Mindsets and narratives: A commentary on Quassim Cassam's *Extremism*

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Extremism is always underpinned by a narrative, a narrative of purity, humiliation, virtue, or any number of other preoccupations that figure in the extremist mindset. (Cassam 2022, 204)

Introduction

In his newest book, *Extremism* (Cassam 2022), philosopher Quassim Cassam brings together and analyses many different concepts in extremism studies, such as ideology, violence, radicalisation, grievances, counternarratives, fanaticism, radicalism, and fundamentalism. Central to the book is the distinction between three different types of extremism: ideological, methods, and psychological extremism. This distinction illuminates the different ways in which the term *is* used and *can* be used to identify an extremist.

In this commentary, I question what I consider to be Cassam's *predominantly individualistic* approach to becoming and being an extremist. I will first focus on one of the types – psychological or mindset extremism – and question its relation to (counter-) extremist narratives. Next, I draw attention to Cassam's emphasis on the role of epistemic agency instead of the role of social or structural factors in radicalisation processes, and argue that conceptualising agency as situated diminishes the dichotomy between these different explanations.

Mindset extremism

One of Cassam's main motivations for the mindset approach to extremism is the intuition that 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). Cassam's notion of a mindset combines the what and the how – a mindset is someone's *outlook* (p. 84): their way of relating to what is happening in their lives and the world around them. Characteristic of the extremist mindset are elements such as a preoccupation with purity, inappropriate resentment, adversity to compromise, strongly dualistic light/dark or good/evil thinking

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(so-called Manichaeism), othering, and many more. The elements of the mindset come in degrees and none of them are necessary for being an extremist, though some are more important than others, or, as Cassam writes, "much harder to imagine away" (p. 111). This implies that one's mindset 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.

One problematic aspect of Cassam's mindset approach is that it does several things at once. This is especially pertinent in the chapter on becoming an extremist (chapter 7). First, it provides a definition of extremism, as explicated in the previous paragraph. Second, it seeks to explain why someone becomes an extremist. For instance, it explains why some people "move from one extreme to another" (p. 86), and it facilitates adopting an extremist ideology (ideological radicalisation) and/or extremist methods (behavioural radicalisation) (p. 175). But third, it also helps to understand what it is to become an extremist, namely, adopting an extremist mindset. Hence, adopting an extremist mindset is itself a form of radicalisation, namely, psychological radicalisation (ibid.). For this reason, Cassam claims that the relation between ideological and psychological radicalisation is one of mutual dependence. As Cassam (p. 176) puts it, "[e]xtremist ideologies might appeal to people who have an extremist mindset, but the extremist mindset is also partly a *product* of ideology."

This raises questions, for instance, about the distinction between ideological and psychological radicalisation: is the distinction between both processes tenable if they are mutually dependent? Or about the relation between explaining and understanding: is it possible to maintain that the extremist mindset has explanatory force if becoming an extremist *consists in* adopting such a mindset?[1] And finally, about the relation between what a mindset is and postulating it as something with explanatory power: is the delineation of the extremist mindset sufficiently clear to carry such explanatory burden? These questions are particularly pertinent, given that research of the extremist (and terrorist) personality types and possible psychopathology has not found distinctive extremist psychological features (see Horgan 2014). This leads to a rather grand sceptical question about Cassam's mindset approach: if no distinctive psychological features have been found in any systematic manner, then why would there be a particular extremist mindset, explicated as psychological features of an individual's mind?

Extremist narratives

One way to elaborate on this worry is to take a closer look at the relation between the extremist mindset and extremist narratives. Narratives are "compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn" (p. 204). They help persons in making sense of what is happening in their lives by providing "a framework for understanding their predicament in a way that meshes with their experiences, interests and values" (p. 205). Extremist narratives do this by highlighting certain grievances, portraying those experiencing the grievances as victims and identifying another person, group, or institution as responsible for those grievances. They involve sensemaking in terms of purity, humiliation, victimhood, Manichaeism, conspiracies, and so forth, and promote intolerance, othering, and often also violence (p. 204–205).

Given this exposition of what extremist narratives are and what they do, i.e., help people make sense of their lived experience and the world around them, how to distinguish between adoption of these narratives and certain elements of the mindset? A preoccupation with purity or victimhood and the attitude of intolerance are just as much part of Cassam's account of extremist narratives as they are part of his account of the extremist mindset.

Hence, we arrive at another way to put the worry: it concerns not whether, say, a preoccupation with victimhood is characteristic of being an extremist, but whether such a preoccupation should be attributed to the psychological makeup of the individual. Does such a preoccupation tell us something about the underlying psychology of the individual or is it, first and foremost, part of extremist narratives instead? Is intolerance part of a person's mindset because it springs from their character or because it is promoted by the narrative they have adopted? The difference between these options – attributing elements of the mindset to individual psychology or to the narrative they have adopted – matters for the following reasons.

First, it matters for thinking about radicalisation. On *the narrative model*, to become an extremist is to adopt an extremist narrative to make sense of one's life, thereby framing things dualistically in terms of us/them, good/evil, and victims/wrongdoers. The way in which the narrative is adopted accounts for the degree of radicalisation: a person might be committed to the narrative, say, only intellectually, wholeheartedly, fanatically, or militantly. On this model, Cassam's terminology of ideological (intellectual), psychological (fanatical) and behavioural (militant) radicalisation pick out different forms of commitment. Obviously, the model needs to be developed further, but it seems to avoid some of the previously discussed confusion that Cassam's chapter on radicalisation instigates (e.g., on the relation between ideological and psychological radicalisation).

Second, the narrative model clarifies the explanatory question of why a person becomes an extremist. The mindset will not feature in that question as an independent explanatory factor. Rather, the question will focus on why extremist narratives appeal to a specific person and what influences the way in which the narrative is adopted. As Cassam argues, the appeal of extremist narratives depends on how well they mesh with someone's lived experience (the *resonance* of the narrative, see p. 207) and, especially, how well they address their grievances (the *relevance* of the narrative, see p. 208). Furthermore, group dynamics have a special role to play here because availability and persuasiveness (or *credibility*, ibid.) of narratives depends on one's social (online and offline) environment, which greatly influences which persons, institutions, and outlets one trusts epistemically.

Hence, the explanatory question needs to focus on *lived experience, perceived grievances*, and *social (epistemic) environment*. This is not to say that none of the elements of the mindset are relevant for the explanatory question. Investigating lived experience and perceived grievances, and specifically why some but not others in similar circumstances attach so much weight to grievance, cannot bear uncertainty, are plagued by feelings of powerlessness, or experience excessive anger, might relate to individual psychological capacities and vulnerabilities. Thus, understanding lived experience and perceived grievances will also involve psychology, but without the availability and credibility of extremist narratives, minds do not become extremist.

Third, it influences questions of normativity and context. Cassam develops a normative account of mindset extremism: all the elements of the extremist mindset are epistemically and/or morally wrong. The preoccupation with persecution is either wrong because the persecution is only imagined, or wrong because it leads to unwarranted responses, such as unwarranted anger (pp. 95–96). Unwillingness to compromise is wrong because no distinction is made between compromises necessary for valuable common goods (such as peace) and rotten compromises that would support an inhumane regime (pp. 100–104).

The question is, however, from which standpoint it is decided which persecution is imagined or which compromises are rotten. It might be that some or most of the elements of the mindset are justified from the standpoint of the extremist, i.e., internally coherent and/or meshing with their lived experience. What is problematic about them is that they are unwarranted from an objective point of view. But why include this external justification in the classification of a mindset? It seems that by including objective lack of justification in the characterisation of someone's mind as extremist, we lose track of extremists' psychologies and instead track just and unjust causes, just and unjust regimes, and just and unjust responses. The problem with this is that we then lose track of the core idea of a mindset, i.e., someone's *outlook*, and instead trace how that outlook relates to objective justification.

On the narrative model, the subject of, respectively, potential subjective and objective justification can be identified more precisely. The subject of potential subjective justification is the extremist's lived experience: given their predicament and social environment, can it be subjectively justified to adopt an extremist narrative? By contrast, the subject of potential objective justification is the narratives themselves. How do we evaluate these narratives? Which frames are acceptable or unacceptable, either epistemically or morally speaking? Determining which narratives are acceptable or unacceptable will be, in part, a function of moral judgements, such as that some ideologies (e.g., Khmer Rouge), some mindsets (e.g., Breivik's) and some methods (e.g., burning alive) involve atrocities and are thereby morally abject. But it will also be a function of the politics of meaning-making (Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta 1998). The latter aspect accounts for the context-sensitivity and politics of labelling a person or movement extremist.

One key motivation for Cassam to adopt such a normative account is to avoid relativism. Some ideologies (e.g., Khmer Rouge), some mindsets (e.g., Breivik's) and some methods (e.g., burning alive) *are* extremist, no matter historical or cultural context, alliance, or perspective. This moral judgement can be sustained on the narrative model, without thereby foreclosing the influence of context on labelling an individual, group or narrative extremist.

Situated epistemic agency

Focussing on extremist narratives, which are socially maintained, underscores the social embeddedness of extremism and radicalisation processes. Even lone wolves tap into extremist narratives. There is another point about the social dimension of radicalisation and countering extremism that I would like to address. Cassam emphasises that radicalisation and deradicalisation are a change in an individual's way of making sense of their political circumstances, that is, in their way of thinking and feeling about their predicament, lived experience and political environment (Chapter 7

and 8). These cognitive changes are an expression of the extremist's agency and values (p. 183). The extremist's agency cannot and should not be explained away, not in terms of epistemic environment or crippled epistemology, not in terms of the role of social media, and not in terms of vulnerability to extremist narratives. I take the valuable point here to be that research into risk factors that influence radicalisation should not obfuscate that radicalisation remains something that an individual *does* and not merely *happens* to them. It is not like catching a disease but consists of adopting an ideology, which is based on reasons, arguments and sensemaking (p. 193).

But what exactly does the claim about epistemic agency amount to? It seems that Cassam claims that social factors are neither necessary nor sufficient for radicalisation and that it is easy to overestimate their role. But this leaves the most pressing issue untouched, namely, how to understand the relation between epistemic agency and these other factors.

Consider, for instance, the question of whether providing counter-narratives and providing arguments will be helpful in deradicalising extremists. This will depend on several factors. It depends, especially, on whether extremists are willing to consider these narratives and arguments. And this, in turn, might depend partly on the merits of those narratives and arguments, but will be mostly influenced by issues of trust. Do the extremists trust the source of the counter-narratives and arguments? Do they have social ties outside their extremist network? How close-knit is that network? Are they able to distance themselves enough from their political identity so that alternative perspectives are not discarded out-of-hand?

The situatedness of epistemic agency is also shown in, for instance, a small-scale study with French radicalised inmates (Conti 2019). In this action-based research, the goal is to alter crucial conditions of agency, such as relations of trust and space for dialogue with a variety of viewpoints, and to stay away from providing counter-narratives. The results show important changes in the inmates' outlook. Where the participants first politicised their predicament by viewing their individual case from an extremist narrative, thereby identifying themselves with the victimised group, they were able to move to seeing their own trajectory in its individuality – a trajectory in a complex world, with different perspectives and many injustices, but also full of choices that were and can be made. Space for dialogue and space for being heard opened up space for doubt and self-reflection – shown in this research to be crucial ingredients for a change in thinking. Not all extremists end up in prison or transgress the law, but the mindset as formulated by Cassam and the mindset of the inmates, show strong similarities. The method for addressing their extremism might be the same too: assuming their competence and responsibility and at the same time providing an environment that opens up space for putting their competence to a different use.

Hence, I agree with Cassam that the role of epistemic agency should not be under-estimated, but we should be careful not to depict that agency in a too idealised and detached form. Our epistemic agency is embedded and conditioned by our epistemic environment, trust relations, and communicative possibilities. Moreover, our rationality is bounded: we have limited resources and capacities, and our ways of thinking are easily led astray by personal and political motivations.

As a final word, as I hope my commentary shows, Cassam's account of extremism and related issues is rich and thought-provoking – the perfect invitation for further philosophical and interdisciplinary discussion of extremism.

Note

1. Cassam himself denies this when he considers whether the adoption of an extremist ideology can do explanatory work in radicalisation processes: "the adoption of an extremist ideology is common to the majority of radicalization trajectories because becoming an extremist *consists in* the adoption of an extremist ideology. To regard the latter as a cause or risk factor for radicalization amounts to regarding radicalization as cause or risk factor for itself" (p. 167).

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Naomi Kloosterboer is a Research Fellow in the Philosophy Department and the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (the Netherlands). The focus of her work centers around questions of self-knowledge, epistemic agency, and responsibility, currently in the context of extreme beliefs such as inherent in extremism. In that context, she questions whether to take seriously a person harboring extreme beliefs, and in what sense such a person can be held responsible and blamed for their extreme views. She has co-edited a special issue on Beatrice de Graaf's book *Radical Redemption*, and published a book review on Quassim Cassam's book *Extremism*. Her current research is funded by the ERC-project on Extreme Beliefs: The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism (www.extremebeliefs.com).

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