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Reply to Tahir Abbas, Naomi Kloosterboer, and Rik Peels

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ABSTRACT

A reply to Tahir Abbas, Naomi Kloosterboer, and Rik Peels, focusing on the issues of radicalisation, normativity, and fundamentalism

KEYWORDS

Extremism; terrorism; radicalisation; normativity; radicalism; fundamentalism

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking Tahir, Naomi, and Rik for their insightful comments on my book. Rather than responding to them serially, I will focus on three key topics which come up in their commentaries: radicalisation, normativity, and fundamentalism. I stand by what I say in the book about radicalisation and normativity. However, I share some of Rik's reservations about my account of fundamentalism. I will propose an account that is not only different from the one in the book but also different from the one proposed by Rik in his comments.

Radicalisation

Radicalisation has been defined as the process of becoming an extremist.¹ Since, on my view, there are three varieties of extremism – methods, ideological, and psychological – one can think of radicalisation as the process of becoming an extremist in any of the three senses. Behavioural radicalisation is a process leading to the adoption of extreme methods in pursuit of one's objectives, cognitive radicalisation is the process of adopting an extremist ideology, and psychological radicalisation is the process of acquiring or developing an extremist mindset. The risk factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation include the perception of grievance. Individuals who see themselves or their in-group as victims of injustice or oppression are more likely to become cognitive or behaviourally radicalised than those who do not, but the perception of grievance is more likely to trigger cognitive or behavioural radicalisation in people with an extremist mindset. In other words, psychological radicalisation facilitates radicalisation in the other two senses. How, then, does an individual become psychologically radicalised in the first place? I argue that cognitive radicalisation is itself a cause, though not the only cause, of psychological radicalisation.

This makes my account circular, as I point out in the book (p. 175). As I see it, there is no logical or temporal priority between cognitive and psychological radicalisation because the relationship between them is "symbiotic" or "a relationship of mutual dependence"

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(p. 176). Extremist ideologies appeal to people with an extremist mindset, but the latter is at least partly also a product of ideology. Does this circularity matter? Naomi thinks it does, and that the idea of an extremist mindset cannot bear the explanatory weight I place on it. However, circularity is only a problem if it is vicious circularity. There is also benign circularity, as when there is a cluster of interrelated concepts such that “each concept, could, from a philosophical point of view, be properly understood only by grasping its connections with the others” (Strawson 1992, 19).

This is how I see things. The different concepts of radicalisation and extremism I differentiate are elements of a cluster of mutually dependent concepts. It is hard to imagine that a person with no extremist ideological commitments could have, ready-made, all the elements of an extremist mindset. Yet, it is also plausible that an extremist mindset facilitates ideological radicalisation since extremist ideologies “promote precisely the preoccupations, attitudes, and thinking styles that add up to an extremist mindset” (p. 176). Circularity is mainly a problem for *reductive* analyses that represent a complex concept as constructed out of independently intelligible simpler elements. This is not the sense in which I propose an analysis of extremism. Analysis, as I understand it, is *connective* rather than *reductive*.

However, Naomi is also sceptical about the very idea of an extremist mindset. She cites John Horgan’s view that psychopathology has not found distinctive extremist psychological features.² However, Horgan’s scepticism about the idea of a terrorist personality needs to be weighed against evidence, cited in the book, of a “militant-extremist mindset” (MEM). Saucier et al. propose an inductively based model of MEM consisting of 16 components.³ In the book, I describe myself as trying to impose some order and structure on empirically generated MEM features. The idea that there is no such thing as an extremist mindset is not only difficult to reconcile with research into the MEM but is also at odds with common sense, for what that is worth. Intuitively, people with very different ideological commitments or outlooks can still have a great deal in common at the psychological level.⁴ Extremists with opposing ideologies often have common preoccupations, attitudes, emotion, and thinking styles. The notion of an extremist mindset is an attempt to capture and explain these common features. If the idea of an extremist mindset did not already exist, it would have to be invented.

Another of Naomi’s concerns is that my account of radicalisation is too individualistic and perhaps underestimates the role of what she calls “situated epistemic agency”. On this issue, I am unrepentant, and it is not clear whether there is a significant disagreement between us. There is a section in the book on group dynamics in radicalisation and Naomi’s examples of situated epistemic agency are ones that I am happy to accept. Her remarks on the issue of trust in the reception of counternarratives are both correct and important. My main concern, as she recognises, is to correct “passivist” accounts of radicalisation that represent it as something that happens to people, like catching a disease, rather than as a product of the agent’s own agency in many cases. Naomi is right, though, that we should be careful not to depict that agency in a too idealised form.

Tahir has different concerns about the idea of radicalisation. He argues that “there is no single road to radicalisation” given that “every individual’s experience is distinct”. This is the “particularistic” view of radicalisation I defended in a paper published a few years before the book.⁵ However, while there may be no single road or pathway to radicalisation, this does not preclude the discovery of “risk factors” or “drivers” that, in Peter

Neuman's terminology, are "common to the majority of radicalization trajectories" (2011, 15). The perception of grievance is one such driver, and there may be others. When the grievances to which radicalisation is a response are genuine, they must be addressed by those who seek to counter radicalisation.

Tahir says something else to which I would draw attention: he notes that the labelling of people as extremists can have the effect of silencing criticism of foreign and domestic policy and that to be *radical* is "absolutely appropriate in the setting of secular liberal democracies in Western Europe today". Tahir interprets this as showing that "extremism in and of itself is not a problem" and that "the reality of extremism is relative". In my view, a better response is to insist on a distinction between extremism and radicalism. What is appropriate in the setting of secular liberal democracies is a progressive radicalism *rather than* extremism, which remains problematic on any of the interpretations I propose. The relationship between radicalism and extremism is the focus of chapter 6 of my book.

Following Colin Beck, I take radicalism to be contention outside the common routines of politics, oriented towards substantial change in social, economic, or political structures, and undertaken by actors using extra-institutional means.⁶ To this characterisation, one might add that radicals are opposed to gradualism in politics and challenge the prevailing master narrative. They only endorse violence in limited circumstances, if at all, and lack most of the attitudes and preoccupations of extremists. In my terms, campaigners against slavery in 19th century America were radicals, not extremists. Likewise, most suffragettes. It is radicalism rather than extremism that has been the key to human emancipation, not reactionary right-wing radicalism but the progressive radicalism of the Radical Enlightenment. Hence, every effort should be made to distinguish radicalism and extremism and not to treat legitimate objections to the latter as objections to the former.

Normativity

Rik, Naomi, and Tahir are all exercised by the issue of normativity, but I'll focus here on Rik's discussion. He notes that my approach is unapologetically normative, for without normativity it is hard to distinguish extremism from extreme but benign phenomena. In chapter 3 I argue against the classification of the apartheid-era ANC as an extremist organisation on the grounds that its violence was in a just cause and that there was no realistic alternative to the armed struggle in the battle against apartheid. However, judgements about which causes are just or the necessity of violence are normative judgements. Rik has two concerns about this: first, the normativity of definitions of extremism makes it difficult to "operationalize" them in empirical work. Second, he says that I do not adequately explain my methodology for arriving at the normative definitions I propose in the book.

I agree with Rik up to point. For example, if for some reason we decided to study the mental health of bachelors, we might hope to agree on a value-free definition of bachelorhood and use this definition in designing our study. However, even in this case, we cannot be entirely value-free. The standard definition of "bachelor" is "unmarried man", but the concept of a "man" is not free of normative content. In the case of a term like "extremist", normativity is even harder to escape because it is, as I put it in the book, "a political label, the application of which is a political act with political consequences" (p. 9). "Extremist" is, in this respect, no different from "terrorist". As Jackson et al. point out, the

meanings we give to such words “are never inevitable and their use is not determined or ‘given’ in advance” (2011, 112). However, the difficulty of defining and operationalising such terms does not make them *impossible* to operationalise or define.

Consider another term with heavy normative content: child abuse. This is usually taken to consist in a child being harmed and someone intending that harm. However, “there is no consensus about what is harmful to a child” (Rogers, Hevey, and Ash 1989, 12). There is no non-normative conception of what counts as “harmful to a child”. For that matter, the concept of a child is also normative. Conceptions of childhood are constantly evolving, and it has been suggested that a book on child abuse could not have been written one hundred years ago since pervasive values in the past “sanctioned many practices that we now call abusive” (Kempe and Kempe 1978, 15). However, none of this has prevented social scientists from conducting quantitative studies of the prevalence of child abuse. They have, in this sense, “operationalized” a highly normative concept by stipulating what is to count as an instance of it for their purposes. As Rik concedes, a similar approach is possible with extremism.

It is worth adding that for all the disputes about what counts as child abuse, there are extreme cases which leave no room for doubt that they are child abuse. In the same way, there are archetypal extremists who must be recognised as such by any sane definition of extremism. Explanations by example have their limitations, and there is always a process of adjustment between verdicts about particular cases and general principles. The aim is to arrive at a form of reflective equilibrium between judgements about cases and underlying principles. This bears on Rik’s second point. I have already argued that a philosophical analysis of extremism should be connective rather than reductive. It is now apparent that connective analyses should seek reflective equilibrium along the lines I have just been suggesting, and that there is no barrier to connective, reflective equilibrium seeking analyses of normative concepts. Indeed, analysis as I understand it is not very different from the Wittgensteinian, family resemblance approach that Rik endorses.

Fundamentalism

Rik proposes an account of fundamentalism on which neo-Nazi and other fascists count as secular fundamentalists. Fundamentalism, as Rik understands it, is both highly modern and reactionary towards modernity. It is authoritarian, hostile to outgroups, Manichaeic, and harks back to a “perfectly good paradisaical state” to which it wishes to return. To these attributes, I would add the following: to be a fundamentalist is to think that there is a uniquely right way of living, based on foundational values and principles that are incontestable because of their source; to be committed to this way of living, to protecting it against hostile forces, and in some cases to promoting it by force or persuasion; to regard other ways of living as inferior and react to them with a mixture of suspicion, hostility and contempt. For religious fundamentalists, the usual source of the foundational principles is divine revelation or holy scripture. However, and perhaps contrary to the impression I give in the book, fundamentalism need not be religious. Rik is right that there are, or could be, secular varieties of fundamentalism.

A key epistemological feature of fundamentalism is its attitude to the source of its foundational values and principles. Imagine that P is one such principle whose alleged source is divine revelation. For one kind of fundamentalist, if it is divinely revealed that P, then it is the case that P. To ask whether we can be sure that P is correct despite being

divinely revealed, or whether we can be certain that *P* has been divinely revealed, is to ask questions that make no sense. The fundamentalist's fundamentals are "hinge propositions" in Wittgenstein's sense: they cannot coherently be doubted in the fundamentalist's framework.⁷ Fundamentalism is not just a system of thought but a form of life, which is partly constituted by acceptance of certain fundamental principles. There is no room for scepticism either about the source or the validity of these principles.

A Nazi for whom the fundamental principles of Nazism are incontestable in virtue of having originated in the words and deeds of Adolf Hitler could count as a fundamentalist on my view, as on Rik's. My revised characterisation of fundamentalism comes closer to being non-normative than any of my characterisations of extremism. It is possible to recognise a person as believing in the existence of a uniquely right way of living without taking a stand as to the validity of that belief. The fundamentalist mindset will certainly seem alien from the perspective of a liberal pluralist who agrees with Isaiah Berlin that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question "how should I live?"⁸ However, this leaves it open that the concept of fundamentalism can be operationalised in quantitative work.

Notes

1. Neumann (2013).
2. Horgan (2003).
3. Saucier et al. (2009).
4. As Eric Hoffer noted long ago. See Hoffer (1951).
5. Cassam (2018).
6. Beck (2015).
7. Wittgenstein (1977).
8. Berlin (2013).

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