

“A compelling, original, subtle and important exploration of a major subject.”

**Richard English**, author of *Does Terrorism Work? A History*



# Extremism

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

Quassim Cassam



# Extremism

Extremism is one of the most charged and controversial issues of the twenty-first century. Despite myriad programmes of deradicalization and prevention around the world, it remains an intractable and poorly understood problem. Yet it is also sometimes regarded as a positive force – according to Martin Luther King Jr., ‘the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be’.

In this much-needed and lucid book, Quassim Cassam identifies three types of extremism – ideological; methods; and psychological extremism – and discusses the following fundamental topics and issues: What is extremism? What are the methods adopted by extremists? Is there an extremist ‘mindset’ and if so, what is it? What role do ideas of purity, victimhood and humiliation play in understanding extremism? How does extremism differ from fanaticism and fundamentalism? How does one become an extremist and how should we understand deradicalization?

Throughout the book, Quassim Cassam uses many compelling examples, ranging from the Khmer Rouge, the IRA, Al-Qaeda and Timothy McVeigh to Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral* and counter-extremism programmes, including the UK’s *Prevent* strategy.

Clear-headed and engaging, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* is essential reading for anyone interested in this important topic, not only in Philosophy but related disciplines such as Politics and International Relations, Conflict and Terrorism Studies, Law, Education and Religion. It will also be of great interest to policy-makers and those engaged in understanding extremism at any level.

**Quassim Cassam** is Professor of Philosophy, University of Warwick, UK. He is the author of several books, most recently *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (2019) and *Conspiracy Theories* (2019).

'A compelling, original, subtle and important exploration of a major subject.'

— *Richard English, author of Does Terrorism Work?*

*A History*

'With eloquence, Cassam helps us untangle our thoughts and communicates with a clarity and directness that is unexpected of philosophers and academics. If you want to sort out your thinking about extremism this is a must read.'

— *Gabrielle Rifkind, Group Analyst and Conflict Mediator, author of The Psychology of Political*

*Extremism*

'This book is philosophy at its best. It is deeply empirically informed and supported by a large number of case studies. It shows the direct relevance of rigorous analytic thinking for empirical research and, perhaps even more importantly, for policy based on such research.'

— *Rik Peels, VU University Amsterdam, The*

*Netherlands*

'Intellectually fascinating and engaging, this pathbreaking book achieves the difficult task of bridging the gap between students and more expert research-orientated readers. It shows that philosophy has much to offer in understanding the many dimensions of extremism.'

— *Christopher Finlay, Durham University, UK*

# Extremism

*A Philosophical Analysis*

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Quassim Cassam

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# Contents

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Preface  | viii       |
| <b>Introduction</b>                            | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>1 How to think about extremism</b>          | <b>11</b>  |
| <b>2 Ideological extremism</b>                 | <b>39</b>  |
| <b>3 Methods extremism</b>                     | <b>61</b>  |
| <b>4 The psychology of extremism</b>           | <b>83</b>  |
| <b>5 Extremism, fanaticism, fundamentalism</b> | <b>115</b> |
| <b>6 Why not extremism?</b>                    | <b>144</b> |
| <b>7 Pathways to extremism</b>                 | <b>165</b> |
| <b>8 Countering extremism</b>                  | <b>190</b> |
| <b>Conclusion: the new extremism</b>           | <b>215</b> |
| References                                     | 224        |
| Index  | 233        |





# Preface

I hadn't planned to write a book on extremism, and would not have done so if the idea hadn't been suggested to me by Tony Bruce of Routledge. I was initially sceptical. What, I wondered, does philosophy have to say about extremism? More to the point, what did *I* have to say about it? When Tony approached me, I had already been working for some time on the epistemology of terrorism and counter-terrorism. In this context, I was familiar with the standard definition of radicalization as the process of becoming an extremist but I hadn't tackled the question: what is extremism?

When I gave the matter some serious thought, I quickly discovered that there are deep philosophical questions about extremism that had never been properly addressed. Robert Nozick wrote a useful short paper on the characteristic features of extremism, and many of the great, dead philosophers were interested in fanaticism. However, as far I could tell, philosophy had done no more than scratch the surface of the questions about extremism that interested me. So, I came up with a plan for this book and sent it to Tony. His readers were enthusiastic and I got to work in 2019. By the end of 2020, I had a complete draft. I was interested by what I read about extremism and extremists and, despite the subject matter, enjoyed writing this book more than any of my previous six books. What I take to be the main ideas of the book are summarized in the Introduction, and I hope that readers will find them worthwhile.

When I was a graduate student in Oxford in the mid-1980s, I listened to a set of lectures on scepticism by my supervisor, Sir Peter Strawson. The lectures were subsequently published (Strawson 2008b), and ended with a quotation from Gibbon: 'Philosophy alone can boast (and perhaps it is no more than the boast of philosophy) that her gentle hand is able to eradicate

from the human mind the latent and deadly principle of fanaticism.’ I must confess to being somewhat sceptical about the idea that philosophy can eradicate fanaticism from the human mind. I do believe, however, that it can contribute to an *understanding* of both fanaticism and extremism, and that there is no hope of developing an effective response to these things unless we know what we are talking about. If we are serious about preventing the rise of extremism, then we must do better than the UK government, with its bizarre definition of extremism as involving ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values’.

In writing this book I had the great good fortune to be able to share draft chapters as I wrote them with my dear friend and colleague Naomi Eilan. Her encouragement and feedback were invaluable. With my permission, she also shared my chapters with Avishai Margalit in Jerusalem. His reactions, conveyed to me by Naomi, were important to me, not least because my thinking has been influenced by his book *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*. I thank Naomi and Avishai, and Deborah Ghate, whose trenchant comments led to some significant changes, including the addition of a substantial introduction. Thanks also to Tony Bruce and his three readers for their comments and encouragement.

I presented an early version of Chapter 4 to the Philosophy Department at the University of Tübingen and at a conference in Oxford organized by the Finnish Institute in London and the Academy of Finland. The book’s central ideas also formed the basis of my keynote lecture for the 10th European Congress of Analytic Philosophy (ECAP) in 2020. I thank the audiences on these occasions for helpful comments and questions. I also thank Fabienne Peter, who was my Head of Department while this book was being written, for her wonderful support. I could not wish for a better working environment than the one I enjoy as a member of the Philosophy Department at Warwick.



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# Introduction

At the start of 2020, the year in which this book was written, *The Guardian* reported that British counter-terrorism police had identified Extinction Rebellion as an organization with an ‘extremist’ ideology.<sup>1</sup> Extinction Rebellion, which is committed to a strategy of non-violent civil disobedience in response to the climate emergency, responded with a furious press release. ‘How dare they?’, it asks.<sup>2</sup> Instead of trying to silence an organization that is trying to address the dire state of the planet, ‘wouldn’t it be nice if they focused on the real extremists, the fossil fuel companies and those that do their bidding?’ In this and in countless other cases, there are arguments about who is and who isn’t a real extremist because most people do not appreciate having this label applied to them. In America, anti-fascist and Black Lives Matter activists did not appreciate being labelled left-wing extremists by President Trump, whose more ardent supporters were seen by those same activists as right-wing extremists. Yet if pressed to define ‘extremism’, we struggle. This is one of those cases where we think we have an idea of what is meant but find the idea surprisingly difficult to articulate.

When faced with the challenge of defining pornography, a U.S. Supreme Court justice offered: ‘I know it when I see it.’ Is extremism like that? Do we know it when we see it? On 22 July 2011, Anders Behring Breivik murdered eight people in Oslo and a further 69 people attending a youth camp on an island near Oslo.<sup>3</sup> The killings were politically motivated and coincided with the release of Breivik’s far-right political manifesto. Breivik is the archetypal extremist, and few people have any difficulty recognizing him as such even if they cannot define extremism. If Breivik is not an extremist, then heaven help us. Pointing to him and people like him is one way to explain the notion of an extremist and, by extension, the notion of extremism. However,

such explanations by example have their limitations. Since there are many things that are true of Breivik that are not true of all extremists, there is still the challenge of differentiating essential from non-essential elements of extremism.

For example, Breivik was a *violent* or *militant* extremist, but is all extremism like that? Can extremism be non-violent? Breivik was a political extremist but is all extremism political? Breivik was a right-wing extremist, but political extremists can also be on the extreme left. Are all political extremists either on the extreme left or the extreme right? Take the case of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who orchestrated the 9/11 attacks on America in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Mohammed, or KSM as he came to be known, can certainly be classified as an extremist but not necessarily as right-wing or left-wing. Like other Islamist extremists, KSM is hard to place on the left-right spectrum, though the case has been made that his views should be described as 'Islamofascist'.<sup>5</sup> To talk about a person's view in this sense is to talk about their ideology, their core political beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Should Breivik and KSM be classified as extremists on account of their *beliefs* or their *actions*? And where do extremist groups rather than individuals fit in?

However these questions are answered, one thing is clear: extremism can be, and often has been, lethal. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the history of the twentieth century is essentially the history of extremism and its consequences. To get a sense of the scale of human misery for which extremism has been responsible, one only has to think of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, or Mao's China. Extremism has never gone away since the end of the Second World War, and is once again on the rise in the world today, as a result of rising levels of political polarization. That said, there are people who think that extremism is not necessarily a bad thing and is sometimes necessary in the fight against cruelty, oppression or, indeed, the dire state of the planet. It isn't actually true that *nobody* appreciates being called an extremist. Nineteenth-century abolitionist opponents of slavery called themselves fanatics, and fanaticism is closely related to extremism, if not identical with it. Can extremism be a good thing? A character in a Philip Roth novel says: 'Sometimes you have to fucking go to the extreme' (Roth 1997: 105). Isn't that what the abolitionists realized and what some climate activists realize today? If that's extremism, then bring it on, they might say.

While readers might not need much persuading that these are important issues, they might struggle with the notion that philosophy has anything worthwhile to say about them. It's worth noting that extremism is a subject

that few philosophers have tackled, though a number of the great, dead philosophers had things to say about fanaticism.<sup>7</sup> Does their striking lack of engagement with extremism as such say more about the skewed priorities of philosophers today or about extremism's amenability to philosophical analysis? In my view, extremism *is* amenable to philosophical analysis, as reflected in the sub-title of this book. But what exactly is 'analysis' as philosophers understand it, and what would it even be to give a *philosophical* analysis of extremism? Is analysing extremism something that philosophy can do on its own or does it need help from other disciplines?

Describing what some (but not all) philosophers do as 'analysis' makes it sound more exotic than it is. As Timothy Williamson notes, 'Philosophy, like science, starts with ways of knowing and thinking all normal human beings have, and applies them a bit more carefully, a bit more systematically, a bit more critically, iterating that process over and over again' (2020: 4–5). To do these things is precisely to engage in 'philosophical analysis' as I understand it. One way to analyse a complex idea like extremism is to break it down into its constituent parts. Another is to link it to other, related concepts like fanaticism and fundamentalism.<sup>8</sup> Analysis on the first model will focus on the search for the core elements of extremism. For example, one might ask whether extremism requires extreme beliefs, extreme behaviour, or both. How are these elements themselves to be understood, and does extremism involve anything else? On the second model of analysis, one will be more concerned with questions such as: can a person be an extremist without being a fanatic, or vice versa? Is fundamentalism a variety of extremism, or is it something altogether different? On this 'connective' model of analysis, the idea of extremism is one of a network of ideas that can only be understood in relation to one another.

In asking how the idea of extremism relates to other ideas in the same neighbourhood, one should not make the mistake of thinking that analysing the *idea* of extremism is different from analysing or studying extremism itself. To analyse the idea of extremism is to *theorize* about extremism itself and related phenomena. It would be arrogant to assume that philosophy can do this without help from other disciplines like politics, history, psychology and sociology. Extremism cannot be understood without studying the forms that it takes in different places and at different times. The project of this book is to develop an understanding of extremism by means of philosophical analysis and by drawing on what is known about actual extremists and extremism.

Going back to Breivik and KSM, it is worth reflecting on the similarities and differences between them. They obviously have (or had) different beliefs and different ideologies. Their ideologies are not just different but diametrically opposed. Breivik is anti-Muslim, KSM is not. Yet their ideologies are both extreme. Breivik's is extreme in the sense that it is on the extreme right. If we think of ideologies as arranged on a spectrum running from extreme left to extreme right, then one way to be an extremist is to have political beliefs that are at either end of the spectrum. If KSM is not on the left-right spectrum, then all that goes to show is that this spectrum is not the only one, and that he must be at an extreme end of some other spectrum. Either way, both Breivik and KSM are *positional* extremists whose extremism is defined by their position on an ideological map. Groups and governments can also be extremists in this sense. Their extremism is *positional* or *ideological* extremism.

Another similarity between Breivik and KSM is that both were willing to use extreme methods to make a political point. Methods are methods for doing or achieving something, and political extremists use extreme methods for political ends. They are what might be called *methods* extremists and their extremism is *methods extremism*. The classic extreme method is terrorism, and this explains why many extremists resort to terrorism. However, terrorism is not the only extreme method, and there are extreme methods for achieving political ends that do not involve violence or harm to others.<sup>9</sup> This raises what sounds like a philosophical question: what makes a method 'extreme'? Another question is: when, if ever, is the use of extreme methods justified? Presumably, those who tried to assassinate Hitler with a bomb planted in a briefcase in 1944 were justified in doing so. Was this an extreme method, or does it make a difference whether the method is used in a just cause? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that positional and methods extremism are closely related, since extremist ideologies tend to endorse the use of violence.

A third similarity between Breivik, KSM and many other extremists is psychological. It is often said that being an extremist is not just a matter of *what* one believes but of *how* one believes, that is, one's way of believing.<sup>10</sup> Extremists in the psychological sense are especially fervent and uncompromising in their beliefs, and this is part of what makes them extremists. This points to a distinction between positional and *psychological extremism*. Someone whose beliefs are in the middle of the left-right spectrum is a *centrist*. The opposite of a psychological extremist is a *moderate*. It seems

that a centrist can be a psychological extremist and a positional extremist can be a psychological moderate. An extreme centrist would be someone whose centrist, middle-of-the-road views are uncompromisingly and fervently held, while a moderate positional extremist would be someone with extreme views that are weakly held.

Whether these are genuine possibilities is something that will need to be discussed but of greater immediate interest is the fact that, contrary to the impression given so far, being an extremist in the psychological sense is not just a matter of how one believes. Rather, extremism in the psychological sense means having an *extremist mindset*. The challenge for anyone trying to make sense of extremism is to analyse this mindset. The chapter on *mindset extremism* (Chapter 4) is in many ways the central chapter of this book. Neither the notion of a mindset nor that of an extremist mindset is new. What is new is my account of the different elements of this mindset and how they fit together to form a coherent whole. Recent accounts of the extremist mindset have focused on the *militant* extremist mindset and listed multiple ingredients of this mindset, based on studies of extremist groups, but failed to give a systematic analysis of these ingredients. My aim is to give just such an analysis, while leaving open the possibility of non-militant, non-violent extremism.

Among the novel features of my account is the notion that the extremist mindset is distinguished by, among other things, its *preoccupations*. Extremists who disagree on other matters nevertheless have shared preoccupations, and understanding these preoccupations is essential for an understanding of extremism. One common extremist preoccupation is with purity – religious, ideological or racial – and with anything that detracts from their supposed purity. Breivik was preoccupied with racial purity and KSM with purity of a religious nature. Another extremist preoccupation is with their victimhood and supposed humiliation by their enemies. Perhaps surprisingly, mindset extremists are also preoccupied with their own virtue, with the sense that they are only doing what is right to defend themselves and their fellows. The idea that people who massacre large numbers of innocents can think of themselves as morally virtuous is startling, but it explains the extremists' sense of absolute certainty and unwillingness to compromise.

Extremist preoccupations are only one element of the extremist mindset, and there are several others. Even without going into further details, it is worth emphasizing the extent to which *extremism is a state of mind*, and this state of mind is not confined to people who resort to terrorism or other forms



of political violence. Having an extremist mindset is a matter of degree, and the prevalence of elements of this mindset in the advanced democracies is both striking and worrying. Extremist preoccupations, attitudes and ways of thinking both cause and are reinforced by polarization. However, our mindsets are not wholly separate from our beliefs. It is easier for psychological extremists to be positional extremists, and vice versa.

This book is organized around the distinction between the three forms of extremism – ideological, methods and psychological – and the chapters that follow are a philosophical exploration of these forms of extremism and the relationship between them. Since extremists are often described as fanatics and fundamentalists, it is also important to be clear about the relationship between extremism, fanaticism and fundamentalism. There is also the question whether there are circumstances in which extremism is defensible. Extremism is easily confused with other, more respectable approaches to politics. With relatively few exceptions, the abolitionists were neither extremists nor fanatics. They were *radicals*, and it is possible to be highly critical of extremism while endorsing their political radicalism. Critics of extremism, among whom I count myself, are taken to task for being prejudiced in favour of conservatism and moderation, and I have tried to be sensitive to this criticism. There are deep and difficult questions about how it is appropriate to respond *in extremis* to injustice and oppression if not with extremism. I have tried to address these questions in this book.

To the extent that extremism is a Bad Thing, one will want to know how and why people become extremists. The process of becoming an extremist has been called the *radicalization* process, and much official as well as scholarly time and attention has been devoted to making sense of this process. My own views about radicalization and counter-radicalization are set out in Chapters 7 and 8, which have clear policy implications. If there is one general lesson to be drawn from my discussion, it is that Western governments are in denial about the causes and nature of radicalization, and this goes some way to explaining the defects of their counter-radicalization policies. There are many myths about radicalization that need to be avoided, and one of the missions of this book is to tackle these myths and bring to the surface the wishful thinking on which they are based. Counter-radicalization is possible, but only if one is prepared to engage seriously with extremist narratives and develop counter-narratives that have some basis in reality.

Most of this book is about political extremism, and the examples I have given – Breivik and KSM – are examples of violent extremists. I've already

conceded that extremism does not have to be violent. Does it even have to be political? Faced with this question, the first alternative many people think of is religious extremism. However, the distinction between politics and religion is deeply problematic. KSM acted on behalf of Al-Qaeda, whose members are often represented as religious extremists. However, their objectives were also political, and it is hard to differentiate between their religion and their politics. Are there better examples of apolitical or non-political extremism? If a methods extremist is someone who uses extreme methods to reach their objectives, then, at least in theory, methods extremism is not confined to the political realm. For example, fasting for a week at a time is an extreme method of losing weight. It is worth noting, however, people who adopt this or other extreme diets are not usually described as weight-loss or diet 'extremists'. People who are keen on extreme sports are not known as sports or fitness extremists. When someone is described as an extremist today, the extremism in question is almost always political.

There is a striking contrast between extremism and fanaticism. There aren't fitness extremists but there are fitness fanatics. There aren't football extremists but there are football fanatics, also known more colloquially as football fans. Fanaticism in these contexts connotes unusual dedication or excessive enthusiasm, and it is an interesting question why talk of fitness fanaticism is so much more common than talk of fitness extremism. However, for better or worse, my main interest here is in political extremism and fanaticism. Other varieties will only be mentioned in passing. Hegel characterized fanaticism as 'an enthusiasm for something abstract'.<sup>11</sup> This notably abstract characterization of fanaticism was used by Hegel to make sense of Islam, a religion that supposedly destroys all particularity and whose object of devotion is purely intellectual. In the more straightforwardly political realm, the fanatics of the French Revolution were moved by their enthusiasm for abstractions like liberty, equality and fraternity to send large numbers of their fellow citizens to the guillotine.

In reality, there is more to political fanaticism than enthusiasm for something abstract. Fanatics have unwarranted contempt for other people's ideals and interests and are willing to trample on those ideals and interests in pursuit of their own ideals and interests. They will try to impose their ideals on others, by force, if necessary. They are unwilling or unable to think critically about their own ideals and do not suffer from self-doubt. Their vice is not, or not just, excessive *enthusiasm* but excessive *certainity* about matters that are far from certain. No doubt this explains their willingness to

sacrifice themselves and others in pursuit of their ideals. The relationship between fanaticism and extremism is extremely complex and requires careful unpacking. This happens in Chapter 5, the upshot being that one can be an extremist without being a fanatic but not a fanatic without being an extremist.

Philosophers who write about highly abstract, technical subjects in metaphysics or logic or epistemology often have difficulty convincing non-philosophers, and sometimes even other philosophers, that what they do is worthwhile. The outsider's question is always: why should I, or anyone else, care about that? Philosophers vary in how they respond to this challenge. Some see it as unworthy of a response, as expressive of an unfortunate philistinism or anti-intellectualism from which they can only avert their eyes. Others assert that their questions are intrinsically valuable or interesting, and that they need no further justification for pursuing them, despite their apparent lack of practical relevance. Those who say things like this are always in danger of having their bluff called by those who reject their conception of what has intrinsic value. Still other philosophers represent the eye-wateringly abstract questions that interest them as no different in kind from the questions that exercise theoretical physicists or mathematicians. Some go so far as to represent philosophy as continuous with science. Be that as it may, the impression one comes away with from such discussions is that philosophy is a subject for which justifications need to be given or excuses made.

The philosopher of extremism is in the unusual and happy position of tackling questions whose importance and interest need no explanation. It would be very unusual for someone writing a book on political extremism to be asked: 'Why should I care about extremism?' A more likely question is: 'What can philosophy possibly tell us about extremism?'. The short answer to the latter question is: read this book and tell me if you are any the wiser. Ultimately, the only way to prove the value of philosophizing about extremism is to actually do it and assess the results. Some philosophical purists might regard extremism as an unsuitable subject for philosophers precisely *because* it is of such practical importance. Such a preoccupation with philosophical purity is a type of intellectual extremism that I deplore. In my vision of philosophy, not only is there room for philosophical thinking about subjects like extremism, but such thinking is positively desirable and worthwhile. The pages that follow will put this bold proposition to the test.

As well as philosophers who question the strictly philosophical interest of extremism, there are also those who claim not to find the label 'extremism'

a useful one.<sup>12</sup> One reason for questioning the usefulness of this label is the conviction that it does not pick out something real and only serves to delegitimize political outlooks that are at odds with mainstream thinking. Another way of expressing scepticism about talk of extremism is to describe it as a 'social construction' that does not exist independently of the practice of labelling particular ideologies, individuals and groups as 'extremist'. If something is socially constructed, then it is, to that extent, 'real', but the point of describing extremism as a social construction is to suggest that the *idea* of extremism is optional as well as unhelpful.<sup>13</sup> The opposing view is that the description of some ideologies, individuals and groups as extremist is *apt*, in the sense that it accurately reflects aspects of political and psychological reality, as well as being theoretically *useful*. The only sense in which the idea of extremism is socially constructed is arguably no different from the sense in which ideas generally are socially constructed: it is 'the result of social-historical events' (Haslanger 2012: 116).

The best way to demonstrate the aptness of an idea is to identify patterns of thinking and behaving that call for the use of that idea if one is to describe and make sense of them. The best way to demonstrate the usefulness of an idea is to put it to use and then reflect on whether one could just as well have done without it. To the extent that each of the following chapters puts the idea of extremism to theoretical use, each of these chapters bears on the question whether this is a useful idea or one that is, in any surprising sense, socially constructed. For the moment, it is enough to say the following: someone who seriously proposes that talk of extremism is dispensable or unhelpful is going to have to find some other way of describing the beliefs, mindset and actions of people like Breivik and KSM. It can hardly be denied that Breivik, KSM and others who figure in the following chapters have important things in common, for all their other differences. There is no better way of characterizing what they have in common than by reference to their extremism. While extremism comes in several different forms, it would be perverse to deny that thinking of the Breiviks and KSMs of this world as extremists helps us to make sense of their actions, their beliefs, and their psychology more generally. 'Extremist' is, of course, a political label, the application of which is a political act with political consequences. However, it is possible to accept this, and acknowledge that the label has sometimes been misapplied, without denying the reality of extremism. To deny its reality is to leave oneself in no position to make sense of the political world in which we now live.

## Notes

- 1 'Terrorism police list Extinction Rebellion as extremist ideology: Prevent strategy'. *The Guardian*, 10 January 2020. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/10/xr-extinction-rebellion-listed-extremist-ideology-police-prevent-scheme-guidance](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/10/xr-extinction-rebellion-listed-extremist-ideology-police-prevent-scheme-guidance)
- 2 'How dare they? Extinction Rebellion responds to terrorism slur by Police', Press Release, 10 January 2020. Available at: <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2020/01/10/how-dare-they-extinction-rebellion-responds-to-terrorism-slur-by-police/>. On its website, Extinction Rebellion describes itself as an 'international movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse'. Available at: <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/about-us>.
- 3 The events of that day are described in Borchgrevink (2013) and Seierstad (2015).
- 4 McDermott and Meyer (2012) give a detailed and compelling account of Mohammed's role in masterminding the 9/11 attacks, which killed approximately 3,000 people.
- 5 There is more about this label in the Introduction to Ruthven (2007).
- 6 There is much more about the concept of ideology in Chapter 2.
- 7 See Chapter 5 for some examples.
- 8 The distinction between these two conceptions of analysis is explained in Strawson (1992, Chapter 2).
- 9 As I argue in Chapter 3.
- 10 The latter conception of extremism has been described as the view that extremism is 'a characteristic of the way beliefs are held rather than their location along some social dimension; for example, if they are held rigidly or the person holding them displays a small capacity or willingness to compromise' (Breton et al. 2002: xiii).
- 11 See Chapter 5.
- 12 This is implied, though not asserted, in Coady (2021).
- 13 On the idea of a 'social construction', see Hacking (1999) and Haslanger (2012).

# 1

## How to think about extremism

### Methods extremism

The 3rd of January 2015 was the last day of Muad al-Kasasbeh's life. A mechanical fault had forced the 26-year-old Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot to eject from his F-16 during a bombing raid against ISIS.<sup>1</sup> He was captured near Raqqa in Syria and held for a short time before being executed by an extraordinarily cruel and sadistic method. A video showed him locked in a cage, doused with petrol and burned alive.<sup>2</sup> ISIS was well known for beheading its prisoners, but this method of execution took its moral depravity down to a whole new level.

It is worth remembering al-Kasasbeh's dreadful fate if it is ever suggested that it is a purely subjective matter whether a person or organization is 'extremist', or that this category owes its existence to a politically motivated decision to apply the label to some organizations but not others. This is not to deny that this label, like the label 'terrorist', is often applied for political reasons, as a way to delegitimize opposition to the established order. It is instructive that the African National Congress (ANC) was labelled a terrorist organization for its armed struggle against apartheid, and it is often said in response to this and other such examples that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. If this is true, then is it not also true that one person's extremist is another person's moderate? Doesn't it all depend on one's point of view? After all, the ANC was fighting for democracy in South Africa. In the apartheid era, were they the extremists or the South African government?

These concerns about the use of the label 'extremist' certainly need to be addressed.<sup>3</sup> Yet, when one thinks about Lieutenant al-Kasasbeh, it is difficult

to believe that extremism is relative or that it is a matter of subjective judgement rather than objective fact that ISIS is an extremist organization. One sense in which this is so is that it uses *methods* that are extreme by any reasonable standard. Indeed, they are extreme even by Jihadi standards. Some years before al-Kasasbeh's murder, Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, wrote to the founder of ISIS urging him to avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve of.<sup>4</sup> The reality of ISIS's extremism is inescapable when its methods are judged too extreme even by Al-Qaeda, with its own record of wanton killing and destruction.

Some might object to the idea that ISIS had a method. Would it not be more accurate to classify what was done to al-Kasasbeh as a random act of extreme cruelty, the kind of thing that only a psychopath would do? In a scene in the film *Apocalypse Now*, the unhinged Kurtz asks Captain Willard if he thinks that his brutal methods are unsound. Willard replies: 'I don't see any method at all, sir.'<sup>5</sup> With ISIS, however, there *is* a method. Savagery is the method, albeit an extreme one. Its use is explained in a document called *The Management of Savagery*, whose recommendations include terrorizing the enemy by liquidating hostages in a 'terrifying manner'.<sup>6</sup> The use of this and other similar methods is part of a *strategy* to create conditions in which people will eventually turn to ISIS in desperation to restore order and provide basic services.

Extreme or extremist methods do not have to be as extreme, as intentionally savage, as the ones employed by ISIS. A list of other such methods might include: car bombing, hostage taking, and assassination. These examples all involve the use or threat of physical violence. Some might regard violence against civilians as more extreme than violence against military targets. A different view is that whether a method is extreme or not depends on the nature of the method itself and not the status of the individuals targeted. It is also debatable whether only violent methods are extreme. Some forms of cyber-terrorism might deserve to be labelled as extreme even if no physical violence is involved. There is more to be said about all this but not until later in this book. There is also the issue of whether the use of extreme methods can ever be morally justified. This is another important issue that can be put to one side for the moment.

A methods extremist is an individual or group that uses extreme methods (however exactly these are defined) in pursuit of its objectives. Where these are political objectives, the use of extreme methods makes one a *political* extremist. It remains to be seen whether there are forms of extremism that

are not political. For the moment, our focus is political extremism. The question now arises: why would anybody use, or want to use, extreme methods in pursuit of political objectives? Many different answers to this question are possible. One might be: because they are the most effective. This is the explanation given in *The Management of Savagery*. Another is: because there is no viable alternative. These answers, which tend to be the ones given by methods extremists themselves, are controversial, to say the least. A less controversial answer is that people use extremist *methods* because they have an extremist *ideology*.

The following chapters are organized around a distinction between three basic forms of extremism:

1. Methods extremism.
2. Ideological extremism.
3. Psychological extremism.

Each of these types of extremism will be discussed in greater detail below. The aim of this chapter is to give a brief explanation of the three-way distinction and provide an introduction to each of the three types of extremism. The methods used by ISIS justify its classification as extremist in the first of the three senses and make it vivid what methods extremism amounts to in a specific case. The fact that one is an extremist in the methods sense does not mean that one cannot also be an extremist in the other two senses. Indeed, the leaders of ISIS are plainly extremist in all three senses.

An ideological extremist is an individual or group with an extremist ideology. What is an ideology, and what makes an ideology extremist? Here is one way to think about ideology:

Ideology is an interrelated set of beliefs that provide a way for people to understand the world. Ideologies tell people what is important, who the good guys and bad guys are, what their goals are, and how those goals should be reached. Without ideologies to help categorize and interpret information, the world would be meaningless.

(Uscinski and Parent 2014: 12)

This definition brings out the extent to which ideologies are a framework for making sense of the world. A person watching the news will interpret and respond to the presented stories in a particular way but these interpretations



and responses do not come out of the blue; they are grounded in the viewer's ideological framework. Ideologies aren't just sets of *beliefs*, and they influence our behaviour as well as our understanding of the world. Apart from beliefs, a person or group's ideology will also include, in Raymond Geuss's formulation, 'the concepts they use, the attitudes and psychological dispositions they exhibit, their motives, desires, values, predilections, works of art, religious rituals, gestures' (1981: 5). An ideology in this broad sense is something that everyone has, and ideologies are guides to action as well as frameworks of understanding. One's ideology tells one what to *do* as well as what to *think*.

There is much more to be said about the nature of ideology, but the immediate issue is: what makes an ideology extremist? The most straightforward answer to this question sees ideologies as arranged on a left-right spectrum.<sup>7</sup> Every ideology is located somewhere on the spectrum, and an extremist ideology is one that is either on the extreme left or the extreme right. This is a *positional* conception of ideological extremism. For example, if fascism is on the extreme right of the left-right spectrum, then it is an extremist ideology; it is a form of ideological extremism. Ideological extremists are more likely to be methods extremists, but the two types of extremism are nevertheless conceptually distinct. However, before taking a closer look at the relationship between them, there some other aspects of ideological extremism that need to be clarified.

## Ideological extremism

The idea that ideological extremism is a position on an ideological spectrum has the virtue of simplicity. Positions in the literal sense are positions in physical space. Ideological extremism is a position in ideological space, one that in Nozick's words, 'falls somewhere near the end or fringe of something close to a normal distribution' (1997: 296) along a salient dimension. One is the left-right dimension. Moving from left to right, there is communism, socialism, social democracy, liberalism, conservatism and fascism. A fascist is an ideological extremist, and *becoming* an extremist is a matter of moving in the political sense from the centre to the far left or right. It follows on this definition that social democrats and liberals are not ideological extremists. Because they are in the middle of the left-right dimension, they are *centrists*.

The positional approach to ideological extremism raises a number of questions. Does the spectrum have to be understood in such a way that social democracy and liberalism are in the middle? Are there other equally legitimate projections of ideological space? How fine-grained is the spectrum? Which ideologies should be lumped together, and which ones distinguished on the spectrum? Is 'neo-liberalism' a form of liberalism or an ideology in its own right? Is it to the left or to the right of conservatism? Whichever dimension one chooses, there is bound to be an element of arbitrariness in the placing of ideologies. Furthermore, the left-right spectrum is not the only dimension of ideological space. Ideological space is *multi-dimensional*.

Consider ISIS once again. It is extremist not just in the sense that it uses extreme methods but also in the sense that it has an extremist ideology. However, if an extremist ideology is one that is located on the extreme left or the extreme right of the left-right spectrum, then we will be forced to classify ISIS in terms of this spectrum. Yet ISIS is neither on the extreme left nor the extreme right. It is a mistake, some might argue, to think of ISIS in left-right terms, since its extremism is *religious* rather than political. If its extremism is ideological, it is not so in the sense in which the extremism of revolutionary communists or fascists is ideological. Furthermore, the initial thought was that groups like ISIS use extreme methods because they have extremist ideologies, but the ideological conception of extremism does not explain the link between ideological and methods extremism.

The first thing to say is that the contrast between political and religious extremism is a false one because the contrast between politics and religion is a false one. As Richard English observes, 'any religion of significance necessarily involves vital relations to politics, society, culture, identity, power, economics, and other potentially secular aspects of human life' (2009: 39). To put it another way, the ideological extremism of groups like ISIS is political as well as religious. In fact, it is political *because* it is religious. And this takes us back to the challenge of locating their political ideology on the left-right scale. If ISIS has an extremist political ideology, is it on the extreme left or the extreme right? If the answer is 'neither', then where in ideological space should it be located?

There is a case for classifying the ideology of ISIS as fascist. This would make its ideological extremism 'positional' in a standard sense. The case for classifying ISIS as fascist or 'Islamofascist' has been made by those who point to its rejection of Enlightenment values, its extreme authoritarianism, virulent anti-Semitism, and conspiratorial world-view.<sup>8</sup> These are recognizably