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Introduction: the philosophical foundations of the study of extremism – A symposium on Quassim Cassam’s *Extremism*

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Quassim Cassam’s *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis*¹ (London: Routledge, 2021) breaks new ground by offering the first full-fledged philosophical account of extremism. It builds on his earlier work on conspiracy theorising, vice epistemology, and terrorism. Again, he shows how philosophical work can enrich empirical work – that is, of course, as long as such philosophical work is deeply empirically informed, a criterion the book itself clearly meets, partly by way of the many case-studies it provides.

There are numerous challenging philosophical issues surrounding extremism. Some of them have to do with *conceptual* issues. What are accurate and fruitful definitions of “extremism”, “fundamentalism”, “radicalization”, “terrorism”, and “fanaticism”? Exactly how are each of these phenomena related to one another? Are religious and secular fundamentalisms sufficiently unified to treat them both as varieties of extremism? To what extent can definitions of such things be purely descriptive or are some of them inevitably normative? How can extremism be distinguished from phenomena that are also extreme in various senses of the word, but that are often regarded as benign, such as Greenpeace and the civil rights movement in the US, or perhaps even Extinction Rebellion?

Of course, this is not the first time that such conceptual questions are addressed. Philosophy, however, might provide new resources to satisfactorily answer these questions, such as the distinction between analyses in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, in terms of a Wittgensteinian family resemblance (with stereotypical properties, paradigm cases, and boundary cases), and in terms of INUS conditions (an Insufficient but Necessary part of an Unnecessary but Sufficient condition), or the distinction between a reductive analysis (that aims to analyse a concept by reducing it to particular components) or a Strawsonian connective analysis (that aims to analyse a concept by showing its conceptual relations to other concepts). The book focuses on these conceptual issues by arguing that sound definitions of “extremism” are inevitably normative, by distinguishing between ideological extremism, methods extremism, and mindset extremism, and by mapping extremism’s relation to fundamentalism and fanaticism.

The book is agenda-setting for the project of exploring the philosophical foundations of the study of extremism. Of course, there are countless other philosophical questions that the book could not possibly have covered as well. There are pivotal philosophical questions regarding *explaining* extremism. What desiderata should explanations of extremism meet?

Does it require predictive power, for instance? What is it to explain extremism in the first place? How do explanations at 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, religiosity, narratives, reasons) relate to one another? What's the exact relation between push and pull factors?

There are important *metaphysical* questions about the nature of extremism. For instance, how do belief, affection, action and other phenomena (desires, goals, rituals, symbols, etc.) relate to one another in extremism? There are various important *ethical* and *epistemological* questions that touch on extremism and responsibility. When is one responsible for being an extremist, or for particular violent extremist actions? Under which conditions can one be excused for extremist action and what mitigates responsibility? How do moral and legal responsibility relate here? Does extremism necessarily come with certain moral vices, like arrogance and envy? Can the extremist be a rational person, can extremism be rational, can extremist beliefs be rational – and, if so, in what senses of the word? Does extremism necessarily come with cognitive vices like narrow-mindedness, gullibility, and dogmatism?

The following three commentaries on the book, as well as Cassam's reply, are based on a book symposium that was held at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on 15 December 2021.² What follows are three much more detailed versions of those presentations, each of which have taken the discussion that day into account. Naomi Kloosterboer wonders whether there is such a thing as the extremist mindset and draws attention to the ways epistemic agency is situated. Tahir Abbas reflects on the contextuality of something's being extremist and on the very use and ramifications of the notion of radicalisation. I myself zoom in on the methodological challenges for and ramifications of Cassam's normatively laden approach to extremism. I hope that this short book symposium is the starting point for much further work on extremism in which philosophical and empirical perspective are narrowly intertwined.

Notes

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2. The recording can be found here: <https://extremebeliefs.com/video/book-symposium-extremism-a-philosophical-analysis-quassim-cassam/>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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