) an asshole: even if he systematically enjoyed advantages that flow from social practices that are generally beneficial, he also did a lot more. We can thus accommodate behaviour that need not have any significant material impact on the lives of others.

So far this story might strike some as incomplete in that we need to say more about the nature of the advantages that assholes—as opposed to moral monsters—systematically enjoy. For present purposes, we can leave that for another time. As we'll see, in developing an account of epistemic assholes, we anyway need to articulate a specific theory of the relevant sorts of advantages at issue in the epistemic case.

The account also nicely accommodates ***And Yet They're Awful***. Systematically allowing oneself special advantages over others out of a sense of entitlement and being impervious to criticism because of that very sense of entitlement, is a way of manifesting a serious lack of respect and recognition for the equal moral standing of others in one's relationships. Such behaviour is unfair in an interpersonally robust way. As James' puts it

> [a]lthough one may only suffer the small material cost of being cut ahead of in line, or being interrupted, or being talked over, one also suffers a deeper wrong: one's very status as a moral person goes unrecognized (2012, 22) [....] The asshole is morally repugnant because, even when the material costs he imposes are small, he fails to recognize others in a fundamental, morally important way (2012, 23).

A failure to effectively recognize the full status of others as moral persons is galling. So, the account readily explains our sense of moral outrage at assholes. One might worry this is a bit extreme. Does one really need to systematically fail to *recognize the moral status of others as persons* to count as an asshole? Can't there be less dramatic forms of assholery?

I am happy to remain neutral on this for now. But we can anyways address the point by acknowledging the central role that sensitivity to the claims of others plays in recognizing their status as persons. It might sound dramatic, but on reflection, there is something deeply disrespectful about disregarding the legitimate objections of others to one's objectionable behaviour (cf. Scanlon 1998; Darwall 2006; Wallace 2019). To do so out of a sense of entitlement—because one sees oneself as somehow special or superior—implies that one does not regard those who object as somehow "equally real" as oneself (Nagel 1970; Darwall 2006, 102). To be sure, this kind of recognition failure may come in degrees, such that there may be a greater and lesser extent to which one fails to recognize the status of others as persons. Putting someone in a concentration camp is amongst the worst possible ways of doing so. The asshole's immunity from criticism is a weaker variety. It is galling nonetheless.

As we'll see next section, the role of recognition, respect, and interpersonal relations in theorizing assholes enables us to seriously consider, at a basic conceptual level, whether being a moral asshole is the only way of being an asshole. As I noted, epistemology already acknowledges relationships, respect, recognition, and blame in the epistemic domain. Perhaps these come together in ways that parallel moral assholes, such that there are basic conceptual reasons to take the idea of epistemic assholes seriously and corresponding resources for identifying them as such. This is what I argue next.[13]

[13] For discussion of whether the James-inspired framework should be preferred over other possible approaches to assholes more broadly, see §7, point (iii).

4. A Theory of Epistemic Assholes

Is it possible to be an asshole in the epistemic domain? If so, what would make that the case? We now have three desiderata that any theory of assholes should meet: ***Stability***, ***Not the Worst, And Yet They are Awful***. In explaining what makes someone an epistemic asshole, we need to keep an eye on these since we're talking about *assholes*. But because we're in the business of explaining epistemic assholes, we also need to meet one other desideratum: our theory must be capable of capturing what's *epistemic* about the phenomenon. It needs to identify specifically asshole-like qualities of a person, using epistemic materials as opposed to simply relying on moral ones. Call this the ***Epistemic*** criterion. For example, I asked earlier what, if anything, makes Priest's example of Sam an epistemic asshole. To answer this, we'd need to be able to explain what it is about Sam's behaviour or attitudes that exemplifies ***Stability***, ***Not the Worst, And Yet They are Awful***, and we'd need to be able to do this while also meeting ***Epistemic***.

In this section, I develop resources for providing such an explanation across a wide range of cases by sketching a theory capable of accounting for all our desiderata. As I've said, the trick is giving a central role to our epistemic relationships and related notions of recognition, respect, and blame. I call this the Relational Approach to Epistemic Assholes (REA for short). I'll present REA and then elaborate on its main concepts. Next section, I'll demonstrate REA's usefulness in making sense of a wide range of cases.

4.1 The Basic Idea

According to REA, an epistemic asshole is someone who:

- 1) Systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in his epistemic relations with others;
- 2) Does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement;
- 3) Is impervious to criticism because of his sense of entitlement.

REA of course closely parallels James' theory, and that's because epistemic and other kinds of assholes share a lot in common. The key difference in REA is the addition of enjoying special advantages specifically in one's epistemic relations, as opposed to interpersonal relations more broadly (though REA doesn't rule out these latter kinds of advantages may accompany

any given case). To begin spelling this out, it will be helpful to say a bit more about epistemic relationships.

Consider the role that being able to trust the word of others and being so trusted by others plays at a basic level in human cooperative exchange. In addition to enabling all kinds of instrumental benefits, reciprocal epistemic trust manifests a kind of recognition and respect for one another's epistemic agency. Our capacity to recognize and respect one another's epistemic agency is a deeply valuable part of human life (cf. Fricker 2007) and may even be worth valuing for its own sake (Boult 2024b). In my view, this kind of recognition and respect for epistemic agency underpins a distinctive form of cooperative interpersonal relation, one characterized by reciprocal sets of intentions and expectations concerning the exercise of epistemic agency and the production of epistemic goods (Boult 2024a). People stand in epistemic relations, at the most basic level, simply insofar as they have a capacity for concern for the epistemic justifiability of their attitudes and inquiries. As such, epistemic relations are a kind of foundational bedrock of cooperative relations more generally.

What are the conditions on standing in good epistemic relations? I aim to remain as neutral as possible on this, since my focus is highlighting certain structural features of our epistemic lives, not defending a fully worked out normative epistemology. But at the broadest level, I have in mind relations wherein people are appropriately epistemically trusting of one another, comply with a socially understood set of epistemic norms in their inquiries and belief forming processes, appropriately respect diverging epistemic frameworks, and so on.[14] How epistemic relations can go well inversely mirrors how they can go badly or be impaired. Epistemic relations can be impaired at a *first-order* level, when one falls short of legitimate expectations of others that one complies with a certain socially established set of epistemic norms. But they can also be impaired at a *second-order* level, through distorted or unjust conceptions of what count as legitimate epistemic expectations in the first place (Boult 2025).[15] As we'll see, epistemic assholes impair their epistemic relations in ways that can span both categories. This connects with the different kinds of special advantages one can enjoy in one's epistemic relations.

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[14] Is this an overly idealized conception of cooperative epistemic relations? One might worry that adversarial or marginalized epistemic contexts (e.g. activism, whistleblowing) require certain breakdowns in cooperative exchange for benefits to accrue, or justice to be served (Medina 2013). I agree. However, this is consistent with the conception of cooperative epistemic relations offered here. In my view, there is a kind of baseline of epistemic respect that epistemic communities should strive for; however, non-ideal circumstances can call for disruptions, for example in order to bring communities closer to that baseline.

[15] This is an aspect of epistemic exclusion (Dotson 2014; Pohlhaus 2012) as it surfaces in sexism, ablism, and Eurocentrism, for example. See Allard-Tremblay (2021, 2025), Tobi (2021), and Boult (2025).

Two other concepts in REA that deserve immediate further comment are "entitlement" and being "impervious to criticism". Having a sense of entitlement to X, as I use it, is not primarily a belief about one's superiority, but rather a standing disposition to act/have attitudes that implicitly express an expectation that one will benefit from X. For example, a person cutting the queue at the airport may not explicitly believe they are superior to their fellow travelers, but rather simply tend to act in ways that implicitly express an expectation that they'll benefit from the orderly behavior of others. Being impervious to criticism does not mean that criticism never objectively applies to the person. It means rather that criticism systematically fails to register as appropriate in the person's eyes.

By meeting the conditions of REA—that is, by systematically allowing themselves special advantages in their epistemic relations and being impervious to criticism because of a sense of entitlement to those advantages—epistemic assholes manifest a distinct disregard for their epistemic relations which may or may not be accompanied by disregard for other relations they stand in. In REA, as in the case of James' original theory, entitlement and its role in disregarding criticism is deeply bound up with the further notions of relationships and respect. Having a sense of entitlement to special advantages in one's epistemic relations with others manifests a kind of failure to recognize others as epistemic agents equally real as oneself. By this positioning, epistemic assholes treat their own epistemic agency as somehow superior to, more important than, less scrutinizable or criticizable than the epistemic agency of others.[16]

Consider Sam again. Recalling some details of the case, Sam is lazy in his studies, always complains, and yet somehow sees himself as smarter than everyone else. He's not necessarily epistemically the worst—he's not deeply irrational, prone to spread large amounts of disinformation, or systematically unreliable—but he's also repugnant. He's a denizen of that unique normative space occupied by assholes. We can make sense of this directly within the epistemic domain by characterizing him as someone who feels entitled to special advantages in his epistemic relations, and is impervious to criticism because of that very entitlement. To understand how this works in more detail, we need a better understanding of what it means to enjoy special advantages in one's epistemic relations.

[16] Note that an epistemic asshole is not the same as an "ass". The latter may be slow to understand and be impervious to criticism in that way, but unless they meet the etiological condition of being impervious to criticism because of a sense of entitlement to special advantages in their epistemic relations with others, they do not yet count as an epistemic asshole on my account. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

4.2 Advantages in Epistemic Relations

Special advantages in epistemic relations need not involve an asymmetrical acquisition of epistemic goods. They can involve quite the opposite. For example, one may enjoy such special advantages by allowing oneself certain freedoms in *not* having to worry about meeting epistemic standards and acquiring epistemic goods. Fruits of the special advantages the epistemic asshole enjoys are the sorts of garden variety goods people typically accrue from standing in good epistemic relations: some of these things may themselves be distinctly epistemic in nature, such as knowledge and understanding, and others are simply practical benefits of the sort that arise out of cooperative epistemic practices and mutual recognition of epistemic agency.

Of course, everyone is to some extent entitled to enjoy the benefits of good epistemic relations. What characterizes the epistemic asshole is how he reaps benefits from the epistemic agency and conduct of others precisely by violating certain normal expectations partially constituting his epistemic relations with them. We can come at this by thinking about some paradigmatic kinds of special advantage:

> **i) Freedom from inquiry**: a person enjoys freedom from inquiry when they take themselves to be specially permitted not to inquire further into things that may reasonably be regarded as requiring further inquiry. This may be because they see certain questions as already settled for themselves, perhaps out of a kind of epistemic arrogance, or because they assume they are likely to be right.
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> **ii) Doxastic comfort**: a person enjoys doxastic comfort when they have an excessive disposition towards the psychological ease of holding beliefs that cohere well with other beliefs they hold, and seeing one's beliefs as justified and rational; a person who enjoys doxastic comfort sees themselves as *obviously* right in their world view and its constituent parts; doxastic comfort is a sense of smug surety.[17]
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> **iii) Freedom to criticize**: a person enjoys the freedom to criticize when they see themselves as justified in openly criticizing the beliefs, assertions, and inquiries of others without much need for concern about whether they really are justified; they

[17] What is the difference between seeing oneself as entitled to freedom from inquiry and seeing oneself as entitled to doxastic comfort? The former is entitlement to inaction in circumstances when further inquiry is reasonably required. The latter is entitlement to a certain psychological state. Doxastic comfort may often be causally related to freedom from inquiry, but I remain neutral on whether it always is. Seeing oneself as entitled to freedom from inquiry and doxastic comfort both seem related to things like epistemic arrogance, dogmatism, insouciance, and perhaps other epistemic vices. For discussion of the relationship between epistemic vice and assholes, see §6.

may simultaneously hold others to a high standard of justification for dishing out criticism directed towards themselves.

Generally speaking, special advantages in epistemic relations involve attitudes and conduct of the sort we normally need others *not* to adopt, on pain of losing out on the sorts of goods that good epistemic relations typically allow us to enjoy—whether instrumentally or epistemically speaking. This is how they parallel advantages in other kinds of interpersonal relations: they are ways of enjoying the benefits of a distinctive form of interpersonal cooperation—namely, the kind that underpins our epistemic relationships—by making an exception of oneself when it comes to legitimate expectations that normally enable those benefits. Things tend to go better for communities when people aren't slacking in their inquiries, staying only in their doxastic comfort zones, and incessantly criticizing one another's beliefs, assertions, and inquiries. There may be indefinitely many ways of doing this in addition to the above, for example by resisting evidence, or demanding intellectual labour of others, and so on.[18]

Sam is readily characterized as someone who feels entitled to special advantages in his epistemic relations with others, such as freedom to criticize, and perhaps also doxastic comfort and freedom from inquiry. To the extent that he systematically enjoys these special advantages out of a sense of entitlement and is impervious to criticism because of that very sense of entitlement, REA classifies Sam as an epistemic asshole. Of course, none of this precludes him from also being a moral asshole. But REA identifies an independent dimension of his assholery.

Notice that each special advantage we've identified so far involves allowing oneself certain freedoms in *not* having to worry about meeting epistemic standards and acquiring epistemic goods. It seems possible, however, that some examples of special advantage in one's epistemic relations may overtly concern meeting epistemic standards and acquiring epistemic goods, perhaps in objectionable ways. Here's one possible example:

iv): Freedom to always inquire: a person enjoys the freedom to always inquire when they assume it is always legitimate to demand more reasons and to question the evidence. The person effectively preys on the capacity of other epistemic agents to

[18] I explore other candidate special advantages throughout this essay, including resistance to evidence and demanding intellectual labour from others (on the latter, see §6).

understand the value of epistemic reasons, and exploits it in an overly demanding way.[19]

As we'll see shortly, this latter kind of special advantage may help make sense of "pure" epistemic assholes. The pure epistemic asshole is characterized as someone who pursues *epistemic* goals by exploiting the normal expectations of epistemic relations, in an entitled way that immunizes them from criticism. Not all epistemic assholes are pure epistemic assholes. Often, people—like Sam, perhaps—are epistemic assholes simply in the sense of being people who systematically exploit the normal expectations of epistemic relations in pursuit of their own practical goals, in an entitled way that makes them impervious to criticism. In these cases, the epistemic asshole may very well also be a moral asshole. Both kinds of case are important to understand, and REA can help us do so.

4.3 Meeting the Desiderata

REA meets our first three desiderata. By invoking epistemic relationships, and the attendant notions of respect and recognition, we are well positioned to explain how the epistemic asshole does repugnant things, and yet need not be grossly negligent or irresponsible, such as by being deeply irrational, prone to make significant errors all the time, or spread lots of falsehoods. By enjoying special advantages in epistemic relations and being impervious to criticism because a sense of entitlement to those advantages, the epistemic asshole manifests a repugnant recognition failure of the epistemic agency of others, where this does not necessarily amount to grossly bad epistemic conduct, though it may.

We can also see how the account is positioned to meet ***Epistemic***. This is again through epistemic relationships: in pure cases, what makes the asshole epistemic is the distinctly epistemic aim with which they're willing to impair their epistemic relations. In cases of epistemic assholes who are also moral assholes, what makes the asshole epistemic isn't determined by epistemic aims (they may not have any), but rather the role that their willingness to impair epistemic relations plays in whatever aims they do have. In other

[19] See Ichikawa (2024) for helpful discussion of the epistemic hazards of excessive demand for reasons and haste in assuming one doesn't know. See also Basu (forthcoming), for an argument in support of constraints on curiosity and the value of ignorance. Is there a tension in how I've already articulated one style of epistemic asshole in terms of the opposite idea, namely freedom *from* inquiry? I don't think so. Just as not inquiring enough can be objectionable, so too can inquiring too much. Epistemic assholes may help themselves to advantages along either of these lines.

words, we can make sense of the uniquely normative contours of the asshole's relations with others simply by utilizing a set of well-established epistemological resources.[20]

To explore further how REA meets our desiderata and illuminates the concept of epistemic assholes, I turn now to illustrate its usefulness in understanding a very wide variety of cases.

5. Cases

I'll divide cases in this section into the two broad categories identified so far: i) moral assholes who are also epistemic assholes; and ii) purely epistemic assholes. Next section, I take up the possibility of a third category, which I call "deep cases".

Some of these cases involve real people. My intention isn't to cast conclusive judgment regarding who these people really are. Rather I see them as springboards for thinking about possibilities worth accounting for. Moreover, we should also remember that being *like* an asshole is an independent (deeply related) phenomenon alongside actually *being* an asshole—we need not presuppose any of the exemplars I discuss are full-blown assholes. It's also worth noting that a person can approximate any one of these exemplars to a greater or lesser extent. Assholes come in degrees.

5.1 Moral Assholes Who are Also Epistemic Assholes

I noted in §2 that James has many examples of assholes with a strong epistemic dimension. Consider the flowing exchange between Fox News anchor, Neil Cavuto, and mild-mannered economist, Ron Blackwell, discussing fiscal stimulus and its relation to job creation:

> Blackwell: Why don't you let me finish my thought?
> Cavuto: You never answer a basic question.
> Blackwell: I'm answering you right now.
> Cavuto: Why will spending work?
> Blackwell: These programs created jobs but not net creation. We lost more jobs because of the recession than were created by these programs.
> Cavuto: Wait a minute, Ron. You're the chief economist here. Where did you get your degree? A baking school? Where are you cooking up these numbers?
> Blackwell: Oh that's an insult. You're a joker. You're an asshole.

[20] There may be other approaches to ***Epistemic***, or any of these other desiderata. I return to this in §7 (point iii).

(James 2012, 69)

It seems like Blackwell has a point. There is something deeply annoying about Cavuto here and in many other similar exchanges he had while anchoring on Fox.[21] But he's not a moral monster. He seems rather like a denizen of that unique normative space occupied by assholes. By insulting Blackwell's education on national television, potentially humiliating him in addition to disregarding Blackwell's objections to his failure to engage in basic cooperative conversational exchange, Cavuto behaves like a classic asshole. Also think about how his TV persona is likely at least in part a disingenuous performance designed to achieve ratings goals and enhance the profitability of Fox, in addition to perhaps more sincere aims of advancing an ideological agenda. All of that may involve additional moral assholery.

But Cavuto's behaviour, and that of many other news anchors, also clearly involves important epistemic dimensions: not listening, being selectively skeptical, being excessively epistemically critical, etc. He exemplifies a mastery of what James calls

> the dark asshole arts in verbal debate: the selective outrage, marshaled in defense of the victimized common man; the dogged quibbles over petty details; the seizing of any interlocutory moment of weakness (such as a pause for thought); the refusal to see and understand, supposedly on righteous principle but mainly to distort and distract (71).

We might continue to ask how much, or in what way, any of these latter things make someone an "epistemic" versus a "moral" asshole. REA can help sort through the morass. It does so by capturing an epistemic dimension of Cavuto's assholery that is important to recognize as such. Like Sam, Cavuto is readily characterized as systematically enjoying special advantages in his epistemic relations with others, such as freedom to criticize. He also requests reasons in a way that resembles the freedom to always inquire.[22] To the extent that

[21] Cavuto left Fox in 2024. He has since been diagnosed with MS—shortly after being diagnosed with cancer—and apparently regards this experience as having humbled him while simultaneously acknowledging his past asshole ways: "Before I had cancer, more to the point before I had MS, I was an asshole. I was so self-absorbed in my career…I think the one thing an illness teaches you is to be less of a jerk and to think of people. It's not always about you" (*Adweek*, June 7, 2016). Considering these developments, my focus in what follows is Cavuto of the past without assuming he's still an asshole.

[22] Compare *sealioning*: "an intentional, combative performance of cluelessness [...] rhetorically, sealioning fuses persistent questioning, often about basic information, with a loudly-insisted upon commitment to reasonable debate" (Johnson 2017, 14). Green (2022) offers a helpful discussion of sealioning as manifesting a distinctive epistemic vice of questioning. See Stanley (2015) for analysis of linguistic mechanisms by which contributions

Cavuto has these traits, we can classify him not only as a moral asshole but also an epistemic one. Insofar as meeting these criteria just is a unique way of impairing one's epistemic relations with others—parallel to how the moral asshole impairs their relations—Cavuto is an epistemic asshole.

He is also plausibly just putting on a show. In a sense, a lot of what happens on Fox is theatre. We might say he's just pretending to be an epistemic asshole. Even so, and even if he does not actually take himself to be entitled to enjoy the special advantages we've identified so far, REA may classify Cavuto as a real epistemic asshole in other ways. This is because there are other special advantages in epistemic relations that Cavuto may take himself to be entitled to enjoy. For example, plausibly everyone has at least a small (highly defeasible) duty to care about the broader quality of the epistemic commons. We each have a defeasible duty to refrain from spreading falsehoods and spreading misinformation, for example. Someone with a microphone as large as Cavuto's plausibly has a correspondingly greater duty. And by engaging in these kinds of exchanges on Fox regularly, he shows a blatant sense of entitlement to disregard this duty. By conducting interviews and presenting news segments in his characteristic style, far from showing concern for the epistemic commons, he actively pollutes it with misinformation, distortion of facts, and by fuelling polarization by weaponizing issues in ways that further divide the public. To the extent that someone enjoys the benefits of others' respect for this duty while simultaneously flouting expectations that they do the same, we might say they enjoy a kind of freedom from concern for the epistemic commons. Possibly one of the most significant senses in which Cavuto is an epistemic asshole has to do with a kind of complicity in the polarization of America (Boult 2023, 882). Regardless of how we fill out the precise details in his case, understanding the epistemic dimension of Cavuto's conduct is key to understanding the full extent of his assholery, and correspondingly pinpointing some important hazards in the social epistemic environment.

In another case with strong intellectual or epistemic dimensions, James observes how Richard Dawkins

> [W]rites cocksurely that the views of millions of reasonable and intelligent people (even if ultimately mistaken) have no merit whatsoever and feels entitled to give

to public debate can be presented as embodying reasonableness yet in fact contribute contents that erode reasonableness (2015, 125-176). Also related, see Robinson et al (2025) for helpful analysis of the perlocutionary manipulation involved in "bullshit questions" (cf. Whitcomb 2023).

> sloppy treatment to arguments for the existence of God that have seriously engaged philosophers for thousands of years (James 2012, 40).

Many see Dawkins as a moral asshole. He's well known for controversial stances on sexualized violence, Palestine, and other important issues that affect people with less privilege than he enjoys. To the extent that he regularly offends others—especially members of marginalized groups—and seems impervious to criticism about this out of a sense of entitlement to speak his mind, many regard him as a moral asshole (and possibly worse). But looking at the more distinctly epistemic elements of the case, what might we say about the sense in which Dawkins is an epistemic asshole?

In several respects, Dawkins exhibits the qualities of an epistemic asshole in a manner reminiscent of Cavuto. His smug criticism of others' religious beliefs suggests a kind of asymmetry of critical engagement, which might arise from a sense of entitlement to the comfort of his own beliefs, freedom from inquiring further, and freedom to criticize. This strikes me as plausible. However, as a former Oxford professor and author of bestselling popular science books, it's also plausible that Dawkins has put in his fair share of intellectual labour and critical thinking. To my mind, even if he's not an epistemic asshole in Cavuto's style, there are other kinds of special advantages in epistemic relations that can help us identify further dimensions or styles of epistemic assholery.

For example, if one can enjoy special advantages by exploiting certain features of a shared epistemic framework, one might also enjoy special advantages at a level further back, so to speak, by seeing oneself as entitled *to the framework* within which one operates (and which one's interlocutors may not share). A helpful way of analyzing what's galling about Dawkins isn't necessarily a kind of smug surety in his first-order beliefs, say about the existence of God or the veracity of the bible, but rather a kind of smug surety in his second-order commitments to a certain epistemic framework within which he evaluates beliefs. The asymmetry characterizing his intellectual engagement with others pertains less to the degree of rigor in evaluating token beliefs and inquiries, and more to the meta-stance he adopts towards which epistemic frameworks count as legitimate bases of epistemic evaluation in the first place. In this sense, he appears to take himself to enjoy a kind of meta-level advantage when it comes to his naturalistic, scientific/istic epistemological framework. Dawkins seems like an epistemic asshole when he goes around exhibiting a sense of entitlement to the scientific framework animating his apparent disdain for non-scientific epistemic frameworks.

What's more, such a sense of entitlement would nicely explain his resistance to criticism of his offensive behaviour.[23]

Dawkins is not epistemically the worst, but to many he's deeply annoying and repugnant. He seems like another denizen of the unique normative space of the asshole. To the extent that Dawkins meets the conditions of REA, he is a moral asshole who is also an epistemic asshole. Understanding the epistemic dimensions of Dawkins' case is crucial for understanding the full extent of his assholery, and correspondingly pinpointing another important hazard of the social epistemic environment—one related to, but different from, that exemplified by Cavuto.[24]

5.2 Pure Epistemic Assholes

Can there be pure epistemic assholes? To be a *pure* epistemic asshole is to be an epistemic asshole without being a moral or other directly interpersonal kind of asshole. To my mind, some people are pure epistemic assholes.

Ironically, perhaps one notable example is the received godfather of Western philosophy himself: Socrates. Socrates insistently questioned people whether they wanted to be questioned or not,[25] proclaimed himself to be the mouthpiece of an oracle, did not respect the gods of the day, and declared himself the wisest person he knew (even if this was because he proclaimed himself to know nothing). It's not difficult to see how others may have regarded him as a bit of an asshole.

Nietzsche was a famous critic of Socrates, at times interpreting him as overly committed to reason and manipulative in his engagements with others in the pursuit of truth. As Christa Acampora puts it:

> The rules of Nietzsche's Socratic agon are so prescribed that only those willing to abide by the rigid guidelines are even considered contestants, and those rules ensure

[23] See Kidd (2017, 60; 2018) for related discussion of "the new atheists", specifically from the perspective of vice epistemology. Kidd argues that vice charges of closed-mindedness and arrogance directed at Dawkins and others can be grounded in vice epistemology.

[24] Certain forms of epistemic exclusion, such as those involved in Western imperialism, or colonialism, may involve a related sort of framework-level epistemic assholery. However, since these things are implicated in such significant harms and wrongs, this idea may run afoul of the ***Not the Worst*** criterion. I leave this issue for another time.

[25] "He was known for confusing, stinging, and stunning his conversation partners into the unpleasant experience of realizing their own ignorance" (Nails and Monoson 2025, 2).

> the same position will always win. Socrates is unbeatable on his own turf, and no one who spars with him can survive untouched [...] (Acampora 2002, 31).

Consider also this description of Socrates' attitude towards knowledge:

> Real knowledge, Socrates taught, could be obtained only through absolute definition. If one could not define a thing absolutely, then one didn't really know what it was. Then Socrates demonstrated that such knowledge was unobtainable, even by him. [H]e claimed that, in this sense, all he knew was that he didn't know. Virtue was knowledge, but real knowledge was inaccessible. Even this much of the truth could be grasped only, if at all, by a very few (Stone 1988, 39).

At least two strands of epistemic assholery seem to emerge out of this. On the one hand, we know that Socrates was particularly adept at deploying what we might call a refined or self-righteous form of the "dark asshole arts of verbal debate" (James 2012, 71). On the other hand—and possibly in tension with the first—Socrates was the great worshipper of wisdom and proclaimer of ignorance. Indeed, he was such a worshipper of wisdom and proclaimer of ignorance that many found him deeply annoying, even if not necessarily epistemically the worst. One way to make theoretical sense of this is in terms of the idea that Socrates systematically enjoyed certain special advantages in his epistemic relations. For example, perhaps he enjoyed what I earlier called the *freedom to always inquire*. Recall, this is when a person assumes it is always okay to demand more reasons and question the evidence. Excessive inquiry takes advantage of the capacity of other epistemic agents to understand the value of epistemic reasons, and exploits it in an overly demanding way. That seems like a fairly good way of characterizing Socrates. In the words of Nietzsche, Socrates was the embodiment of "rationality at any cost" (Nietzsche 2008, §11; cf. Ichikawa 2024, 88-90).

Crucially, regarding whether Socrates was a *pure* epistemic asshole, what seems most relevant is that Socrates was driven by distinctively epistemic aims. The special advantages he enjoyed did not necessarily pertain to practical or selfish goals. Indeed, as far as I am aware, there is little evidence to suggest he was the sort of person who would rudely jump a queue, talk loudly in a socially agreed upon quiet space, or unnecessarily cause physical

danger to others merely to save himself some time.[26] He genuinely wanted wisdom for its own sake, and (perhaps mistakenly) thought this was the best way to get it. Indeed, Socrates was deeply concerned with justice, fairness, virtue, and human flourishing. He may not have been a moral asshole. What pissed people off was his epistemic conduct.[27]

For other purely epistemic cases, we can consider additional ways a person might be willing to impair their epistemic relations, out of a sense of entitlement that makes them impervious to criticism, but in the service of some distinctly epistemic aim (however misguidedly so). Returning to a slightly modified version of one example from 2.1, I've personally come across people like Dawkins who have an obnoxious sense of entitlement to an epistemic framework, who exhibit a corresponding willingness to impair epistemic relations, where I'd feel hesitant to call them moral assholes. These people may show a kind of obnoxious dedication to science, or to clear and technically rigorous thinking, for example. Yet, outside the study they are equanimous, gracious, and warm-hearted people.

6. Vice Epistemology, Active Ignorance, and Epistemic Exploitation

I turn now to some considerations about how epistemic assholes fit within our understanding of some other important phenomena in the epistemic domain. I start by examining the relationship between epistemic assholes and epistemic vice. Clearly the epistemic assholes we've looked at have traits many call epistemic vices, such as intellectual arrogance,[28] haughtiness,[29] hypocrisy,[30] closed-mindedness,[31] epistemic insouciance,[32] and epistemic self-indulgence.[33] What does the concept of an epistemic asshole add to the conceptual repertoire already developed by vice epistemologists?

I'll argue that REA brings additional (non-virtue-based) theoretical resources to the table and provides unifying organizing frame for understanding important cases, within

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[26] These are my leading examples of moral assholery from earlier. There are of course other ways of being a moral asshole, but my general point is that one does not get the impression Socrates is aptly characterized as someone systematically disposed to take advantage of his cooperative interpersonal relations with others, even though a case can be made he took advantage of his epistemic relations with others.

[27] Someone might argue that Socrates' behaviour as an epistemic asshole—his treatment of his interlocutors, for example—was itself morally objectionable. This might seem to undermine my suggestion he's an example of a pure epistemic asshole. But I don't think it does. As I explain further in Sec 7, ii), when it comes to determining someone's status as a pure epistemic asshole, what matters isn't necessarily whether they do morally *objectionable* things, but rather whether they are also a moral *asshole*.

[28] Cassam 2019; Tanesini 2016; Kidd 2017.

[29] Tanesini 2016; Roberts & Wood 2003.

[30] Cunningham 2025; Piovarchy 2025.

[31] Battaly 2018; Cassam 2019; Roberts & Wood 2007.

[32] Cassam 2018; Le Morvan 2021.

[33] Battaly 2010.

which vice epistemology can of course play a contributing role. With any given epistemic vice, there can be epistemic assholes who do not exhibit that vice, and people who exhibit that vice without being epistemic assholes. So, the concepts at play in these respective areas of theorizing are not co-extensive.

In the second part of this section, I'll explore the relationship between REA and active ignorance (Martín 2021; Medina 2012; Mills 2007; Pohlhaus 2012) and epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016). I will examine "deep cases" of epistemic assholery in which the phenomenon is considerably more recalcitrant and less obvious, and yet may play an important role in perpetuating objectionable social power dynamics.

6.1 Epistemic Vice

The relationship between epistemic assholes and epistemic vice is perhaps best approached by starting with some observations about intellectual arrogance.[34] Intellectual arrogance is the intellectual vice with properties most closely resembling properties of epistemic assholes. According to Tanesini:

> [I]ntellectual arrogance is a very common and varied phenomenon. It is exhibited by individuals who do not respect their turn in conversation, who interrupt others, who take up an unfair share of the available time. It shows up when a person boasts about his achievements, never admits to a mistake, publicly puts other people 'in their place', or thinks that he is always right. It is also manifested by excessive risktakers ,by people who do not tolerate dissent, by those who try to intimidate others into agreeing with them (2016, 72).

Intellectually arrogant people sound a lot like epistemic assholes. Perhaps even more strikingly, Tanesini's analysis of intellectual arrogance—that is, her way of understanding what it amounts to—resembles my own analysis of epistemic assholes. Consider:

> What matters [...] is that the [intellectually] arrogant presume that their alleged or genuine superior intellectual authority *entitles them to a range of privileges* which they deny to others. In what follows, I argue that these alleged privileges can be understood as *putative exemptions* from the ordinary responsibilities pertaining to

[34] Thanks to [redacted] for discussion.

> epistemic agents. I limit my discussion to the norms of two important epistemic practices: turn-taking and asserting (Tanesini 2016, 75).

I won't get into Tanesini's details on turn-taking and asserting. It's enough to note the striking similarity between "enjoying special advantages in epistemic relations" at the heart of REA, and the idea of being "entitled to a range of privileges" which are in turn understood as "putative exemptions from ordinary epistemic responsibilities". These almost seem like two different ways of saying the same thing.[35]

Rather than presenting a problem for REA, this strikes me as further confirmation that REA is onto something important. In my view, the kind of exemption from epistemic responsibilities that Tanesini uses to articulate intellectual arrogance is just one example of something much more general that needs recognizing as such. To put the point one way, epistemic agents are capable of conduct and attitudes that manifest a multitude of "putative exemptions from epistemic responsibilities", each of which is worth understanding as an instance of a well-organized phenomenon. The framework of epistemic assholes—as articulated by REA—is an excellent vehicle for doing this.

Like REA, Tanesini understands the harm of intellectual arrogance as a kind of disrespect for others' epistemic agency. However, Tanesini links intellectual arrogance to disrespect for epistemic agency *directly,* as a sui generis thing (Tanesini 2016, 76). It seems unlikely that intellectual arrogance is sui generis in this way. REA explains why. We've already seen that REA utilizes a relational approach to epistemology enabling a more general approach to epistemic disrespect. In REA, the general form of epistemic disrespect is being impervious to the legitimate objections of others (epistemic blame and criticism) through a sense of entitlement to advantages in one's epistemic relations. We saw above how this amounts to a distinctive but broad form of recognition failure, a unique way of impairing one's epistemic relationships. Tanesini's intellectual arrogance is just a specific example of this (Tanesini 2016, 76; cf. Cassam 2019; Roberts and Wood 2007). Interestingly, while it's already intuitive that there are many kinds or styles of epistemic asshole (beyond arrogant ones), this observation shows why, at an explanatory level, we should expect more than one kind or style of epistemic asshole. There is more than one way to manifest the relevant kind of disrespect involved in being an epistemic asshole. So, we have substantive grounds for taking epistemic assholes seriously as a category beyond any one form of epistemic vice.

[35] See also Kidd (2017, 59) and Roberts & Wood (2007, 243-244) for related analyses.

One might object that epistemic arrogance is really the more general phenomenon. Perhaps being an epistemic asshole is simply an instance of being epistemically arrogant. For this to be the case, all instances of epistemic assholery would have to be instances of epistemic arrogance. It seems this is not the case. For example, if we take characteristic descriptions of Socrates at face value (e.g. his proclamations of knowing nothing while also being the wisest person he knew), then it is unclear he was straightforwardly epistemically arrogant, as opposed to embodying a paradoxical mix of epistemic humility and perhaps arrogance. The concept of epistemic assholery is helpful here precisely because it seems broader and accommodates his unique brand of epistemic conduct, one not straightforwardly captured by epistemic arrogance. Moreover, shortly below I will discuss the case of a person genuinely trying to learn more about a subject, thereby not obviously manifesting epistemic arrogance, and yet plausibly counting as a kind of epistemic asshole. It would take me too far afield to go into this matter further, but I hope these examples are proof of concept that a reasonable case can be made that not all epistemic assholes are epistemically arrogant. This is grounds for resisting the idea that epistemic arrogance is the more general phenomenon.[36]

A final point on the relation between epistemic assholes and epistemic vice, since intellectual arrogance seems like a best-case-scenario for arguing that epistemic assholery just reduces to a particular epistemic vice, the foregoing will apply mutatis mutandis to other epistemic vices, such as closed-mindedness, epistemic insouciance, haughtiness, or epistemic self-indulgence.[37]

6.2 Active Ignorance and Epistemic Exploitation

I now briefly explore some cases which, if they can be analyzed in the way I propose, connect epistemic assholes to objectionable social power dynamics. These forms of epistemic assholery are perhaps more hidden than some of our previous cases. Partly because they are hidden, I think of these as "deep cases".

Start with active ignorance, which is the mechanism through which members of a dominant group actively ignore or resist evidence or other conceptual resources to preserve a

[36] Even if I am wrong and "epistemic asshole" is the narrower category, this doesn't preclude the value and importance of examining epistemic assholes. Even if being an epistemic asshole is simply a distinctive way of being epistemically arrogant, for example, that distinctiveness calls out for explanation.

[37] It is also worth noting that REA allows us to think about these issues without necessarily going full bore on a virtue theoretic epistemology, which may be attractive to some. For example, for recent work on the situationist challenge to virtue epistemology, see Fairweather & Alfano (2017). See Boult (2021) for a challenge from political ignorance. For a general critical discussion of responsibilist virtue epistemology from a meta-epistemological point of view, see Boult et. al (2020). See Pritchard (2012) for challenges for reliabilist virtue epistemology.

status quo that benefits them. The classic example is "white ignorance" (Mills 2007) whereby members of the group—white people—resist evidence and conceptual resources concerning racist dispositions and structures, as a means of preserving the status quo that benefits them (often but not always unconsciously). Other sites of social power provide related examples, such as gender and ability. Consider a case inspired by Mitova (Forthcoming, 9):

> **Just Joking Around:** Xoliswa is a widely valued executive secretary in the firm of Ex. She lives in a society that has recently acquired the concept of sexism. While this concept is rapidly gaining traction amongst women, men still don't use or understand it, though they have started hearing it occasionally. For the last two weeks, Xoliswa's boss, Joe, has been making crude jokes that have an overtone of sexism. Today, she's had enough and says 'Please stop. These jokes are sexist.' He looks at her weirdly and responds: 'I've no idea what you are talking about. I'm just joking around!' Joe continues to make the Jokes in the full belief that he's doing nothing wrong, a belief widely held by men in their community and worldwide.

There is a lot to say about this case, but one question is whether Joe is being an epistemic asshole. Probing this, one thing we can note is that Joe clearly exhibits a sense of entitlement to be skeptical and resist salient evidence that something is not right here, namely that he is being sexist (Simion 2024). In certain forms, being skeptical and resisting salient evidence may in turn be a kind of special advantage in epistemic relations. If it is, and if Joe is impervious to criticism because of a sense of entitlement to that special advantage, he'd meet the conditions of REA and count as a certain kind of epistemic asshole.

Here is a brief argument that "freedom to be skeptical" is a special advantage in epistemic relations. Normally, epistemic communities require a certain degree of credulousness and confidence in knowledge. This is well known, for example, from the philosophy of science literature, and the epistemic injustice literature. If someone enjoys benefits of this feature of good epistemic relations while simultaneously flouting corresponding expectations others might legitimately have of them regarding their own credulity, they are making a kind of exception of themselves. Making an exception of oneself in this way just is enjoying a special advantage in one's epistemic relations. If that's right (and if the relevant conditions around entitlement and imperviousness to criticism obtain) then Joe's active ignorance puts him squarely in the domain of epistemic assholes. To be sure,

Joe may be a moral asshole too, and maybe worse. But what's important not to overlook is that a significant causal factor in his assholery—or at least his active ignorance—is the fact that, further back, he's (acting like) an epistemic asshole.

This is an example of how epistemic assholes can play an important role in perpetuating objectionable social power dynamics. It also reveals how large numbers of privileged individuals may be assholes despite not thinking of themselves that way. Deep cases are "deep" in the sense of being both opaque and widespread.

Here is another point of contact between epistemic assholes and social power. According to Nora Berenstain (2016), "epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to educate them about the nature of their oppression" (2016, 569). She quotes Audre Lorde:

> Black and Third-World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbian and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future (Audre Lorde 1995).

Epistemic exploitation is ubiquitous. And it is often exercised under the guise of epistemically virtuous intellectual engagement. It goes under many euphemistic names, such as "exercising harmless curiosity," "just asking a question," "making a well-intentioned effort to learn," "offering alternative explanations," and "just playing devil's advocate" (Berenstain 2016, 571). Consider a variant of **Just Joking Around** in which Joe—call him Trying Joe—has an "epiphany" and realizes Xoliswa might be onto something. Next day at work, after trying to tone down the jokes, she's still offended and calls him out. Frustrated, Trying Joe makes a "well-intentioned effort to learn", and firmly requests an explanation from Xoliswa regarding why his jokes are sexist. During what ensues, Joe repeatedly plays devil's advocate and offers alternative explanations. When Xoliswa tires, he insists on his good intentions.

Rather than taking himself to be entitled to a kind of freedom to be skeptical (or perhaps in addition to this), it now seems more accurate to describe Joe as taking himself to be entitled to the intellectual labor of others. Is Trying Joe an epistemic asshole? Just as good epistemic relations require each of us to pull their weight in situations of inquiry and developing an understanding of the world, those who simultaneously enjoy the labour of

others while flouting legitimate expectations that others might have of them in this regard, would seem to enjoy special advantages in their epistemic relations. To the extent that Trying Joe exhibits an entitlement to this advantage, and is impervious to criticism because of that entitlement, a case can be made that Joe is indeed still being an epistemic asshole, albeit a slightly different kind. As before, he's being a moral asshole too, and maybe worse. But the point remains that recognizing his epistemic assholery is important because of the causal role it can play in wider objectionable behaviour. This is another illustration of how epistemic assholes can play an important role in perpetuating objectionable social power dynamics. It's also another example of how recalcitrant, insidious, and widespread this phenomenon can be, for example when we consider how it persists through Joe's *efforts at doing better*.

7. Objections and Replies

In this section I consider some worries one might have about my proposal so far. The following three objections strike me as points of pressure worth addressing in more detail.

i) Does REA prove too much? Sure, assholes may be everywhere. But on my account, epistemic assholes seem to be *everywhere.* The worry is that REA counts an implausibly wide range of people as epistemic assholes. In response, don't forget two main caveats when calling out assholes: i) there are degrees of assholery, and ii) there is an important distinction between being an asshole and acting like an asshole. It may seem problematic for a theory to count all the cases I've discussed as full-blown epistemic assholes, but the theory need not say that. We can also use it to classify people as behaving like epistemic assholes. And it really is plausible that, a lot of the time, the stuff people do—especially members of privileged and dominant groups—amounts to behaving like an epistemic asshole.

ii) Is the idea of a "pure epistemic asshole" coherent? One issue here concerns the tight connections between belief, knowledge, and action. Our intellectual lives deeply affect how we are disposed to act, and how we should act (Fantl and McGrath 2011; Littlejohn 2026). If there is such a tight connection, can there really be epistemic assholes who are not moral assholes?

First, even if it turns out that "pure" epistemic assholes are incoherent (contrary to my own view), I've argued that moral assholes who are also epistemic assholes are important to understand in their own right. This is in part because of the causal role that the epistemic dimension of being an asshole can play in relation to one's moral life. But second, we can

defend the coherence of pure epistemic assholes as follows. While our ways of thinking are of course deeply implicated in our ways of acting, there is always room for factors outside a given causal chain to override results that would otherwise occur. In cases of pure epistemic assholes, all we need to allow is that sometimes one's epistemic assholery can fail to precipitate in moral assholery because other features of the person's character override the causal propensity of these things to go hand in hand. Even if someone is disposed to think in ways characteristic of an asshole, they may have such a strong moral character in other respects that the relevant intellectual traits are overridden in the overall net result of the person's practical and moral character.

Another issue here, however, concerns the role of *respect* in my understanding of epistemic assholes. I have said that epistemic assholes manifest a unique disregard for the epistemic agency of others, amounting to a kind of disrespect. Is respect an inherently moral concept?[38] I will remain neutral on this question. Even if it is, the kind of disrespect one manifests as an epistemic asshole, whether moral or otherwise, need not entail that one is a moral *asshole.* This is crucial, because arguing that there are pure epistemic assholes only requires establishing that some epistemic assholes are not moral *assholes*. It does not require establishing that pure epistemic assholes do nothing morally objectionable.[39]

iii) I have drawn on James' broadly contractualist, relational approach to assholes, using it in part to motivate my appeal to epistemic relations, respect, and recognition in thinking about epistemic assholes. But what if this is the wrong way of thinking about assholes generally—that is, what if a relational approach is also misguided for moral assholes, let alone their epistemic counterparts? If it is, my whole approach seems problematic.

First, when I call James' approach "broadly contractualist and relational" I mean this in a fairly thin sense, whereby we need not connect the approach to controversial meta-ethical theses, for example about what grounds moral duties or obligations, or what right and wrong consist in (even if certain substantive views about these things fit neatly within the picture).[40]

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[38] See Darwall (1977) for a distinction between appraisal respect and recognition respect. At least in the appraisal sense, the answer here is clearly "no".

[39] It may be that epistemic assholery is morally objectionable, where the relation between the epistemic and the moral here is something akin, for example, to how some theorists try to explain why we ought to proportion our beliefs to the evidence in terms of some moral/social story. I take the latter to be an example of how something clearly epistemic may ultimately have a moral grounding and am prepared to grant something similar could be the case with epistemic assholes. Thanks to [redacted] for pressing this issue.

[40] For defenses of contractualist views on these issues, see: e.g. Wallace 2019; Scanlon 1998, Ch.s 4-6; Zylberman 2019.

This point is consonant with how I have remained neutral on the precise details of various aspects of the relational approach to epistemology I've taken. When I call James' approach relational, all I have in mind is the central role that it gives to cooperative interpersonal relations, recognition, respect, and blame.

Second, while I have not said anything here to preclude accounting for assholes with alternative frameworks, this thinly relational approach strikes me as especially plausible for a couple of reasons. For a start, assholes just are inherently interpersonal phenomena. If one keeps whatever bad-making traits one has entirely to oneself, and those bad-making traits (e.g. a tendency to form certain intentions or entertain certain thoughts) simply don't involve other people, one ceases to seem like an asshole and instead counts as something different. So, a relational approach is very well positioned to make sense of assholes. Being an asshole, in large part, just is inherently about taking advantage of the fruits of cooperative interpersonal relations. Moreover, even setting this point aside, a relational approach seems especially well positioned to meet two of our key desiderata, namely ***Not The Worst, And Yet They're Awful***. To see this, suppose we try to make sense of assholes using only non-relational materials, such as purely consequentialist notions. While I do not have space to argue this here, *prima facia,* it seems comparably more difficult to meet both of these desiderata. If the only materials we have for explaining why assholes are so galling are consequentialist ones, then the more we increase the intensity of those, the less capable it seems we'll be of explaining why assholes are ***Not the Worst.*** Someone might push back and suggest assholery can be understood as a sort of "middle ground of badness" in consequentialist terms. But this strikes me as unpromising. Rather than occupying a kind of middle ground between monsters and petty norm violators, assholes can seem like *really* bad people while simultaneously causing no harm at all. A scalar approach seems ill-suited to capturing this.[41]

Of course, we might try something altogether different, such as a Kantian approach to assholes. But my framework is broadly part of that latter tradition, rather than being opposed to it. So, the extent to which the latter seems plausible further motivates the basic spirit of my approach.

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[41] There may of course be further resources available for defending a consequentialist account of epistemic assholes, for example by deploying ideas from rule- as opposed to act-consequentialism. But a final thought: even if this can be done, it's worth noting that assholery seems like just the sort of normative phenomenon that consequentialist theorizing tends to have a harder time making sense of than, say, deontological theorizing—because the sort of badness at issue does not seem to concern consequences. The force of promissory obligation is another example of a phenomenon that consequentialist theorizing seems to have at least a *comparatively* harder time making sense of. Thanks to Eugene Chislenko for helpful discussion.

8. Conclusion

Theorizing about epistemic assholes does two main things: i) it helps us better understand the epistemic domain, including some importantly hazardous features of our social epistemic environment; and ii) it helps us better understand assholes.

Regarding ii), REA significantly expands, in a principled way, the full extent of how we can be assholes. We can see this in part by laying out the partial taxonomy of special advantages in epistemic relations we've encountered while looking at different forms of epistemic assholery. Some of these special advantages are more general than others and so admit of perhaps greater subvarieties of epistemic asshole. The first three of our paradigmatic special advantages seem fundamental enough that they will show up in different forms across many epistemic asshole styles, as opposed to corresponding to any one kind:

- Freedom from inquiry
- Doxastic comfort
- Freedom to criticize

Other forms of special advantage are more specific. Some have to do with social roles, others with more niche character traits. We examined special advantages oriented around:

- Concern for the epistemic commons
    - The Cavuto
- Privileging an epistemic framework
    - The Dawkins
- Excessive inquiry
    - The Socratic asshole
- Excessive skepticism
    - The Joe
- Enjoying the epistemic labour of others
    - The Trying Joe

One reason this complexity is important is because of the causal relationship between epistemic and moral assholes. As I've argued, rather than simply being coextensive with moral assholery, epistemic assholery—whether in its pure form, or when it functions as a

dimension of some broader set of dispositions—can make it more likely that one will behave in ways characteristic of moral assholes, or morally bad people more broadly. In addition to being an important and multifaceted form of objectionable conduct it its own right, being an epistemic asshole blocks access to epistemic goods that would otherwise inform one's beliefs about how to treat other people. Examining the complexity of epistemic assholes sheds useful light on the hazards at play in the epistemic routes people may take towards a wide range of objectionable behaviour.

Regarding point i), the study of epistemic assholes leads to a more nuanced and unified approach to how our epistemic lives can go wrong and what we need to be wary of. We saw this in part by examining the relationship between epistemic assholes and epistemic vice: while vice epistemology surely overlaps with the study of epistemic assholes, the latter seems to open more unified ways—e.g. REA—of thinking about epistemic disrespect and other harmful relational epistemic phenomena. Recall that the epistemic asshole stands apart from the merely culpable epistemic norm violator, as well as the egregiously negligent or irresponsible epistemic agent. Epistemic assholes occupy a unique place in the epistemic landscape by virtue of their willingness to enjoy special advantages in epistemic relations, and to do so out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes them from criticism. REA explains how epistemic assholes are ***Not The Worst***, ***And Yet They're Awful.***

To end with just one example where more attention is needed, some forms of epistemic assholery strike me as sites of bad conduct where people are particularly adept at framing their bad conduct in innocent or virtuous terms, thereby getting away things they might otherwise not be able to. For example, when discussing epistemic exploitation, we saw how particularly deep forms of epistemic assholery can be disguised using the euphemisms "just playing devil's advocate" and "making a well-intentioned effort to learn".[42] It is also a familiar strategy of news anchors and political talking heads, for example, to frame persistent questioning of well-established facts as "engaging in healthy debate", or "not jumping to conclusions" (cf. Ichikawa 2024) only to flip things around and appeal to "common sense" when less inquiry and skepticism are to their advantage. There are of course many things going on here, but it's worth noting that such selective flip-flopping is made possible, in part, by a willingness to impair one's epistemic relations in the way characteristic of an asshole.

[42] This point about disguise is also true of epistemic exploitation itself and is part of Berenstain's own argument for recognizing epistemic exploitation for what it is.

My hope is that wider uptake of the concept *epistemic assholes* might make getting away with this sort of thing a bit harder. Recognizing epistemic assholery as the kind of badness it is—clearly categorizing and calling it out as such—is an important tool among others for navigating an important hazard in our social epistemic environment.

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