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## Radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism: an interview with Quassim Cassam

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Quassim Cassam is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, UK. He was previously Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge, Professor of Philosophy at UCL, and Reader in Philosophy, University of Oxford. He has also been a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Northwestern University. He is the author of six books, including *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford 2019), *Conspiracy Theories* (Polity 2019), and *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford 2014). He was born in Mombasa, Kenya, and educated at Oxford, where he was supervised as a graduate student by P. F. Strawson. He is a past President of the Aristotelian Society and an Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow. His research interests include epistemic vices, conspiracy theories, the philosophy of terrorism, extremism, the philosophy of medicine, and the self and self-knowledge.

**Mitja Sardoč (MS):** The phenomena of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism have brought to the forefront problems previously either compartmentalised in specialised courses on intelligence and security studies or at the very fringes of scholarly interest. Is radicalisation problematic only when coupled with violence or is there any other issue that makes it puzzling (e.g. the use of indoctrination in the process of radicalisation)?

**Quassim Cassam (QC):** The notion of radicalisation is far from straightforward. It is often used uncritically in discussions of terrorism, and there are many important questions about the nature and concept of radicalisation that have never been satisfactorily answered. It has been defined by Peter Neumann as ‘the process whereby people become extremists’. An immediate challenge is to explain the notion of extremism. On one view, there is a distinction between extremist *beliefs* (or ideas) and extremist *methods*. Let’s set aside for the moment all the difficult questions about what it is for a belief to be “extremist”. Extremist methods are generally understood to be ones that involve the use of violence. This suggests that radicalisation can pertain to a person’s beliefs or their methods. This is essentially the distinction between what terrorism scholar Marc Sageman calls “cognitive” and “behavioural” radicalisation. Cognitive radicalisation involves “the acquisition of extreme ideas”, whereas behavioural radicalisation is the “turn to violence”. To talk about a person’s ideas or beliefs in this context is to talk about their *ideology*. So cognitive radicalisation can also be described as ideological radicalisation. The violence that is at issue in Sageman’s definition is *political* violence, the use of violence for

political ends rather than, say, for merely criminal ends. What counts as a “political” end is, of course a difficult question.

It’s not clear whether behavioural radicalisation is necessarily a matter of using violence to achieve one’s political objectives. For example, does an ideologically radicalised person who threatens, but does not use, political violence count as behaviourally, or only cognitively, radicalised? What if they plan acts of violence but are unable to carry them out for reasons that are beyond their control? At least in the latter case, I think it’s clear that we are dealing with behavioural radicalisation even if there is no actual violence. So, the “turn to violence” needs to be understood broadly enough to allow for such cases. Perhaps, in that case, extremist methods should be defined as ones that involve the use or *threat* of violence. However, even this definition might not be adequate. Terrorists who resort to cyber-warfare might be regarded as using extremist methods even if no physical violence is involved. What does or doesn’t count as an act of violence is another difficult and interesting question.

With regard to the relationship between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, it is natural to think that the former leads to the latter. The reality is much less straightforward. Only a very small proportion of cognitively radicalised individuals ever carry out or plan acts of violence: cognitive radicalisation is by no means sufficient for behavioural radicalisation. Nor is cognitive radicalisation necessary for behavioural radicalisation, though this is more controversial. Some have argued that many terrorists are not deeply ideological, and a recent UN study of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria found that their motivations are more emotional than ideological.

You ask if radicalisation is only problematic when coupled with violence. Behavioural radicalisation is *always* coupled with violence or the threat of violence so I guess that your question concerns cognitive radicalisation. There are at least two views here. One is that ideological radicalisation is bad in itself whether or not it is coupled with violence. The other is that it is only problematic to the extent that it leads, or tends to lead, to acts of violence. We shouldn’t be worried about extremist beliefs if they have no behavioural consequences. What if extremist beliefs occasionally lead to violence but generally do not? This might be enough for such beliefs to be regarded as problematic but the difficult question is: when do extremist beliefs lead to violence, and in what circumstances do they *not* lead to violence? What makes the difference? Unfortunately, it’s not clear that we are ever going to be able to give a definitive answer to these questions. Perhaps it is best to think of cognitive radicalisation as one risk factor, among others, for the turn to violence.

Regardless of the relationship between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, there is also the question: how do people become *cognitively* radicalised in the first place? One answer says that people become cognitively radicalised through exposure to extremist ideas. However, just as only a relatively small proportion of people who are cognitively radicalised become behaviourally radicalised, it also seems that only a small proportion of people who are exposed to ideological extremism become ideological extremists. So here we have two versions of what I call “the problem of the few”. The first version asks: out of everyone who has become cognitively radicalised, why did these particular individuals become behaviourally radicalised when many others did not? Walter Laqueur asks a similar question: “how to explain that out of 100 militants believing with equal intensity in the justice of their cause, only a very few will actually engage in terrorist actions?”. It is simplistic to suppose that those who actually engaged in terrorist actions *must*, by

definition, have believed in their cause with greater intensity than those who did not. The empirical evidence certainly doesn't support this claim. The second version of the problem of the few asks: out of everyone who has been exposed to an extremist ideology, why did these particular individuals adopt that ideology when many others did not? The answers to these questions are likely to be person-specific rather than general, and this is one of the insights of the *particularist* approach to radicalisation that I recommend. I say more about this below.

**MS:** Despite the consensus that radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism represent a major threat to the security and stability of contemporary societies, the question "what is radicalisation" opens a range of additional challenges. What are the major obstacles in providing a plausible answer to this question?

**QC:** There are many obstacles but I will focus on just three: lack of clarity about key concepts, flawed assumptions about the nature of radicalisation, and flawed assumptions about the nature of causation.

If radicalisation is defined as the process whereby people become extremists, then we need an account of what counts as an "extremist". The concept of extremism is both crucial and hard to define. The same goes for the concept of a terrorist. Extremism comes in many different varieties, and there are difficult questions about how the different varieties are related. For example, what is the relationship between religious and political extremism? I find it helpful to distinguish three varieties of political extremism: positional, modal and methodological. What makes a political ideology extremist in the positional sense is its relationship to other ideologies. This presupposes a spectrum of ideologies, with "moderate" ideologies in the middle and extremist ideologies at the ends of the spectrum. Modal extremism is a mode of commitment to an ideology. With modal extremism it's not what you believe but *how* you believe, your *attitude* towards your beliefs. Extremists in this sense are dogmatic and unwilling to compromise or entertain the possibility that their beliefs might be mistaken. It's possible, in theory, for a political centrist to be a modal extremist but not a positional extremist. Methodological extremism involves a commitment to the use of extremist methods, such as terrorism. Clearly, there is a lot more to be said about all this.

When I talk about flawed assumptions about the nature of radicalisation, one such assumption is that there is such a thing as "*the* radicalisation process", a single process or set of processes whose nature can be studied and discovered. This is the key assumption of what I call *generalism*, which I define as the view that it is possible to give a plausible general answer to the question of why people radicalise or turn to political violence. The contrast is with *particularism*. For the particularist, radicalisation in either form is best explained and understood by reference to specific and idiosyncratic features of a person's life history. There is no *general* answer to the question why people become radicalised because people who are radicalised are historically specific particulars with their individual trajectories and interactions with different environmental factors. This is not to say, however, that there aren't some common "radicalisation drivers" or risk factors. The key is to balance the search for common patterns with a recognition of the fine-grained particularity of individual human beings. There is a connection here with what Donald Davidson calls the "anomalism of the mental", the idea that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained. By the

same token, there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which radicalisation can be predicted and explained.

In that case, how can radicalisation be understood as a causal process? When a person's behavioural radicalisation is said to have been caused, at least in part by their prior cognitive radicalisation, what is the relevant notion of cause? If causes necessitate their effects, or are necessary and sufficient for their effects, then there is little hope of understanding radicalisation in causal terms: exposure to radical ideas doesn't necessitate cognitive radicalisation and the latter doesn't necessitate behavioural radicalisation. Also, as we have seen, cognitive radicalisation is neither necessary nor sufficient for behavioural radicalisation. A different causal model is required if we are to make any progress here. Two ideas that I have found helpful in my thinking about these issues are the idea of a *risk factor* and that of an *INUS* condition.

In medicine, a risk factor is any attribute, characteristic or exposure of an individual that increases the likelihood of developing a disease or injury. For example, smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer. X can be a risk factor for Y even if most people who are exposed to X don't develop Y. For example, only 172 out of 1000 current male smokers will get lung cancer. Most men who smoke won't get lung cancer but many more male smokers than non-smokers will get lung cancer: only 13 out of 1000 non-smoking males will get lung cancer. It is impossible to predict who among all the men who smoke will develop lung cancer and who will not. In cases where exposure to a risk factor results in a disease, we suppose that there is an underlying, known or unknown, mechanism connecting the two. On its own, however, exposure to a risk factor won't result in the associated disease. Other conditions or factors also need to be present. We suppose that when exposure does not result in the disease, one or more of the other factors was absent, or the disease was blocked by the operation of contrary causes. Finally, if X is a risk factor for Y then levels of Y can be altered by changing levels of X.

In these terms, a risk factor for behavioural radicalisation is anything that increases its likelihood. One such risk factor is cognitive radicalisation, which in turn has its own risk factors. Most people who become cognitively radicalised won't become terrorists, and some terrorists might not be cognitively radicalised, but becoming cognitively radicalised increases the likelihood that an individual will be behaviourally radicalised. In cases where cognitive radicalisation leads to behavioural radicalisation, we suppose that there is an underlying mechanism connecting them. On its own, cognitive radicalisation won't result in behavioural radicalisation. Other conditions and factors also need to be present. If one cognitively radicalised individual turns to political violence while another does not, we suppose that there must be some further relevant difference between the two. If cognitive radicalisation is a risk factor for behavioural radicalisation then levels of the latter can be altered by altering levels of the former. Whether this is actually so is an empirical question.

The notion of an INUS condition was introduced many years ago by the philosopher J. L. Mackie. Until now it has never, to the best of my knowledge, been used to analyse radicalisation. As Mackie notes, there are many cases (e.g. "the short-circuit caused the fire") in which "the so-called cause is, and is known to be, an *insufficient* but *necessary* part of a condition which is itself *unnecessary* but *sufficient* for the result". Such a condition is an "INUS condition". In general, if X caused Y, then X was present and is at least an INUS condition of Y. When cognitive radicalisation is described as causing terrorism this can be

understood as the claim that cognitive radicalisation is an INUS condition of behavioural radicalisation. The challenge is then to identify the other ingredients (conditions) which, in conjunction with cognitive radicalisation, are sufficient for behavioural radicalisation.

**MS:** Discussions over radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism have been dominated by a set of well-known slogans (e.g. “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”), metaphors (e.g. “hearts & minds”) and thought-terminating clichés (e.g. “what goes on before the bomb goes off”). How can we overcome a simplified representation of these issues?

**QC:** Some of these slogans are less objectionable than others. “One man’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” is just a vivid way of expressing the concern that no objective definition of terrorism is possible. Someone once suggested that terrorism is simply “violence that I don’t support”. This is obviously incorrect; domestic violence is violence I don’t support but not terrorism as this is normally understood. Nevertheless, the issue of whether it is possible to arrive at a politically neutral characterisation of terrorism is a serious and difficult one. I’m sure you are right that many representations of these issues are over-simplified. It’s worth noting that it is politicians and journalists who are mainly responsible for over-simplifying the issues. I see no evidence that terrorism scholars and intelligence professionals are generally guilty of this. Sadly, I doubt that the tendency of politicians and journalists to over-simplify is curable.

**MS:** Your work is primarily in epistemology and philosophy of mind. How have you become interested in radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism? What triggered your interest in this area of scholarly research?

**QC:** I became interested quite by accident. Back in 2016 I was writing a book called *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political*. I was interested in the political impact of epistemic vices, and the idea came to me that perhaps vices like closed-mindedness and dogmatism have a bearing on why some people become radicalised while other do not. Could it be, for example, that political extremism has something to do with the closed-mindedness of extremists? So, I organised a conference on this subject and started to read about extremism, terrorism and radicalisation. I soon discovered that these are fascinating subjects in their own right, regardless of whether there is any connection with my work on epistemic vices. The more I got into it, the more I realised that at least some of the interesting questions about extremism, terrorism and radicalisation are philosophical. Yet philosophers of terrorism have rarely addressed these questions. In my view, looking at terrorism and radicalisation from the perspective of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind is extremely fruitful.

For example, what I call “particularism” is grounded in the metaphysics of particulars. Samuel Gorovitz and Alasdair MacIntyre draw a helpful distinction between simple and complex particulars. The latter “interact continuously with a variety of uncontrollable environmental factors” and we can never know “what historically specific interactions may impact on such historically specific particulars” (p. 16). Like people generally, terrorists are complex particulars. Apart from the difficulty of knowing which interactions with other people have impacted on them, there is also the difficulty of knowing *how* such interactions have impacted on them. This is one factor that accounts for the fact Laqueur’s question is so hard to answer. The metaphysics of complex particulars has huge

methodological and epistemological implications for the study of terrorism and radicalisation, and this is one example of the importance of metaphysics in this context. The discussion of causation and INUS conditions is another example of how one's thinking about terrorism and radicalisation can't avoid being shaped, consciously or otherwise, by one's view of causation.

With regard to the importance of epistemology, a key question in terrorism studies is: to what extent is it possible for us to arrive at knowledge of terrorism and the motivations of individual terrorists? In a very interesting book called *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"*, Lisa Stampnitzky talks about what she calls "the politics of anti-knowledge" since 9/11. Anti-knowledge is characterised by an active refusal to explain terrorism. On this view, if terrorists are evil and irrational then we cannot and should not know them. In a similar vein, the distinguished terrorism scholar Richard Jackson has a paper in which he discusses what he calls "the epistemological crisis of counterterrorism". He describes this as an identifiable posture towards knowledge about the terrorist threat. This epistemic posture is characterised by, among other things, wilful ignorance of terrorism and a refusal to engage with the subjectivity of those responsible for acts of terrorism. What would it be to engage with a person's subjectivity and to what extent is it possible for us to know why terrorists attack or what causes their actions? These questions are epistemological, and point to the need for a worked out "epistemology of terrorism".

A key issue in philosophy of mind concerns the constraints on knowledge of other minds. So-called "interpretationists" think that if a subject has beliefs, desires and other propositional attitudes then the relation between these attitudes must by and large be rational. If this is right then there are limits to how irrational terrorists can be, assuming that they have beliefs and desires. But in what sense *are* terrorists rational? How do we make sense of members of organisations like ISIS? In what sense are their beliefs and desires governed by what Davidson calls the "constitutive ideal of rationality"? One notion of rationality is *instrumental* rationality. An instrumentally rational person chooses means that are suitable to their ends. Are terrorists at least instrumentally rational? These questions have an obvious bearing on the anti-knowledge perspective described by Stampnitzky and Jackson. At the same time, terrorist organisations like ISIS are an interesting test case for interpretationism in the philosophy of mind.

These are just three examples of potentially fruitful links between terrorism studies and metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind. To date, these links haven't been seriously explored by philosophers. A philosopher of terrorism once claimed that there are two central philosophical questions about terrorism: what is it, and what, if anything, is wrong with it? As I see it, this is an excessively narrow view. There is, or should be, much more to the philosophy of terrorism than questions of definition and morality. My own recent focus has been on the epistemology of terrorism and radicalisation but I don't see the epistemological issues in this area as neatly separable from issues in metaphysics and philosophy of mind.

**MS:** As you emphasise in your article "The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation", the very term "the radicalisation process" may be an important part of the problem while tackling the turn to violence. What are the remaining alternatives?

**QC:** Suppose that person X at time  $t_1$  has little interest in politics. At a later time  $t_2$  X subscribes to an extremist ideology and is prepared to fight for his extremist beliefs.

X must somehow have made the transition from not being a political extremist to being a political extremist. Describing the transition as a *process* implies that it didn't happen in an instant; it was something that happened in stages, and that may well be the case. Suppose that we label the process by which X made his transition *X's radicalisation process*. Now consider a different person Y who also made the transition from not being an extremist to being an extremist. We can call Y's pathway *Y's radicalisation process*. If it turns out that the radicalisation processes of X and Y have significant common features then we might begin to speak, more generally, about "the radicalisation process" as something that both X and Y underwent. Understood in this way, there would be no objection to talking about "the radicalisation process". However, the evidence suggests that different individuals who radicalise often radicalise very differently. As has often been noted, terrorists vary enormously in terms of education, family background, class, religion and many other factors. This means, as Andrew Silke puts it, that "the manner in which they become a terrorist can also vary, and factors which played a pivotal role in one person's decision to engage in terrorist violence can play a peripheral role in the decision-making of others, or indeed may have played no part whatsoever". If this is correct, as I'm sure it is, then it would be more accurate to talk about radicalisation *processes* than about "the radicalisation process".

One crucial difference between different pathways to cognitive or behavioural radicalisation might be the extent to which becoming radicalised is something that *happens* to a person, rather than being an expression of their own agency. On a "contagion" model, extremist beliefs are a disease that vulnerable people contract by contact with infectious agents in the form of so-called "radicalisers". To describe an individual as "vulnerable" to radicalisation is to imply that they have low ideological immunity, just as it is possible for one to have low immunity to a particular disease. I am sceptical about the notion that this is generally how radicalisation works, though it might happen like this in some cases. In reality, people often self-radicalise, either as individuals or as members of friendship or kinship groups. Furthermore, when a person radicalises, their radicalisation may well be an expression of their own agency. Talk of "vulnerability" to radicalisation implies a degree of passivity that is absent in many cases. It also overlooks the extent to which radicalisation can be a *political* response to an actual or perceived *political* or social grievance.

**MS:** Radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism (together with other concepts from the pantheon of political ideas, such as patriotism) have been viewed primarily as moral and political phenomena. Several of your papers (e.g. "The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation", "Humility and Terrorism Studies" etc.) raise important "epistemological" issues. Why have scholars neglected the epistemological dimension of terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism?

**QC:** I don't think it's true that terrorism scholars have entirely neglected the epistemological dimension. As I've mentioned, important epistemological issues have been highlighted by terrorism scholars such as Jackson and Stampnitzky. And, of course, there is Donald Rumsfeld's famous aphorism about known and unknown unknowns in relation to 9/11. To the extent that scholars have neglected the epistemological dimension of terrorism, that may be because they lack the necessary expertise in epistemology. This is where philosophers can make a contribution.

**MS:** What are the most pressing conceptual problems associated with radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism?

**QC:** I've already mentioned some of the conceptual problems. It's also worth giving some thought to the methodological issues associated with the study of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism. One methodological issue is whether these phenomena are best studied from an external or an internal perspective. *Externalism* looks at terrorism from the outside, from the perspective of a natural scientist trying to develop general causal laws that can be used to explain and, ideally, predict political violence. Its method is to develop explanatory hypotheses and test them by observation or, if possible, experiment. From this standpoint, explaining political violence isn't fundamentally different from explaining any other naturally occurring phenomenon. *Internalism* tries to make sense of terrorism by understanding its perpetrators "from the inside". As Sageman puts it, in order to understand what leads people to turn to political violence, it is necessary to have "at least some understanding of what is going on in their minds, a peek into their subjectivity".

I'm very much in agreement with Sageman. Because human beings have a subjective perspective, our understanding of what they do and why they do what they do must be fundamentally different from our understanding of ordinary natural phenomena, such as the movements of the planets. Understanding terrorists from the inside is at least partly a matter of grasping the values and attitudes in the light of which their actions make sense to them. Failing to engage with the subjectivity of those who perpetrate political violence leaves us with no real understanding of their actions and motivations. The issue is not whether their actions can be justified but whether we can make sense of them and, if so, how. Taking internalism seriously, as I believe we should, means accepting that terrorism studies is not, and cannot be, a science. It is better to think of it as a humanistic discipline in something like Bernard Williams' sense. Thinking of it in this way means thinking of it as part of what Williams calls "a wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and of our activities". For some of "us", these activities include acts of terrorism.

The distinction between internalism and externalism is related to Karl Jaspers' distinction between understanding and explanation. According to Jaspers, we *explain* by "observation of events, by experiment and the collection of numerous examples." As in the natural sciences, we formulate rules and establish laws. Rules are obtained inductively and particular cases are subsumed under them. With mental events (including actions), what we seek is an *understanding* of how one such event emerges out of another. This kind of understanding is highly personal and depends on what Jaspers calls "empathy". In my view, a satisfactory response to the problem of the few needs to be particularist, internalist and understanding-focused. Only by engaging with the particularity and subjectivity of those individuals who turn to political violence can we hope to understand why they act as they do, in contrast to many others in the same situation who don't resort to terrorism. This is not to deny that there are some things of a general nature that can be said about the turn to political violence. That's why I call my approach *Moderate Particularism*. On this account there is no objection to recognising general patterns as long as we don't over-generalise and fail to acknowledge the fine-grained particularity of individuals terrorists whose conduct can neither be explained nor predicted "scientifically".

This approach faces a number of challenges and objections. I will mention just two. One is that empathising with terrorists might be regarded as morally suspect, especially if empathising with a person is linked to sympathising with them. I accept that this is a real danger but we have no choice if we want to understand terrorism. The other issue is that there are limits to empathy. Empathy has been described as a form of “other-oriented perspective taking”: it involves adopting the target’s perspective but if the target is a member of ISIS then it might be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to adopt their perspective. In these cases, only an external perspective, with all its limitations, is possible.

**MS:** The voluminous literature on radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism in disciplines as diverse as psychology, political science, criminology, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, education as well as philosophy, is a testament to the complexity of these phenomena. What has been philosophy’s main contribution to these discussions?

**QC:** At this point it is hard to identify a single significant contribution, except to debates about whether terrorism can be morally justified. Even when it comes to defining “terrorism”, the efforts of philosophers have been notably less successful than those of the best terrorism researchers. The epistemology of terrorism and radicalisation is still in its infancy. I hope, in my recent work, to have taken the first few steps. I don’t think that my philosophical colleagues are especially interested but I have been heartened by the interest shown by terrorism scholars, including some whose work I greatly admire.

**MS:** Thank you.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Mitja Sardoč* (PhD) is a senior research associate at the Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana (Slovenia) where he is member of the “Social Contract in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” research programme. He is author of scholarly articles and editor of a number of journal special issues on citizenship education, toleration, patriotism, equality of opportunity, multiculturalism and radicalisation. He is Managing Editor of *Theory and Research in Education* [<http://tre.sagepub.com/>] and editor-in-chief of *The Handbook of Patriotism* to be published by Springer. He is currently a visiting fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (European University Institute).