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How accounting for extremism’s different guises remains challenging

Extremism: A philosophical analysis, by Quassim Cassam, London, Routledge, 2022, ix+243 pp., £17.99, ISBN 9780367343873

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BOOK REVIEW

How accounting for extremism's different guises remains challenging

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In his stimulating and engaging book *Extremism: A philosophical analysis* (2022), Quassim Cassam develops a new philosophical account of extremism, the first in analytic philosophy, in which he identifies three types: ideological; methods; and psychological extremism. He relates the account to closely associated phenomena, such as fanaticism, radicalism, and fundamentalism and to questions of explanation and intervention: why do people become extremists and what are fruitful strategies to counter extremism? As such, Cassam provides an excellent overview of topics most relevant to extremism and of their connections. Additionally, the book stands out in laying bear the difficulties in giving an account of extremism, and in its boldness in giving such an account anyway, while providing intricate arguments along the way.

In addressing a politically and socially highly relevant topic, the book fits neatly with Cassam's earlier work. Since *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Cassam, 2014), Cassam's research has moved to topics and approaches relevant to how human beings actually live and engage with each other, addressing concepts such as self-knowledge, intellectual vice, conspiracy theories, terrorism and now also extremism. In doing so, *Extremism*, like Cassam's earlier works such as *Conspiracy Theories* (Cassam, 2019) and *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political (Cassam, 2019)*, demonstrates how theoretical philosophical analysis can be fruitfully brought to bear on societal concerns. Cassam's reflections are not abstract but plunged in historical and contemporary examples and developments, and he shows how political issues, such as UK's *Prevent* strategy, depend on how extremism is understood. In line with his analysis of conspiracy theories and terrorism, Cassam's analysis of extremism is highly normative: it is, in part, defined by intrinsically epistemically or morally bad features.

In this review, I focus on the three types of extremism delineated by Cassam and raise some methodological concerns. The distinction between types of extremism takes away much conceptual confusion surrounding the term. It clarifies different ways in which one can be an extremist and illuminates the natural but not necessary connection to violence.

The first type of extremism is ideological extremism (Chapter 2). The question which ideology is extremist is notoriously difficult to answer, especially in non-relativistic terms. Cassam starts his analysis of classifying ideologies by placing them in *ideological space*, in which different political ideologies can be placed along ideological dimensions such as a left-right spectrum. The position in space determines extremism: the more an ideology should be placed at the fringes of the dimension, the more extremist it is.

Cassam discusses two main problems with this approach. What is the nature of the spectrum and what determines where an ideology is placed on the spectrum? Consider the political left-right spectrum. What determines whether an ideology is left or right, and more to the middle or to the edge of the spectrum? Cassam introduces the 'Menu Conception of ideological location' to tackle this issue (p. 45). Location is determined 'by questions about the size and role of the state, private property, freedom, human rights, democracy, justice, equality, nationalism, and free speech' (p. 45). But as Cassam himself acknowledges, this merely passes the buck: what if some answers reveal a moderate position and others an extreme position? And what determines which questions should be included? These problems are only reiterated by Cassam's observation that ideologies differ in multiple ways, not just on a left-right spectrum but also on a Pro-Violence spectrum and Authoritarian spectrum (pp. 53–58).

The second type of extremism is methods extremism (Chapter 3). The basic idea is that persons or social movements can be labeled 'extremist' in virtue of using extreme methods in pursuit of a political objective. Extreme methods need not (e.g., hunger strike) but often are violent. However, not all violence, understood as direct physical violence (p. 63), counts as an extreme method. The trick clearly is how to draw the line. Cassam's solution is analogous to the one used in ideological extremism, namely introducing a list of relevant questions. Among these questions are the following: 'Was violence employed in a *just* cause? … Was violence *necessary* to attain the objective for which it was employed? … Was the violence *proportionate*? … Were those against whom the violence was directed *legitimate* targets?' (pp. 79–80. Italics added.) Cassam's careful discussion brings out the complexity of classifying violence, specifically that classifying violence merges with evaluating it, as the previous questions exemplify. The result is that calling violence extreme coincides with *condemning* it.

Psychological extremism is the third type of extremism (Chapter 4). A person or group can be an extremist by having an extremist mind-set. A mind-set can be understood as a pattern of thinking and motivation that determines how events or situations are interpreted, how questions are answered (in which frame, how evidence is evaluated, etc.), and which courses of action seem feasible or needed. A mind-set is thus someone's *outlook* (p. 84): their way of relating to what is happening in their lives and the world around them.

An extremist mind-set contains different elements: preoccupations with purity, victimhood, and humiliation, among others (pp. 91–96); emotions such as disproportionate anger, inappropriate resentment, and self-pity (pp. 96–100); attitudes (understood as likes/dislikes), namely pro-violence, aversity to compromise, and intolerance (pp. 100–109); and thinking styles, most important of which is a strongly dualistic light/dark or good/evil thinking (so-called Manicheism, pp. 105), which leads to Othering, and other forms, such as conspiracy and apocalyptic thinking (pp. 109–111). These elements come in degrees and none of them are necessary, though some are more important than others, or, as Cassam writes, 'much harder to imagine away' (pp. 111). This implies that one's mind-set is extremist only if certain core elements are present and, if that condition is met, will be more extremist depending on the number and degree of elements present.

'The chapter on *mind-set extremism*,' as Cassam writes (p. 5) 'is in many ways the central chapter in this book.' Cassam doesn't detail why this is so, but the following reasons are good candidates: first, intuitively, someone is an extremist not just in virtue of *what* they believe, i.e., their ideology, but also *how* they believe it. Prime example would be a belief in an unsolvable difference between us and them (the what) which is fervently held (the how). This holds for other mental attitudes too, such as a deeply felt anger (the how) directed at the elite, immigrants, or colonists (the what). Moreover, the extremist mind-set figures prominently in Cassam's discussion of what radicalization is and how it comes about, both as explanatory factor *why* someone is prone to radicalization and *what it is* to be radicalized (Chapter 7). Finally, the extreme mind-set is important in the discussion on countering extremism because it is the preoccupations, attitudes and thinking styles that need to be addressed by providing convincing counternarratives. That is, narratives that provide other- and democratic-friendly frames but still speak to the lived experience of extremists (Chapter 8).

There is much more to say about the other chapters and the book in general, and about the mind-set approach in particular. But with the target audience of philosophers, psychologists, and other academics in mind, I use the remaining space to examine Cassam's methodology.

It is clear from the book that Cassam has chosen to forego extensive discussion of methodology (but see Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 6) and to write in an outspoken fashion, where empirically informed examples and his own intuitions about the examples play a prominent role. Cassam's invitation is to think along with him, and then see how useful it is. Such an invitation provides a great impetus for a philosophy of extremism and for an interdisciplinary conversation about it. But the lack of focus on methodology is also problematic since methodological issues are at the heart of the difficulties faced by extremism studies (see, e.g., Jackson, 2019).

One crucial question regarding methodology is how to treat examples and empirical studies broadly conceived. Cassam doesn't include criteria for their proper treatment. As a consequence, the reader remains ignorant whether the choice of examples and Cassam's intuitions about them are widely shared or idiosyncratic. What's more, a person harboring different intuitions is not given any reason to accept Cassam's starting point. Despite Cassam's vast amount of knowledge of historical and contemporary extremist movements and persons, this might lead to controversy about Cassam's position before the argument has even begun.

Secondly, Cassam does not contextualize reference to empirical studies. For instance, in Chapter 4 on the mind-set approach, Cassam refers to psychological studies of *the militant extremist mind-set*, conducted by Gerald Saucier and colleagues. He does not detail, however, whether there is only one research group studying the extremist mind-set, nor how the work is received in the field of psychology or extremism studies, nor how it relates to the multifarious studies of the extremist (and terrorist) personality types and possible psychopathology. This question is especially pertinent given that the overarching conclusion of the latter research is that there is no extremist (or terrorist) personality type or psychopathology (see Horgan, 2014). Why would there then be a particular *mind-set*? Are the elements of the mind-set really things that refer to characteristics specifically tied to individual psychologies? To me it seems that we should distinguish i) elements such as belief in a strong divide between us and them and the connected good/evil thinking style that spring from extremist narratives, and ii) elements such as feelings of powerlessness that may reflect the individual's psychological capacities (but not necessarily, for they may also fittingly reflect their predicament). The elements of the extremist mind-set seem so diverse in kind, source, and possible justification, that to speak of a unified thing with explanatory force asks for considerable support (for more on the extremist mind-set, see Kloosterboer, 2022).

Another question regarding methodology but one that also substantially addresses Cassam's account is on the normative nature of the concept extremism. This is a matter of great controversy in extremism studies (and terrorism studies, fundamentalism studies, etcetera), the gist of which seems to lie in the question why we have the concept of extremism. Do we have it to condemn certain political actors and social movements? Is it a concept that merely describes political actors and social movements of a certain kind, and so avoids value-judgments and better enables empirical research (Jackson, 2019)? Or is it both, as Cassam proposes (p. 9; p. 26)? That is, is it possible that the concept tracks something real in the world, namely those political actors and social movements that are epistemically and morally wrong? And importantly, how to choose between these alternatives?

Normally, these questions are answered by appeal to ordinary practice, etymology, past and present usage, or stipulation. In the case of extremism, however, each of these appeals faces limits: extremism as a concept is not 'ordinary' as intention, responsibility and promise are but is one of those political concepts embedded in polemical, ideological, and propagandist contexts. Moreover, given the pejorative use of the label 'extremism', i.e., it discredits the political struggle of those subject to the label, why think that its past and present usage will clarify the concept? Finally, etymology and stipulation run the danger of losing touch with the widespread usage of the term. A combination of methods, probably of usage and stipulation, is the likely result, but its plausibility will depend on clarifying the desiderata that such analysis meets.

Given the aims of the book, perhaps Cassam is right to avoid discussing this too much. However, his revisionist approach, where some labeling is taken at face value (ISIS, Anders Behring Breivik, and many more), whereas other extremist labels, i.e., those applied to what Cassam deems benign or morally good phenomena, are revised (Martin Luther King Jr. and ANC are radicals rather than extremists) asks for wider discussion of these issues. Why should other scholars accept this revisionist proposal? How could it be operationalized historically and empirically? In what ways will it clarify and provide tools to evaluate societal and political uses of the term?

One key motivation for Cassam to adopt a normative account of extremism is to avoid relativism. Some ideologies (e.g., Khmer Rouge), some mind-sets (e.g., Breivik's) and some methods (e.g., burning alive) *are* extreme, no matter historical or cultural context, alliance, or perspective. This, however, seems to constitute a *moral* judgment. Committing atrocities (or dehumanization) is morally wrong, no matter the context. But which atrocities deserve the label extremism and whether extremism is always morally wrong, is thereby not yet settled. In other words, that such a moral judgment is context-independent does not entail that context is irrelevant for applying the label 'extremist'.

In all its various guises, extremism is one of the greatest threats to contemporary society and Cassam's book shows philosophy's relevance in examining it. The breadth of topics discussed, clarity of argumentation, and outspoken stance make the book an inspiring read. The book provides a very good introduction to philosophy of extremism for students, interdisciplinary scholars, and philosophers and invites further philosophical and interdisciplinary work. Especially welcome would be more discussion on methodology and on the question why we have the concept of extremism – both seem to be crucial for solving the most pressing issues in conceptualizing extremism.

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