# Extreme Beliefs

## The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism

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# 1. State-of-the-art and Objectives

Fundamentalism is an important, harmful phenomenon in contemporary society. Fundamentalist groups avoid contact with what they consider evil, modern, and, in the case of religious fundamentalisms, secular developments. They treat certain texts as infallible, they are suspicious of various kinds of science, they deny the distinction between public and private, and sometimes commit terrorist attacks [Marty & Appleby 1991a; 1991b; Ruthven 2004; Shupe 2011]. It impedes access to education for members of fundamentalist groups [Beyerlein 2004; West 2016]. It limits the rights of minorities like members of the LGBT community [Cunningham & Melton 2013] and people from different faiths or races [Rose & Firmin 2016]. It negatively influences the public image of religions, especially Islam, and it is sometimes taken to display a clash of civilizations [Oudenampsen 2016]. Such fundamentalism can, but need not be religious; there are all sorts of secular extreme ideologies that qualify as varieties of fundamentalism—e.g., certain kinds of neo-Nazism, left-wing political extremism, certain kinds of communism, versions of nationalism, and so on [Hardin 2002]. Moreover, according to a number of scholars, fundamentalism is on the rise [Emerson & Hartman 2006].

The scientific attention has almost entirely focused on fundamentalist *behaviour*, naturally leading to *historical and empirical* research. For instance, the seminal five-volume series *The Fundamentalism Project* [Marty & Appleby 1991-1995] asks such questions as how different fundamentalisms in religions arise and when they lead to violence. Correspondingly, the main models used to *explain why* and *predict when* people display fundamentalist behaviour are spelled out in terms of social and political influences, such as perceived secular threat and lost political influence. The Radicalization Model, for instance, explains the turn to fundamentalist behaviour by appeal to a process of radicalization that involves various social and political factors [HM Government 2009; Sageman 2016]. Increasingly, though, scholars from fundamentalism studies are dissatisfied with these models, since they are often unable to explain why one individual turns to fundamentalism while another in similar conditions does not [Cassam 2018; Sageman 2014; 2016]. Explanations in terms of personality pathology are considered problematic, as are explanations in terms of a process of radicalization in which vulnerable young people are brainwashed into true believers. This leads some fundamentalism experts to claim that research in this field has stagnated for the past dozen years [Sageman 2014; 2016].

This project aims to *deepen our understanding of fundamentalism*, not by additional empirical or historical work, but by rigorous conceptual and normative scrutiny. It focuses on a neglected phenomenon underlying much fundamentalist behaviour: *fundamentalist beliefs*. This is important, because many fundamentalists act from sincere *beliefs* that they are doing the right thing, and the fundamentalism literature has come to acknowledge that fundamentalist beliefs are often in some sense *rational* [e.g., Baurman 2007; Cassam 2018; Sageman 2014]. Some people in the field of fundamentalism studies still claim that terrorists and other fundamentalists suffer from some sort of mental disorder [e.g. Lankford 2013], but the majority view nowadays is that we should consider fundamentalists as non-pathological people who act and think at least *in some sense* rationally [Crenshaw 2011; Horgan 2005; Sageman 2004; 2014; 2016].

Therefore, in order to get a firmer grip on fundamentalism and better be able to normatively assess it, we need an *epistemology and ethics* of fundamentalism. More specifically, we need to better understand what makes these beliefs fundamentalist, how an individual's fundamentalist beliefs relate to those of the group s/he belongs to, what duties fundamentalists have regarding their beliefs, and when they are excused for violating them. This provides a more fine-grained normative-theoretical framework for understanding and assessing fundamentalism in all its facets.

In what follows, I spell out my background motivation for this project and explain why it is important that an epistemology and ethics of fundamentalism be developed (a.1). I then give an analysis of the state-of-the-art in the relevant debates in epistemology and ethics (a.2). Subsequently, I describe in detail both the objectives of my research project as well as the challenges each of the five subprojects faces (a.3).

**a.1 Background Motivation and Importance**

Developing an epistemology and ethics of fundamentalist belief is important, because it breaks new ground in at least three different academic fields that will profit from the multidisciplinary interaction delivered by this project: epistemology, ethics, and fundamentalism studies.

1. *Epistemology* has paid much attention to *positive* epistemic statuses of belief, like rationality, justification, and knowledge [Audi 2011; Moser 2005]. However, there are situations in which beliefs with statuses that are epistemically and morally in some sense *negative* are highly influential. Extreme beliefs, especially fundamentalist beliefs, seem to be among such beliefs. The literature on epistemic virtues has profited much from recent literature on epistemic vice: in order to know what we should aim at, we ought to know what we want to avoid [Baehr 2010; Battaly 2016]. Similarly, if we want to have responsible beliefs, rational beliefs, and knowledge, it can be helpful to know what extreme beliefs and fundamentalist beliefs in particular are. Are extreme beliefs ones of which one is (too) certain, beliefs that few people hold, highly controversial beliefs, beliefs with extreme consequences? One also needed extreme beliefs in order to abolish slavery: beliefs from a minority, that were controversial, and that had drastic social consequences. However, we would not deem those *fundamentalist* beliefs. An epistemology of fundamentalist belief will explore new terrain, shed light on positive epistemic statuses of fundamentalist belief, and unearth various relations between epistemically detrimental phenomena, such as intellectual vices, belief in conspiracy theories, and certain kinds of extreme beliefs.

2. *Ethics* is a second field that will profit from this project. Ethics has almost entirely focused on responsibility for *actions* and *omissions*. Over the last two decades or so, this has changed: philosophers have started to pay attention to responsibility for belief [Goldberg 2018; Nottelmann 2007, Peels 2017a]. This so-called *ethics of belief*-debate will be turned in a new direction by paying attention to *fundamentalist* beliefs. This is needed, because fundamentalists, especially leading figures, do not act purely at random. Rather, they act from a variety of beliefs about a pristine state, beliefs about an evil cause that led to a fall, beliefs about how the original state can be restored, beliefs about the inferior position of certain minorities, and so on [Marty and Appleby 1993a; 1993b]. Ethics will also be enriched by the exploration of various context-dependent obligations and excuses regarding fundamentalist belief. After all, they will normally not be excuses that many ethicists are used to work with, but specifically *doxastic* excuses, like manipulation, indoctrination, cultural difference, peer pressure, and social isolation.

3. The field of *fundamentalism studies* is flourishing, but it is virtually entirely historical and empirical – social, psychological, political – in nature. What is urgently needed is both a philosophical analysis of fundamentalist belief, from which much fundamentalist behaviour issues, and an assessment of how we can hold people responsible for such beliefs, that is, how we can properly praise, blame, or neutrally appraise them for their beliefs [Strawson 1974]. The, by now, seminal series *The Fundamentalism Project* [Marty and Appleby 1991-1995] provides an etiological explanation of words like 'fundamentalism', a political analysis of the relation between fundamentalism and the state, an historical analysis of how fundamentalisms in various countries and religions came about, and so on. More recent studies explore the social causes and consequences of fundamentalism [Bruce 2008] and its various characteristics, such as how it treats women [Ruthven 2004]. This descriptive work is important, but falls short when it comes to a full understanding and assessment of fundamentalism, which requires not only descriptive, but also prescriptive-theoretical insight into fundamentalism, viz. a thorough analysis of individual and group fundamentalist belief and an ethical theory of when and, if so, how we can hold people responsible for such beliefs.

For four reasons, I am especially suited to carry out this project. First, as an analytic philosopher, I have extensive training in the conceptual analysis needed to better understand what fundamentalist beliefs are, which norms of rationality they can (not) meet, and how the social environment affects the (ir)rationality of fundamentalist beliefs. Second, which obligations fundamentalists have regarding their beliefs and when they are excused for violating them are *normative* issues, and philosophical ethics is the proper discipline to address such normative questions.

Philosophers with a background in ethics, like me, are trained in ethical methods, such as developing a reflective equilibrium between intuitions about cases, different principles, and general moral and epistemic values, that are needed to address these normative questions. Third, defending an ethics of fundamentalist beliefs in terms of responsibility, duties, and excuses, requires training in the use of informal logic and thought experiments. These are among the tools that analytic philosophers like me are used to work with. Fourth, much fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism; I have a background in and written on a variety of issues in theology and the science of religion. Moreover, I have written extensively on *responsible* belief, which is in a sense the opposite of fundamentalist belief. Thus, this novel project will be rooted in my earlier work, but explore a whole new terrain.

**a.2 State of the Art in the Relevant Discussions**
I will break down the overview of the state-of-the-art into five subsections. This provides the background for my five research questions and my description of each of the five subprojects in section a.3.

**a.2.1 The Epistemology of Individual Fundamentalist Belief**
The literature on fundamentalism provides detailed historical and empirical work on which beliefs fundamentalists hold. The influential five-volume series *The Fundamentalism Project* (1991-1995) starts with a volume that also explores fundamentalist beliefs in various religions and worldviews [Mark & Appleby 1991]. A large number of studies have followed, both on factual and normative fundamentalist beliefs [e.g., Friedman & Rholes 2007; Hardin 2002; Yelderman et al. 2018]. Moreover, various scales with a variety of psychometric properties have been developed to measure the degree of someone's religious fundamentalism [e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger 2004]. However, a rigorous conceptual and epistemological analysis of the *nature* of fundamentalist belief is absent in the literature: should we think of them in terms of content, degree of certainty, centrality to one's belief system, or various other properties, such as that of being self-enforcing [Hardin 2002]? Islamic epistemology, for instance, provides resources to think that certain extreme beliefs violate norms of moderation in belief formation [Booth 2016; Winter 2006]. What also deserves careful scrutiny is whether we should think of fundamentalist belief in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, as a family resemblance concept (as is often thought to be the case for fundamentalist *behaviour*), or yet in some other way. Also, do religious and non-religious fundamentalist beliefs have enough in common to both be treated as true varieties of fundamentalist belief?

There *has* been significant attention for other epistemically detrimental phenomena, things that from a standpoint of knowing and understanding reality we wish to avoid. I will mention three of them that have not been explored in relation to fundamentalist belief. First, there is *ignorance*. The field of agnotology investigates culturally induced ignorance, in particular the kind of ignorance brought about by the publication of misleading or inaccurate scientific data, such as that regarding the tobacco industry [for a recent introduction, see Proctor and Schiebinger 2008]. Ignorance has also received much attention when it comes to race and the self-understanding of minorities [Medina 2012; Sullivan and Tuana 2007]. Finally, various epistemologists, including myself, have explored the nature and varieties of ignorance [Le Morvan 2011; Peels 2010; 2017b; Peels & Blaauw 2016]. Second, empirical [Pratkanis & Aronson 2001; Tan 2011; Taylor 2004] and some philosophical [Yaffe 2003] research has been carried out regarding *indoctrination* and *brainwashing*. Third, there has been empirical and philosophical attention for belief in *conspiracy theories* [Cassam 2015; Dentith 2017; Pigden 2007].

Third, the field of fundamentalism studies has come to acknowledge that fundamentalist belief can be in some sense rational [Baurman 2007; Cassam 2018; Sageman 2016]. However, it has not yet explored *in virtue of what* it can be rational and *in which particular sense* it can be rational. Epistemologists have paid plenty of attention not only to rationality, but also to other positive epistemic statuses, such as epistemic justification, being evidence-based, being reliably formed, and so on [Alston 1993; 2005]. However, except for one or two studies [Baurman 2007; Cassam 2018] this has not yet

been applied to fundamentalist beliefs. This leaves open the question exactly what epistemic statuses individual fundamentalist belief can have. This project will address that question.

### a.2.2 The Epistemology of Individual and Collective Fundamentalist Belief

Ever since René Descartes (1596-1650) epistemology has long been rather individualistic, focusing on the mental states of the individual in isolation from its social context. This has drastically changed over the last few decades, giving rise to the field of social epistemology [Goldman & Blanchard 2016]. The surge in social epistemology has led, on the one hand, to the analysis of social factors that shape an individual's belief, such as testimony [Lackey 2008], and, on the other, to the analysis of belief and knowledge on a group level, such as the beliefs of courts, boards, governments, and research groups [Brady and Fricker 2016; Klausen 2015; Mathiesen 2006; Tuomela 1995].

Another important recent development in epistemology that bears on the analysis of fundamentalist belief on a group level is that of *vice* epistemology: after the renaissance of Aristotelian virtue ethics [Aristotle 2003] brought about by Alasdair MacIntyre [1981], philosophers turned to the *virtues of the mind*, such as open-mindedness and thoroughness [Zagzebski 1996]. More recently, epistemologists have started to consider the opposites of these virtues: intellectual *vices*. These are intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry [Cassam 2016]. Among the many vices are carelessness, closed-mindedness, conformity, cowardice, dogmatism, gullibility, idleness, insensitivity to detail, intellectual pride, lack of thoroughness, negligence, obtuseness, prejudice, rigidity, and wishful thinking [Baehr 2011; Battaly 2010; 2016].

The two have not yet been brought together, though. What are the conditions under which groups have vices and how do they relate to the vices of the individuals of which the group is composed? This is crucial, for it is widely acknowledged in fundamentalism studies that the group conditions heavily influence the beliefs of the individual that belongs to it [Hardin 2002]. Some empirical work has been done on vices that we find among fundamentalist individuals, such as prejudice and authoritarianism [Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992], but this has yet to be explored on a group level and from a conceptual and epistemological point of view.

Significantly more attention has been paid to two other phenomena that are relevant when it comes to the relation between the beliefs of the individual and those of the group: trust and believing on the basis of authority [Alfano 2016; Faulkner & Simpson 2017; Hawley 2014; Simpson 2018], and peer disagreement [Christensen & Lackey 2013; Feldman 2006; Feldman & Warfield 2010; Frances 2014; Kelly 2005; Machuca 2013]. These issues have not yet been considered in relation to individual and group fundamentalist belief, though. This is important, for fundamentalists beliefs of individuals are often based on the authority of and trust in others in the group [Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992; Hardin 2002]. Disagreement on the truth-value of those fundamentalist beliefs, which is inevitable in Western society, may undermine their rationality.

### a.2.3 The Ethics of Obligations regarding Fundamentalist Belief

Ever since Alston's influential argument from doxastic involuntarism against the deontological conception of epistemic justification [Alston 1989], the ethics of belief has seen a veritable renaissance, especially when it comes to attempts to meet Alston's worry that we lack sufficient voluntary control over our beliefs to have obligations to hold specific beliefs [e.g., Booth 2014; Chuard and Southwood 2009; McHugh 2014; Steup 2012]. Most handbooks in ethics do not yet explore the ethics of belief [Copp 2006; Gensler 2012], but ethicists are starting to pay attention to it in the context of the so-called epistemic condition for responsibility [Robichaud & Wieland 2017].

Relatively few studies have gone beyond addressing Alston's worry as to how we can be responsible for our beliefs, in order to spell out what our obligations regarding our beliefs are. There are a few exceptions, though [Goldberg 2018; Meylan 2013; Nottelmann 2007; Peels 2017a]. However, since they are mostly written by epistemologists, they focus on general epistemic obligations; there is much less attention for general moral obligations regarding our beliefs. Moreover, what none of these studies has done, is to explore which general epistemic and moral obligations are violated in the case

of fundamentalist beliefs. Finally, as these studies acknowledge, some obligations regarding our beliefs are context-specific: they depend on the roles, tasks, commitments, beliefs and evidence one already has, one's social context and so on. Clearly, these context-specific factors will be to a large extent unique in the case of fundamentalist beliefs. Thus, it remains to be investigated which context-specific obligations apply to fundamentalist belief.

**a.2.4 The Ethics of Excuses regarding Fundamentalist Belief**
Ethics has studied the nature of excuses [Brandt 1969] and various problems regarding excuses, such as whether moral ignorance can excuse [Rivera-López 2006]. Ethics has also paid considerable attention to specific excuses, such as the inability to act otherwise [Fischer and Ravizza 1998] and ignorance [Guererro 2007; Harman 2011; Rosen 2003; 2004; Smith 2011; Zimmerman 1986; 1997]. However, the focus has been on excuses for *actions*, not so much on excuses for *beliefs*. There have been a few studies on excuses for belief [Robichaud and Wieland 2017; Van Woudenberg 2009] and one on indoctrination in particular [Yaffe 2003], but these are the exception. Moreover, what needs to be done is that this work be taken a step further by exploring when people are excused for violating obligations regarding *fundamentalist* beliefs.

From a more empirical perspective, we *do* find a large number of studies on excuses for belief, especially the excuses of brainwashing and indoctrination, or, as some scholars prefer to phrase it, thought reform or thought persuasion [Pratkanis & Aronson 2001; Tan 2011; Taylor 2004]. However, this work focuses very much on the context-specific social and political factors, rather than building an ethical theory of when specific excuses hold for fundamentalist beliefs. What fundamentalism studies as a field needs, in order to better understand and assess fundamentalism in all its facets, is a thorough analysis of (1) the various excuses that can hold with respect to fundamentalist beliefs, (2) how they relate to the obligations that fundamentalists are subject to, (3) when excuses hold on an individual level and when they hold on a group level, as well as (4) a carefully developed theory that provides criteria to distinguish which excuses fully or partially hold in specific circumstances.

**a.2.5 Synthesis: An Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalist Belief**
The synthesis combines the main results of subprojects 1-4 into a single epistemological and ethical theory of fundamentalist belief. It follows from the overviews above that no such theory is currently available in epistemology, ethics, or fundamentalism studies, and that it would greatly increase our understanding of responsibility for fundamentalist belief in each of the three fields of epistemology, ethics, and fundamentalism studies.

**a.3 Structure of my Research, Indicating Prospects and Challenges**

The main result of this project will be a detailed epistemology and ethics of fundamentalist belief that complements existing models and explanations of fundamentalism that are based on empirical and historical work. My team and I will answer five main research questions (RQ1-5):

| RQ1 | *What turns a person's extreme beliefs into fundamentalist beliefs and how do they relate to other epistemically detrimental phenomena like narrow-mindedness and belief in conspiracy theories?* |
|---|---|
| RQ2 | *How does the social environment affect the rationality and other epistemic statuses of fundamentalist beliefs of the individual and of the group?* |
| RQ3 | *What are people's general and context-specific moral and epistemic obligations regarding fundamentalist beliefs?* |
| RQ4 | *Under which conditions are people excused for violating their moral and epistemic obligations regarding their fundamentalist beliefs?* |

| RQ5 | *Exactly how does an epistemology and ethics of individual and group fundamentalist belief help us to better understand and assess fundamentalism?* |
| --- | --- |

*Figure 1: Research Questions*

RQ1, to be answered by the PhD and the PI, concerns the epistemology of fundamentalist beliefs of the *individual*. RQ2, to be answered by postdoc 1 (PD1) and the PI, deals with the epistemology of fundamentalist beliefs of *groups of people*. RQ3, to be answered by the PI, and RQ4, to be answered by postdoc 2 (PD2) and the PI, have to do with the *ethics* of fundamentalist belief. Whether an individual or group is blameworthy for having certain fundamentalist beliefs depends on exactly which obligations they have (RQ3) and whether or not they are excused for violating them (RQ4). The final project, to be carried out by me as the PI, draws the threads together by making explicit how the epistemology and ethics of fundamentalist belief helps us to better understand and assess fundamentalism (RQ5). In each of the following subproject descriptions, I specify concrete milestones, referred to as 'MS'. These are crucial intermediate results that indicate progress in the project and that are natural topics for journal publications and conference talks.

**a.3.1 Subproject 1: Conceptualizing Fundamentalist Belief (PhD)**
The main objective of this subproject is *to develop an epistemology of fundamentalist belief of individuals*. It has four steps. First, the PhD and the PI will carry out a careful review of how terms and phrases like 'extreme belief', 'fundamentalist belief', and 'radical belief' are used in the empirical and historical literature on fundamentalism. We will combine this with a conceptual analysis of the notion of fundamentalist belief by spelling what its constituent parts or stereotypical properties are and by mapping its conceptual relations to similar notions, like 'extreme belief', and notions that are in a sense its opposites, such as 'responsible belief', 'common sense belief', and 'widely endorsed belief'. The PhD and I will test this conceptual analysis by applying it to four case studies carefully chosen based on the criteria mentioned in the methodology section below. The result is a detailed conceptual analysis of the notion of extreme belief and that of fundamentalist belief in particular (MS1.1).

Second, the PhD and I will conceptually explore the relations between fundamentalist belief on the one hand and other epistemically detrimental phenomena on the other, such as a variety of intellectual vices, like dogmatism and narrow-mindedness [Baehr 2010; Battaly 2010; 2016; Cassam 2016; Fricker 2007], and belief in conspiracy theories [Cassam 2015; Dentith 2017; Pigden 2007]. These other epistemically detrimental phenomena have received significant attention in epistemology lately, so that the PhD can focus on exploring not so much what they are, but rather exactly how they relate to fundamentalist belief. The PhD will use the four case studies selected for this subproject to test these hypotheses. The result of this part of the subproject will be a conceptual mapping that embeds fundamentalist belief in the epistemic realm and shows its relation to other negative epistemic phenomena and, thus, gives us more insight into the cognitive lives of fundamentalist believers (MS1.2).

Third, the PhD and I will investigate which positive and negative epistemic statuses fundamentalist belief, thus understood, can have: can it be objectively rational, subjectively rational, epistemically justified, reliably formed, reason-responsive, and so on [for an overview of these desiderata, see Alston 2005]? This is important, since it is often claimed nowadays that fundamentalist belief can be rational and that the fundamentalist can act rationally (even though morally wrongly) based on those beliefs [Baurman 2007; Cassam 2018]. It is thus of crucial importance to better understand which epistemic statuses fundamentalist beliefs can (not) have and *how* they can (not) do so. The ideas developed in this part of the first subproject will again be compared with the four case studies and then fine-tuned. The result of all this will be a detailed account that provides an epistemic-normative assessment of individual fundamentalist belief [MS1.3].

Finally, in the fourth year, the PhD will bring these three threads together into a single epistemological theory of fundamentalist belief, laid out in a PhD thesis (MS1.4). Each of these

milestones will be reached in close cooperation with the PI, as well as close cooperation with PD1 who works on the epistemology of fundamentalist beliefs in *groups* rather than *individuals*.

**Prospects**. In answering RQ1, this first subproject creates a firm conceptual basis for understanding fundamentalist belief. This will be useful for grasping the dynamics between individual and group fundamentalist belief (subproject 2). It will also help to get into focus exactly what we (do not) hold fundamentalists responsible for when it comes to their fundamentalist beliefs (subprojects 3 and 4). Each of the milestones will be entirely novel in the epistemological literature and in fundamentalism studies. It will give scholars working on fundamentalism a much firmer grip on what makes certain extreme beliefs fundamentalist beliefs and how they relate to other closely related phenomena that we deem epistemically detrimental, such as various kinds of intellectual vices and belief in conspiracy theories. It thus enables scholars to locate with much more precision the place and role of fundamentalist belief in the epistemic realm.

**Challenges**. The major challenge for this subproject is that there is virtually no literature on the nature of fundamentalist belief. It is also not clear whether it should be understood in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, in terms of a family resemblance, or something else. It is not even clear whether it can be entirely understood without looking at other parts of the cognitive life of the fundamentalist. Much conceptual work will, therefore, have to start from scratch. This challenge can be overcome by rigorously applying the method of conceptual analysis and thorough acquaintance with the epistemological literature on related topics.

### a.3.2 Subproject 2: Individual and Group Fundamentalist Belief (Postdoc 1)

The second subproject will *study the social-epistemic context of fundamentalist belief*, that is, the relation between the individual's fundamentalist beliefs and those of fundamentalist groups. It will shed light on the relation between individual and collective fundamentalist belief by reaching three milestones.

First, an important idea in recent social epistemology is that *groups of people*, such as boards, research groups, and minorities also hold certain beliefs. The same seems true for fundamentalist groups: they seem to hold certain beliefs *as a group* [Bruce 2008]. It is worthwhile to go beyond this widely shared idea and address the question which intellectual virtues and vices fundamentalist groups can display *as groups*. Thus, what would it mean for a group to be narrow-minded, dogmatist, or gullible? This is important, because an individual's beliefs and character traits are heavily influenced by the group the fundamentalist belongs to [Hardin 2002]. PD1 and the PI will latch onto the emerging literature on group virtues and vices. PD1 and I will test our ideas by comparing them with four case studies different from those in subproject 1 (in order to gather more material for comparison). In addition to the criteria from the methodology section, for this subproject, PD1 and the PI will base their selection of the four case studies on the extent to which they display intellectual virtues and vices on the level of the fundamentalist group. The first milestone will be an account of intellectual virtues and vices and their relations that play a role for fundamentalist beliefs of groups (MS2.2).

In the second part, PD1 and the PI will study *under which conditions it is rational to trust a particular authority within a social group*. Trust and authority have received considerable attention in social epistemology [Faulkner & Simpson 2017; Simpson 2018]. The issue is particularly pertinent here, as fundamentalists often rely on a specific authority within their group. Moreover, PD1 and the PI will study to what extent relying on an authority within a group can make both various beliefs and different *features* of those beliefs rational, such as how certain one is of them and how central they are to one's belief system. Social epistemology provides a wide variety of concepts and theories that are helpful in studying this phenomenon, such as that of evidence from a person's testimony [Fricker 2016; Goldberg 2002; 2010]. The result is a detailed theory, backed up by careful argumentation and several thought experiments, as to when it is rational – in relevant senses – for an individual within a fundamentalist group to accept the testimony of a leading figure within that group (MS2.2). PD1 and the PI will compare the results with the role of testimonial evidence in the four case studies selected earlier in this subproject.

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Third, PD1 will address *to what extent fundamentalist belief can still be rational* (and what other epistemic features it can have) *in the face of substantial peer disagreement*. As I pointed out above, social epistemology has been paying *much* attention to peer disagreement. However, it is not clear how we should think of *fundamentalist* beliefs. This is because virtually all fundamentalist beliefs will face substantial disagreement with others, presumably not within the fundamentalist group, but surely in society at large, especially in Western democracies. Does such disagreement undermine their rationality? (After all, it is not the case that we should give up any beliefs that people severely disagree on.) If so, in virtue of what? Is there a difference between whether it undermines the rationality of the *individual's* fundamentalist's beliefs and the *group's* fundamentalist beliefs? What other positive epistemic features can fundamentalist beliefs still have in the face of disagreement if they are not rational? And if they *can* still be rational despite such disagreement, in virtue of what can they be so? The third milestone, to be reached by PD1 and the PI, is a philosophical account of which epistemic properties fundamentalist beliefs can still rightly be said to have in the face of peer disagreement (MS2.3). Again, these results will be compared with four case studies from the same databases selected for MS2.1.

**Prospects**. This subproject has good prospects with respect to feasibility, since it can rely on various theories, concepts, accounts, and arguments that have already been developed over the last two decades or so in social epistemology, such a those regarding group belief, testimonial evidence, and peer disagreement. Since the PI will make sure that PD1 has a background in social epistemology, it is guaranteed that the relevant expertise is brought to the table. Of course, applying all of this to fundamentalist belief will be new. It will give scholars in epistemology and fundamentalism studies new insights into how we should think, both conceptually and normatively, of the relation between fundamentalist beliefs on a group level and fundamentalist beliefs of individuals who are members of those groups.

**Challenges**. It will be a challenge to develop ideas and accounts that do *not* rely on controversial positions in social epistemology, such as, say, the equal weight view in the debate on peer disagreement. On that view, it is *not* rational to maintain one's belief (or not to the same degree) when one's epistemic peers disagree with one [Feldman & Warfield 2010]. This challenge will be met by taking into account at several junctures the specific features of fundamentalist beliefs, partly based on the results of subproject 1.

### a.3.3 Subproject 3: Obligations Regarding Fundamentalist Belief (PI)

The third subproject moves on to a full-blown deontological – in the sense of entailing responsibility – assessment of duties regarding fundamentalist beliefs. The main purpose of this subproject is to *give an account of which obligations regarding their beliefs fundamentalists violate*. The account developed in this subproject will give scholars in epistemology, ethics, and fundamentalism studies a detailed overview of the elements that should be taken into account in assessing a fundamentalist's beliefs and those of a fundamentalist group from the point of duties.

The first question that I as the PI will address is what *general* moral obligations regarding their beliefs fundamentalists violate. Over the last fifteen years or so, the ethics of *belief* has been flourishing. We now find a large number of studies on responsibility for belief [Levy 2007; McCormick 2015], blameworthy belief [Nottelmann 2007], and responsible belief [Goldberg 2018; Peels 2017a]. Many of these explicitly address which obligations we have concerning our beliefs. What is missing both here and in the literature on fundamentalism is an account of which *moral* obligations regarding their beliefs (rather than regarding their actions) fundamentalists violate. The first milestone is reached when I have done precisely that (MS3.1). I will test the ideas developed in this account on the basis of again four different case studies.

The second question I address is which general *epistemic* obligations fundamentalists violate regarding their beliefs. Epistemic duties are distinguished from moral duties in that they arise from such values as truth, the avoidance of falsehood, rational belief, and knowledge, rather than moral values like wellbeing and peace. Examples of epistemic duties regarding one's beliefs are the duty to gather further

evidence regarding highly controversial beliefs, the obligation to resolve inconsistencies among one's beliefs, and the norm to reconsider beliefs that one deems unreliably formed [Nottelmann 2007; Peels 2017a]. This second part of this subproject will categorize the general obligations regarding belief and explore which kinds of general obligations fundamentalists violate, both individually and on a group level (MS3.2). Again, I will test the hypotheses that flow from this on the basis of again four different case studies.

Third, the literature on the ethics of belief explicitly acknowledges that some obligations regarding beliefs are crucially context-dependent [Goldberg 2018; McCormick 2015; Peels 2017a]. Contexts include one's job, tasks, epistemic environment, one's evidence, and the beliefs one already holds. The second step of this subproject is to make this work operational by applying it to a person's context-specific obligations regarding fundamentalist beliefs that usually arise in epistemically challenging scenarios, such as growing up in a fundamentalist community, suffering from peer pressure, and facing poverty. Thus, the third part of this subproject will investigate what context-*specific* obligations fundamentalists violate and provide a scheme of relevant context-specific obligations. Moreover, I will explore what fundamentalists' obligations are when their moral and epistemic, or moral and context-specific, etc. duties conflict with each other. The third milestone to be reached will, therefore, be a detailed account of fundamentalists' overall or all-things-considered duties that takes context-specific duties into account (MS3.3). Again, these ideas will be tested by applying them to the four case studies selected in the first part of this subproject.

**Prospects**. This subproject will provide crucial building blocks for an ethics of fundamentalist belief. It will do so by giving the first detailed account of general moral and epistemic as well as context-specific obligations that fundamentalists are subject to with respect to their beliefs. This is crucial in order to assess to what extent we can hold fundamentalists responsible for their beliefs (and for acting upon those beliefs). The other crucial part concerns the conditions under which one is excused for holding such fundamentalist beliefs (addressed in subproject 4).

### a.3.4 Subproject 4: Excuses for Fundamentalist Belief (Postdoc 2)

It is one thing to violate an obligation; this is explored in detail in subproject 3. It is quite another thing to be *blameworthy* for the violation of such obligations. After all, one is blameworthy for violating an obligation only if one is *not* excused for that [Zimmerman 1988; 1996; 2008]. It is widely taken, though, that fundamentalists are often blameworthy for their beliefs [Cassam 2018; Shupe 2011]. Thus, a viable ethics of fundamentalist belief should be able to explain when someone is excused for fundamentalist beliefs and when not. The fourth subproject, therefore, studies the conditions under which fundamentalists can be excused for violating certain general moral, general epistemic, and context-specific obligations regarding their beliefs.

First, PD2 will explore to what extent excuses from the philosophy of law translate to moral and epistemic excuses for fundamentalist belief (MS4.1). This is important, because the philosophy of law has addressed whether indoctrination and brainwashing can count as *legal* excuses for holding certain beliefs and for certain behaviour [Ginsburg & Richardson 1998]. To get a full-blown account of moral and epistemic excuses for fundamentalist beliefs, this project will have to go beyond excuses in the (philosophy of) law. This is because there might be legal reasons to excuse someone where there are no such moral or epistemic reasons and vice versa.

Second, PD2 and the PI will provide a detailed theory of various doxastic excuses for fundamentalist belief (MS4.2). We will pay attention to general excuses, like ignorance [Peels 2017b; Peels & Blaauw 2016]. However, we will pay special attention to excuses that seem primarily directed at giving rise to extreme beliefs, including fundamentalist beliefs, such as manipulation, cultural difference, peer pressure, social isolation, and indoctrination [Yaffe 2003]. We will test the ideas that we develop regarding excuses for fundamentalist beliefs on the basis of again four different case studies.

Third, it is one thing to claim that one can be excused for holding fundamentalist beliefs and spelling out what such excuses amount to. It is another thing to be able to actually *distinguish* which excuses hold or to what extent they hold in specific circumstances. We will, therefore, go beyond mere

theoretical consideration and provide a detailed set of criteria (stereotypical properties) that can be used to identify which specific doxastic excuses hold in cases of fundamentalist beliefs (MS4.3). This will, again, be thoroughly informed and illustrated by way of the four case studies selected earlier in this subproject.

**Prospects**. This subproject will especially enrich ethics and fundamentalism studies by providing an account of the conditions under which someone or a group of people is excused for holding certain fundamentalist beliefs, such as indoctrination. It will complement existing empirical and historical research on brainwashing, indoctrination, and other excuses, with a rigorous conceptual analysis and balanced ethical evaluation of such excuses that is thoroughly informed by related work in the philosophy of law and empirical reality, based on four case studies. Moreover, it will provide a detailed set of criteria that can be used to assess whether someone is actually excused for holding fundamentalist beliefs.

**a.3.5 Subproject 5. Synthesis: An Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism**

The aim of this subproject, carried out by me as the PI, is *to spell out how this new epistemology and ethics of fundamentalist belief helps us to understand and assess fundamentalism*. More specifically, the two objectives are: (a) to provide a detailed account, both on an individual level and a group level, of the positive or negative epistemic (e.g., irrationality) and moral status (e.g. blameworthiness) of fundamentalist belief; (b) to spell out how understanding the rationality of and responsibility for fundamentalist beliefs increases the scientific and scholarly understanding of fundamentalist belief and the fundamentalist behaviour to which it leads. The methods are conceptual analysis and reflective equilibrium, and I will use several of the case studies selected in subprojects 1-4.
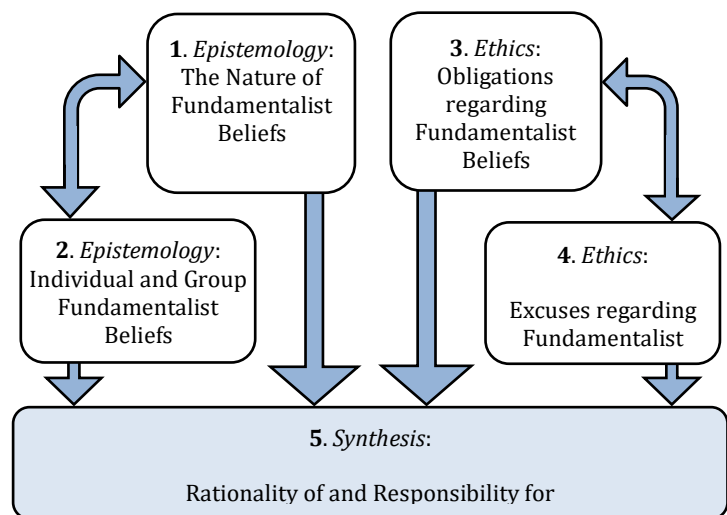


*Table 2: Subprojects and their relations*

In doing this, I will also develop various directions of thought for how can we can prevent, mitigate, and lessen fundamentalist beliefs. I will not give recommendations for preventing fundamentalist *behaviour*, because that is not the focus of this project (even though preventing fundamentalist *belief* will often indirectly prevent fundamentalist *behaviour*). How to translate these directions of thought into specific measures is up to politicians and other policy makers. However, I will make these directions of thought available to them via articles on the website, the popular book, the opinion pieces, the symposium for a general audience, and the white paper.

**Prospects**. Since this final subproject combines the insights of the previous projects into a single epistemological and ethical theory, it will bring the core ideas together into one overarching theory. This theory can fruitfully be consulted by epistemologists, ethicists, and scholars from fundamentalism studies. The ideas, hypotheses, arguments, and illustrations by way of various case studies will be brought together into a single monograph. This will make it easier for scholars working on fundamentalism to get a good overview of and grip on this epistemology and ethics of fundamentalism and how it enriches and deepens existing empirical and historical work on fundamentalist beliefs.

**2. Methodology**

This project will employ three distinct methods.

1. In order to ensure that the four subprojects' deliverables will be firmly embedded in the literature and provide novel contributions, each of them will start with a thorough *literature review* stage of the relevant writings in epistemology, ethics, philosophy of law, and the emerging interdisciplinary field of fundamentalism studies. An exception to this is subproject 3, since it is carried out by me and I am already familiar with the literature on obligations regarding belief, given my earlier extensive work on this. Closely related to this, each of subprojects 1-4 will apply the ideas developed to four *case studies*, a total of sixteen case studies, using a *normative-theoretical analysis* [Radder 1996]. I have used these two methods before, for instance in my work on replication in the humanities [Peels & Bouter 2018a; 2018b; 2018c]. In order to make the results of the literature review and the analyses of the case studies as fruitful as possible, I will create a database of 'notes and quotes' via a web interface that is accessible to all project members. It will also be used to distribute other work during the project. Moreover, I will set up a website with regular updates about important findings and publications.

2. I will also employ the traditional method of analytic philosophy and mainstream (social) epistemology: *conceptual analysis* informed by common sense, intuitions, and thought experiments [see Daly 2010; Cappelen, Gendler, Hawthorne Strawson 2016; Strawson 1992]. This method is particularly suitable for addressing the conceptual and normative issues about belief, rationality, and justification. This method is especially important for the first subproject, since subproject 1 lays some of the conceptual groundwork that will be employed in the other subprojects, but it will also be employed in projects 2-4. The PI has successfully used conceptual analysis on previous occasions in order to provide accounts of 'luck' [Peels 2015; 2019], 'belief', 'responsibility', and 'responsible belief [Peels 2017a] and 'scientism' [Peels 2018]. I will now apply the same method to concepts such as 'extreme beliefs' and 'fundamentalism'.

3. The normative parts of the project, especially in subprojects 3 and 4, employ the method of establishing a *reflective equilibirium*. This method is widely used nowadays in normative philosophy, especially ethics [see, for instance, Cappelen, Gendler, Hawthorne 2016; Scanlon 1998; 2002; Schroeter 2004]. It consists in working back and forth among our considered judgments about particular scenarios, the general rules that govern them, and the values we take to bear on those judgments and principles, revising each of these elements until we have reached an acceptable coherence among them. I will use both a narrow reflective equilibrium, that is confined to Western democratic values, such as autonomy and universality, and a wider reflective equilibrium, that also uses different values, and will compare the results. I have successfully employed this method in my discussion of moral luck [Peels 2015; 2019] and obligations regarding belief [Peels 2017a]. I will now apply this same method to a new area, viz. the ethics of fundamentalist beliefs.

The team members will, of course, also make use of various theories and arguments that have already been developed in the literature and that might bear on the issues under consideration, such as various theories regarding testimonial evidence and peer disagreement in social epistemology [Goldman & Blanchard 2016]. The concepts, theses, and arguments developed in this project will be put to the test by subjecting them to criticisms during review processes, at four international workshops, and at one international conference. These criticisms will be provided by peers from such disciplines as ethics, epistemology, philosophy of law, and social scientists and historians working on fundamentalism. Their comments and feedback will provide the checks and balances.

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