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## Replies to Elizabeth Frazer and Daniel Gordon

Quassim Cassam

I thank Elizabeth Frazer and Daniel Gordon for their generous and insightful responses to my book. Gordon focuses on my methodology and my account of methods extremism. His concerns about my account of the latter are well taken but less serious than he believes. Frazer asks whether my analysis of extremism could, and perhaps should, be reframed as debunking project. This is a good question to which I will respond after reacting to Gordon's discussion.

Gordon describes my approach as post-metaphysical and post-analytical. I do not rely on a semantic analysis of extremism but instead regard my study as multidisciplinary. I draw on political science in my account of ideological extremism and psychology in my account of psychological extremism but Gordon worries that 'methods extremism' has no corresponding discipline. This lack of symmetry is evidence, he argues, of my inability to ground some of my conclusions in a disciplinary analysis of any identifiable kind. To be a methods extremist is to use extreme methods in pursuit of one's objectives. Extreme methods can be, but need not be, violent, and using violence in pursuit of one's objectives does not necessarily make one a methods extremist. It depends on other contextual factors. However, Gordon suspects that it is impossible on my view to define methods extremism 'intrinsically', that is, without regard to the justness of the goal in pursuit of which extreme methods are employed.

In reply, I am tempted to say that the disciplinary context for elucidating what is to count as an extreme method is philosophy. In other words, when it comes to analyzing methods extremism, philosophy may need to go it alone. Take the case of the Jordanian pilot who was locked in a cage by ISIS, doused with petrol, and burned alive. The whole episode was filmed and shown online as ISIS propaganda. If pressed to say what made this an extreme method for advancing, or trying to advance, ISIS's political objectives, the obvious thing to say is that ISIS's methods, including burning their enemies alive, are distinguished by their extreme cruelty. There

is no reason to think that this claim can only be justified in a disciplinary context. The philosopher Judith Shklar once noted that cruelty is the worst vice, the *summum malum*.<sup>1</sup> The perception of cruelty requires empathy; it is difficult fully to grasp the cruelty of the pilot's fate without empathy. Anyone with the ability to put himself in the pilot's shoes can grasp the extent to which we are dealing here with an extreme method. According to what I call 'intrinsicism', the extent to which a person counts as a methods extremist 'is determined by the intrinsic qualities of their methods' (2022: 63). Cruelty is one such quality.

However, this proposal soon runs into difficulties. To begin with, there is the question whether cruelty is a contextual matter. Methods that might seem exceptionally cruel in one context might look different in another. ISIS beheads some of its victims but in Tudor England, beheading was regarded as a more humane alternative to other, grislier punishments meted out to traitors and heretics. There is also the point that some of the methods I describe as 'extreme' are not obviously cruel. I give the example of the IRA's 'dirty protest' in the Maze prison in the early 1980s and Bobby Sands starving himself to death in pursuit of political status for IRA prisoners. Gordon asks what the point is of telling us that such methods are extreme, but this is not an unanswerable question. One sense in which not eating for 66 days is an extreme method of making a political point is that it is something that few are capable of doing. Sands was a hero to many in the Republican movement not just because of his self-sacrifice but also because of the exceptionally demanding form his self-sacrifice took. It involved a degree of prolonged suffering that very few people would be able to bear. This is a humanity-based rather than a discipline-based judgement, but none the worse for that.

The lesson that Gordon derives from my examples of extreme methods is that 'one cannot define extreme methods intrinsically'. This is the defining thesis of what I refer to as 'contextualism', as distinct from intrinsicism. For the contextualist, the question whether the use of a particular method constitutes methods extremism cannot be answered solely based on the intrinsic qualities of the method itself. It depends on a range of contextual factors, including

whether the method was employed in a just cause. This view, which I endorse, opens up the possibility that the use of violence in pursuit of a political objective does not necessarily make one a methods extremist. Those who use proportionate, discriminating, and necessary violence in a just cause are not necessarily methods extremists. Violence can, in some circumstances, be justified.

This makes my conception of methods extremism normative rather than descriptive. I suspect that some of Gordon's concerns center on this point. He writes that if we cannot define methods extremism without regard to the justness of the putative extremist's goal, this 'brings us back to square one in terms of how to make sense of extremism.' The implication here, and elsewhere in Gordon's discussion, is that my account of methods extremism is uninformative or circular. In fact, neither the claim that methods extremism consists in the use of extreme methods nor the thesis that the notion of an extreme method is partly normative is circular since I do not define extreme methods simply as the methods used by methods extremists. The real issue here is whether it is acceptable to employ normative notions such as that of a just cause in defining methods extremism. In another discussion of my book, Rik Peels argues that the resort to normativity in defining extremism makes my account hard to 'operationalize' since social scientists who are trying to decide whether to classify an organization as extremist would then be forced to decide whether its cause is just and whether its violence was excessive.<sup>2</sup> Is this not at odds with the need for scholarly neutrality? Should we not, as scholars, be trying *not* to take sides in our analysis of extremism?

In my view, concepts like that of extremism are irreducibly normative and essentially contested. An account of extremism that suggests otherwise should be rejected on that account. 'Extremist' is, as I put it, 'a political label, the application of which is a political act with political consequences' (2022: 9). It is, in this respect, no different from 'terrorist'. However, normative concepts can still be operationalized. It is possible to study terrorism and extremism using the techniques of the social scientist while recognizing the element of normativity. The same goes for

many other phenomena that social scientists study. For example, social and other scientists are not prevented from studying child abuse by the fact that it involves harm to a child and the concept of harm to a child is thoroughly normative.

In proposing that my analysis of extremism could be reframed as a debunking project, Frazer suggests that when we look at any class of objects, we generally see criss-crossing similarities and overlaps rather than sharp boundaries. Wittgenstein is Frazer's inspiration here. In response to the question 'what do all games in common?', Wittgenstein's answer is 'nothing'. Instead, what we see is 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (1978: 67).<sup>3</sup> Games form a family, and the concept of a game is a family resemblance concept. There is no essence of games, but it is possible to draw a boundary between games and other activities 'for a special purpose' (1978: 69).

In much the same way, Frazer suggests, extremism, fanaticism, authoritarianism, terrorism, and other related phenomena form a family. What observation reveals is a series of overlapping and criss-crossing similarities between them. We can draw a boundary around any one of them for a special purpose, but it is a political question whether to do so. The risk is that by drawing a sharp boundary around it we will be 'upholding the current rhetoric of, and current police, judicial and regulatory approaches' to extremism. The clear implication is that these approaches are dangerously flawed, and that a philosophical analysis of extremism should be careful not to justify the surveillance or arrest of so-called 'extremists' who have not done anything illegal. Extremism, Frazer claims, is not necessarily harmful to the extremist or to anyone else.

I agree with some, but not all, of these observations. Consider the United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism, also known as CONTEST. The aim of the so-called 'Prevent' strand of this strategy is to 'safeguard people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (2018: 27). However, there is said to be no precise line between 'terrorist ideology' and 'extremist ideology'. As a result, the government's counter-terrorism strategy involves 'tackling extremism in all its forms' given that 'extremists of all kinds use malevolent narratives to justify behavior that

contradicts and undermines the values that are the foundation of our society' (2018: 23). Countering terrorism, which is a tactic, becomes an exercise in countering extremism, which is understood as an ideology.

Faced with such attempts to collapse the distinction between terrorism and extremism, the obvious remedy is to do the very thing that Frazer sees as questionable: insist on greater conceptual clarity about the relationship between terrorism and extremism, where achieving such clarity is at least partly a matter of drawing a boundary around terrorism and extremism and noting that the two concepts are distinct, even if many terrorists are extremists and some extremists are terrorists. In this way, drawing a clear boundary around extremism undermines rather than upholds the rhetoric of extremism in official policy documents such as CONTEST. It is, of course, a further question whether ideological or psychological extremism is a risk factor for methods extremism or terrorism, and this question can only be answered by empirical research. Even if extremism is a risk factor for terrorism, this does not justify the criminalization of extremism. At the same time, it is not unreasonable for those responsible for countering terrorism to take a special interest in individuals who endorse violent extremism, regardless of whether these individuals have carried out acts of terrorism.

Wittgenstein characterizes the concept of a game as one with blurred edges.<sup>4</sup> However, blurry concepts are still concepts, and the point of Wittgenstein's analysis is not to debunk the concept of a game. His target is not our concepts but flawed philosophical accounts of their nature. A more pertinent account of conceptual debunking is given by Philip Kitcher in his account of the concept of a mermaid. The problem with this concept is not that it is blurry but that it is useless and lacks application. There are no mermaids and the concept of a mermaid 'plays no role in what, by our current lights, is the best description and explanation of the world' (1982: 224). It has been 'demoted from a role in our cognitive endeavors' and only lingers on because 'we sometimes use it in storytelling or in intellectual history' (ibid.). There may be other forms of debunking, but Kitcher provides a compelling account of what it would be to debunk a concept. Thus, instead of

appealing to Wittgenstein, a potentially better way of trying to debunk the concept of extremism would be to make the case that it is explanatorily and descriptively useless.

The prospects for an argument along these lines are not good. If we are to do justice to the fact that some ideologies are prone to taking certain political ideas to their limits, then we need the idea of ideological extremism.<sup>5</sup> To understand the psychological appeal of ideological extremism, we need the concept of psychological extremism. If we are to explain the respects in which ideologically opposed extremists still have a lot in common in terms of their attitudes, preoccupations, and ways of thinking we need something like the idea of an extremist mindset. If we want to capture the willingness of some political actors to pursue their objectives using extreme methods, we need the notion of methods extremism. These are all ways of making the point that the concept of extremism is one that we cannot easily do without. The concept is, as Frazer notes, sometimes misapplied but extremism is nevertheless a real phenomenon by which many countries have been disfigured. The concept of extremism thus has a place in any serious attempt to understand political reality. What it deserves is not debunking but deepening.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Shklar 1984. There is, of course, much more to be said about this, but not here.

<sup>2</sup> See Peels' contribution to a forthcoming symposium on my book in the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

<sup>3</sup> These references are to section numbers rather than page numbers of Anscombe's translation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

<sup>4</sup> See Wittgenstein 1978: p. 71 and the surrounding discussion.

<sup>5</sup> On the connection between extremism and taking a political idea to its limits, see Scruton 2007: p. 237.

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