

On the Philosophical Interest and Surprising Significance of the Asshole

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ABSTRACT: The term “asshole” might be of interest to philosophers for several reasons. It displays the power of philosophy to expose the implicit structure of ordinary thought. It suggests why we should not be able to answer certain skeptics on their own terms. It corroborates the idea of an “internal” connection between moral judgment and motivation. And it raises doubts about expressivism where it has the best chance of being true.

Today I address two main questions: What is it for someone to be an asshole? And: Who cares? That is, why would a *philosopher* care, about the answer to what surely ranks among the *least* profound philosophical questions of all time?¹

My bold answer is that a certain theory of the asshole is of *some* philosophical interest, and indeed *surprisingly* so, given that one could have easily assumed that asshole theory would be of absolutely no philosophical interest at all to anyone, philosophically speaking.

My main question is: What precisely is the difference between the asshole and the mere jerk, prick, dick, twit, wanker, prat, schmuck, cad, boor, bastard, ass, ass-clown, or douchebag?

Here is my proposal: the *asshole* is the guy (yes, assholes are mainly, but not exclusively, men) who systematically allows himself special advantages in social relationships out of an entrenched (and mistaken) sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people. That is,

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- (i) he allows himself special advantages in social relationships, and does so systematically (or across a range of social settings, e.g., at work, on the road, and at the kids soccer game, but maybe not in the family home);
- (ii) he is motivated by an entrenched (and mistaken) sense of entitlement (where different ways of feeling mistakenly entitled correspond to different asshole styles);
- (iii) He is immunized against the complaints of other people (in the psychological sense that, being “entrenched” in entitlement, he is strongly disposed against hearing them out).

I shall not stoop to naming names like Donald Trump, Newt Gingrich, Kanye West, or Silvio Berlusconi in a serious philosophical discussion. For purposes of illustration, we might consider Steve Jobs, whose mild-mannered colleague and trusted friend, Jony Ive, describes him as follows: “when he’s very frustrated . . . his way to achieve catharsis is to hurt someone. And I think he feels he has a liberty and license to do that. The normal rules of social engagement, he feels, don’t apply to him.” Jobs presumably felt this way because he had the unique privilege of seeing the world revolutionized by his inventions within his own lifetime. If that doesn’t entitle him to savage his associates, park in handicap spaces, and curb philanthropic giving at Apple (as he did), then he’s also an asshole.

While the asshole is repugnant from a moral perspective, he’s nowhere near the bottom of the moral barrel, and certainly not as terrifying as the *psychopath*, who, as I understand him, either lacks moral concepts, or fails to take their application to supply reasons for action. This will be important momentarily.

If your reaction to my definition is to say, “Hey, I’ve met that guy!,” then I submit that I’ve established my main thesis that a theory of the asshole is of *some* interest. If nothing else, the definition displays the power of philosophical analysis to expose the implicit structure of ordinary thought. If correct, it adds to the sum of human knowledge, albeit in a (teeny) tiny way.

If only to reinforce the point, I will also offer several further reasons why my proposal is of some philosophical significance, focusing on three familiar philosophical debates: debates about skepticism, about moral judgment and motivation, and about the meaning of ethical and/or foul terms. Briefly stated, my claims will be as follows. First, if the asshole is a “skeptic” about whether he has sufficient reason not to treat others as equals, he offers a clear model of why we should not expect an anti-skeptical philosophical theory to answer the skeptic on his own terms. Second, comparing the asshole with the psychopath vividly corroborates the view that there is a necessary “internal” connection between moral judgment and motivation. Third, my definition is the thin end of the wedge in a larger argument that cognitivist analyses are plausible for all or at least a lot of foul language. This undercuts expressivism where it has the best chance of being true.

I. MUST WE ANSWER THE SKEPTIC?

I begin with the least interesting of the three theses. Assholes are distinctive for their entrenched unwillingness to listen to reason. We’d say an asshole shouldn’t speak so loudly on his cell phone in public, or and that he shouldn’t say “Do you know who I am?” to the restaurant maitre d’, and we think there are good reasons why. But we often won’t give him

the arguments in a serious way, not because they aren't good arguments, but because he's plainly unwilling to give them a serious hearing.

Now notice that, in discussing many of the big philosophical questions—perhaps the question of other minds, of our knowledge of the external world, of whether morality is anything more than a device for the weak to oppress the strong—the skeptic (the philosopher who takes the skeptical position) often argues a lot like an asshole: he's doggedly unwilling to entertain anything other than his own skeptical position, usually insisting that everyone else has the burden of proving him wrong. If he's not simply a "dogmatist," who flatly asserts the skeptical perspective, he's at least "the skeptic" who'll engage in argument, but only or mainly in ways that retrench his position. Perhaps few such philosophers actually exist. Yet, for most of us, being well trained in philosophy means learning how to channel or embody the asshole in just that way.

That *could* be nothing more than a philosophical exercise. Yet even if we ourselves aren't skeptics, it is all too tempting to assume, with Descartes, that such a skeptic must be answered on his own terms. To any proposed argument for the non-skeptical view *p*, we might consider the possibility of a skeptical denial—we think, "But the skeptic will just say not-*p*, 'for such-and-such reason.'" We might then take that possibility as sufficient reason for thinking we haven't given an adequate reasoned justification of *p*.

I suggest that here the asshole offers a helpful corrective: when the asshole won't admit any reason as good enough for him not to cut in the post office line, we won't and usually wouldn't concede that he lacks such a reason. When we articulate the reason to our satisfaction, we wouldn't and shouldn't expect an asshole to listen to fully take it in, because we rightly don't take his acceptance or would-be acceptance as a test for whether we've adequately justified the claim that he really should get to the back of the line. Likewise, we might say, when the philosophical skeptic is not listening to reason—where we decide what "listening to reason" would be—a reasoned justification isn't beholden to what he would or would not concede. Much as with asshole, the skeptic's dug-in view is just not relevant.

To be sure, a non-skeptic can argue in a dogmatic way, refusing to seriously entertain anything like a skeptical view. We might find it fruitful to play the skeptic in order to induce puzzlement, raise questions, and formulate rival analyses and arguments. But this can *simply* be a way of posing and answering questions that *we* think are interesting and important, where we *non-skeptics* rightly decide when a question needs asking and when an answer is satisfactory.

We have, then, another reason why the asshole is of some philosophical interest: when one is tempted to think the skeptic must be answered on his own terms, and one can't quite get a fix on how philosophical justification wouldn't require this, think of the asshole, who offers a plausible model case.

II. MUST MORAL JUDGMENT MOTIVATE?

For a slightly more interesting thesis, consider a tempting line of argument for "externalism" about moral motivation, the view that fully competent moral judgment needn't motivate one toward action, as a matter of logical, semantic, or rational necessity. The tempting argument appeals to the apparent plausibility of examples such as Milton's Satan, who says "Evil be thou my good." He *seems* to make a full-fledged moral judgment, with no disposition at all not to do what himself says is wrong (or "evil") to do. If we add that one must

always have some desire in order to be motivated to action, or even see something as a reason for action, then we reinforce the point by imaging someone who makes proper moral judgments while simply lacking any desire to do the right rather than the wrong thing.

The “internalist” replies that the case is not so plain, and that, properly formulated, there is indeed an “internal” and necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation. On the version I find plausible, there are two related requirements, of conceptual competence and of rational coherence. That is, if someone (Satan) judges that it is wrong for him to act in some way, and yet remains wholly unmoved to do it, then one of three things must be true:

(1) he fails to make a moral judgment of *what is wrong*, as opposed to a judgment of what *people regard* as “wrong” (he speaks disquotationally, or in the “inverted commas sense”);

(2) he makes such a judgment but fails to be fully competent with moral concept of “wrong”—where full competence requires *taking there to be at least some reason* not to do the putatively wrong thing. (Or, rather, there’s a failure of full competence if the concept of wrongness is “what I owe to others,” or some such, and perhaps not such failure if the concept is merely “illegal” or “contrary to normally authoritative standards of conduct”);

(3) he makes a judgment of wrongness, and takes himself to have reasons for action, but simply suffers from incoherence, in one form or another, for failing to be appropriately moved. For instance, he might fail a “wide-scoped” standard of rational consistency like this one: if or when one takes there to be some reason to do something (morally or otherwise), one must [either be disposed to action (at an appropriate time), or revise one’s reasons judgment]. Or one might be strictly consistent but “incoherent” in a looser way, as when a woman is “in denial” about her husband’s cheating, because she won’t let herself look seriously at what she somehow “knows” is accumulating evidence.

Now, I submit that here fictional Satan or the abstract “amoralist” is not the most credible test case. But even if we focus on more realistic examples, the internalist position will suffer if it cannot be corroborated by a plausible range of examples that fall into one or other of the categories that it says all cases must fall into. I suggest that the asshole, or rather the comparison between the psychopath and the asshole, vividly corroborates internalism in just this way, making it more plausible than it otherwise would appear.

Consider the psychopath, who says things like: “When I killed the kid in order to eat his sandwich—hey, I was super hungry—I of course knew that I was doing something wrong.” Following Gary Watson, let’s assume the psychopath is incapable of seeing any reason to treat the interests of others as giving him reasons for action, except insofar as this serves his own, perhaps fleeting ends. Here I submit that the psychopath is not making a full-fledged moral judgment; he’s merely saying that he knows that *people generally regard* the action as “wrong,” and that he knows they’d sanction him given their view of things. Psychopaths are generally good at tracking prevailing social norms and linguistic custom, and indeed savvy at working around them for the sake of manipulating people or otherwise getting what they happen to want. If that means they are *partly* competent users

of the term “wrong,” I submit that we should not say that our present psychopath is *fully* competent with moral concepts, in full-fledged moral judgment, where that is true *simply* because he sees no reason at all not to do the presumed “wrong” thing. Seeing such a reason is a necessary condition of full competence with the concept *morally wrong*. (Or at least this is true for judgments of “what we owe to others,” and perhaps not true, say, for color judgments: maybe a blind person *can* be fully competent with the concept *red*.)

Now, I assume the psychopath doesn’t necessarily suffer irrationality or incoherence. For the internalist, the specter of incoherence arises only when one takes oneself to have reasons for action, a fully competent wrongness judgment having been made. But then the question is why or how one could suffer incoherence simply for having these views without being at all moved not to do the wrong thing. Why is there even a danger of incoherence here?

To answer, consider the asshole. He is (I assume) basically competent with moral concepts—he reasons fine with them when others are concerned. Even so, the asshole can be internally confused in any number of ways that arise because of his troubled view of what reasons he or others have.

The serious asshole who really does feel entitled to cut in line of course doesn’t think that he’s doing anything wrong, so there’s no risk of incoherence if he fails to see any reason, and lacks any motive, not to cut to the front: he *is* disposed to do what he feels is right, just as internalism claims.

Other assholes aren’t so sure. Perhaps some really don’t think they’re entitled to park in handicapped spaces, at least not “deep down,” but can’t help themselves in a crowded parking lot, suffering from a kind of weakness of will. Others may be just defensive enough to keep themselves relatively confident in their entitlement views, while harboring suspicions that their position would be unsustainable if they really reasoned it through. Some suffer the incoherence of being “in denial,” much like the woman who ignores mounting evidence of her husband’s cheating. In all these cases, the asshole seems at risk of incoherence, in a loose sense, because he is in some sense aware of moral reasons not to act as he does.

Other assholes could simply be inconsistent, flat out. Consider the asshole who taunts his colleagues with, “I’m an asshole—and proud; deal with it!” Maybe he means to speak disquotationally, saying simply “I am what you all *regard* as an ‘asshole,’” which is of course consistent with not thinking you really are yourself an asshole, because you really are entitled to the special advantages you allow yourself, and because the people you are speaking to are just wrong to morally expect more egalitarian relations. But the following situation also seems quite possible: the asshole who calls himself an asshole (i) really believes he is entitled to special advantages when he takes them and yet (ii) he also really accepts that he is an asshole, in the sense that he generally takes himself to have entitlements that he doesn’t in fact have.

How is that possible? Well, maybe he accepts a straight-up contradiction (the asshole believes “I’m entitled to X” while at the same time believing “I am not entitled to X”). This is irrational, but perfectly possible; people manage it all the time.

Still more realistically, the asshole’s beliefs could stand in an unresolved tension. Maybe he believes “I’m entitled to X” and “I’m entitled to Y”, etc., while he also believes “A lot of my beliefs about my entitlements are mistaken.” That *isn’t* a logical contraction. We can all consistently hold that we are probably wrong about *something or other* but then

defend *any particular* belief when we consider the matter on its merits. So it is with the “paradox of the preface”: at the start of an essay, you might write, “I’m sure many of the things I am about to write are mistaken,” but then go on and write each statement while sincerely believing every one.

To different degrees, we are all more or less in this situation about our own beliefs: we think we must be wrong somewhere; we just don’t know where. When it comes to our various entitlement beliefs, most of us make a certain effort to figure out where we might be wrong about what others are really due. What’s different about the asshole is that he sees *no reason, or no reason of any great weight, to find out* which of his particular entitlement beliefs is mistaken—perhaps because he prefers taking special advantages, given his abiding sense of entitlement, over having a well-integrated, fully coherent mind. Like Plato’s tyrant, he takes being rich or powerful over having a justly ordered soul.

Here, then, is my second thesis, a second reason why the asshole is of interest: the psychopath and the asshole, once juxtaposed, vividly corroborate one kind of internalism, making it more plausible than it might initially appear (more plausible, at least, than alluring fictional counter-examples like Satan would suggest).

III. COGNITIVISM ABOUT “ASSHOLE”

I now turn to the most interesting reason why my theory of the asshole is of philosophical significance. Before I really thought about the matter, I would have been inclined toward some sort of “expressivist” analysis of the meaning of “asshole.” The word, I might have said, is just another term of abuse, a way of simply expressing one’s disapproval. Much as if one had said “Boo on you!,” one isn’t trying to say something that can be true or false, correct or incorrect. The job of foul language like “asshole” is not to *describe* the world, but simply to express one’s disapproving feelings, in an ejaculatory or cathartic burst facilitated by inherently emotive words. And I would have conceded this despite my deep resistance to (indeed, revulsion of) expressivist analyses of moral and normative terms generally. Expressivism has famous difficulties with basic ethical language (given the Frege-Geach problem, for instance), but foul language initially seems to be the one area of language where it has a very good chance of being correct.

But now notice that, if your reaction to my definition was, “hey, I’ve met that guy,” then, even if you quibble about details, you have reason to agree with me that “asshole” doesn’t *simply* have expressive meaning. You aren’t simply disapproving of him, in feelings that lack an objection, as with a melancholy mood or bout of indigestion and discomfort. In recognizing the type, this is reason to think the term “asshole” functions to at least *partly* to classify a person, correctly or incorrectly, as having a particular kind of moral personality.

There’s also *prima facie* linguistic evidence for this “cognitivist” rather than “expressivist” treatment of the meaning of “asshole.” It makes perfect sense to say of someone, “Yes, he is my friend, and he’s fine to me personally, but I admit he’s an asshole.” On point of Frege-Geach, you can also reason with the conditional sentence, “if an asshole cuts you off in traffic, you should lay on the horn,” concluding that you should now lay on the horn, because an asshole nearly swiped your bumper. You can coherently say *approving* things like, “General MacArthur was plainly an asshole, but in the end a force for good.” And if that isn’t necessarily *all-out* approval, because one’s disapproval might be muted by ap-

proval of all the good that was done, then we have already seen a case in which all-out approval seems perfectly coherent, linguistically speaking. When the asshole boasts “Yes I’m an asshole—deal with it,” he might taunt his subjects with this pronouncement precisely because he really does approve wholeheartedly.

As for what the “cognitive meaning” of “asshole” is, I think my definition explicates it. But here you might worry: are we going too far in a cognitivist direction? Surely the word “asshole” is *often* used to vent feelings with no concern for whether its target meets any set of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application (after swearing in the car, you don’t usually verify with the driver, say, at the next traffic stop). If nothing else, the emotional charge often associated with the term is something that must be explained.

An easy move here is to follow Stephen Finlay’s idea that ethical language *pragmatically indicates* attitudes of approval or disapproval within a normal conversation. If you call Trump an asshole while you and I are talking, it will normally make sense for me to interpret you as disapproving of Trump’s conduct. But that may *only* be a matter of what it is reasonable for me to infer about you given our conversational context and my general knowledge of how people feel when they speak. The very meaning of the word “asshole,” as set by the linguistic rules that govern its use, doesn’t *itself* imply that you disapprove. And so the statement “Trump is an asshole” can count as straightforwardly true or false. Expression is, in the standard parlance, a matter of “pragmatics” rather than “semantics.”

I take great comfort in Finlay’s idea, if nothing else as a last resort. As I’ll explain momentarily, if need be, a cognitivist account also allows that expressive meaning is part of the very *semantic* meaning of “asshole.” As David Kaplan has explained, that needn’t undermine pretensions of objective truth. In David Copp’s version of the point, you can think that ethical terms express attitudes, as a matter of their semantic meaning, and still be a robust moral realist—in the style of Plato, for instance.

IV. A CONJECTURE ABOUT FOUL LANGUAGE

If the forgoing seems at all promising, then I submit that we should be pretty skeptical of expressivist analyses of foul language. The foul terms they get right—“Damn you!” or “You’re such a fuck!”—aren’t representative of foul language generally. To see how that might be, consider the following conjecture: there are four main categories of foul language, and all of them open are to a different kind of very plausible “cognitivist” analysis.

The four categories are these:

- (1) **vice terms**, which purport to classify a kind of moral personality, correctly or incorrectly (e.g., “asshole,” “jerk,” “bastard,” “schmuck,” “boor,” “cad”);
- (2) **pejoratives**, which assume systematically *false* or mistaken normative or moral claims about certain independently identifiable groups of people (e.g., “honkey,” “wop,” “kike,” “limey,” “chink”);
- (3) **slurs**, which invoke a metaphor (“four-eyes,” “pig,” “dickhead,” “cocksucker”) that is often literally false but potentially “true,” metaphorically speaking; and

(4) **objective expressives** (e.g., “shit,” “fucking,” “fucker,” “mother-fucker”), which do display attitudes of the speaker, but are expressively correct or incorrect depending on what is going on in the world.

The conjecture is that these categories cover a lot—surely not all, but at least *most*—of foul language, and that, in each category, an expressivist analysis doesn’t ring true.

That is only a conjecture at this point, but it is not hard to appreciate its significance if it pans out. Expressivism is then wrong *even about most foul language*, the area of language where it had the best chance of being right. And this is presumably a further count against expressivism about ethical language generally. The case for a cognitivist “constructivism” about ethics of the kind I favor gets even better.

Here everything depends on how the different categories of foul language get explained. So, with the remainder of this discussion, I will offer a few tentative comments about the categories *other* than vice terms like “asshole.”

Objective Expressives: I mentioned earlier that David Kaplan has argued that one kind of “expressive meaning” needn’t undermine pretensions of objective truth. Kaplan suggests that, alongside “descriptive” terms whose meaning can be given by a straightforward definition (e.g., “fortnight”), we can explain the meaning of “expressive” terms (e.g., “damn,” “bastard,” “ouch,” “oops,” “goodbye”) in terms of an idea of what he calls “expressive correctness.”

When someone sincerely uses an expressive term, this doesn’t simply *report* certain purported facts; “ouch” doesn’t just mean “I am in pain.” It does, however, purport to “display” things as being a certain way. When I say “ouch,” I display the fact that I am in pain, and when I say “that bastard,” I display the fact that I despise the person in question. Use of the term is *expressively correct*, says Kaplan, when the supposed fact holds: I say “ouch” and I am, in fact, in pain; I say “that bastard” and I do indeed despise the person. Use of the term is *expressively incorrect* when the supposed fact doesn’t hold—as when I’m not really in pain, but faking to get attention, or when I don’t despise the person at all.

But now consider “oops,” which, unlike “ouch,” has an element of objectivity. To say “oops,” Kaplan suggests, is (roughly) to purport to display the fact that “one has observed a minor mishap.” So saying “oops” will be (expressively) correct when one has just seen someone inadvertently break a wine glass, but *incorrect* when the mishap isn’t minor, as when a whole building falls down, killing hundreds—in which case “oops” could at best be a macabre and vile joke. So whereas the correctness of “ouch” depends entirely on one’s state of mind, the correctness of “oops” *also* depends on how the world is, independent of one’s subjective attitudes.

Now turn to foul language. For a given foul term, we can ask whether its correctness conditions are fully subjective, as with “ouch,” or at least partly objective, as with “oops.” And, when you survey foul terms—even the foulest of the foul—many seem to be *objective* expressives: their correctness seem to depend, at least in part, on what is going on in out in the world.

Here are several examples along with some (very, very) tentative arm-chair suggestions about what those “objective correctness conditions” might be. (The tentative suggestions are only for one sense of the term in question; other senses might not fit.)

“Shit”—as when “shit!” is said after a fender bender (in contrast with something’s being “shitty,” or of poor quality). This implies that an unexpected event has occurred that frustrates the speaker’s aspirations (such as avoiding costly auto repairs, or getting to work

quickly). (In its more positive use, as in “You got the job; good shit!,” the unexpected event needn’t be frustrating.) The aspirations are subjective, or up to the person, but the event in question has to actually occur. Shit happens, and has to happen, for it to be shit: shit has existence as its essence. Or, more plainly: in its negative use, if the fender bender or other untoward event hasn’t actually occurred, it won’t be expressively correct to say “shit!” (Except in fictional cases, when things are fictionally presented as actually happening—a pretty special context.)

“Fucking”—as in “the fucking car wouldn’t start, right there in the middle of the road.” This implies major frustration of someone’s plans, though not necessarily the speaker’s. (Again, a more positive usage, as in “You got the job; good fucking show!,” wouldn’t assume frustration of hopes or plans.) I could be hearing the story of a woman whose car had stalled in the middle of the road and say “really, and the fucking car just wouldn’t start?” Her plans would be majorly frustrated, but (unlike “oops”) I wouldn’t have had to observe the events myself or even myself have the frustrated plans (the event may have passed, in which case there is nothing, as regards that event, to plan for).

“Fucker”—as directed at a toaster that burns one’s toast or an electrical outlet that shocks one. The object is personified as having malicious intent. The expressive correctness of the term depends on whether the personification is apt, given the situation’s descriptive features. We’d usually say this of more readily personified objects, such as toasters or computers, but perhaps not a stationary rock.

“Mother fucker”—a way of saying someone can’t be trusted. You can’t trust him not to have sex with your own mother if he had the chance. The term is inapt if someone is completely trustworthy.

“Bastard”—much as with “mother fucker,” implies treachery, that the person in question is a traitor, or would-be traitor. When we aren’t thinking of its non-derogatory meaning (“one without a father”), a person doesn’t count as a bastard, in the central, paradigmatic sense, unless he (or she?) is treacherous or prone to betray others in relationships. It would be a mistake to call someone a bastard if he were reliably faithful in what his relationships required.

Kaplan seems to disagree about “bastard.” He treats “That bastard X” as akin to “That damn X.” But no matter. Though “damned” or “damnable” does have an older and very rich set of meanings, especially religious ones, I think Kaplan is quite right about *one* use of “damn.” Like “you fuck!” or “you’re a fuck,” “damn” can be a purely “subjective” expressive, without external correctness conditions. If I say “Damn you!”, it seems pretty clear that I in some sense express my disapproval of you. The word “damn” itself carries that implication when it is sincerely used, by virtue of the linguistic conventions that set its meaning. I can’t sincerely (and properly) say “That damn Trump; but I really like him!” (There’s also a positive use of “damn,” as in “he’s a damn good fellow!”).

So traditional emotivism gets one set of cases right! Still, if many foul terms are “objective expressives,” then those cases are not especially representative of the class of “expressives,” even leaving aside the other categories of foul language distinguished above. And we turn to the other categories, we can see any expressive meaning in the present “objectivist” way. A vice term like “asshole,” for instance, might have expressive semantic meaning in a similar way. If my definition says when the term descriptively correct, and if its expressive meaning goes beyond mere “pragmatics,” we can also say that “asshole” will be expressively correct when, and only when, the speaker in fact disapproves, or finds

disapproval appropriate, in virtue of the asshole's acting upon entitlements that he is assumed not in fact have.

Racist Pejoratives: Turning to a further category, consider racist pejorative terms, by which I mean the class of pejorative terms that get directed toward a particular group of people ("yankee" or "honkey" and whites; "wop" and Italians; "kike" and Jews; "chink" and Chinese people; "limey" and Irish people; the N-word and Afro-Americans). Some recent expressivists (Ridge, Boivert) have suggested that such terms offer a model for how expressivism can easily solve the Frege-Geach problem. I'm inclined to see these terms quite differently, as, in a certain sense, *systematically wrong*.

Here I follow recent work by Chris Hom and Robert May, which argues that the very meaning of such pejorative terms assumes certain normative beliefs or assumptions about the group in question. "Wop," for instance, assumes that Italians are *the appropriate object of contempt and discrimination, simply because they are Italian*. But now suppose the assumed judgments of appropriateness are radically mistaken, from a moral perspective. No one is the appropriate object of contempt or discrimination simply because he or she happens to belong to a racial group. In that case, the racist judgment that Berlusconi is a wop will lay *claim* to truth and yet fall into error by virtue of resting on a false presupposition.

We presumably won't want to say that about "asshole." Although we can surely be mistaken about what someone is or is not entitled to, it would be a radical form of skepticism to hold that the moral presuppositions of an asshole judgment are systematically wrong. In that case, there are no kikes, no chinks, and certainly no "n----rs". And Berlusconi is not a wop—even if he is an asshole.

V. CONJECTURAL ORIGINS IN METAPHOR

In closing, let us consider the very different category of slurs, such as "four eyes" and "dickhead," understood as metaphors. My guess is that "asshole" initially got its meaning as a metaphorical slur. Calling someone an asshole is of course literally false in the *non-moral* sense of "asshole" that refers to a physical body part, just as it is literally false to say of someone that he is his own left arm (and literally false to call someone a "dickhead"). To say either thing is at best some kind of metaphor. Yet, if I am right that "he's an asshole" can be a literally true or false from a moral perspective, then the question arises: how could "asshole" come to have acquired a literal moral meaning? While the real, full story is presumably complicated, it is helpful, or at least interesting, to speculate with something like the following conjectural history.

In the beginning was the word, used as a mere metaphor. Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg tells us that "asshole" caught on in recent times among World War II soldiers. Imagine its first non-literal use: a soldier called his superior officer—let's call him Sergeant Pug—"an asshole," thereby inviting his fellow soldiers to imaginatively engage Pug in a certain unflattering light. Although it is literally false that Pug is a body part, likening him to a foul and hidden part of his own body called attention to his arrogant disposition and repugnant personality. As with any good metaphor, at least on Richard Moran's account, the point was to *see or experience Pug as an asshole*, to interpret him and his actions from an imaginative frame of reference that treats a man as the physical embodiment of a body part that behaves much as that body part might. They were to feel and almost believe that Pug is as problematic and as foul and yet shamefully exposing himself in public.

The more literal minded of soldiers might have objected: “Look, it’s not strictly speaking, *literally* true that Pug is an asshole any more than it is or could be literally true that Pug is his own left arm.” In reply, the soldiers would have laughed off the objection as beside the point. Sure, they’ll say, the statement “Pug is an asshole” is literally false; “asshole” is just a metaphor; the point is that it is especially apt. Or as we might elaborate the idea, use of the word by the soldiers says things about Pug that could not have been literally said of him up to this point. While some of those things can be put as literal truth-claims, such as the claim that Pug isn’t worthy of respect, or that he abuses his office, or that he is contemptible, those truths aren’t the whole point of the metaphor, which is mainly to see Pug in an unflattering light that cannot be fully expressed in so many truths.

Because the metaphor was apt, it quickly caught on as a way of speaking. Use of the term became popular among the other soldiers on the base, in the wider army, and then in further reaches of society. The term was especially useful as communication. People found calling someone an asshole an especially handy way of conveying and perhaps even venting their contempt for abusive authority figures who are not, for them, worthy of respect. Those who heard the metaphor invoked found it especially easy to grasp what the speaker meant: they meant not simply to vent feelings of contempt, but to invite an interpretation of their target that would make those feelings of contempt fully appropriate. That’s because, when someone calls someone an asshole, you could easily tell that he or she has a certain moral view of things: the view that person called an asshole is not worthy of respect, because of how he treats those around him.

Soon enough, when someone used the word, you could readily land upon this interpretation of the user’s meaning, without knowing very much about his or her context of utterance. The metaphor thus came into a different kind of meaning: calling someone an asshole moved away from mere metaphorical communication and became a literal, more routine claim to truth, a claim to the truth of a moral judgment: that the person in question is not worthy of respect because of the way he treats others.

Even now, few were careful about or even aware of exactly what kind of unsavory people they were calling an asshole. Still, there was a rough but remarkable convergence. The invited perspective would be appropriate for certain kinds of people and not for others. Knowing or not, people began to grasp the rules of normal usage, which called for one type of person to be called an asshole and left other types for better names.

Eventually, the rules settled. They became well enough established that a competent speaker of the language could entertain asshole judgments without meaning to express contemptuous attitudes. The curious user of the language would wonder whether this person is the right kind of person to qualify as unworthy of respect, even without feeling at all exercised about this, let alone speaking out about it. The curious person would ask questions that don’t express negative attitudes, such as “Is Trump an asshole? Or just an ass-clown?” And people could reason with hypotheticals, such as, “If Trump is an asshole, I probably shouldn’t watch his show; Trump does seem to be an asshole: so I probably shouldn’t watch his show.” Beyond private reflections, all of this could be discussed in a mode of cool-headed argument among friends. Over coffee, friends might agree that, yes, Trump indeed qualifies as an asshole, literally speaking. They might conclude on that basis that they probably shouldn’t go out of their way to listen to him or watch his show, having reasoned together and reached agreement upon what they all regard as an objective matter of moral fact: Trump is, in fact, an asshole.

Now when a less agreeable fellow in the coffee shop says it isn't *literally* true that Trump is an asshole, the friends don't say what the soldiers said to their literal-minded fellow soldier. They don't agree and say that this is beside the point, because "asshole" is just a metaphor. Now they beg to differ. They reply: "no, that's wrong; Trump definitely qualifies; he's literally an asshole; you've made a mistake." At that point, the journey of "asshole" from metaphorical slur to vice term is complete.

Note

1. For discussion, I am grateful to an audience at CSU Long Beach.