

Cassam, Quassim. *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis*.  
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Quassim Cassam is well-known for his work on, among other things, self-knowledge, conspiracy theorizing, perception, and epistemic vices. Those familiar with his writings will recognize important ideas and approaches that can be found in his earlier publications in his latest work on extremism and terrorism. He has now brought many of his ideas on extremism together in an overarching philosophical theory of extremism that, along the way, also touches on fundamentalism, fanaticism, radicalism, and terrorism.

As far as I can see, this is the first major work in the philosophy of extremism. That is surprising, for extremism is not exactly a novel phenomenon. In fact, arguably, the history of the twentieth century is a history of extremism in various guises: communism, fascism, and other kinds of totalitarianism—only to be succeeded by the events of 9/11. Even more importantly, it should be rather clear that the phenomenon of extremism raises a whole host of philosophical questions, particularly epistemological and ethical ones: What sort of a thing is extremism: a set of beliefs, a collection of affections, a series of actions, a combination of these, or yet something else? Can one be an extremist without being violent? Is being an extremist primarily a matter of holding certain beliefs; believing in certain ways; having certain mindsets, dispositions, or preoccupations; or performing actions of a specific kind? Does extremism necessarily come with cognitive vices? What exactly is morally and epistemically wrong with extremism? Is the notion of extremism inherently normative, or can we come up with an accurate but purely descriptive analysis? How should we conceptually distinguish extremism from fundamentalism, terrorism, fanaticism, radicalism, and other closely related phenomena? How can it be differentiated from various benign phenomena that are also extreme in various senses, such as Greenpeace or the civil rights movement in the United States in the sixties? Is extremism necessarily religious, or can it also be secular? Should we analyze extremism in terms of stereotypical properties, a family resemblance, INUS conditions, or yet something else? Can extremism be explained, and if so, on what level or which levels: the macro level (religions, political and social factors, economic circumstances), the meso level (one's family and friends, the groups one belongs to), or the micro level (individual character traits, religiosity, life story, narratives, reasons)?

We can only guess why the topic has been neglected by philosophers—at least analytic philosophers—for so long. As Cassam himself points out, analyzing extremism—perhaps in opposition to such things as knowledge and responsibility—cannot be done from the armchair: one needs to take a staggering amount of empirical and historical work on extremism into account. It is clear from the book that Cassam himself has done so extensively. And, of course, fields like social and political epistemology that go beyond traditional issues like the analysis of knowledge are relatively recent. Now that epistemologists and ethicists are paying attention to disagreement, testimony, epistemic virtues and vices, group belief,

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epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, and the like, it is only natural to also turn to the philosophy—and in particular the epistemology and ethics—of extremism.

This book stands out from much existing work on extremism in at least three ways. First, central to the book is the distinction between ideological extremists, methods extremists, and psychological extremists. *Ideological* extremists are those who embrace a position that is extreme along one or multiple dimensions, which is why Cassam calls his view the “Menu Conception of ideological location.” Politically, for instance, extremists are to the extreme left or to the extreme right in ideological space, they are unequivocally committed to it, and their position is totalizing. Or they have extreme views on the use of violence or on issues related to authority, order, and discipline. *Methods* extremists use extreme methods in order to reach their objectives. Those methods may but need not be violent. Of course, the use of violence is sometimes necessary. Extremists, though, use violence for unjust causes (where viable alternatives are available), disproportionate violence, or violence against innocents. *Mindset* or *psychological* extremism concerns particular preoccupations, such as those with alleged victimhood, catastrophe, a mythic past, purity, virtue, imaginary persecution, and humiliation. The idea that these preoccupations play an important role in extremism is novel and helpful. Psychological extremism also has to do with affections, such as desiring another person’s punishment, and violent passions. It comes with specific attitudes, such as regarding all compromises rotten. It also tends to be accompanied by what Cassam calls Manicheism, a strong sense of dualism between good and evil in the world. And, finally, psychological extremism usually or maybe even always goes together with specific cognitive styles, such as conspiracy thinking. This three-fold distinction between different kinds of extremism that can but need not be co-exemplified in a person or group is much needed. Some scholars in the field mistakenly think that extremism is necessarily violent. But methods can be extreme without being violent. In fact, one can be an extremist without being a methods extremist. The distinction is, therefore, highly clarifying and helpful: it gives us a much better grip on the phenomenon of extremism, its varieties, and the realms of life it can impact.

Second, the book aims to take extremists seriously in an important sense of the word. By that I mean that Cassam explores the phenomena that the extremist himself appeals to in explaining his behavior: his beliefs, his reasons, his narratives, his aims and purposes. I say “he” and “his,” but, of course, there are also female extremists. Yet males, especially when it comes to violent extremism, seem to be in the majority among extremists. Paying attention to the first-person perspective or subjectivity, as it is also called in the literature, of the extremist might seem obvious and commonsensical, but it is more remarkable than one might initially think. Scholars of extremism and terrorism have often sought to explain away extremist behavior in terms of various social, economic, political, cultural, and sometimes even psychiatric and other medical factors, overlooking or discarding the first-person perspective of the extremist.

The failure of various attempts after 9/11 to explain these phenomena in terms of ideology (religion generally or Islam specifically) has made such third-person approaches even more prominent. Adam Lankford has argued that people turn to terrorism and extremism because they suffer from psychological trauma.

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Manni Crone has defended the view that most terrorists have a criminal background. Sara Savage has championed the view that terrorists and extremists have various medical defects. Of course, these are rough characterizations that cannot do full justice to the complexity of their accounts. Yet common to all these explanations is that they pay little attention to motivational agency, that is, to the beliefs, religiosity, and other subjectivities of those engaged in extreme actions. Such third-person perspective explanations have been severely criticized by, among others, John Horgan, especially for lack of empirical adequacy and predictive power. Some leading scholars, like Marc Sageman, even speak of a “stagnation” in these fields. Yet such explanations remain influential in the fields of fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism studies.

Of course, Cassam does not reject these factors as explanatorily irrelevant. Surely, they can be triggers, drivers, enabling conditions, or determinants, but they cannot as such provide a full explanation: extremists are often relatively normal, rational, healthy human beings—this is sometimes referred to as the “normality hypothesis”—and we need to take their perspective on things into account if we are to understand, explain, and prevent extremism, and similarly for purposes of deradicalization. This is a position that scholars who have been doing empirical and historical work, such as Lorne Dawson, Beatrice de Graaf, John Horgan, and Nikki Sterkenburg, have advocated and pursued over the past few years. Cassam follows this route. The book is deeply empirically informed, and Cassam works with various case studies at crucial junctures, such as that of the devoted Nazi Reinhard Heydrich, the Jordanian pilot who was burned alive by ISIS fighters, and the Oklahoma bombing by Timothy McVeigh in 1995. However, he differs from these psychologists, sociologists, and historians in that he brings philosophical resources to bear on the debate.

Third, the book does not shy away from defining crucial terms normatively. We saw that in Cassam’s earlier work as well, for instance, in his book *Conspiracy Theories*, in which he defines “Conspiracy Theories” (with capitals) like those of David Icke, as opposed to “conspiracy theories” (like Watergate), as theories that are “unlikely to be true,” “implausible by design,” such that “it isn’t usually sensible to *believe* that they are true,” “based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence,” and “speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern” (Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* [Cambridge: Polity, 2019], 7, 16, 28). Among various reasons to pursue such normative definitions is the fact that it is hard, maybe impossible, to properly distinguish extremism from phenomena that are in a sense also extreme but that are benign rather than morally and epistemically harmful, such as Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement and the African National Congress that fought apartheid. In this book, we find similar normative definitions of extremism, fanaticism, radicalization, and fundamentalism. He defines “violent extremism” in terms of “unjust causes,” “using violence when there are viable alternatives,” “using disproportionate violence,” and “using violence against innocents” (64); the fanatic has a “contempt for other people’s ideals and interests that is *unwarranted*,” and his or her own ideals are “perverted” (130). Clearly, phrases like these are normative and more specifically morally negatively laden terms. Other terms in the book are intentionally

defined neutrally, such as “radicalism”—and that is, of course, a normative choice itself.

I think that Cassam is right that proper definitions of such phenomena as extremism, fanaticism, fundamentalism, and terrorism are needed. First, there is much confusion in the literature on these phenomena: Does fundamentalism come with a disposition to use violence or not? Is extremism a belief set, or is it more than that? Are all terrorists extremists or not? Second, it will make a difference to various government policies, for instance, whether or not Extinction Rebellion is classified as an extremist organization. It was classified as such by the British counterterrorism police in 2020—wrongly, according to Cassam. Third, in quantitative but also in qualitative research, we need definitions that are operationalizable. This third and final reason also provides a challenge for Cassam’s accounts of these extreme phenomena since, as we saw, they involve various normative notions and it is not clear how these normative notions can be operationalized. It is here that we find a certain tension in the book: the volume is meant to help the empirical debate to take important steps further by offering conceptual clarification, but then the definitions and analyses are such that empirical scholars will have some trouble actually using them. Of course, much of the conceptual work is still highly beneficial, such as the threefold distinction between ideological, methods, and mindset extremism. But the normative dimension of each definition will undoubtedly provide a challenge. How does one translate something like “perverted ideals” or “disproportionate violence” to interviews, questionnaires, and various measurement tools? (I have further methodological worries, but I address them in a separate piece, forthcoming in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.)

Cassam’s analyses provide important insights, particularly into phenomena that are often overlooked in the literature, such as extremists’ preoccupations. His work is a call for others to join the project of developing a philosophy of extremism. If Cassam is right that these notions are inevitably normatively laden, it should be clear that epistemologists and ethicists have important roles to play in studying extremism. It equally calls for empirical scholars to take notice of the conceptual work done here and follow up on it in qualitative and quantitative studies. Can we operationalize each of these notions? Can we construe scales for mindset, methods, and ideological extremism—in other words, can we reliably measure them? If Cassam and others are right that we ought to take extremists seriously when they claim that they act for reasons and based on beliefs of various kinds, how does that relate to other first-person factors that are often appealed to, such as affections and passions, probably grievances in particular? And can we properly integrate such first-person explanations with third-person explanations in terms of social, political, economic, and ideological factors? Do these conceptualizations have ramifications for practical matters, such as prevention strategies and deradicalization programs? Cassam’s book provides an excellent starting point for answering these fascinating and important questions.

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