Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: a philosophical analysis*

Routledge 2022

Why do we care about extremists? Should we be concerned about them? Isn't it *harm* – to persons, to other living things, to the environment and planet - that does, or should, bother us?

It's easy to say what's wrong, for instance, with terrorism. A parent who terrorizes a child does terrible harm to the child; a state officer, or a criminal, who terrorizes people, individually or in groups, does harm above and beyond any physical assault or, theft of goods they also perpetrate. A government, or gang, or military force which uses 'terror' as a weapon perpetrates a harm which is independent of any violence, theft, deprivation, or domination that they inflict. The theory of the use of terror, and the practice of systematic terrorism, similarly is a wrong independently of the evils of torture, violence, close surveillance and control, etc. Terrorism does harm; it's a specific kind of harm; and it is widely recognized, morally, politically, socially, legally as a specific phenomenon, as well as widely adopted as a strategy and a technique by would-be dominators, a strategy and technique, moreover, which itself embodies or prefigures the 'values' – a subdued and quiescent population, anticipatory fear of the consequences of resistance, the elimination of enemies, and so on – that the terrorists seek to realise.

In many states and societies, now as ever, violence generally is a concern. From the late twentieth century there has been growing concern about terrorism. The concern is moral, social, religious, political, and legal. Recently, the focus has shifted to extremism: anti-extremist educational programmes, extremist-detection by professionals and state officers, criminal law that licenses an inference from extremism to risk. But the problem is that 'extremism' is not necessarily or inevitably harmful, to the extremist or to anyone else. Cassam is concerned to acknowledge that just causes can be extreme, and that extreme conduct can be neutral, neither good nor bad. So why should extremism be a 'major subject', as the cover blurb of this paperback edition has it? (The cover illustration on my edition is a hand grenade: the book's publishers certainly know how they interpret the problem of extremism!)

At the end of Cassam's clear and informative analysis the class of relevant extremists has been cut down. We are not here concerned with ascetics and those with whacky personal regimes which rule out normal shared social pursuits with friends and kin. Many pursue extreme political or ethical projects, but their causes are just, their methods are justified and constrained, and their ideologies are saved by truth, validity and reason. These – including nineteenth century anti-slavery activists and some (not all) of the twentieth century anti racism and anti colonial

movements - are shifted to the category 'radical'. It does seem that extremists who are truly a problem are the violent ones, and the ones who seek to impose their views on others, or worse, on everyone, by anti-political methods.

Rhetorically, twenty first century polities – both liberal and authoritarian – are flooded with talk of extremists who pose a threat to the polity and therefore are justifiably treated as traitors. In recent decades cultural studies and political science and theory have generated a good deal of analysis of the rhetoric of terrorism and extremism, in particular in connection with law, policing, political speech and policy, and journalism. In political and social rhetoric, although extremism is a distinct category, it jostles with terrorism, militancy, fanaticism, and fundamentalism, among others.

Cassam avoids the field of rhetoric, but his analysis takes him into discussion of all of these. In the 1950s, when the Oxford moral philosopher Richard Hare and many others were thinking about fascism from the point of view of epistemology and ethics, the extremist did not loom so large in political culture, and he figured the problem as that of the fanatic. (Fanatics of interest here must be separated out from 'fans' – short for fanatic – which is to say individuals with particular liking for and interest in groups, teams, artists, genres or specific sports, in particular in the fields of popular culture and sport). We also meet religious fundamentalists, mass murderers with political manifestoes, and right wing parties (including governing ones) whose aims and actions are dedicated to eliminating the existing center ground and radically shifting what is generally considered normal.

Cassam does not view the norms or middle way to be particularly virtuous. There is a complex history to the idea of moderation as a virtue such that any extremism whether leading to harm or not tends to be vicious. In Christian theological, liturgical and doctrinal contexts – and in their counterparts in other established religions - the problems of enthusiasm and extremism are bound up with heresy on the one hand, and with the stability and executive effectiveness of religious and secular authority, on the other. Ethically, in the strain of thinking and understanding from Aristotle to recent and contemporary liberalism, there are accounts of extremism and enthusiasm that are couched in terms of the rightness of restraint in our dealings with others: in a liberal society we should not impinge on others as affecting them can amount to interference or even molestation. The ethics in this line of thought can shade into aesthetics. The imperative of restraint and leaving others alone can be as much a matter of taste and style – among other things, excess is distasteful. In much social theory, meanwhile, norms matter. Not simply in the ethical sense of norm as 'what ought to be', nor only in the statistical,descriptive sense of norm as average. Beyond these, norms as a combination of is and ought permit and

promote coordination, they give us the assurance of predictability, they anchor our world and our daily lives. Homophily – recognising and favouring those who are like me or us in the sense of working within and around the norm – is reasonable, functional.

These lines of analysis can make concern about extremism look like a distinctly conservative impulse. Cassam considers the view that we should be debunking extremism, partly because of this view that preoccupation with it is reactionary, and about guarding the norm, the status quo. Partly there is the suspicion that sometimes, at least, extremism, and norm violation, are the only rational way, as with campaigners for votes for women. Mostly the problem, according to some, is that extremism collapses under analytical pressure. Either 'extreme' is only a relative matter measured by distance from the norm; or, if we focus on substantive content, our concern turns out to be with something else. We might see extremists, to be sure, but we see them the way some people see witches, or cosmic conspiracies. Cassam's response is that extremism is a thing in our world – it is a legal, a social, a political, an ethical, a psychological, etc. phenomenon, one whose nature can be clarified by philosophical analysis. Karl Marx (*Theses on Feurbach*) criticized philosophy for only interpreting the world, not changing it. If only philosophers even interpreted the world … adds Cassam ruefully. (p. 222) His interpretation reveals three kinds or elements of extremism: extreme ideology or belief set, extreme mindset, and extreme methods.

In many polities left (commitment to socialist distribution) v right (commitment to individual property) is an axis along which parties, party programmes, voter preferences and vote choice can be arrayed. This was a good conceptualisation and model of western democracies in the twentieth century. The measures 'extreme left' and 'extreme right' are given by the very mathematical spatial method of analysis, and by the concomitant concept of 'social space', as developed in social and political sciences. Attitude surveys go on to show that 'religious v secular' is an independent axis of voter preferences and identifications, which doesn't straightforwardly predict left-right political choice or party constitution, although in some twentieth century democracies parties and theological interests reached a more or less stable, although never uncontested, accord. In many polities the axis is more like religion v religion: catholic v protestant, orthodox v reform, sunni and shia, have been and still are reflected in party programmes and identifications, and even in state constitutions. As becomes evident in Cassam's discussion, another axis of disagreement, independent of left-right and of religious commitment, is 'liberal-authoritarian', which arrays individual preferences or commitments and party programmes according to their views about strong government, human rights, sexual and

social freedoms and choices. On all these axes of variation the position 'extremist' is simply built in.

Cassam highlights the spatial nature of ideology analysis. (41) But his other forms – mindset extremism and methods extremism – both also are susceptible of spatial analysis. The extreme mindset is committed to perverted ideals (e.g. the extermination of some group of human beings, or the ideal of something like 'racial purity' or 'religious purity'), is marked by characteristic preoccupations with pollution and purity themselves (pp. 91-4), with vengeance for past or present humiliation and victimhood (95-6), with anger, resentment, and self-pity (pp. 97-100). In the extremist mindset commitments are powerful - the justification and even celebration of violence (100), and the view that compromise is rotten or worse. (p. 101f). Presumably, psychological measurement and statistical analysis locates this kind of mindset on an axis. And similarly with methods: in political science what methods individuals and groups do, or would, employ, and attitudes to the justifiability of different methods are also conceptualized spatially.

The point of all this variable analysis is not simply mapping, although that is part of it. The issue is cause, or perhaps tipping. Is an individual with an extremist mindset, or a group with extremist ideology, liable to move to the use of extreme methods in pursuit of extremist goals? This possibility – that the ideology extremist, the mindset extremist, and perhaps in particular the person who is both, is a risk - underpins laws that permit the surveillance and apprehension of such individuals without them having done anything illegal. But, of course, there is no necessary, or invariant, causal connection. In any case, extreme methods need not be violent or otherwise harmful, although they might be. Cassam's point is that the extremes that should bother us are not those that are given simply by their distance from the norm. The point about the extremist mindset, in particular, gripped affectively by its sense of injury and resentment, and obsessed with a necessarily imagined purity, is that these feelings can – might – tip individuals into violence. Some extreme ideologies – fascism, obviously, is a case in point – celebrate and endorse apocalyptic destructive violence. Extremist methods, whether or not they are violently injurious to others, tend, given the way the world works, to be less efficacious than political engagement with people on their own terrain, speaking language they understand and appealing to values they share. So, many activists can be judged negatively simply because they lack political understanding and know how. Is this the problem then? – that bothersome extremists are either politically illiterate or straightforwardly anti-political, with their tendency to understand 'compromise' as 'rotten compromise?

Cassam's accounts are unfailingly clear, interesting and informative. His point is that selected theories of fundamentalism, fanaticism, radicalism and others, although they seem

relevant to extremism, are, on examination, insufficient for the cases he has in view. (I'm intrigued at the omission of the authoritarian personality studies – other readers undoubtedly will have their own lists of studies and research programmes that they think should have made the cut.) He isolates some critical characteristics of members of the category of bothersome extremists: elements of their beliefs or ideologies, their emotional and cognitive preoccupations, their attitudes to other people, to political processes, to violence and other injurious methods of pursuing their aims. The point is to say 'yes, we should be bothered by extremism, but perhaps not for the reasons that you thought'.

But I suspect that the self-same analysis could just as easily, and perhaps more illuminatingly, have been framed as more of a debunking project. Wittgenstein suggested that when we look at a putative class of objects we will see series' of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.[1] Fanatics, fundamentalists, fascists, terrorists, authoritarians have similarities, and differences – and are also similar to and different from radicals, revolutionaries, anarchists, militants etc. Themes of purity, resentment, and violence are recognizable from the fascist and authoritarian traditions. Themes of self-sacrifice, and even the sacrifice of compatriots and kin, in pursuit of annihilation of enemies, are common in a number of religious and secular traditions. We can draw a clear boundary around any of these – for a special purpose, as Wittgenstein put it.[2] Whether we *should*, now, be drawing a clear boundary, upholding the current rhetoric of, and current police, judicial and regulatory approaches to 'extremism', seems to me to be an open, and a political, question.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Frazer is Emeritus Fellow in Politics, New College, University of Oxford and among her more recent publications are *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified (2019),* and *Violence and Political Theory (2020)* which she wrote with Kimberly Hutchings, and *Shakespeare and the Political Way* (2020).

Email: elizabeth.frazer@politics.ox.ac.uk

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Ss.66-7.
[2] *Op.cit.* S.69