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Normativity in analysing extremism and fundamentalism: a reply to Quassim Cassam's *Extremism*

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the role of normativity in defining extremism and evaluates Cassam's understanding of fundamentalism.

KEYWORDS

Conceptual analysis;
definition; extremism;
fanaticism; fundamentalism;
normativity

Introduction

Quassim Cassam's *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2021) is an extremely welcome addition to the literature on extremism: it provides rigorous definitions of extremism and related phenomena like fanaticism and fundamentalism; it explores in detail the complex relations between them; it takes the first-person perspective of extremists seriously by understanding extremist behaviour partly in terms of extremist beliefs, reasons, preoccupations, and narratives; and it provides highly useful distinctions, such as that between ideological extremism, methods extremism, and mindset extremism. It has set the scene for future philosophical work on extremism that aims to take the empirical literature seriously. My more critical comments in this reply build on Cassam's insights and are meant to help us move forward in answering the challenging questions that he has put on the table.

Normativity in analyses of extreme phenomena

One of the most striking features of the book is its normative approach to defining extremism, fanaticism, and radicalisation. It is bold but not unapologetic in doing so; it gives us reasons to think that such a normative approach is inevitable. Those familiar with Cassam's work will recognise that this is a recurring theme. Earlier, in analysing conspiracy theorising, he defined a "Conspiracy Theory" as "unlikely to be true", "implausible by design", "based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence", and "speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern" (Cassam 2019, 7, 16, 28).

Among the various reasons to pursue such normative definitions is, according to Cassam, the fact that without such normativity, it is hard or maybe even impossible to properly distinguish extremism from extreme but benign phenomena. Here, we can think of things like Martin Luther King's civil rights movement and the African National Congress (ANC) that fought apartheid, movements that were extreme but not

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epistemically or morally harmful. In Cassam's *Extremism*, we find normative definitions of extremism, fanaticism, and radicalisation. Of course, the use of violence is sometimes necessary, but extremists use violence for "unjust causes", "when there are viable alternatives", they use "disproportionate violence", or they use it "against innocents" (p. 64). Extremists have a "preoccupation with imaginary persecution, or a disproportionate or otherwise inappropriate response to real persecution" (p. 96).

Mindset extremists are "insufficiently discriminating" about compromises and "have other unjustified beliefs" (p. 104). He defines "fanatics" as those who

have *unwarranted contempt* for other people's ideals and interests, are willing to trample on those ideals and interests in pursuit of their own *perverted ideals*, and impose their ideals on others, by force if necessary. Fanatics are *unwilling to think critically* about their ideals because they regard them as indubitable. However, they are willing to sacrifice themselves and others in pursuit of their ideals. (p. 132 italics mine)

Clearly, "unwarranted contempt", "perverted ideals", and "unwilling to think critically" are normative and more specifically morally negatively laden terms. Other terms are intentionally defined neutrally, such as "radicalism" – and that is, of course, a normative choice itself.

Rigorous definitions of phenomena like "extremism" are desperately needed. In 2020, the British counter-terrorism police classified Extinction Rebellion as extremist – wrongly, according to many. Policies are based on what counts as extremism and what not. Yet, the explicitly normative approach Cassam advocates raises at least two distinct worries.

First, the book is meant to provide conceptual clarity in a debate that is almost exclusively empirical and historical; more conceptual philosophical and theological approaches are hard to find in the study of extremism. However, in order to make Cassam's definitions and analyses fruitful for empirical work, we should probably be able to *operationalise* the core definitions, particularly in quantitative work. However, exactly how can we do so if they are normative all the way down? Of course, in, say, a questionnaire one can explore whether respondents *consider* an ideal perverted or the use of particular violence disproportionate, but clearly that would be different from claiming that they *are* perverted and disproportionate. Maybe this challenge can be met by rigorously stipulating what the researchers in question consider to be disproportionate violence or a perverted ideal so that the normative assumptions are at least transparently laid out and others can see to what extent they agree and what the ramifications are, for instance, for one's scope of "extremism" and "fanaticism".

Second, in the book, there is relatively little by way of explicit methodological exposition of how the author goes about seeking definitions of crucial terms. This is not to deny that Cassam makes some insightful comments about how one should seek analyses of extremism and related phenomena. He points out, for instance, that "armchair reflection of the kind favoured by many philosophers cannot, on its own, uncover the nature of the extremist mindset. Philosophical claims about extremism require empirical support" (p. 88). Yet, apart from such incidental remarks, there is little by way of a systematic methodological explanation. In many cases, he takes a particular example and just assumes that that is a paradigm case of the phenomenon in question, as for instance, Reinhold Heydrich for fanaticism or the Khmer Rouge for extremism.

I find this somewhat problematic, partly because I would surely consider Heydrich a paradigm case of an *extremist*, but not of a *fanatic*. For instance, he seems to have lacked the required affective zeal (for that notion and its relation to fanaticism, see Townsend et al. 2022). Undoubtedly, he was highly ideological, cruel, cold, and merciless; but none of those things seem truly distinctive to fanaticism. In other cases, he makes assumptions about the nature of a phenomenon, or he just posits certain things that the reader may not share. For instance, fanatics “trample on the ideals and interests of other people” (p. 141). But why think that is an important characteristic of fanaticism?

All of this clearly has to do with what in epistemology has come to be known as the problem of the criterion, as Roderick Chisholm (1973) and others called it. The problem originally arose from the analysis of what knowledge is: does one start with what one considers to be particular cases of knowledge or with general principles and ideas about what knowledge requires? Mutatis mutandis the same applies to phenomena like extremism: does one depart from intuitions about particular cases or ideas about general conditions for extremism? Closely related to this, Cassam is rarely explicit about what desiderata the definitions should meet. Here, we can think of *accuracy* (the scope of phenomena it is meant to capture), *precision* (how rich and detailed it should be), *fairness* (to what extent it does justice to the people involved and how it does so), *clarity* (how clear and univocal the notions are that the definition appeals to), and *fecundity* (how fruitfully it can be utilised in empirical research).

I suggest that this second problem can be overcome by complementing it with other approaches that jointly provide a sound methodological basis. One could base one’s analyses, for instance, on extensive scoping reviews, so that they are firmly embedded in existing use while also going beyond it (they would be so-called *explicative* definitions then), the range of cases on which they are built could be broader, the criteria or desiderata for the selection of such cases could be made transparent and motivated, and so on. Of course, all this could not be covered in a single volume. This methodological remark can then also be read as an encouragement for others to join the project of analysing extremism and its conceptual neighbors—rigorously and on a solid evidential basis.

Extremism and fundamentalism

One of those conceptual neighbours is fundamentalism. A central question in the literature on fundamentalism is whether there are not just religious but also non-religious or secular varieties of fundamentalism. In other words, should we count as fundamentalist not only early twentieth-century strident Protestant evangelicalism, Salafi Jihadism, and RSS Hindu fundamentalism (which is actually a blend of religious and ethno-national phenomena), but also, say, neo-Nazism, extreme environmentalism, or market fundamentalism, as numerous scholars have done in the literature?

Cassam rightly points out that the cult of the text – that is, seeking external security in allegedly indubitable and infallible fundamentals as to be found in literal-historical interpretations of holy texts, like the Bible and the Quran – is a characteristic property of fundamentalism. He is right that some extremist and fanaticist movements like certain kinds of Marxism tend to exemplify it, but that others, like fascists, do not – even though,

of course, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Anders Breivik's *Manifesto 2083: A European Declaration of Independence* are held in high regard in these circles. However, he concludes on that basis that secular movements like these cannot be fundamentalist.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it works only if we treat properties like the cult of the text as necessary conditions for fundamentalism. It is widely acknowledged in the fundamentalism literature, though, that it is best approached as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept and various authors have developed this idea in some detail (e.g. Droogers 2005; Marty and Appleby 1991; Almond, Sivan, and Scott Appleby 1995; Almond, Scott Appleby, and Sivan 2003, 90–115; Pfürtner 1997, 107–18). The idea is that some things in life, particularly certain social constructions, are related to one another not by sharing a collection of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, but by overlapping similarities, none of which they all have (Wittgenstein 1953, §§66-69).

In other words, a movement is fundamentalist just in case it has *enough* of these stereotypical properties. Given the ambiguity of “enough of”, it follows straight away that there is, of course, a grey area: some are paradigm cases of fundamentalism, others are clearly non-fundamentalist cases, yet others are in-between and are usually called boundary cases. Here are some examples of stereotypical properties that are widely acknowledged to be characteristic of fundamentalism:

- It is reactionary towards modernity, as embodied in natural science, liberal ethics, globalism, and historical criticism.
- Paradoxically, it is itself highly modern, both in seeking certainty in fundamentals in an uncertain world, and in the means it employs to reach its audience: internet, social media, and videos.
- It has an authoritarian structure.
- It has a negative view of the outgroup, often resulting in othering, hatred, and sometimes even violence.
- It frames reality in Manicheistic terms or at least in morally dualistic terms: good and evil are two grand forces fighting each other in the world and one is either on the good side or on the bad side.
- It says that the world's history can be understood in terms of the following narrative: there once was a perfectly good paradisaical state, then there was a fall that led to its loss, and we are now under a duty to restore the original situation.

It should be clear that neo-Nazi and other fascist movements exemplify most of these properties. It is reactionary towards certain modern developments, like migration and globalisation; it is modern in the means it employs to reach its audience; it has an hierarchical and authoritarian structure; To others those of the outgroup and has a disposition to use violence; the world is thought of as a battle between nationalists and globalist left-wing country-betraying progressives; and it understands world history in terms of a perfect past in which, say, Europe was populated merely by white Caucasians, things then went down the drain due to the fall of migration after the Second World War, resulting in the failure of multicultural society which we should make undone as soon as possible. Of course, the way these properties play out in practice differs drastically from movement to movement; in many ways, for instance, Wahhabism

and neo-Nazism are opposites. Yet, family resemblance analyses like these show their crucial similarities and give us solid reason to include secular varieties among fundamentalisms.

This not only questions Cassam's claim that all fundamentalisms are religious; it also raises important worries for his own analysis of extremism. First, if fundamentalism can properly be analysed in terms of a family resemblance, why should not we pursue a similar analysis for extremism? Second, if fundamentalism can accurately be analysed in purely descriptive, non-normative terms (our list contains no pejorative elements), why should not that also hold for extremism? There are plenty of opportunities for follow-up work here, then, and the book can rightly be read as an invitation for others to join the project of developing and applying a philosophy of extremism.

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