

FANATICISM: FOR AND AGAINST

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Abstract: This paper examines attempts to rehabilitate fanaticism by drawing on its supposed contribution to combatting injustices like slavery. Radical campaigners against slavery called themselves ‘fanatics’, but in the pejorative tradition fanaticism almost invariably has a negative connotation. On the account given here, the supposed virtues of fanaticism are the actual virtues of something with which it is easily confused: radicalism. The abolitionists were not fanatics but radicals. Nevertheless, philosophical apologists for fanaticism are right to raise questions about the merits of moderation. After a critical examination of some arguments for the view that moderation is the quintessential political virtue it is concluded that, depending on the circumstances, both moderation and radicalism can play the role of corrective virtues.

1. Merry’s challenge

“Sometimes you have to fucking go to the extreme” (Roth 1997: 105). These words are spoken by Merry Levov, a character in Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral*.¹ In Merry’s eyes, the carpet bombing of Vietnam in the 1960s was something to which only an extreme response was appropriate. For all the supposed virtues of moderation, sometimes it is necessary to be an extremist, especially when confronted by a great evil. In what the political scientist Joel Olson calls the “pejorative tradition”, extremism, fanaticism and zealotry invariably have a negative connotation, but the clear lesson of history is that these supposed political vices “can advance democracy while moderation and compromise can actually undermine it” (2007: 692). In a similar vein, Senator Barry Goldwater asserted in a speech that “extremism in defense of liberty is no vice” and “moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”² Similar sentiments were expressed by Malcom X.³

To illustrate the virtues of fanaticism, Olson turns to the campaign against slavery in 19th century America. In his account, the notable abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison led “a movement of self-defined fanatics with an unyielding commitment to the immediate and unconditional emancipation of the enslaved” (2007: 686). Garrisonians brimmed with zealotry but zealotry is not inherently problematic. Far from being a moral or psychological defect, zealotry, which Olson sees as equivalent to fanaticism, is “a strategy rather than a temperament” (2007: 695). It is a “political activity, driven by an ardent devotion to a cause” (2007: 688). It was the only effective means of overturning the institution of slavery, and Garrison embraced the description of his wing of the abolitionist movement as fanatics. When it comes to slavery, there is no middle way and no room for compromise. Slavery does not call for a moderate response, and is precisely one of those cases in which, in Merry’s words, you have to fucking go to the extreme.

Olson is unusual but not unique in attempting to rehabilitate fanaticism. In his study, Alberto Toscano observes that the idea of fanaticism “is rarely, if ever, an object of political affirmation, serving almost invariably as a foil against which to define the proper path of politics” (2017: xxv). The fanatic is always the enemy, “an inscrutable, intransigent and alien enemy” (2017: 1). Yet the fact that people like Garrison were described as fanatics should give us pause. In effect, the charge of fanaticism was used to defend slavery “against the threat of an uncompromising egalitarianism” (2017: 8). It is clear in retrospect that if Garrison was a zealot, he was a “reasonable zealot” (2017: 10). If he was a fanatic, his fanaticism was justified in the context of his fight against slavery.

Is it actually *true* that Garrisonian abolitionists were fanatics? This question brings out a fundamental lack of clarity in attempts to make the case for fanaticism. There are two ways of reading such attempts. On the one hand, they are simply pointing out that “fanatic” is a pejorative label that has been applied to people who we now regard not just as admirable but

as positively heroic. This leaves it open whether fanaticism, properly so-called, is admirable because it leaves it open whether people like Garrison were *in fact* fanatics or, if they were, whether their fanaticism was what made them admirable. On this interpretation, it is possible to deplore the misuse of labels like “fanatic” or “extremist” without endorsing either fanaticism or extremism. Indeed, challenging the misuse of these labels might make it easier to see what is *actually* wrong with fanaticism.

On a stronger reading, the argument is that Garrison and his followers *were* fanatics and admirable in virtue of their fanatical opposition to slavery. This would be a compelling illustration of Olson’s point that fanaticism can advance the cause of democracy. However, for this argument to work, one would need to be sure that the labelling of people like Garrison as fanatics is not anachronistic. According to Toscano, “the epithet ‘fanatic’ was worn as a badge of pride among the radical wing of the abolitionist movement” (2017: 9). However, this does not settle the question whether these radicals were right to think of themselves as fanatics or to regard their tactics and methods as fanatical. Olson and Toscano take the radical abolitionists at their word but if this is a mistake then the case for fanaticism is considerably weakened. It is possible to see the abolitionists in a positive light without seeing fanaticism in a positive light.

The discussion that follows is in three parts. In part 2, I give my own positive account of fanaticism and what it takes to be a fanatic. In part 3, I will use this account to argue that the abolitionists were not fanatics and that the supposed virtues of fanaticism are the actual virtues of something with which it shouldn’t be confused: radicalism. The antithesis of fanaticism is moderation, and in part 4 I will focus on a study of moderation by Aurelian Craiutu, who sees it as the “quintessential political virtue” (2012: 1). In developing his argument, Craiutu draws on the 18th century woman of letters Madame de Staël.⁴ Her *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* is described by Craiutu as the “true manifesto of moderation”

(2012: 190). Her criticisms of fanaticism are still relevant today, as is her defence of moderation. However, the history of abolitionism brings out the limitations of this virtue. Apologists for fanaticism are right at least to this extent: although moderation is potentially an antidote to fanaticism, it can also make it much harder to address major social injustices. When that happens, the antidote to moderation is radicalism.

2. Fanaticism

In a neglected discussion of fanaticism in his 1963 monograph *Freedom and Reason*, R. M. Hare observes that:

it is when people step from the selfish pursuit of their own interests to the propagation of perverted ideals that they become really dangerous. We shall never understand the phenomenon called Fascism, and other similar political movements, until we realize that this is what is happening. The extreme sort of Fascist is a fanatic who not merely wants something for himself, but thinks that it ought to be brought into existence universally, whether or not anybody else, or even he himself if his tastes change, wants it (1963: 114).

A key distinction for Hare is between ideals and interests. To have an *ideal* “is to think of some kind of thing as pre-eminently good within some larger class” (1963: 159). To have an *interest* is “for there to be something which one wants (or may want), or which is (or may be) a means, necessary or sufficient, for the attainment of something which one wants (or may want)” (1963: 157). Ideals can conflict with other ideals and with interests, just as interests can conflict. Your ideals can conflict with mine, and my interests can conflict with yours. In these terms, “morality includes the pursuit of ideals as well as the reconciliation of interests” (1963: 157).

A fanatic is someone who is willing to trample on other people’s ideals and interests, and sacrifice his own interests, in order to realize his ideals. For example, the Nazis thought that a certain kind of society and a certain kind of person were pre-eminently good. In this

sense, they had ideals. What differentiates them from liberals is that “they not only pursued a certain ideal, but pursued it because of the sort of ideal that it was, in contempt and defiance of both the interests and ideals of others” (1963: 160). They “trampled ruthlessly on other people’s interests, including that interest which consists in the freedom to pursue varying ideals” (1963: 157). In contrast, the liberal is “in favour of allowing anybody to pursue his own ideals and interests except in so far as their pursuit interferes with other people’s pursuit of theirs” (1963: 178). Crucially, the liberal is forbidden “to force his own ideals down the throats of other people by legal or other compulsion” (1963: 178).

Hare imagines a conversation in which a liberal asks a Nazi the following question: suppose you find out that you are a Jew. Would you still be in favour of the extermination of all Jews? The fanatical Nazi will presumably say: if I were a Jew then I would deserve to be killed. The Nazi “sticks to his judgements even when they conflict with his own interest in hypothetical cases” (1963: 162). Indeed, the fanatic is prepared to sacrifice the interests of his nearest and dearest, as well as his own, in order to realize his ideal. Thus, fanaticism has at least the following two components:

- (i) A fanatic is willing to trample on the interests and ideals of other people in pursuit of his own ideals.
- (ii) A fanatic is willing to sacrifice his own interests in order to realize his ideals.

Taking these in reverse order, (ii) might seem an odd requirement on fanaticism since it makes the fanatic look in some ways like an almost heroic figure, and certainly more attractive than someone who is determined to get his own way without being willing to give up anything in exchange. As Hare points out, the fanatic “might even claim to be morally superior to his opponent, in that the latter abandons his principles when they conflict with his own interest in hypothetical cases” (1963: 162). A person who satisfies (i) but not (ii) is a bully rather than a fanatic.

Are people fanatics in virtue of the nature of their ideals or in virtue of their attitude to their ideals, whatever their nature? In his later work, Hare endorses the latter view: “one may be fanatical about moral opinions even when they are sound ones’ and ‘it is not the content of a person’s intuitive principles that makes him a fanatic, but his attitude to them” (1981: 175).⁵ However, the discussion in *Freedom and Reason* presupposes that the true fanatic’s ideals are *pervverted*. It is partly in virtue of the nature of their ideals that fanatics pursue them in contempt and defiance of others’ interests and ideals. In other words, a fanatic’s attitude to his ideals is not “external” to the ideals themselves since it is in the nature of these ideals to require their imposition on others. One cannot be a Nazi but against the trampling of other people’s interests and ideals. In the same way, one is not a liberal if one is in favour of forcing one’s ideals down the throats of other people. As Hare points out, “the liberal is not forbidden by his principle of toleration to propagate his own ideals; but he is restricted as to the means” (1963: 1978). What qualifies as an acceptable means of promoting one’s ideals is dictated by the nature of the ideals themselves.

Abolitionism is an interesting case because what is at issue here is not the imposition of alien ideals on other people. Garrison’s point was that slavery was flatly inconsistent with the American ideal of liberty and justice for all, and that respect for these ideals required the abolition of slavery. This argues against the calling the radical abolitionists fanatics. It is true that they were happy to trample on the interests of slave owners. However, this does not make abolitionists fanatics since the practice of slave-owning was inhuman and unjust and there is no moral requirement to respect the interests of slave owners. A fanatic is not only willing to trample on the interests and ideals of other people in pursuit of his own ideals but to do so even when there is no moral justification for acting in this way. To put it another way, the fanatic’s contempt for other people’s ideals and interests is *unwarranted*.

Trampling on the ideals and interests of other people in pursuit of one's own ideals might be regarded as morally problematic even if one's ideals are unobjectionable. When one's ideals *are* objectionable or, as Hare describes them, "perverted", then trampling on other people in pursuit of them is doubly problematic. The question this raises is whether condition (i) on fanaticism is too weak. This condition says nothing about the nature of the fanatic's own ideals. It might be suggested, therefore, that something stronger is required, and that (i) should be replaced by:

(i)* A fanatic is willing to trample on the interests and ideals of other people in pursuit of his own *perverted* ideals.

Here, "perverted" means morally objectionable. The intuition behind (i)* is that being willing to trample on other people's interests and ideals in pursuit of one's own ideals is not relevant to whether one is a fanatic unless there is something wrong with one's ideals. A different approach is to distinguish between *weak* and *strong* fanaticism. A person who only satisfies (i) and (ii) might be described as a fanatic in the weak sense. A fanatic in the strong sense, a *full-blown* fanatic, is a person who meets condition (i)* and (ii). When I talk about 'fanaticism', I mean fanaticism in the strong sense.

Are (i)* and (ii) sufficient for fanaticism? A common observation is that fanatics are unwilling or unable to think critically about their ideals. This is related to another epistemic failing: being excessively certain about their ideals, or what Paul Katsafanas calls the fanatic's "unwillingness to doubt" (2019: 8).⁶ Some truths, like the truth that triangles have three sides, *are* immune to doubt. However, the propositions that the fanatic regards as immune to doubt – like those of Nazi race theory – are not only dubious but demonstrably false. This means that the fanatic's certainty about his ideals is *spurious*. At the same time, it explains his willingness to sacrifice himself and others in pursuit of his ideals. Spurious certainty is a core element of the fanatic's mindset: there is no such thing as a doubtful or uncertain fanatic.

Fanaticism's attitude to doubt is a respect in which it is pre-modern. The sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that doubt is a pervasive feature of modernity and "forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world" (1991: 3). "Modernity" here refers to "the institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe" (1991: 14-15). Modernity in this sense "institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims which.... are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned" (1991: 3). This is precisely what the fanatic does *not* think. Fanatics regard doubts about their ideals and objectives as corrosive and immoral. Fanaticism is the rejection of doubt and a return to the certainty that characterises the pre-modern world.

It might be objected that liberals are as certain about their ideals as fanatics are about theirs. Is this not at least one respect in which liberalism is indistinguishable from fanaticism? There is a seeming tension within liberalism between its conviction that "the ends of men are many" (Berlin 2013: 239) and its certainty about the ultimate validity of its pluralist ideals. One thing that liberals do not question is that human beings can have fundamentally different ends and still be fully rational. Yet this idea is not immune to doubt and this is something that liberals should accept. Liberalism requires epistemic humility, including humility about the standing of liberalism itself. This does not prevent the liberal from arguing for and promoting pluralism. It is possible to be convinced by pluralism without regarding it as immune to doubt.

There is one more important feature of fanaticism that needs to be recognized. Fanatics, it is said, are unwilling to compromise but so are people described as principled. What, then, is the difference between being a fanatic and being principled? Compromise is a subject that has attracted surprisingly little philosophical interest. There is, however, one notable exception to the neglect of this subject, Avishai Margalit's *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*. This is how Margalit summarizes the message of his book:

On the whole, political compromises are a good thing. Political compromises for the sake of peace are a very good thing. Shabby, shady, and shoddy compromises are bad but not sufficiently bad to be always avoided at all costs, especially when they are concluded for the sake of peace. Only rotten compromises are to be avoided at all costs (2010: 16).

A compromise in the anemic sense is any feasible agreement between two or more parties. A sanguine compromise is an agreement that also involves recognizing the other side and its point of view as legitimate. A sanguine compromise “may even involve a measure of sacrifice from the strong side, not driving as hard a bargain as it could to get what it desires” (2010: 41). The aim is to “dispel an image of domination” (2010: 41). Sanguine compromises “must be based on mutual concessions: on splitting the difference” (2010: 48). Lastly, a *rotten* compromise is “an agreement to establish or maintain an inhuman regime, a regime of cruelty and humiliation, that is, a regime that does not treat humans as humans” (2010: 2). Rotten compromises should be avoided “*come what may*” (2010: 90).

One of Margalit’s observations is that the notion of a political compromise is caught between two pictures of politics, the economic and the religious. In the first picture, everything is subject to compromise. In the second picture, “there are things over which we must never compromise” (2010: 24). Most of us recognize that some aspects of politics are covered by the economic picture while others are better thought of in terms of the religious picture. What Margalit calls “sectarians” are in the grip of the religious picture and nothing else:

Sectarianism is a mode of operation and a state of mind.... The state of mind is that of keeping your principled position uncompromised, come what may. Sectarianism is a disposition to view any compromise as a rotten compromise... [The sectarian] finds compromise a capitulation, a betrayal of the cause.... There is more to the sectarian cast

of mind than just a negative attitude to compromise. But in my view the refusal to compromise is its main feature (2010: 148-9).

Margalit links hostility to compromise to a preoccupation with purity. Purity is based on the fear of mixing categories. In his obsession with purity, the sectarian “regards compromise as an act of pollution” (2010: 156). Shit is the negation of the pure and “the sectarian craves life without shit” (2010: 157).

Margalit talks about sectarians rather than fanatics but most of what he says about the former is applicable to the latter. This is the key to the difference between being a fanatic and merely being principled. A person of principle will not see everything as negotiable and subject to bargaining. However, he will be prepared to make compromises, especially compromises for the sake of peace. What he rules out are rotten compromises. In contrast, fanatics aren’t just uncompromising about the *wrong* things – their perverted ideals – but uncompromising about *everything*. They see “*any* compromise [as] a shameful capitulation” (2010: 10). In other words, they see all compromises as rotten, including ones that do not establish or maintain an inhuman regime. They are so preoccupied with purity that they would rather die than compromise. This explains why fanatics are often violent. They have a one-track mind and suffer from a form of monomania that makes them incapable of distinguishing between areas in which compromise is appropriate and areas in which it is not. Because they regard all compromises as rotten, they don’t accept that some compromises are better than others. To mark this distinction between being a person of principle and being a fanatic, I’ll describe the latter’s aversion to compromise as *pathological*.

To sum up:

(F) Fanatics have unwarranted contempt for other people’s ideals and interests and they are willing to trample on those ideals and interests in pursuit of their own perverted ideals. They are pathologically uncompromising and unwilling to think critically about

their own ideals because they mistakenly regard them as indubitable. Their certainty is spurious but they are nevertheless willing to sacrifice themselves and others in pursuit of their ideals.

This is a multi-part characterisation of what might be described as the fanatic's cast of mind or mindset rather than an attempt to provide a definition. A mindset is an interrelated collection of attitudes, preoccupations and ways of thinking. The different parts of (F) fit together to form a coherent mindset. If a person has some but not all of the features listed in (F) then it might be unclear how to describe their mindset. Fanaticism is a matter of degree, and one person can be more fanatical another. The test of (F) is whether it accurately describes individuals who are widely regarded as fanatics. (F) passes this test. For example, it justifies the description of members of ISIS as fanatics since they plainly have all the characteristics it lists.⁷ ISIS fanatics are supposedly religious but fanaticism needn't be religious.⁸ Nazi fanaticism had nothing to do with religion but (F) nevertheless captures the sense in which Nazis were fanatics. (F) builds on Hare's insights regarding fanaticism and fascism but goes beyond them in certain respects.

3. Radical abolitionism

With this account of fanaticism in the background, we can now return to the question raised earlier: is it correct to describe radical abolitionists as fanatics? If not, what would be a better description? Olson tells the story of Stephen Foster, who belonged to the radical wing of the abolitionist movement. At a meeting in 1842, Foster rose, unannounced and uninvited, and started to lecture against slavery. He was rewarded by being thrown down a flight of stairs. He dusted himself off and continued his lecture at other venues, including a Quaker meeting. On each occasion he was subjected to physical violence. Yet he was undeterred. Olson concludes that "Stephen Foster was a zealot" who, despite his unpopularity, "never shrank from his fanatical approach to abolitionism" (2007: 685). In the pejorative tradition as Olson defines it, the fanatic is an irrational and intolerant fundamentalist, and "often but a terrorist in waiting"

(2007: 688). Foster was none of these things. Nor was he a fanatic according to (F). He was principled, determined and courageous to the point of foolhardiness but these traits do not add up to fanaticism in the pejorative sense. However, Olson rejects the pejorative definition of fanaticism.

For Olson, the fundamental error of pejorative accounts is to suppose that fanaticism or zealotry is a matter or character or temperament. What this approach fails to see is that zealotry is a political tactic and that fanaticism is fundamentally a type of political activity, a means to an end:

Zealotry is an activity practiced not so much by disturbed temperaments as by collectivities working to transform relations of power by creating an “us” in struggling against a “them”, and by pressuring those in between to choose sides. Accordingly, zealotry is *political activity, driven by ardent devotion to a cause, which seeks to draw clear lines along a friends/ enemies dichotomy in order to mobilize friends in the service of that cause* (Olson 2007: 688).

To draw a clear line between “us” and “them” and force those in between to choose sides is to engage in *polarization*.⁹ Polarizing political activity is the essence of zealotry on Olson’s view, and it cannot be denied that polarization has been used by political extremists and fanatics to advance their cause. A case in point is fascism, which Jason Stanley describes as the “politics of us and them.”¹⁰ However, the use of polarization as a political tactic is by no means confined to extremists and fanatics and is a relatively minor element of fanaticism. When Garrison and his fellow abolitionists are seen in relation to (F), the argument for describing them as fanatics collapses. There is little evidence that (F) was the mindset of the radical abolitionists.

The only respect Garrison and Foster look like fanatics according to (F) is that they were willing to sacrifice themselves in pursuit of their ideals. In most other respects, they were not fanatics in any reasonable sense of the term. This is one of the lessons of Aileen Kraditor’s

study of Garrison. She notes that Garrison “frankly expressed uncertainty about his opinions on given issues” and invited further discussion that “might change his mind” (1989: ix). There is no trace here of the fanatic’s immunity to self-doubt. Garrison was no dogmatic ideologue. He insisted that an antislavery society should be broad enough to “include members with all religious, social, and political views, united only by their devotion to abolitionist principles” (1989: 8). He was a pacifist and his radical pacifism took the form of a commitment to the doctrine of nonresistance, defined as the rejection of all government based on force. He saw persuasion and propaganda as the key to bringing people over to his side of the argument. He supposed that “the conscience of even the most unregenerate slaveholder could be awakened by the redeeming truth if only the channels of communication were kept open and flooded by unremitting propaganda that permitted the guilty soul no hiding place” (1989: 255). On this basis, Garrison might reasonably be accused of naivety but not fanaticism.

Even on the issue of compromise, his position was more nuanced than one would expect a fanatic’s to be. Kraditor views Garrison’s uncompromising commitment to immediate and unconditional emancipation as tactical, as ultimately making favourable compromises possible. The more extreme the abolitionists’ demands, the greater the concessions required of those who are prepared to meet them halfway. Garrison’s refusal to water down his demands was, in this sense, “eminently practical” (1989: 28), and he did not display the true fanatic’s tendency to see all compromises as rotten. Garrisonians “repeatedly explained that they were not averse to practical alliances with those who disagreed with them, provided such alliances did not entail sacrifice of principle” (Kraditor 1989: 213). This account of Garrison makes it plain that the description of him and his followers as zealots or fanatics is anachronistic.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a less fanatical campaigner than Garrison. In the final analysis, Olson’s only real argument for classifying Garrison as a zealot is that his politics were the politics of us and them. It is true that fanatics have a Manichean view of the world, that is,

a strong sense of dualism “between the realm of light and goodness (us) and the realm of darkness and evil (them)” (Margalit 2010: 153-4). However, for Garrison the drawing of a clear line between friends and enemies was not Manichean but tactical. It was a way to mobilize moderates in the cause of radical abolitionism by promoting the idea that a commitment to anything less than unconditional and immediate emancipation amounted to being on the side of slave-owners. However, Garrison didn’t think that moderates were evil or the forces of darkness. For that matter, he didn’t even think that people who kept slaves were irredeemably evil. As noted above, he assumed that they had consciences to which it was possible to appeal. This is not the perspective of a fanatic.

What Olson describes is not fanaticism but *radicalism*, which Colin J. Beck helpfully defines as “contention that is outside the common routines of politics present with a society, oriented towards substantial change in social, cultural, economic, and/or political structures, and undertaken by any actor using extra-institutional means” (2015: 18). Radical abolitionists “were often willing to defy decorum” (Olson 2007: 690) and showed no respect for “the boundaries of “respectable” politics” (Olson 2007: 689) but these are the tactics of the radical as well as the zealot. Radicalism is compatible with self-doubt but zealotry is not. Zealotry and dogmatism are inseparable but the radical need not be dogmatic. In these and in other respects, there is a clear dividing line between radicalism and zealotry, and Garrison was no zealot. However, even if Olson and his fellow apologists for fanaticism are wrong about fanaticism and wrong about the abolitionists, they could still be right about the limitations of moderation. They could still be right that moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue, and that the interests of democracy and emancipation are poorly served by moderation and compromise. One does not have to believe that fanaticism is the answer to oppression and injustice to share the scepticism of writers like Olson and Toscano about moderation. However, before coming to any conclusions about this, it would be worth considering Craiutu’s arguments for the view

that moderation is the quintessential political virtue. Should the spirit of Madame de Staël live on, or are critics of moderation right to be sceptical? These are the next questions to be considered.

4.Moderates and radicals

Craiuu describes Madame de Staël's works and personal trajectory as "a particularly interesting case study for the student of moderation" (2012: 158). He quotes her observations about the Terror that followed the French Revolution, including her identification of fanaticism as its primary cause. The antidote to fanaticism is moderation, and the Terror demonstrated that time, wisdom, moderation are the only means with which one can found justice and humanity. This is how Craiuu describes de Staël's view of fanaticism:

As the opposite of moderation, fanaticism is the outcome of an extreme partisan spirit and, though pretending to speak on behalf of virtue, equality and morality, is instead one of the most dangerous of political passions.... The fanatic mind, Mme de Staël argued, is dangerous because it knows no limits, is incapable of self-restraint, and admits of no guilt. Fanatics demand unconditional obedience and uniformity of thought, and they have no scruples about sacrificing the fate of current generations to the hypothetical happiness of future ones. They tend to reduce every political and moral issue to one single problem (or dimension) on which they focus blindly. Fanaticism is a malady of the spirit, more dangerous than the passion for vengeance or domination, because it so easily masks its true face under a veil of generosity and humanity' (2012: 168).

In this striking passage, Craiuu represents Madame de Staël as responding directly and with considerable force to the main assertion of apologists for fanaticism: that the wholehearted and effective pursuit of freedom and justice *requires* fanaticism and that we would not have many of the liberties we take for granted today were it not for the fanaticism of figures from the past.

Madame de Staël is well aware that fanatics regard themselves as friends of liberty and justice, but she argues that these claims to political virtue are a fraud. The consequences of fanaticism are the opposite of those claimed by its apologists.

Madame de Staël is careful to distinguish between fanaticism and enthusiasm, and has no qualms about praising the latter while criticizing the former. Enthusiasm is an “elevated and powerful passion” that is qualitatively different from fanaticism.¹¹ It is enthusiasm that enables us to “pursue the truth disinterestedly” and contemplate “the good, and the noble things of life as ends in themselves, without being distracted by their practical aspects.”¹² Surprisingly, de Staël concedes that “a small dose of fanaticism *sui generis* might be a good thing in pursuit of worthy political causes.”¹³ This is not very different from Olson’s view, but it is difficult to see how it can be correct if fanaticism is understood as de Staël understands it. How can “the most dangerous of political passions” and a “malady of the spirit” be a genuine force for good? Mme de Staël’s considered view is that only moderation can be a foundation of justice and humanity, and that the fanatic’s claim to be speaking on behalf of virtue is baseless. The fanatic is no friend of justice and lacks humanity.

What is moderation, and what do moderates stand for? Craiutu admits that it is virtually impossible to offer a single definition, and that it is easier to define it by reference to what it opposes, namely, extremism, radicalism, zealotry and fanaticism. It can also be interpreted as an antonym for rigidity, stubbornness, dogmatism, perfectionism and utopianism. Moderation can be interpreted both as a state of mind and a “distinct political style” (2012: 15). The essence of this style is “trimming”, that is, “the art of compromise needed for maintaining equipoise between different interests, groups and powers” (2012: 30). Trimmers avoid “one of the greatest sins in politics – single-mindedness – being sometimes of several minds and uncertain which way to go” (2012: 245).

This makes it sound as though moderates don't stand for anything in politics apart from splitting the difference between contrary standpoints or ideologies but Craiutu is keen to correct this impression. On his account, moderates affirm three basic attitudes:

First, they defend pluralism – of ideas, interests, and social forces – and seek to achieve a balance between them in order to temper political and social conflicts. Second, moderates prefer gradual reforms to revolutionary breakthroughs, and they are temperamentally inclined to making compromises and concessions on both prudential and normative grounds... Third, moderation presupposes a tolerant approach which refuses to see the world in Manichean terms that divide it into forces of good (or light) and agents of evil (or darkness) (2012: 14-15).

However, moderation is not the same as centrism since moderates can be found “on the left, at the center, and on the right of the political spectrum” (2012: 15). Craiutu stresses that being a moderate can be hard since “searching for the mean is always a demanding task, arguably more difficult than making one’s journey along paths that are more extreme” (2012: 19). Contrary to what is often supposed, moderation is “a *difficult* virtue for courageous minds” (2012: 19).

Viewed in one way, this account of moderation makes it sound like a political style to which no reasonable person could object. Rigidity, stubbornness, and dogmatism all sound like intellectual and political vices. If moderation is the opposite of these things, how can it fail to be a virtue? Again, toleration might be seen as essential for a civilized society, so if moderation promotes toleration then that is surely a good thing. By the same token, linking fanaticism to intolerance and Manicheanism and representing it as a malady of the spirit makes it look like a disease for which moderation is the antidote. However, viewed in another way, Craiutu’s characterization of moderation confirms the worst fears of radicals who see it as an obstacle to the pursuit of social justice and as promoting complacency and political apathy.

There are several illustrations of these defects, or potential defects, in Craiutu's account. It cannot be right, for example, that single-mindedness is one of the greatest sins in politics or that being uncertain which way to go is preferable. Without the single-mindedness of reformers like Garrison the fight against slavery would have been much less effective, and this is just one of countless examples of the value of single-mindedness. When it comes to cruelty and injustice it is no good being of several minds. A tendency to engage in trimming is another problematic feature of the moderate mindset. Trimming is the art of compromise but in Craiutu's account there are no safeguards against rotten compromises. Indeed, moderation as Craiutu construes it, might even *promote* rotten compromises. Such compromises are unavoidable if maintaining equipoise between different interests, groups and powers is a priority. For example, how would it have been possible for radical abolitionists to balance the interests of slaves and slave owners without making rotten compromises? More to the point, why should any concessions be made to the interests of slave owners? Equipoise or a balance of interests cannot be a worthy objective in this case. Moderates prefer gradual reforms but what if such reforms prolong the suffering of victims of cruelty and injustice? In such cases, a preference for reform over revolution is not commendable.

Underlying these concerns is a deeper question about moderation. A presupposition of Craiutu's defence of this supposed virtue is that compromise is possible and stark choices can be avoided. While this might be true in some cases, there are many cases in which there is no middle way and no possibility of reconciling diametrically opposed interests. In these cases, radicalism and moderation are incompatible, and it is the radical rather than the moderate who is on the side of progress. This is one lesson of what Jonathan Israel describes as the *Radical Enlightenment*. Radical Enlightenment is a set of principles "that can be summed up concisely as: democracy, racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative

process and education; and full separation of church and state” (Israel 2009: vii-viii). The contrast is with the Moderate Enlightenment, which was not opposed to reform as such but more gradualist in its approach and opposed to sweeping programs of reform. Between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment, “no compromise or half way position was ever possible, either theoretically or practically” (2009: 17-18). To put it another way, there is no possibility of trimming.

The sharp contrast between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment is illustrated by the different approaches of Tom Paine and thinkers like Hume, Burke and Ferguson. For Paine, “progress was inseparable from transforming attitudes as well as overturning the prevailing monarchical-aristocratic-ecclesiastical order, and not only in one country but universally” (2009: 11). Radical Enlightenment “emerged in opposition to mainstream thinking” (2009: xii) and required a revolution of the mind. For moderates, reform had to take place “within the framework of monarchy, aristocracy and the existing order” (2009: 7). The ideal, according to Ferguson, was the mixed British system which was democratic but not too democratic. More radical reformers “betrayed a considerable lack of respect for the divinely fashioned order of things” (2009: 17).

On this account, it is clear why trimming between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment ideals was not an option either theoretically or practically. This is how Israel makes the point:

Either history is infused by divine providence or it is not, either one endorses a society of ranks or embraces equality, one approves representative democracy or opposes it. On these questions it was the polarization, the division of opinion, that shaped developments. Beyond a certain level there were and could only be two Enlightenments – moderate (...) Enlightenment, on the one hand, postulating a balance between reason and tradition and broadly supporting the status quo and, on the other Radical (...) Enlightenment (2009: 18-19).

In a way, this takes us back to Merry's challenge: sometimes one has to choose, and moderation is not a way to avoid choosing. Moderation is also a choice and, in many instances, the wrong choice. It is not just that, as Craiutu admits, moderation is not a virtue for all seasons and can be a "political liability" (2012: 18). The point is that in the history of the Enlightenment, pleas for moderation have been anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, and used to limit criticism of the established order.

These criticisms of moderation are not arguments for fanaticism. The criticisms of the latter still stand even if moderation has been an obstacle to progress at various stages in human history. It is easy to criticize moderation when the alternative is Radical Enlightenment but not when the alternative is an extremist, totalitarian dictatorship. From the perspective of the 20th century, in which such dictatorships held sway in Europe and elsewhere, it is difficult not to think that greater moderation would have alleviated the suffering of millions. A balanced or, as one might call it, moderate perspective on moderation needs to acknowledge its benefits as well the ways in which it can be problematic. Moderation *as such* is neither a virtue nor a vice; it can be harmful or beneficial, depending on the circumstances.

In this respect, at least, there is more to be said for moderation than for fanaticism. The circumstances in which moderation is beneficial are somewhat easier to envisage than those in which fanaticism is beneficial, especially in view of the failure of apologists for fanaticism to demonstrate that admirable figures like Garrison were fanatics. They were radicals not fanatics, but what, exactly, is radicalism, and what is the difference between radicalism and fanaticism? Are they fundamentally different kinds of thing or is fanaticism simply an extreme form of radicalism? The latter is what might be called a *common factor view* of the relationship between fanaticism and radicalism: the two have certain features in common but these features are more marked in fanaticism, which may also have certain additional features that mere radicalism lacks. The view the fanaticism and radicalism are fundamentally different might be labelled a

disjunctive conception of their relationship. On this account, the core features of fanaticism are quite different from those of radicalism and the fanaticism is not a form— an extreme form-of radicalism.

Radicalism is underpinned by dissatisfaction with the status quo. Because radicals are dissatisfied with the way things are, they seek change. The changes that radicals pursue have several features: they tend to be sweeping rather than piecemeal and they are immediate rather than gradual. Beck describes radicals as oriented towards substantial change in social, cultural, economic, and/ or political structures but it is not change for its own sake. Radicals typically see the changes they seek as essential for something else that they care about: justice, equality, sustainability, or some other ideal. These are not perverted ideals, though there is no guarantee that the sweeping reforms that radicals favour will promote their ideals. Sweeping changes can have unforeseen and unintended consequences, as conservatives are always keen to point out. Furthermore, radicals are prepared to use extra-institutional means to achieve their objectives. These include “those things that are not part of institutional governance, such as protests, boycotts, sit-ins, arson, violence, and so on. When institutional actors, like politicians, begin to use extra-institutional means, they approach radicalism” (Beck 2015: 19). This brings out the sense in which radical politics is transgressive. Radicals have little sense of decorum and do not see civility as a virtue. They have strong opinions and a strong sense of the links between the political and the personal. They are not opposed to compromise *per se*, but they are hypersensitive to any compromises that are at odds with their overarching ideals. They have a broader conception of a rotten compromise than Margalit. For example, from the perspective of radical climate change activists, rotten compromises include ones endanger the future of the planet even if they are not naturally described as establishing or maintaining a regime of cruelty and humiliation.

These different aspects of radicalism can be summarized as follows:

(R) Radicals are dissatisfied with the status quo and seek sweeping and rapid change to bring reality in line with their ideals. They are prepared to use extra-institutional means in pursuit of their ideals. They are politically transgressive rather than conventional. They aim to disturb the placid surface of society and are hyper-sensitive to what they see as rotten compromises.

When (R) is read alongside (F), two things are quickly apparent. The first is that (R) provides a more accurate description of Garrison and other radical abolitionists than (F). The second is that (F) and (R) have little in common. There is no clearly identifiable common core of the two outlooks. (R) says nothing about radicals having an unwarranted contempt for other people's ideals and interests or being willing to trample on those ideals and interests in pursuit of their own perverted ideals. Radicals are, in a way, uncompromising but not pathologically so and not preoccupied with purity or pollution. There is nothing in (R) about the spurious certainty of radicals and nothing in (F) about dissatisfaction with the status quo or a desire for sweeping and rapid change. One can be fanatically committed to the status quo but a fanatic for the status quo is not a radical.

This points to a disjunctive rather than common conception of the relationship between fanaticism and radicalism. This is not to say, however, that (F) and (R) are incompatible. It is possible to be dissatisfied with the status quo and be willing to trample on other people's ideals and interests in place of one's own perverted ideals. The radical's ideals need not be perverted but they can be perverted. Fanatics can be politically transgressive, and a person can be hyper-sensitive to rotten compromises *and* pathologically uncompromising. These concession would be a problem for disjunctivism if the fanaticism/ radicalism disjunction were to be regarded as exclusive. However, the disjunctive approach need not be understood in this way. It is possible to hold that fanaticism and radicalism are fundamentally different, and that Garrison was a radical *rather than* a fanatic, while admitting that it is possible to be both a radical and a fanatic.

Admitting this possibility raises another question: if radicalism and fanaticism are at least compatible, are radicals likely to become fanatics? Is radicalism a step in the direction of fanaticism? There might be something to be said for this, though it is ultimately an empirical question. It is clear, though, that radicalism does not make fanaticism inevitable. People like Garrison were genuine radicals but avoided fanaticism. Thus, in asking whether it is better to be moderate than radical, one should not make the mistake of supposing that this is equivalent to asking whether it is better to be moderate than fanatical. Moderation might indeed be better than fanaticism, and an antidote to it, with being preferable to radicalism.

It is easy to see why radicalism might seem preferable to moderation. To the extent that the compromises they reject are rotten, and they avoid any form of trimming that is at odds with their radical agenda, radicals might be viewed as politically virtuous. It took radicalism rather than moderation to put an end to slavery in America, apartheid in South Africa and many other forms of cruelty and injustice. However, this is not an argument for radicalism *per se* because the sweeping changes that radical demands need not be desirable. A recent example of a transgressive politician who lacked any sense of decorum and attempted to undermine the foundations of democracy in America is President Trump. He railed against the political establishment and encouraged his supporters to employ extra-institutional means to overturn the result of the 2020 Presidential election. He was, in all these senses, a radical but hardly admirable.

From a progressive standpoint, Trump's reactionary radicalism is surely not preferable to moderation. If forced to choose between moderation and the reactionary radicalism of Trump or even Margaret Thatcher, who systematically undermined the post-1945 political consensus in the UK, progressives will prefer moderation. In much the same way, progressive or left-wing radicalism will not be preferable to moderation from a conservative standpoint. This is a reflection of the fact that radicalism, as defined here, is a political style rather than a substantial

ideology, and its attractions in a given context depends on the merits of the radicals' political objectives and the nature of the extra-institutional means employed to reach those objectives. In and of itself, radicalism is neither a political vice nor a virtue, neither admirable nor deplorable. In this respect, it is no different from moderation.

A good way to think about radicalism and moderation is in terms of Philippa Foot's account of virtue. For Foot, virtues like courage, temperance and wisdom are in some general way beneficial: "Human beings do not get on well without them" (1978: 2). The virtues are *corrective*: each one stands at a point at which "there is some temptation to be resisted or some deficiency of motivation to be made good" (1978: 8). There is a virtue of industriousness only because idleness is a temptation, and a virtue of humility only because human beings tend to think too well of themselves. Viewed in this light, one should be reluctant to characterize moderation and radicalism as virtues since they are not in some *general* way beneficial to us. Each can be beneficial but can also be harmful in some circumstances.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the idea that radicalism and moderation can both be corrective. Moderation can be an effective antidote to fanaticism and we are more inclined to admire moderation where fanaticism or radicalism of the wrong sort are the main threats to our well-being. Where extremism is on the rise, or we are in danger from the excesses of fanaticism, moderation has the feel of a corrective virtue. In the same way, radicalism is an antidote to moderation and has the feel of a corrective virtue in contexts in which moderation is an obstacle to progress. The characterization of moderation as the quintessential political virtue is potentially misleading because it gives the impression that moderation is generally beneficial. However, the reasons for thinking that moderation might be problematic in certain circumstances are not reasons for praising fanaticism. If fanaticism is understood along the lines of (F), and distinguished from radicalism in a good cause, then it is as deplorable as its liberal critics have always claimed.¹⁴

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¹ For Merry, going to the extreme meant terrorism. However, extreme measures don't have to be violent. There is more than one way to be an 'extremist'.

² For an account of the origins of this aphorism see Wilkinson 2016.

³ See Wilkinson 2016.

⁴ There is a charming profile of Madame de Staël in chapter 8 of Holmes 2017. He quotes Madame de Chastenay's epigram to the effect that there are three great powers struggling against Napoleon for the soul of Europe: 'England, Russia, and Madame de Staël' (Holmes 2017: 160).

⁵ In a somewhat similar vein, Frank Chouraqui has recently argued in favour of the view that 'fanaticism is not characterised by its content but by its form' (2019: 12). For Chouraqui, fanaticism '*results from the assumption that consistency cannot accommodate moderation*' (2019: 12). In my account, the 'form' of fanaticism is dictated, at least in part, by the content of the fanatic's views, and there is more to fanaticism than is captured by Chouraqui's formal definition.

⁶ For reasons of space, I'm unable to discuss Katsafanas's account of fanaticism. Unlike him, I do not regard fanaticism as a form of psychological fragility.

⁷ On ISIS, see McCants 2015, Gerges 2016 and Wood 2018.

⁸ I say supposedly religious because there is plenty of evidence that many ISIS foot soldiers have only the shakiest understanding of Islam.

⁹ Polarization has been defined as 'a process whereby the normal multiplicities of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive politics and society in terms of "Us" and "Them"' (McCoy, Rahman & Somer 2018: 18). In Cassam 2021a I defend the idea of polarization as a political strategy. What I call the 'polarization toolkit' consists of 'a set of strategies or tricks of the trade that those intent on causing polarization employ for their own

ends' (2021a: 214). The use of this toolkit has increasingly become part of mainstream politics. If using polarization for political ends makes one a fanatic that many politicians in the Western democracies are fanatics.

¹⁰ Stanley 2018.

¹¹ Quoted in Craiutu 2012: 167.

¹² Quoted in Craiutu 2012: 167.

¹³ Quoted in Craiutu 2012: 5.

¹⁴ I thank two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. For further discussion of fanaticism and related topics, see Cassam 2021b.