

## THE VICES AND VIRTUES OF EXTREMISM

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*Abstract:* This paper develops the notion of an extremist mindset. This mindset is understood in terms of its distinctive preoccupations, attitudes, emotions and thinking patterns. Two key extremist preoccupations are persecution and purity. These and other elements of the extremist mindset are identified by reference to uncontroversially extremist individuals and groups. The extremist mindset is shown to be morally, politically and epistemically vicious. The suggestion that extremism can be regarded as a virtue is considered and rejected. Various accounts of the causes and sources of extremism are considered, including the view that extremism draws on certain natural human tendencies. Building on Foot's suggestion that virtues are corrective, the proposed antidote to extremism is the cultivation by educational institutions of corrective anti-extremist virtues.

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When a person is labelled as an 'extremist' it is natural to suppose that this act of labelling serves at least two purposes: to describe and to evaluate.<sup>1</sup> The implied evaluation is usually negative but what is the label's descriptive content?<sup>2</sup> Does it even have a definite descriptive content and is there a real feature of some individuals that answers to this content? I will argue that one real feature of individuals that the 'extremist' label picks out is their *mindset*. The idea that there is an extremist mindset is not new but existing accounts of this mindset are sketchy. This is partly a reflection of the fact that the idea of a mindset is far from clear. Some accounts of the extremist mindset represent it as a belief or way of believing. Others describe it as a way of thinking or thinking pattern. There is also the idea that it is an attitude or attitude disposition. One challenge, therefore, is to clarify the general idea of a mindset and, specifically, the notion of an extremist mindset.<sup>3</sup>

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People are not the only entities that are described as extremist. As well as beliefs, ways of thinking and attitudes, this label also applied to ideologies, behaviour, policies, groups and movements. On a suitably expansive conception of ideology, ideologies are mindsets and extremist ideologies are, or give expression to, an extremist mindset.<sup>4</sup> Extremist movements or groups can be understood as ones that subscribe to and are motivated by extremist ideologies. It follows that the extremist mindset also underpins extremism at the level of movements or groups. Extremist policies can also be understood as an expression of an extremist mindset. It should be noted that extremism is often characterized in terms of a commitment to violence. On the account given here, violent extremism is one form of extremism but extremism needn't be violent.

Is an extremist mindset necessarily bad? Are there circumstances in which a person or group might deserve to be commended rather than condemned for being extremist? On the one hand, there is a strong intuitive case for viewing the extremist mindset as epistemically, morally and politically vicious.<sup>5</sup> On this view, extremism is to be countered by encouraging the development of a range of anti-extremist virtues. On the other hand, it might also be held that extremism can be positive when it is extremism in support of a just cause. It has been suggested, for example, that the suffragettes were extremists but is this not a case in which extremism was justified? Extremism is partly a matter of being unwilling to compromise and there are surely some issues in relation to which there is no room for compromise. Votes for women is one such issue. It remains to be seen, however, whether such examples of the supposed virtues of extremism are compelling.

One welcome consequence of a mindset approach to extremism is that the classification of a person or group or ideology as extremist isn't simply a matter of opinion or an exercise in political rhetoric. No doubt the label 'extremist' is often applied for narrowly political reasons but if it is an objective matter whether someone has an extremist mindset then it is also an

objective matter whether that person is an extremist. This is one sense in which the label 'extremist' picks out something real. Mindsets aren't fictions. This is not to deny, however, that having an extremist mindset is a matter of degree. A person or group can be more or less extremist. Extremism isn't all or nothing, and one evaluative question is whether extreme extremism is significantly worse than what might be called, somewhat oxymoronicly, more moderate forms of extremism.

A test for any account of extremism is whether it delivers the correct verdicts about specific individuals or organizations. For example, an account of extremism is unacceptable if it implies that organizations like ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) or individuals like the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik are not extremist.<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is no danger of the mindset approach delivering such perverse verdicts. The mindset of ISIS and its leaders is a paradigm case of an extremist mindset. Since extremism can be non-violent, there is also scope for examining the role of the extremist mindset in non-violent political conflicts. For example, it is arguable that non-violent extremism has played a role in the Brexit debate in the UK. To the extent that mindsets are psychologically real, a further question for the mindset approach is whether it accords with the empirical psychological evidence. As it happens, there is psychological evidence of a 'Militant Extremist Mindset' (MEM), and the papers in which this evidence is reported cast further light on the concept of a mindset.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion below will proceed as follows: part 2 will explain the idea of a mindset and develop the notion of an extremist mindset. As understood here, the extremist mindset is constituted by, among other things, a distinctive set of attitudes, preoccupations, emotions, and thinking patterns. These attitudes, preoccupations, emotions, and ways of thinking are liable to cause types of behaviour that are associated with, though not uniquely, extremism. The mindset approach to extremism will be compared to other approaches and be shown to be consistent

with the psychological evidence about extremism. It will also be shown to deliver the correct intuitive verdicts in particular cases.

Part 3 will explore the sense or senses in which extremism is epistemically, politically and morally vicious. This will necessitate a brief discussion of what counts as an epistemic, political or moral vice. This will also be the place for a discussion of the supposed upside of extremism in relation to just causes. Regardless of whether the suffragettes were extremists, is it not conceivable that extremism might be politically virtuous, that is, better able to advance just causes than moderation? Conceivable, perhaps, but in practice the political harms done by extremism far outweigh any supposed benefits. The determination, implacability and tenacity displayed by campaigners for just causes should not be confused with extremism.

Part 4 will explore the causes and sources of extremism as well as potential antidotes. Is the extremist mindset a personality trait or an acquired or inculcated politico-psychological posture? If it is acquired then it will need to be explained how it is acquired. One notion that is sometimes employed to explain the process of becoming an extremist is that of *radicalisation*. The suggestion is that people become extremists either by self-radicalising or being radicalised by others. Following a brief discussion of this suggestion I will conclude by identifying some of the anti-extremist virtues that might have a part to play in countering extremism. If there are such virtues, then the practical challenge is to identify ways of educating for them.

## 2

The concept of a mindset will be familiar to some readers from the work of Carol Dweck. Mindsets in Dweck's sense are 'just beliefs' (2012: 16). So, for example, what Dweck calls the 'growth' mindset is 'based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your own efforts' (2012: 7). As understood here, mindsets are not just beliefs, and there is no 'extremist mindset' if that means that there is a single belief that all extremists have. Mindsets are closer to world views or frameworks through which the world is viewed

and understood. They shape our beliefs and filter our perception of reality. In this respect there is a parallel with Kant's categories, but mindsets aren't just concepts, any more than they are just beliefs.

Mindsets are partly constituted by preoccupations. One's beliefs are relevant to one's mindset to that extent that they underpin and explain one's preoccupations. Two key extremist preoccupations are *persecution* and *purity*.<sup>8</sup> Extremists are typically preoccupied with the idea that they belong to a persecuted or victimized group, and convince themselves that extreme measures are called for in response. Nazi propaganda made much of the threat to Germany posed by a supposed Jewish world conspiracy, and there are many other examples of extremists with lurid fantasies of victimization and persecution. Anders Breivik justified the killing of 77 people in Norway in 2011 partly on the grounds that Christian civilization was threatened by Islam. The threat of subordination to Islam is also a part of the mindset of Buddhist extremists in Myanmar, and many Muslim extremists see Islam as threatened by the "Crusader" West.

These examples might be thought to imply that the preoccupation with persecution that plays a significant role in the extremist mindset is baseless, hence the characterisation of this preoccupation as relying on lurid *fantasies* of persecution and victimization. But what if the persecution is real? Would this then invalidate the description of mindsets that are preoccupied with persecution as 'extremist'? Not necessarily, since other elements of an extremist mindset might be present in a given case even if the persecution is genuine. It is still plausible, however, that the extremist mindset is paradigmatically preoccupied with non-actual persecution. Where there is genuine persecution, such as the persecution of the black population of South Africa under apartheid, it might be appropriate to refrain from calling those engaged in a struggle against such oppression as extremists, though much will depend on their other preoccupations and other aspects of their mindset.

The purity with which extremists are pre-occupied can take many different forms: racial or ethnic, religious, ideological, and so on. For the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the pursuit of ideological purity was bound up with ‘a racialist project of ethnic purification’ (Kiernan 2008: xxx). For ISIS, what matters is religious purity. It sees itself as defending and promoting a pure and unadulterated form of Islam, grounded in a literal reading of the Koran. Carolin Emcke highlights ISIS’s ‘cult of purity’ (2019: 102) and its perception of itself as the only ‘authentic’ Muslims. Their lack of purity justifies the targeting of the polluted and impure by all available means, including violence and intimidation. For all the ideological differences between the Khmer Rouge and ISIS, their pre-occupation with purity points to a shared extremist mindset. Given the extent to which extremists are pre-occupied with purity it comes as no surprise to find many of them engaged in acts of ethnic, ideological or religious ‘cleansing’.<sup>9</sup>

The attitudinal components of the extremist mindset are easily identified. One’s attitude towards something is one’s stance or posture towards it. A key extremist attitude, and one that flows from its pre-occupation with purity, is its attitude towards compromise. Extremists are bitterly opposed to compromising their ideals and objectives.<sup>10</sup> As they see it, compromise is incompatible with purity, and this explains their perception of compromise as a form of betrayal that can never be countenanced. As well as flowing from its obsession with purity, extremism’s uncompromising attitude is related to its Manicheanism. If the world is divided into good and evil, believer and infidel, and one thinks of one’s opponents as utterly depraved and misguided, then negotiating or compromising with them would amount to negotiating or compromising with evil.

Extremism’s view of compromise is a reflection of its certainty in its own rectitude and the complete absence from of its mindset of any element of self-doubt. Certainty and absence of self-doubt are epistemic postures, attitudes towards one’s own epistemic standing and that of one’s principles and commitments. The extremist’s certainty is subjective, though taken to

be objective. The extremist is totally convinced of the correctness of his principles even though, objectively speaking, there is plenty of room for doubt. Certainty is not necessarily a sign of extremism. Being certain that two plus two is four or that slavery is indefensible does not make one an extremist. The extremist's psychological certainty pertains to matters in regard to which an absence of doubt is inappropriate. The extremist is not only doubt-free in relation to his doctrinal commitments but also in relation to his own grasp of the truth. It is not just doubt that he lacks, but *self*-doubt. Like the ISIS supporters described by Graeme Wood in his study of the Islamic State, he revels in his self-confidence and luxuriates in the 'banishment of uncertainty' (2018: 103).

Another characteristically extremist attitude is a kind of indifference or insouciance about the practical implications or consequences of their policies. This practical indifference is helpfully characterized in the following terms by Scruton: extremism takes a political idea to its limits, 'regardless of unfortunate repercussions, impracticalities, arguments, and feelings to the contrary, and with the intention not only to confront, but to eliminate opposition' (2007: 237). Extremists are not deterred by the notion that their approach will have catastrophic consequences for large numbers of people. For example, the Khmer Rouge was indifferent to the fact that their policies would result in the death by starvation of millions of Cambodians. For the extremist, such consequences are a price worth paying for ideological purity. Indeed, the true extremist goes even further than the character described by Scruton; the Khmer Rouge didn't even regard the repercussions of their murderous policies as unfortunate. The extremist's motto is: you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.

The practical indifference that is an element of extremism is the essence of fanaticism. Fanatics have been described as 'aggressive and potentially violent ideologues' (Saucier et al. 2009: 268). An ideologue is supposedly someone with 'a high degree of commitment to an ideology' (ibid.). It remains to be seen how talk of degrees of commitment is to be cashed out.

Meanwhile, a natural thought is that the higher one's degree of commitment to a principle the less one's concern about any unfortunate repercussions or impracticalities. The fanatic sees any unfortunate repercussions as a price worth paying. A person who is not practically indifferent is not a fanatic even if they display several other characteristics of the extremist. In practice, however, extremism and fanaticism go hand in hand.

The extremist's unwarranted psychological certainty is usually sustained by high levels of closed-mindedness and dogmatism.<sup>11</sup> These can either be conceived of as character traits or as attitudes. For present purposes they are attitudes. Closed-mindedness consists in, among other things, having a poor appreciation of perspectives that are different from one's own, a high degree of intolerance of alternative perspectives, and a tendency to reject information that is inconsistent with what one already believes. Dogmatism pertains to one's specific doctrinal commitments rather than one's epistemic conduct generally. It is an irrational commitment to a fundamental doctrine.<sup>12</sup> It stands to reason that extremists who are supremely convinced of the correctness of their doctrines will be hostile to alternative points of view. To the extent that these doctrines are themselves baseless, the extremist's commitment to them is also likely to be irrational. The question of what, in general, makes a commitment irrational cannot be considered here.

The emotional components of the extremist mindset include hatred, fear and self-pity.<sup>13</sup> Hatred of the ideological or religious Other is a major driving force of extremism. Extremists don't just see individuals with a different take on reality as people with whom they disagree. As noted above, they see them as evil and depraved. Extremism's hatred is tied to its sense of certainty. As Emcke notes, 'hating requires absolute certainty' because 'you cannot hate and be unsure about hating at the same time' (2019: xi). In its most extreme form, extremist hatred results in the 'othering' of one's opponents. Othering is 'the attribution of relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to some other/ out-group' (Brons 2015: 83). The 'other' is regarded as



barely human, as an entity that can be ‘disregarded or denounced, injured or killed, without fear of punishment’ (Emcke 2019: xii). This is ISIS’s attitude towards Jews, Christians and Shia Muslims, and it is how Buddhist extremists in Myanmar see the Rohingya.

Extremism’s hatred of the other is typically grounded, at least in part, in fear.<sup>14</sup> Fear of the other is related to extremism’s preoccupation with persecution by the other. One curious feature of this preoccupation is that the persecution is usually imaginary. In most instances, the feared other poses no real threat to the extremist and is, indeed, itself a victim of persecution by extremists. Nevertheless, extremists like to think of themselves as victims. What Ruth Ben-Ghiat describes as the ‘cult of victimization’ is at the core of their identity and explains the key role of self-pity in the extremist mindset.<sup>15</sup> As O’Toole notes, self-pity combines ‘a deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority’ (2019: 3). In Myanmar, Buddhist extremists have a deep sense of grievance against the Rohingya, but take the inferiority of the Rohingya for granted.

Having identified its pre-occupations, attitudes and emotions it remains to identify the styles of thinking or thinking patterns that are associated with an extremist mindset. Among these thinking patterns are catastrophic thinking, utopian thinking, apocalyptic thinking and conspiracy thinking. The blandest form of catastrophic thinking is the tendency to exaggerate the negative consequences of our life situations.<sup>16</sup> Extremist catastrophizing goes well beyond that; it usually involves the idea of an impending catastrophe for the extremist’s in-group that can only be averted by extreme measures.<sup>17</sup> The promise of extremism is that it is the route to utopia or, in the case of some religious extremists, paradise. Apocalyptic thinking consists in the tendency to think of the ideal end-state as attainable only after an apocalyptic battle with the forces of evil. This form of apocalyptic thinking is, for example, integral to the mindset of ISIS, which has even identified a town in Syria as the venue for one of its final battles.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between extremism and conspiracy thinking deserves more attention than it is possible to give it here. For present purposes it is sufficient to note that, as a matter of historical fact, conspiracy theories have often been used to promote extremism.<sup>19</sup> Right-wing and left-wing extremists have both relied on the myth of a world Jewish conspiracy to justify their anti-Semitism, and both Hitler and Stalin were conspiracy theorists. Just as conspiracy thinking promotes extremism, extremism makes one more liable to engage in this type of thinking. There are extremists who are not conspiracy theorist but the point of talking about an extremist mindset is not to identify strictly necessary conditions for extremism. The attitudes, pre-occupation, emotions and thinking patterns identified here are not all required for a mindset to qualify as extremist, but a reasonable number must be present. It is in this sense that these things are constitutive of extremism or the extremist mindset.

How has the extremist mindset been identified? On what basis is a given attitude or pre-occupation or emotion or thinking pattern said to be part and parcel of this mindset? The nature of the extremist mindset cannot be identified without reference to mindset of actual extremists, that is, the mindset of individuals or groups that are widely regarded as extremist. This is the methodology employed in recent empirical work on the Militant Extremist Mindset (MEM). Specifically, it has been suggested that the description of this mindset should be ‘grounded on “themes” (recurrent patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving) based on explicit statements found in primary sources and characterizing at least three different extremist groups’ (Stankov, Saucier and Knežević 2010: 71). More recent work on the MEM has identified a total of 16 key themes, including several that I have identified as components of the extremist mindset.<sup>20</sup> These themes have been identified by induction rather than by *a priori* conceptual analysis.

A key ingredient of MEM that has not featured in the account that I have given is pro-violence, the belief that violence is a useful and legitimate means of achieving one’s goals. The omission of pro-violence and, indeed, actual violence from the extremist mindset is a reflection

of the distinction between extremism and militant extremism.<sup>21</sup> Extremism need not be violent or even pro-violence even if, in practice, a great deal of extremism is both of these things. The othering of out-groups can and often does result in violence but there are many non-violent means of oppressing the Other. It should be conceded, however, that the extremist individuals, groups and organizations on which I have based my account – anti-Rohingya extremists in Myanmar, the Khmer Rouge, Anders Breivik and ISIS - are all violent. To the extent that such individuals and organizations are the basis of one's understanding of extremism, there is no danger of the resulting account of extremism delivering the perverse verdict that they are not extremist.

The mindset approach to extremism contrasts with several other approaches. On what might be called a *positional* conception of extremism, an extremist position 'falls somewhere near the end or fringe of something close to a normal distribution' (Nozick 1997: 296) along some salient political dimension. Left-Right is one such dimension but there are others, and positions that were once viewed as extreme 'later often come to be viewed as somewhere in the center' (Nozick 1997: 296). On this conception, an extremist *move* can be defined as 'a move away from the centre and towards the extreme in some dimension' (Wintrobe 2010: 25). On a *modal* conception of extremism, in contrast, what counts is not *what* one believes but *how* one believes. Extremism is essentially 'a characteristic of the way beliefs are held rather than their location along some dimension' (Breton, Galeotti, Salmon, and Wintrobe 2010: xiii). A *methods* conception of extremism holds that being an extremist is a matter of being willing to use or endorse extreme methods. Such methods are usually understood as violent, and it is in the methods sense that many terrorists are extremists.

Of these three conceptions, the second is the closest to the mindset approach. A question about modal extremism concerns its understanding of 'the way beliefs are held'. This can be understood as a reference to the strength or intensity of the extremist's beliefs. The most intense

beliefs, on this view, are accompanied by the strongest or most intense feelings of conviction. Yet, as Ramsey notes, ‘the beliefs which we hold most strongly are often accompanied by practically no feeling at all; no one feels strongly about what he takes for granted’ (1931: 169). On an alternative reading, the strength of one’s beliefs is a function of one’s willingness to give them up or compromise them. There are many reasons why a particular belief might be treated as immune to revision. Beliefs that help to define one’s world view or sense of identity are not easily given up. The problem with extremists is not that they have bedrock or “hinge” beliefs in this sense; we all do.<sup>22</sup> The problem is that the specific principles or propositions they take for granted are in fact highly contentious and far from unproblematic.

Holding onto one’s beliefs and principles in a rigid and uncompromising manner is one element of the extremist mindset but there is much more to it than that. Given that having an extremist mindset is a matter of having certain specific preoccupations, it is not possible to understand extremism in purely formal terms, in terms of how one believes rather than what one believes. Extremism is, to some extent, a matter of what one believes. For example, a preoccupation with loss of purity is a substantial rather than a purely formal feature of extremism. Beliefs about purity and victimhood are bedrock extremist beliefs. They, together with the other features of the extremist mindset, indicate that extremism is an ideology in its own right, and not just a way for one to hold onto one’s political or other beliefs regardless of their content.

This has a bearing on the question whether extremism is compatible with any political philosophy. For example, is it possible for one to be a liberal extremist? If extremism is simply a matter of ‘the way beliefs are held’ then there is no reason in principle not to classify some liberals as extremists. After all, liberals can be just as uncompromising about their core beliefs as those who are more usually classified as extremists. Yet it would be perverse to characterise uncompromising liberals as extremists if they are not pre-occupied with victimhood or purity

and do not have an extremist thinking style. When a person is described as an extremist it is usual to ask ‘an extremist what?’. This is a legitimate question to ask, insofar as extremism can take many different forms. However, it does not follow that extremism can be combined with *any* political or religious beliefs, or that describing a person as an extremist on its own implies nothing about their substantive commitments. There must be some such commitments, or least preoccupations, if this label is to apply. The complete absence of hatred and a lack of practical indifference are also incompatible with extremism. Liberals who do not hate their opponents, do not engage in othering, and are not practically indifferent are just not extremists, regardless of how rigidly they hold on to their core values. This is the truth in the positional conception of extremism: people whose politics place them close to the centre of a normal distribution are highly unlikely to have the substantive ideological commitments required for them to qualify as extremists.

### 3

What is wrong with having an extremist mindset? Is such a mindset morally, politically or epistemically vicious? It is easy to make the case that extremism is a moral failing. It is a moral failing to be indifferent to the consequences of one’s actions and policies for other human beings. It is a moral failing to engage in the ‘othering’ of people with whom one disagrees, and it is morally indefensible to be motivated by a concern for ideological, religious or racial purity. Whatever else there is to say about virtues, they are ‘in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake, and that of his fellows’ (Foot 1978: 3). An extremist mindset is not, in general, beneficial, even if there are circumstances in which it might be. Extremism is not a virtue, and the harms done by extremists over the years suggests that it is, in fact, a vice.

For present purposes, epistemic vices can be understood as character traits, attitudes or thinking styles that get in the way of the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge.<sup>23</sup> As well

as getting in the way of knowledge, epistemic vices are personal qualities that merit criticism or blame. The closed-mindedness and dogmatism that characterise the extremist mindset both get in the way of knowledge and merit criticism. The various thinking patterns that are part and parcel of the extremist mindset are no less epistemically problematic. Conspiracy thinking, or what psychologists refer to as a ‘conspiracy mentality’, leads extremists to endorse fallacious or even contradictory conspiracy theories.<sup>24</sup> Catastrophic thinking is an obstacle to knowledge one’s actual situation or prospects, and the apocalyptic thinking which groups like ISIS find so irresistible further weakens their grip on reality. It is also arguable that one is responsible for one’s own thinking and attitudes.<sup>25</sup> In that case, there is no prospect of extremists being immune to blame or criticism for their extremist thinking patterns and attitudes on the basis that they aren’t responsible for them.

Political vices have been defined as ‘persistent dispositions of character and conduct that imperil both the functioning of democratic political institutions and the trust that a diverse citizenry has in the ability of those institutions to secure a just political order of equal moral standing, reciprocal freedom, and human dignity’ (Button 2016: 1). One might quibble about some aspects of this definition. One might want to allow attitudes, thinking patterns and even emotions to count as political vices. There is also the question whether political vices should be identified exclusively by reference to their effect on *democratic* political institutions or, for that matter, by reference to their effect on a nation’s political *institutions* rather than its political culture more generally. The basic point, however, is that political vices are *politically* damaging. One of the effects of extremism, indeed one of its intended effects, is polarization. If extremism causes polarization and the latter is politically damaging then that is one reason to classify extremism as politically vicious. No doubt there are plenty of others.

The claims that extremism causes polarization and that the latter is politically damaging will not be defended in any detail here, though both seem obvious enough. The recent history

of the United States and United Kingdom amply demonstrates that polarization is politically dysfunctional and causes severe difficulties for political institutions that were designed on the assumption of a broad consensus about fundamental values. The role of extremism in causing polarization follows from its pre-occupation with purity, its tendency to engage in othering and its propensity for conspiracy thinking. In a recent analysis of extremism, J. M. Berger defines it as ‘the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group’ (2018: 170). If this belief is part of the extremist mindset then possession of that mindset is almost bound to cause the in-group and out-group to polarise.

Yet this line of argument faces the following apparently seductive response: there are surely circumstances, including some that are far from unusual, in which extremism is the only way to achieve worthy and democratically desirable objectives. In such cases it can be an asset to have an extremist mindset, and there are plenty of examples of extremists who have done more good, politically speaking, than their more moderate allies. Indeed, not only is it possible that extremists are more effective than moderates but also that political actors at the far end of the extremist spectrum are even more effective than more “moderate” extremists. If extremism can be politically beneficial in circumstances that are far from unusual, does this not call into question the idea that extremism is politically vicious?

Consider, again, the case of the suffragettes. On one view, they (or some of them) were extremists who campaigned successfully for votes for women, and their extremism was a significant factor in explaining their success. Since their extremism was politically effective and in a just cause, there is no reason to regard it as politically vicious. As it helped to overturn an obvious injustice – discrimination against women – it can also be regarded as morally virtuous rather than vicious. Finally, their extremism was epistemically beneficial to the extent that it gave them a clear insight into social and political injustices that were invisible to more moderate political opinion. In a similar vein it might be said that the extremism of the African

National Congress (ANC) in its battle against apartheid was justified and necessary; there was little hope of overthrowing apartheid by moderation. The ANC, with its extremist mindset, saw what needed to be done and did it. This therefore *looks* like another case in which extremism proved morally, politically and epistemologically beneficial.

In what sense were the suffragettes and the apartheid era ANC ‘extremists’? The usual explanation refers to the means or methods they employed. The ANC was engaged in armed struggle against the South African government and carried out acts of terrorism for which it was later held to account by its post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Some of the ANC’s terrorist acts resulted in the deaths of civilians, including children. The bombings and arson carried out by the suffragettes were also clearly terrorist acts, regardless of whether they were justified.<sup>26</sup> It follows that both the ANC and the suffragettes were extremists in the methods sense. What is less clear is whether their use of extremist methods was effective. It is arguable that terrorist acts carried out by the ANC contributed little to the overthrowing of apartheid. The case of the suffragettes is even more complicated because, aside from questions about effectiveness of their methods, there are also questions about their cause: unlike the ANC, they were not campaigning for universal adult suffrage.<sup>27</sup>

The present question is not whether *terrorism* is politically, morally or epistemically vicious but whether an extremist mindset is vicious in any of these senses. Just as it is possible to have an extremist mindset without condoning or using violence, so it is possible to be pro-violence without having an extremist mindset. There is little evidence, for example, that Nelson Mandela or other senior members of the ANC had an extremist mindset despite being pro-violence, in the sense that they argued for an armed struggle against apartheid.<sup>28</sup> They did not engage in othering, were not pre-occupied with purity, and were responding to actual as distinct from imaginary oppression. People with an extremist mindset would not have set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission after victory. If this is right, then the ANC provides no support



for the idea that an extremist mindset can be beneficial or virtuous. Its leadership did not have an extremist mindset, and its greatest achievements would not have been possible with such a mindset. Similarly, it is hard to make the case that the suffragettes' extremist mindset – if they did indeed have such a mindset – contributed to their achievements.

The point of these considerations is not to suggest that it is absolutely inconceivable for an extremist mindset to be beneficial. The point is rather to suggest that convincing examples of this are much harder to find than one might suppose. Whether or not an extremist mindset is *invariably* harmful, the moral, political and epistemic harms that it *normally* causes are both systematic and predictable. This is enough to justify the classification of it as a moral, political and epistemic vice. The contrary view is sometimes based on a simple misreading of examples, such as those discussed above, of supposedly benevolent extremism, and sometimes on another simple misunderstanding: it is true that successful political campaigns against injustice require such qualities as determination, implacability and tenacity, and that many extremists have these qualities. However, it is possible to have these qualities without having an extremist mindset and the benefits of determination, implacability and tenacity in a just cause are more than likely to be cancelled out by the vicious aspects of such a mindset. There is therefore no reason to revise the initial verdict that extremism is a vice.

#### 4

The remaining question is: how does a person come to have an extremist mindset? Is it an innate personality trait or is it acquired?<sup>29</sup> If it is acquired, how is it acquired, and what can be done to counter it? The empirical work in this area tends to focus on MEM. One view is that in the right conditions anyone is capable of becoming a militant extremist because MEM draws on 'certain natural human tendencies' (Saucier et al. 2009: 257). On the other hand, in a given context some individuals 'may be more prone than others to take on this mind-set' (Saucier et al. 2009: 257). How are such variations to be accounted for? Psychopathy might be one factor.

This is taken to be a trait consisting of four characteristics: callousness, manipulativeness, lack of inhibition and anti-social behaviour. Sadism is another potentially relevant factor. According to one study, ‘proviolence was found to be predicted by sadism and psychopathy’ (Međedovic and Knežević 2018: 99). Other research has found evidence to link extremist sympathies to common mental disorders such as depression (Bhui et al. 2019: 6).

Suppose that the process of acquiring an extremist mindset (militant or otherwise) is described as the radicalisation process. Aside from the psychological or other factors that predispose a person to radicalise there is also the question of how the radicalisation process itself works. In truth there are likely to be many such processes, and multiple different pathways to an extremist mindset if one doesn’t already have it.<sup>30</sup> Extremist ideologies reinforce an extremist mindset but one might suppose that such ideologies are only attractive to individuals who have this mindset to begin with. Some accounts of radicalisation see it as something that *happens* to a person, through physical or online contact with extremist ideologues. Other accounts question the assumption that extremism is a ‘communicable disease’ (Wood 2017: 179) to which some people are vulnerable. They see it more as an expression of an individual’s agency, as is suggested by talk of *self*-radicalisation. There are also questions about the role of group dynamics in the radicalisation process, with some influential accounts insisting that extremists who only come into contact with other extremists, and are prevented from interacting with people with different views, are likely to have their extremism reinforced. The resulting ‘crippled epistemology of extremism’ (Hardin 2010) is the result of group dynamics rather than individual choice. It is groups that are ‘the natural habitat of extremism’ (Breton and Dalmazzone 2010: 55).

The jury is still out on whether and how an extremist mindset is acquired. However, regardless of how a person comes to have an extremist mindset, there is the practical question of what, if anything, can be done to counter this mindset. A natural thought is that if having an

extremist mindset is partly a matter of how one thinks, then one way to counter this mindset is to cultivate or inculcate thinking styles that are antithetical to extremist thinking.<sup>31</sup> Anti-extremist thinking will be realistic rather than utopian or catastrophic. It will respond to conspiracy and apocalyptic thinking with healthy doses of scepticism, humour and irony. As Emcke observes, ‘what is needed is a culture of enlightened doubt and irony – because those genres of thinking are most inimical to the rigorist fanatics and racist dogmatists’ (2019: 111). If extremists or proto-extremists can be trained to ask questions like ‘is that true?’, ‘is there any evidence for that?’, ‘do they know what they are talking about’, and to ask these questions as a matter of course, then it should be possible to counter any extremist tendencies in their thinking. Such questions might also serve as an antidote to the extremist’s pre-occupations with persecution and purity, to the extent that such pre-occupations are baseless.

Just as extremist thinking needs to be countered by antithetical thinking patterns, so the attitudes that underpin extremism need to be countered by antithetical attitudes. Scepticism is again the key. Introducing doubt and self-doubt into the extremist mindset is way to undermine its excessive certainty and uncompromising attitude. Extremists need, somehow, to be made comfortable with difference, ambiguity and uncertainty. Uncertainty is, in turn, a cure for hate if Emcke is right about hating requiring absolute certainty. Finally, greater open-mindedness, if such a thing can be taught, is the obvious antidote to the extremists’ closed-mindedness and dogmatism. Above all, their othering tendencies need to be countered by helping them to see people who do not share their outlook as human beings who are not to be killed or tortured in the name of some supposed greater good.

Many of these antidotes to an extremist mindset are examples of intellectual or moral virtues. Talk of ‘virtue’ is helpful in this context for reasons that were set out some years ago by Philippa Foot. The Aristotelian virtues, Foot points out, are *corrective*, ‘each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be

made good' (1979: 8). As noted above, the extremist mindset draws on certain natural human tendencies. This evidence indicates that fanatical thinking patterns are 'somewhat common' and that the base rate of such thinking in the population at large 'does not appear to be low' (Saucier et al. 2009: 267). If this is right then extremism in one form or another is an example of a temptation to be resisted through the cultivation of corrective anti-extremist virtues. There would be no reason to regard scepticism and irony as *virtues* in this sense if extremism in one form or another were not something by which large numbers of people are tempted. Extremism is the disease for which corrective anti-extremist virtues are the antidote.

How is this antidote to be administered? Can open-mindedness be taught? How can a person who is prone to extremist or fanatical thinking be made comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty? At least some anti-extremist virtues are intellectual virtues. In a useful discussion Baehr argues that 'fostering growth in intellectual virtues should be a central educational aim' (2014: 107) and outlines seven practical measures for doing this in an educational setting. Not all anti-extremist virtues are character traits, and a number of them – such as the ability to see out-group members as human beings- might more accurately be characterised as moral rather than intellectual virtues. The extent to which they can be fostered in an educational setting remains an open question. It is an empirical question whether the measures described by Baehr are effective. If they are effective then there is hope for the project of countering extremism by education.

This approach to countering extremism has more going for it than some governmental responses. For example, the U.K. government defines extremism as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the rule of law'.<sup>32</sup> The inadequacy of this definition is perhaps too obvious to need spelling out. Its unfortunate practical consequences have included the placing of an 'active duty' on schools in to promote fundamental British values, in the vain hope that the promotion of these values may

contribute to countering extremism.<sup>33</sup> Yet if extremism is understood as a mindset, with its distinctive preoccupations, attitudes, emotions and thinking patterns, then extolling the virtues of the rule of law and democracy is unlikely, on its own, to have much impact, beyond fueling the sense of resentment felt by marginalised individuals and communities. A more constructive approach is needed, and the discussion above suggests that it might prove fruitful to focus on equipping citizens at an early age with a range of virtues that will reduce their susceptibility to extremism. If an extremist mindset is the problem, then tackling that mindset must be part of the solution.

These recommendations are of particular importance today because of the extent to which recognizably extremist preoccupations, attitudes and thinking patterns have entered the political mainstream. To take just example, the supposed victimization of the U.K. by the E.U. has been a key pre-occupation of many English supporters of “Brexit”, Britain’s exit from the European Union. What O’Toole describes Brexit as ‘a genuine national revolution against a phoney oppressor’ (2019: 164) – the E.U. – is very much keeping with the extremist cult of victimhood. The fantasy of Brexit as a revolt against oppression both creates and exploits a sense of national self-pity. The uncompromising attitude of the more extreme pro-Brexit faction in British politics is also explained by its pre-occupation with victimhood, as well as its hankering after the purest form of Brexit - a so-called “clean” Brexit.

The issue here is not whether Brexit is an extremist policy but whether the arguments in its favour deployed by its most committed proponents are expressive of an extremist mindset. This question must be answered in the negative if all extremism is violent or pro-violence. On the whole, violence is not on the Brexit agenda but it is a mistake to stipulate that extremism must be violent. The mindset of the most hardline supporters of Brexit is an extremist mindset, not in the sense that it is pro-violence but rather in the sense that its preoccupations, attitudes and styles of thinking are one that will be familiar to anyone who has made a study of this

mindset in other, perhaps more familiar contexts. The resulting polarization of British politics is, again, something that could have been predicted by anyone with even a passing familiarity of the way that extremists operate. Extremism is a spectrum and it is a serious matter if even mainstream political movements are somewhere on this spectrum.

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<sup>1</sup> The extremism I am concerned with in this paper is *political* extremism. There are, of course, several other varieties.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between the descriptive and evaluative content of the ‘extremist’ label see Nozick 1997: 299.

<sup>3</sup> Nozick notes that ‘a simple definition of extremism is not really possible’ but that there is ‘a cluster of features, some more central than others, that constitutes what might be called an extremist syndrome’ (1997: 296). In the same way, there is a cluster of features, some more central than others, that constitute an extremist mindset. In the present discussion I don’t try to rank the suggested features of an extremist mindset in order of importance.

<sup>4</sup> The suitably expansive conception of ideology I have in mind is what Raymond Geuss calls ‘ideology in the descriptive sense’. This includes, as well as the beliefs of the members of a group, ‘the concepts they use, the attitudes and psychological dispositions they exhibit, their motives, desires, values, predilections, works of art, religious rituals, gestures, etc.’ (1981: 5). There are many items on this list that help to constitute a person’s mindset.

<sup>5</sup> Labelling someone as an ‘extremist’ is rarely understood as a way of complimenting them.

<sup>6</sup> On ISIS, see McCants 2015, Wood 2015 and Wood 2018. On Breivik, see Seierstad 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See Saucier et al. 2009, Stankov, Saucier, and Knežević 2010 and Međedovic and Knežević 2018.

<sup>8</sup> A third extremist preoccupation which, for reasons of space, will not be discussed here, is with a mythic or mythologized past. For an account of this preoccupation in relation to fascism, see the opening chapter of Stanley 2018. See, also, Saucier et al. 2009: 261 and O’Toole 2019: 75-109.

<sup>9</sup> The purity preoccupation is related to what Jonathan Haidt calls the ‘sanctity/ degradation foundation’ of conservative morality. If Haidt is right about conservatism’s preoccupation with ‘stain, pollution and purification’ (2012: 171) then one might conclude that conservatism is more likely to be associated with extremism than outlooks that do not have this preoccupation.

<sup>10</sup> As Nozick notes, a key question is how we distinguish the extremist’s non-compromising position from a principled one. As he points out, ‘even if one has principles and is convinced that they are right, there can be non-authoritarian ways of maintaining them; one can still be willing to listen to and consider counter-arguments’ (1997: 297). Those with an extremist mindset are unwilling to listen or consider counter-arguments. This aspect of the extremist mindset is closely related to its closed-mindedness.

<sup>11</sup> These vices are discussed in much greater detail in Cassam 2019a, especially chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts and Wood 2007: 194-5. See, also, the account of dogmatism in chapter 5 of Cassam 2019a.

<sup>13</sup> On hate, see Emcke 2019. On fear, see Appadurai 2006. Self-pity is the focus of O’Toole 2019. Another basic extremist emotion is anger, as described in Mishra 2018.

<sup>14</sup> In particular, there is what Appadurai calls ‘fear of small numbers’. See Appadurai 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Ben-Ghiat is quoted in a *Washington Post* article as describing a cult of victimization as part of the persona of leaders with authoritarian tendencies. The title of the *Post* article, published on 28 September 2019, says it all; ‘Staring down impeachment, Trump sees himself as a victim of historical proportions’. A similar point is made by Jason Stanley in chapter 6 of his book on fascism (Stanley 2018).

<sup>16</sup> See Cassam 2019a: 177.

<sup>17</sup> In their account of what they call ‘catastrophizing’, Saucier et al. note that ‘among militant extremists, there may be an obsession with events perceived as catastrophic and a tendency to portray situations as desperate’ (2009: 261).

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<sup>18</sup> There are vivid accounts of ISIS’s obsession with the apocalypse in McCants 2015, Wood 2015 and Wood 2018.

<sup>19</sup> As argued in Cassam 2019b.

<sup>20</sup> See Saucier et al. 2009.

<sup>21</sup> On the role of pro-violence in militant extremism see Stankov, Saucier, and Knežević 2010.

<sup>22</sup> As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘the *questions* we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn’ (1969: 341). The propositions that extremists regard as exempt from doubt are no such thing.

<sup>23</sup> See Cassam 2019a for a defence of this approach.

<sup>24</sup> Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012.

<sup>25</sup> This claim is defended in chapter 6 of Cassam 2019a.

<sup>26</sup> This controversial view of the suffragettes is defended in Webb 2014. For a contrary view, see the letter by June Purkis published in *The Guardian* on 6 June 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Webb 2014.

<sup>28</sup> It follows from this that it is possible to be a terrorist without being an extremist, just as it is possible to be an extremist without a terrorist. As understood here ‘extremism’ is a mindset. Terrorism is a tactic. Members of the ANC who planned and carried out bomb attacks that predictably killed civilians were terrorists but it is a further question whether their mindset was extremist.

<sup>29</sup> While acknowledging that he is not a psychologist Nozick speculates in his brief discussion of extremism that ‘there is a determinate extremist personality’ (1997: 298).

<sup>30</sup> As argued in Cassam 2018.

<sup>31</sup> See Saucier et al. 2009 for one version of this approach.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, H.M. Government 2015.

<sup>33</sup> H.M. Government 2015.