

## **Moral Extremism**

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**ABSTRACT** *The word ‘extremist’ is often used pejoratively, but it’s not clear what, if anything, is wrong with extremism. My project is to give an account of moral extremism as a vice. It consists roughly in having moral convictions so intense that they cause a sort of moral tunnel vision, pushing salient competing considerations out of mind. We should be interested in moral extremism for several reasons: it’s consequential, it’s insidious – we don’t expect immorality to arise from excessive devotion to morality – and it’s yet to attract much philosophical attention. I give several examples of moral extremism from history and explore their social-political implications. I also consider how we should evaluate people who miss the mark, being either too extreme in the service of a good cause or inconsistent with their righteous convictions. I compare John Brown and John Quincy Adams, who fell on either side of this spectrum, as examples.*

‘The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.’ (William Butler Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’)

### **Introduction**

Some reformers have responded to allegations of ‘extremism’ by embracing the label. During his speech accepting the 1964 Republican Party nomination for president, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater said: ‘I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.’<sup>1</sup> Civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. likewise said that he had warmed up to being called an extremist. The question, King concludes, ‘is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?’<sup>2</sup> Philosopher and proanimal activist Tom Regan similarly brushes aside the criticism that animal rights activists (ARAs) are extremists. According to Regan, this either means that they will take any means to further their ends – which isn’t true – or else that their views are uncompromising and unqualified. That describes their stance on animal cruelty, but so what?

The plain fact is, extreme views sometimes are correct views. That being so, the fact that ARAs are extremists, in the sense that we have unqualified beliefs about right and wrong, by itself provides no reason for thinking that we are mistaken. So the question to be examined is not, ‘Are ARAs extremists?’ It is, ‘Are we right?’<sup>3</sup>

Goldwater, King, and Regan each express the thought that extremism itself isn’t inherently bad and may even be good. Everything depends on what sort of extremists we are – whether, on King’s formulation, we’re extremists for love or hate. King suggests that being an extremist is unavoidable; Regan agrees. ARAs are, Regan says, extremists only in the sense that (almost) everyone is an extremist: ‘For example, everyone . . . is an extremist when it comes to rape; we are against rape all of the time. Each of us is an extremist when it comes to child abuse; we are against it all the time’.<sup>4</sup> If anyone absolutely opposed to rape is an extremist, then the charge of extremism doesn’t amount to much of an objection.

Can all accusations of extremism be so easily dispensed with? There’s room for doubt. Goldwater’s defense of extremism is pithy, but not entirely convincing. Perhaps extremists for liberty tend to run off the rails, and justice is best achieved when pursued with moderation. Extremism is bad, I think, because it implies a readiness to do more than morality permits in the name of sincerely held moral ideals. Regan’s briefly stated first definition of extremism is on the right track:

In one sense, extremists are people who will do anything to further their objectives. The terrorists who destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center were extremists in this sense; they were willing to go to any lengths, including killing thousands of innocent human beings, to further their ends.<sup>5</sup>

Extremism isn’t often examined philosophically, although the related concepts of moralism and fanaticism have recently been analyzed.<sup>6</sup> Quassim Cassam’s work on extremism is an important exception. Cassam distinguishes between position extremism, methods extremism, and modal extremism. The first two are fairly self-explanatory: having an extreme position and being willing to employ extreme methods, respectively. Modal extremism is typified by a set of psychological traits, for example, ‘Extremists in this sense are dogmatic and unwilling to compromise or entertain the possibility that their beliefs might be mistaken.’<sup>7</sup> This sense of extremism is closest to the account I develop here. I understand moral extremism (henceforth, simply ‘extremism’) to be a kind of vice. So it’s a property of agents primarily and only secondarily a property of actions, positions, and parties. This account respects the intuition that, contra Goldwater and King, there really is something wrong with being an extremist for a good cause.

In the first section, I introduce and explicate my account of extremism, then address two objections. In the second section, I discuss two episodes from 20th-century history that plausibly implicate extremism. The third section argues that extremism on a societal scale is especially destructive and that it has probably played a significant role in the rise of totalitarian regimes. Finally, the fourth section considers how we should evaluate people who intend well, but who miss the mark, that is, people who are either extremists or are insufficiently moved by their moral convictions.

## The Vice of Extremism

My account of extremism is as follows.

### *Extremism*

An agent has the vice of extremism just in case: (1) she has a moral conviction; (2) her conviction is strongly affectively invested; (3) on account of this, she is unable or unwilling to take competing moral considerations into account in her thought or behavior or to consider evidence that might lead her to qualify her conviction.

Let's take each part in turn. What's a moral conviction? It's a moral judgment, but not just any moral judgment. Convictions aren't fleeting or episodic. They're confident and relatively stable. A moral conviction must motivate behavior in a wide range of circumstances. Philosophers have debated whether it's possible for some people to make moral judgments that aren't at all motivating.<sup>8</sup> But a moral *conviction* clearly cannot be inert; it must motivate the person whose conviction it is. If someone told you that he had a conviction that eating meat was wrong but took no steps to minimize his meat consumption, you'd reasonably doubt his sincerity. Just as convictions can't be episodic, they can't be judgments at such a high level of generality that they border on triviality: one ought to be good, justice should be pursued, etc. Such beliefs do little to direct action independently of more specific beliefs about the substance of these normative terms. (Herein lies the basis of a reply to Goldwater: no one is an extremist for either liberty or justice *in the abstract*. No terrorist's last words are 'Long live goodness as such!') We can only ever pursue specific notions of liberty and justice in particular contexts, and these ideals can certainly be pursued recklessly.)

A moral conviction must be affectively invested; hence (2) makes explicit what (1) implies. Again, it's hard to imagine anyone having a conviction that eating meat is wrong, but also not caring about whether he, or anyone else, eats meat. (3) states that the extremist's emotional investment in his conviction leads to a sort of moral tunnel vision that impairs his moral thinking or behavior. But how exactly does this happen? Here it might be useful to draw on Thomas Aquinas's distinction between two kinds of anger. Anger is inherently sinful when it's contrary to charity and justice, as when someone desires an unjust revenge. By contrast, *zealous anger* is directed at appropriate objects, instances of vice. Although zealous anger isn't inherently sinful, it remains morally dangerous. Aquinas approvingly quotes Pope Gregory I who says: 'We must beware lest, when we use anger as an instrument of virtue, it overrule the mind, and go before it as its mistress, instead of following in reason's train, ever ready, as its handmaid, to obey.'<sup>9</sup> Aquinas adds:

the movement of anger may be inordinate in the mode of being angry, for instance, if one be too fiercely angry inwardly, or if one exceed in the outward signs of anger. On this way anger is not a mortal sin in the point of its genus; yet it may happen to be a mortal sin, for instance if through the fierceness of his anger a man fall away from the love of God and his neighbor.<sup>10</sup>

Zealous anger can ‘overrule the mind’ in two ways. It can prompt weakness of will, as when an agent desires to punish a wrongdoer disproportionately. Or it can obscure his moral judgment, leading him to mistake revenge for self-defense, for example. Often the enraged person’s judgment is impaired because he focuses myopically on retaliation at the expense of competing considerations. We shouldn’t be surprised to find zealous anger undermining morality in both ways, since it’s tempting to rationalize errors that initially arise through weakness of will. A good example of this is someone who’s understandably indignant about a road-rage incident, but who then unjustifiably escalates it with the excuse that the instigator ‘had it coming’.

Anger isn’t the only morally dangerous emotion associated with moral judgment. In an article published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Barbara Oakley adduces evidence that ‘people’s own good intentions, coupled with a variety of cognitive biases, can sometimes blind them to the deleterious consequences of their actions’.<sup>11</sup> For example, suppose that your brother is addicted to pain medication: ‘When he goes through withdrawal, you get more painkillers to help him feel better, and you cover for him when his work supervisor calls. You genuinely want to help your brother, but the reality is that you are enabling his addiction.’<sup>12</sup> The person who does this may be suffering from moral tunnel vision: his desire to alleviate his brother’s immediate suffering occludes weightier considerations. The errors of the addiction facilitator aren’t mere miscalculations; they’re ethically criticizable errors. His selective moral attention jeopardizes his brother’s well-being.

This isn’t to say that the road-rage escalator or drug procurer are extremists; that would depend on whether the moral judgments they act on constitute convictions in the sense I’ve described. This seems unlikely in the road-rage case, though it’s a possibility in the addiction case. Moral convictions may produce moral tunnel vision simply in virtue of being moral judgments. But they can also distort cognition in ways that prosaic moral judgments do not. Paul Katsafanas, in his analysis of fanaticism, says that the fanatic has one or more ‘sacred values’ which can never be reassessed or traded off against any competing values. The fanatic forms his identity around these values and restricts his community to others who accept them. Since he assumes that the value is threatened when not widely accepted, the fanatic is intolerant.<sup>13</sup> Katsafanas’s criteria for fanaticism are more stringent than my criteria for extremism. Having an intense moral conviction, even one that undermines moral thinking and behavior, doesn’t imply thoroughly forming one’s identity around that conviction as the fanatic does. Nevertheless, moral convictions are more central to our social identities than prosaic moral judgments. Revising them can be very unsettling.

I want to avoid as much as possible committing myself to controversial stances in virtue theory. Still it would be good to say a bit about why extremism is a vice. In short, extremism is a vice for the same reason wrath is. The wrathful person has difficulty behaving morally because of the inordinate influence of anger. Similarly, the extremist deviates from morality because inordinately strong moral convictions impede her ability to act morally. In both cases, the agent has a character trait that reliably compromises her ability to act morally. The ‘reliably’ is important: generally, virtues and vices are thought to be traits that are stable over time. I think they also explain particular actions, rather than simply describe patterns of actions. Thomas Hurka has defended an alternative view with the implication that virtues and vices need not be stable over time.<sup>14</sup> If he’s right, then my account will have to be revised so that an

agent can momentarily be an extremist in virtue of episodic moral judgments. I'll nevertheless proceed on the assumption that vices and virtues must be stable over time.

We haven't yet considered any real-life examples of extremists (I'll come to those shortly), but already the reader might be mulling an objection. The problem with putative 'extremists', this objection goes, isn't the excessive intensity of their convictions or the emotions associated with them. Rather they have others flaws. The supposed extremist might be too impulsive or unreflective. He might fail to take competing moral considerations into account because he's insensitive to others' suffering. In each of these cases, some vice besides extremism satisfactorily accounts for the extremist's badness. There's no reason to think this reasoning can't be extended to all putative extremists. So we should conclude that the 'vice of extremism' is redundant and explains nothing.

This objection can be rebutted. Of course people with strong convictions can be led astray by vices other than extremism. But there's no reason to suppose that all misbehavior plausibly attributable to extremism is wholly accounted for by other vices. Being too impulsive or insufficiently reflective *with regard to one's moral convictions* are forms that extremism might take, not other vices that explain extremism away. Consider wrath again. It wouldn't make sense to say that positing wrath as a vice is redundant on the grounds that the bad behavior of any apparently wrathful person can be accounted for by that person's lack of impulse control. Lacking impulse control in states of anger constitutes wrath. What makes either anger or moral conviction excessive to the point of vice is its relationship with the rest of the agent's mental states. Someone prone to feel angry but also quick to reflect on and control that anger doesn't have an anger problem. Similarly, someone who has strong moral convictions but who's sufficiently reflective wouldn't be an extremist.

It's tempting to think that a *true* moral conviction, which is a good thing, could never be the seat of vice. To show how that's possible, I return to Aquinas, who writes:

The natural inclination to a good of virtue is a kind of beginning of virtue, but is not perfect virtue. For the stronger this inclination is, the more perilous may it prove to be, unless it be accompanied by right reason [...] Thus if a running horse be blind, the faster it runs the more heavily it will fall, and the more grievously it will be hurt.<sup>15</sup>

For a blind horse, speed is a vice, even though speed is virtuous in sighted horses. Apparently, what traits are vicious or virtuous sometimes depends on what other traits an agent (or horse) has. We can understand extremism to be moral motivation unmoored from circumspection, humility, and self-reflectiveness, which can make people like blind horses, running without seeing where they are going. Strong moral convictions are vicious in extremists, even though those same convictions could be virtuous in more circumspect, reflective people. Given that no one's perfectly rational, there are levels of moral intensity that would be dangerous for any human being to have, just as there are speeds that would be dangerous for any horse to be able to run.

A second objection concerns semantics. It's natural to describe terrorism as 'extremist' behavior regardless of whether the terrorist has the constellation of qualities I label 'extremism'. Does this mean that my account is mislabeled as an account of extremism, or that it relies on a stipulative definition of 'extremism'? I don't think so.

Like Regan and Cassam, I don't think the ordinary language word has a single meaning; there are at least the three senses that Cassam identifies. By 'extreme', people often seem to mean simply 'out of the mainstream, and probably bad'. In other instances, for example, when they describe Osama bin Laden as an extremist, people seem to be referring to a vice. My project here is to clarify our notion of this vice. I don't dispute that there are other interesting senses of the word that could also merit philosophical investigation.

### **Extremism in History**

I now turn to episodes from 20th-century history that plausibly exemplify extremism.

#### *Case 1: Alcohol Prohibition*

In the early 20th century, antialcohol crusader Carry A. Nation gained notoriety for attacking Kansas saloons with rocks, bricks, and three hatchets affectionately named 'Faith', 'Hope', and 'Charity'. Nation, proud of her methods, called her attacks 'Hatchetations' and named one of her newsletters *The Smasher's Mail*. She once described herself as 'a bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what He doesn't like'.<sup>16</sup> In her heyday, 'One ornament on many saloon walls was a cast-iron hatchet with a die-cut profile of Nation's face adorning the blade and the slogan "All Nations Welcome But Carrie" in bas-relief on the handle."<sup>17</sup>

When alcohol prohibition was written into the US Constitution by the 18th Amendment (1920–33), the US government required that poisonous 'denaturants' like formaldehyde, iodine, and sulphuric acid be added to alcohol produced for industrial purposes in order to deter people from drinking it or selling it to others for consumption.<sup>18</sup> Prior to Prohibition, mild denaturants had been required for all distilleries that produced alcohol not intended for consumption so that these producers could avoid the taxes levied on alcoholic beverages. These just caused the alcohol to taste bad. However, during Prohibition toxic denaturants were used as a part of prohibition enforcement. The Calvin Coolidge administration announced what (terrifying) new denaturants would be added in hopes of bolstering deterrence.

Despite these warnings, many did drink the toxic alcohol with tragic consequences. One journalist writes that 'In 1926, in New York City, 1,200 were sickened by poisonous alcohol; 400 died. The following year, deaths climbed to 700. These numbers were repeated in cities around the country as public-health officials nationwide joined in the angry clamor'; by some estimates, the total number of Americans who died by these poisonings might have been as high as 10,000.<sup>19</sup> Some ardent supporters of Prohibition remained unmoved. After receiving the news that poisoned alcohol had killed several New Yorkers and sickened hundreds of others, Wayne Wheeler, *de facto* leader of the Anti-Saloon League, said: 'The government is under no obligation to furnish the people with alcohol that is drinkable, when the Constitution prohibits it[. . .] The person who drinks this alcohol is a deliberate suicide.'<sup>20</sup> A 1927 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* on the poisoning incidents says: 'Normally, no American government would engage in such business[. . .] It is only in the curious *fanaticism* of Prohibition that *any means, however barbarous, are considered justified*.'<sup>21</sup>

This is paradigmatic extremism. Consider Nation again. Her first husband died of alcohol-related causes at the age of 29, leaving her alone with a sick child. Through her involvement with the Temperance Movement, the religiously motivated campaign to reduce alcohol consumption and related evils, she came into contact with women whose alcoholic husbands became wastrels, or abusive, and this at a time when the state offered far less protection to women and children. Saloons were associated with gambling, which could be financially ruinous, and extramarital sex, through which men could spread then incurable venereal diseases to their wives. Opponents of saloons weren't mere haters of merriment. Nation was motivated by sincere concern about these social problems; she wasn't using them as a pretext for carrying out recreational vandalism. It's also unlikely that Wheeler wanted anyone to die from drinking poisoned alcohol. Like Nation, he wanted the suffering that alcohol caused to end, a laudable goal. Even eliminating alcohol consumption altogether is arguably a good goal, if an unrealistic one, given the costs of alcoholism to society. It seems plausible that the intensity of Nation's and Wheeler's moral convictions prevented them from being able to perceive, or appropriately weigh, competing moral considerations.

*Case 2: Retribution for Axis Atrocities in World War 2*

In *Among the Dead Cities*, A.C. Grayling quotes an officer in the British Royal Air Force who told the press 'that the Allied Air Chiefs were employing a strategy of "deliberate terror-bombing of German population centres as a ruthless expedient of hastening Hitler's doom"'.<sup>22</sup> Officials worried that this blunt description might create a public affairs problem, but 'Newsreel footage from the concentration camps hugely revived anger and hostility towards Germany. For many in this mood, the area bombing in general and the destruction of Dresden in particular *seemed no more than just punishment*.'<sup>23</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, the Allied Forces, working with local governments, expelled 12 million German civilians (perhaps even 14 million), mostly women and children, from their homes in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, parts of eastern Germany, and elsewhere. These figures include many who were prevented from returning home after fleeing the Red Army. In his book on this little-discussed expulsion, *Orderly and Humane*, historian R.M. Douglas describes these events as 'the largest forced population transfer—and perhaps the greatest single movement of peoples—in human history' and notes that 'estimates of 500,000 deaths at the lower end of the spectrum, and as many as 1.5 million at the higher, are consistent with the evidence as it exists at present'.<sup>24</sup> Douglas attributes some of the widespread ignorance of these events to the fact that most people in Allied countries consider the war to have been a 'Good War' and a 'justified crusade' against monstrous regimes. Apparently, many people don't want this picture complicated by news of Allied wrongdoing.<sup>25</sup>

That retributive spirit also manifested in the Pacific theater, between the United States and imperial Japan. On August 9, 1945, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist William L. Laurence accompanied the flight crew that dropped the atomic bomb over Nagasaki, Japan. One month later it was released to American newspapers. The atom bomb, the second dropped on Japan (after the one dropped on Hiroshima three days prior), instantly killed 70,000 people or more and caused many others to die protracted deaths of radiation poisoning.<sup>26</sup> In his article, Laurence excitedly describes the lightning storm he sees en route to the target, seemingly unbothered by the moral

gravity of events. Of the bomb, Laurence wrote: 'It is a thing of beauty to behold, this "gadget". In its design went millions of man-hours of what is without a doubt the most concentrated intellectual effort in history. Never before had so much brainpower been focused on a single problem.' Later he describes the plane carrying it as having a 'precious load.' He turns his thoughts to casualties only once. Just before the bomb is about to be dropped, he says: 'Does one feel any pity or compassion for the poor devils about to die? Not when one thinks of Pearl Harbor and of the death march on Bataan.' Laurence, apparently unencumbered by sympathy for the civilian casualties, then provides the reader with lengthy, awestruck description of the mushroom cloud created by the bomb's detonation.<sup>27</sup>

The role of extremism is somewhat harder to discern here than in the Temperance Movement/Prohibition case because of the plurality of motives in play. Winning the war was obviously in the interest of the Allies, irrespective of their moral reasons for wanting victory over the Axis powers. Some of their callousness toward German and Japanese civilians derived from bigotry that predated the war. Nonetheless, these motives coincided with moral zeal. People fighting in wars often fail to distinguish between the national cause and justice itself. The hideous nature of Axis atrocities made this black-and-white picture especially plausible for those on the Allied side. Laurence refers to Japanese civilians as 'devils', but he also gushes with enthusiasm for the glorious tool of Allied victory whose use he proudly documented. I don't know this for sure, but I surmise that Laurence's conviction in the righteousness of the Allied cause made it easier for him to disregard the humanity of Japanese civilians.

Even if this wasn't true of Laurence, it must have been true for many of the people in Allied countries, including people in positions of authority throughout the Allied military leadership. The moral convictions associated with prolonged war, especially war against demonstrably evil foes, are psychologically too powerful not to have played any role in these events. How much of a role it played is difficult to quantify. But consider an analogy with racism understood in a somewhat old-fashioned way, as the vice of unreasonable dislike or prejudice against a race of people. It might be reasonable to conclude that many people in a given society must have this vice even if it's hard to identify any particular person as a racist or to say that any particular action was the product of racist motives. Extremism can also be defused: many people can have their moral thinking and behavior distorted by overly confident moral convictions, though not to such a degree that this distortion is easy to spot, or to distinguish from coinciding bad motives, in a given person.<sup>28</sup> The aggregate consequences of widely dispersed, low-level extremism can nonetheless be terrible. I suspect that partly explains the remorselessness of some on the Allied side at the end of World War II.

### **Social and Political Aspects of Extremism**

These examples show that extremism can have disastrous social and political consequences. Although I understand extremism to be an individual vice, some of its consequences might be manifest only on a large scale. Few nationalists are so extreme that they murder foreigners, but many compatriot nationalists may collectively cause huge numbers of people to die in unnecessary wars, even if none is individually murderous. Reinhold Niebuhr, writing about the outbreak of World War I (for a time ambiguously



called the ‘Great War’), observed that defenders of the war believed they were advancing lofty goals:

This was the moral charm that war still holds for many as an opportunity for the expression of some of man’s noblest passions. As a collective undertaking, war is primarily selfish and immoral without excuse. But for the individual it often means the highest expression of his altruism and the greatest opportunity for the development of his nobler passions.<sup>29</sup>

Niebuhr here describes a dynamic that’s almost the opposite of Adam Smith’s famous ‘invisible hand’ metaphor. According to Smith, individual actors benignly pursuing their economic self-interest promote the common good in market economies;<sup>30</sup> according to Niebuhr, many individuals seeking moral ends collectively promote immorality and pathology. Some intellectuals have found it plausible that this same phenomenon, or something like it, is implicated in the rise of totalitarianism regimes. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn finds Iago, the villain of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, unbelievable because he self-consciously acts from evil motives, which real human beings rarely do: ‘To do evil a human must first of all believe that what he is doing is good.’<sup>31</sup> He adds:

Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.<sup>32</sup>

Solzhenitsyn unfortunately doesn’t define ‘ideology’ here, but his examples suggest that an ideology is a false narrative that makes immoral actions appear justifiable, or even glorious. People in the grip of ideologies seem to be extremists. We might be surprised to see Nazism mentioned alongside communism as an ideology; the former seems too driven by dark impulses to be an instance of *moral* extremism. Mary Midgely wrote that ‘It is particularly necessary to put the Nazis in perspective because they are, in a way, too good an example [of evil]. It is not often that a political movement is as meanly supplied with positive, constructive ideals as they were.’<sup>33</sup> Midgely is wrong to suggest that they mostly lacked ‘positive, constructive ideals’, however. Their ideals included fostering a sense of national pride and a desire for retribution for the injustices they thought had been inflicted on Germany during and after World War I. They also yearned for a highly civilized, genetically pure future that (they hoped) would be much better.

Consider the speech that Heinrich Himmler gave to the SS about the Final Solution, that is, the extermination of the Jewish people and others, on October 3, 1943. Himmler encouraged his audience to reconceptualize the guilt and trauma of participating in mass murder as a burden that they nobly bore in the service of a greater cause. He concluded: ‘But altogether we can say: We have carried out this most difficult task [i.e., genocide] for the love of our people. And we have suffered no defect within us, in our soul, in our character.’<sup>34</sup> This probably reflected the motives of some

people in his audience. How did they arrive at such horrifically wrong conclusions? This is ultimately a matter for historians to decipher, but I suggest that extremism played some role. Many Germans presumably felt attracted to the Nazis' moral ideals, and this attraction, together with social pressure to conform, made it easy for them to push doubts about the Nazi narrative out of mind. Eventually it became an article of faith, enabling Himmler to reframe their feelings of guilt, shame, and trauma in a per-versely flattering way.<sup>35</sup>

This story appears to be in tension with an influential picture of totalitarianism that emphasizes the significance of conformity and other ordinary biases. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which describes the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, portrays him as a bland, unreflective cog in a political machine, a monster driven by surprisingly pedestrian motives.<sup>36</sup> Arendt famously called this an illustration of 'the banality of evil'. Daniel Ellsberg later suggested that this ought to be revised to 'the banality of *evildoing*, and of most evildoers.'<sup>37</sup> Stanley Milgram's notorious authority experiments in the 1960s seem to support this perspective.<sup>38</sup> At the behest of experimenters wearing white lab coats, subjects were induced to give (what they thought were) progressively more intense electric shocks to fellow subjects (actually confederates with the experimenters). Milgram found that people generally complied when the experimenters told them to administer more shocks, even when the person supposedly receiving the shocks said he no longer consented to be a part of the experiment.

So there's good evidence pedestrian motives and common cognitive biases account for much evil. Still it would be a mistake to dismiss the complementary role of ideology and extremism. Ordinary citizens don't become cogs in machines until those machines exist in the first place. And people like the Bolsheviks and the early Nazis, who were fired up by their ideologies, are pivotal to establishing them. Moreover, authoritarian regimes usually invest considerable resources in propaganda to persuade people that they are morally legitimate, apparently under the impression that people's moral beliefs matter to their survival. Finally, although many evildoers seem banal, others are arrogant and full of zeal. Without the pernicious influence of such fanatics, unreflective people are less likely to end up committing monstrous deeds.

### **Missing the Mark**

Aristotle advises us to err on the side of being vicious in a small way when we are danger of being vicious in a much worse way.<sup>39</sup> Better to be a little rash rather than to miss the mark more dramatically on the side of cowardice. This raises an interesting question about extremism: is it usually better to err on the side of extremism to avoid complicity with a particularly bad sort of evil or to be somewhat complicit to avoid extremism? I offer no definitive conclusions, but I think we can get a clearer sense of the issue by juxtaposing two Johns who opposed slavery in the antebellum United States: John Brown and John Quincy Adams.

Although William Lloyd Garrison and his followers had a reputation for being pur-ists, the most plausible case of an abolitionist extremist is John Brown, who's most famous for the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry. His actions against the federal arsenal in Virginia with a small band of supporters were intended to start a massive slave rebellion that would end slavery once and for all. Perhaps he succeeded in a roundabout

way: his actions precipitated the American Civil War, which ended with the abolition of legalized slavery in the United States and the extension of citizenship to the formerly enslaved. There's much to admire about Brown, not least his courage and consistency. Many prominent Americans have praised Brown and his actions. Philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson gushed that 'hanging Brown would make the gallows as holy as the cross'.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, I think there are good reasons to be critical of Brown.

The first is the Pottawatomie Massacre of 1856. This occurred in the context of 'Bleeding Kansas', a smaller civil war, or proto-civil war, that preceded the conflagration of the 1860s. Proslavery and antislavery ('free-soil') factions fought over the territory that would become the state of Kansas, whose entry into the union as either a free state or a slave state would tip the national balance of power for or against slavery. In response to aggression from the proslavery side (including the caning of Senator Charles Sumner, an opponent of slavery, on the floor of the US Senate at the hands of South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks), Brown led a small group of followers on a retributive mission. They abducted five slavery supporters in the middle of the night and killed them. Some were hacked to death with broadswords, or else mutilated after they'd been killed. Apparently, this was done to terrify those on the proslavery side. Brown's victims included three members of the Doyle family, who supported slavery, but were poor and not slave owners themselves. The abolitionists spared the youngest Doyle son, who was only 16.<sup>41</sup> Participation in the massacre traumatized two of Brown's sons who had done some of the most grisly work, and the slayings seem to have backfired: 'Pottawatomie had clearly succeeded in sowing terror [among slavery partisans]. But it failed to produce the "restraining fear" that John [Brown] junior believed to be its intent. Instead of deterring violence, the massacre incited it.'<sup>42</sup>

Brown's signature action, the raid on Harpers Ferry, is more defensible than the Pottawatomie Massacre. Nevertheless, the rebellion that Brown wanted to start likely would have resulted in tens of thousands of deaths (or more) had it been successful. And if it got going in earnest before being squelched, the blowback could have been horrendous. When the 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia led by Nat Turner failed, paranoid white mobs killed upward of 200 blacks, sometimes gruesomely, including many who had nothing to do with the rebellion. The response of whites to a much larger insurrection can be imagined. The rebellion might also have marginalized the abolitionist cause in the north where its foothold was tenuous. As it was, the first person to lose his life during Brown's raid was a free black man, Heyward Shepherd, whom one of Brown's men shot in confusion.<sup>43</sup> Brown's actions at Harpers Ferry *did* contribute to the demise of slavery in the United States, though not because he was militarily successful. Instead his actions increased the centrifugal political forces that were already pulling the United States apart over slavery. Brown's success, if it can be called that, depended on a lot of moral luck, as contemporary admirer Susan Neiman admits.<sup>44</sup> Given that the moral stakes were so high, and that Brown seemed to lack a lot of relevant knowledge about the likely consequences of his actions, I doubt that his raid on Harpers Ferry was justified. Admittedly, there's plenty of room for good faith disagreement here.

There's a good case to be made that Brown was an extremist. He clearly had an intense conviction that slavery should be destroyed. He also seemed unable or unwilling to reflect on his ideals and the means he took to promote them. Fredrick Douglass tried to dissuade Brown from his designs on Harpers Ferry – he thought that Brown

would quickly be surrounded by troops, as indeed happened – but Douglass found Brown impervious to his cogent arguments.<sup>45</sup> Brown's moral rigidity extended beyond slavery. Like Carry Nation, he destroyed jugs and barrels of whiskey.<sup>46</sup> He wanted his postrebellion society to ban 'Profane swearing, filthy conversation, indecent behavior, or indecent exposure of the person, or intoxication or quarreling, shall not be allowed or tolerated, neither unlawful intercourse of the sexes.'<sup>47</sup> Although it's hard to know exactly what was going on in his mind, it's plausible that Brown's opposition to slavery and other vices was so intense that it compromised his ability to perceive either moral constraints on his means or practical limits on what he could hope to achieve.

Very different temperamentally from Brown was US president and later congressman John Quincy Adams. Toward the end of his life, Adams, despite his conservative disposition, increasingly found himself gravitating toward abolitionism, which was then considered a radical position. While he was a member of the House of Representatives, he argued against the so-called 'gag rule' that prevented slavery from being critically discussed, and in 1844 he succeeded in getting it repealed. His most important service to the abolitionist cause, however, was in 1841 when he argued a case before the US Supreme Court. The case, *United States v. Schooner Amistad*, arose when the enslaved Africans on board the Spanish slave ship, *La Amistad*, rose up against their captors. The survivors eventually ended up in US waters, where they were apprehended and charged with piracy.<sup>48</sup> Adams successfully argued the defense case that these Africans were legally free when they rebelled, and therefore innocent. The survivors were declared free, and abolitionists raised money to repatriate them; 35 miraculously returned to Sierra Leone alive.

Notwithstanding his antislavery bona fides, Adams was reluctant to draw certain conclusions about slavery to which he seemed epistemically committed. Above all, he was unable to see all slave owners as evil people. A biographer describes Adams's internal conflict:

He could never go all the way. He could not accept the charge that every American who possessed a slave was 'a Man-Stealer'. He had known, and even respected, too many slave owners to accept that universal condemnation [. . .] Struggling among what he defined as 'these adverse impulses', he repeated, 'My mind is agitated to distraction'. No matter the direction, he predicted, 'I walk on the edge of a precipice in every step that I take.'<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps Adams found himself committed to each proposition in the following aporetic triad:

- (1) Slavery is evil.
- (2) Anyone who engages in this form of evil is an evil person ('a Man-Stealer').
- (3) These people who practice slavery are not Man-Stealers.

Adams's dissonance might not have been purely intellectual. Instead of (3), Adams might have been (and I think probably was) committed to

- (3)\* These people practice slavery, but I find myself unable to think of them as 'Man-Stealers' or to treat them that way.

Accepting (1), (2), and (3) would make Adams epistemically irrational, since the dissonance would be cognitive, whereas substituting (3)\* for (3) would make him practically irrational. Both forms of dissonance would be rationally bad to have, and since Adams's dissonance concerns a pivotal moral issue, they would be morally bad as well. So it's understandable that committed abolitionists criticized Adams for wavering. On the other hand, it's plausible that his defense of the kidnapped Africans before the Supreme Court required someone far more cautious than John Brown, the thundering antislavery prophet. It's also plausible, I think, that Adams might not have been as effective in the antislavery cause if he'd internalized the epistemically justified conclusion that his associates were indeed deserving of the epithet 'Man-Stealer.' That knowledge would be a heavy burden for most people to bear.

How should we evaluate these two men? I'll begin with Brown. When someone's an extremist in the service of a truly worthy cause at a pivotal moment, it's appropriate that our evaluation of that person be mixed. Michael Slote used the term 'admirable immorality' to classify immoral acts committed out of virtuous motives; it might be tempting to classify some of Brown's actions that way. But Slote's examples are unconvincing. (For example, he thinks Winston Churchill's needless military firebombing of Dresden at the end of World War II was immoral but admirable because it was motivated by hatred of the Nazis; I think this is false.<sup>50</sup>) What I think we should say about Brown is that his courage and opposition to slavery were admirable, although some of his other characteristics, and actions, weren't. Our assessment of Adams should also be mixed. Adams lacked Brown's logical and practical consistency, but he also avoided Brown's extremism. It is to Adams's credit that what seems to have stopped him from 'going all the way' was that he didn't want to condemn people who were somehow blinded to the immorality of their actions.

Which sort of flaw is it better to have? Would we rather have more people like John Brown in the world or more people like John Adams? I don't know the answer to this, but one intriguing possibility is that it would be better for a society to have a smattering of both types of person than too many of one type or the other. Perhaps societies can achieve an overall balance by including a diversity of people who individually miss the mark in different ways. In other words, people with Adams's kind of dissonance could serve a certain function: they help extremism on an individual level from determining the character of their societies as wholes. The same can be said of Brown. Occasionally perhaps a moral madman is the only thing that can shake a society out of its moral lethargy.

## Conclusion

Accusations of extremism are often thrown around to discredit unpopular positions. It seems fair for the person accused of being an extremist to ask: 'Who cares if I'm an extremist, or if the position I'm defending is extreme, if I'm right?' I began with quotes from three reformers who adopted this reply. I've argued, however, that we should worry about extremism in the service of good causes. Extremism on my account is a vice. What it consists in, roughly, is an intense moral conviction that prevents the agent from perceiving, or acting on, competing moral considerations when these are important. I've argued that this vice has had baleful consequences

throughout history. The discussion of John Brown and John Adams introduced a wrinkle: perhaps in rare circumstances, extremists can also confer certain benefits on a society. A general lesson from this discussion is that we must occasionally look at our own moral convictions, especially the ones that generate the strongest emotions, with a degree of suspicion. Passion for some righteous cause doesn't necessarily indicate that we are morally on the right track. Evil can be insidious, and even our strongest moral convictions can morally mislead.<sup>51</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Goldwater's 1964 Acceptance Speech: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/may98/goldwaterspeech.htm>
- 2 Martin Luther King Jr. 'Letter From a Birmingham Jail': [https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter\\_Birmingham\\_Jail.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf)
- 3 Regan, Tom. *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), p. 11.
- 4 *Ibid* p. 10.
- 5 *Ibid*.
- 6 See Julia Driver, 'Moralism', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22, 2, (2005): 137–151; Paul Katsafanas, 'Fanaticism and Sacred Values', *Philosophical Imprint*, 19, 17, (2019): 1–20.
- 7 Mitja Sardoč, 'Radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism: an interview with Quassim Cassam', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, 1 (2020), p. 168.
- 8 Danielle Bromwich, 'Motivational Internalism and the Challenge of the Amoralist', *European Journal of Philosophy* 24, 2, (2016): 452–471; Nick Zangwill, 'The Indifference Argument', *Philosophical Studies* 138, 1 (2008): 91–124.
- 9 Quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Volume 2. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), p. 1839. (Q158, A1).
- 10 *Ibid* p. 1840. (Q158, A3).
- 11 Barbara Oakley, 'Concepts and Implications of Altruism Bias and Pathological Altruism', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, 2, (2013), p. 10408.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 10409. See also Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 31–34. Bloom notes that empathy is like a spotlight in that it highlights whatever is in focus at the exclusion of everything outside. This can result in moral innumeracy.
- 13 Katsafanas opt. cit., pp. 11–17.
- 14 Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 43–44.
- 15 Aquinas, ST, Q58, A4, reply obj. 3.
- 16 Daniel Okrent. *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 35.
- 17 Okrent opt. cit. 40. She spelled her name both 'Carry' and 'Carrie.'
- 18 *Ibid* p. 211.
- 19 Deborah Blum, 'The Chemist's War', *Slate*, February 19, 2010: <https://slate.com/technology/2010/02/the-little-told-story-of-how-the-u-s-government-poisoned-alcohol-during-prohibition.html>
- 20 Okrent opt. cit., p. 295.
- 21 Quoted in Blum opt. cit. (online).
- 22 A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*. (New York: Walker and Company, 2006), p. 42.
- 23 *Ibid* emphasis mine.
- 24 R.M. Douglas. *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 1.
- 25 *Ibid* p. 3.
- 26 The bomb dropped over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, is believed to have killed over 130,000 people. Moreover, hundreds of thousands more died in the firebombing of 60 Japanese cities. The firebombing of

- Tokyo alone killed over 105,000 people in a single night. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/military/war/deadly-wwii-firebombings-of-japanese-cities-largely-ignored/2220606/#:~:text=TOKYO%20%E2%80%94%20It%20was%20not%20Hiroshima,it%20was%20just%20as%20horrific.>
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  - 28 This distinguishes my account of extremism from fanaticism, as Katsafanas understands it, which is too intense to be defused in this way.
  - 29 Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Patriotism and Altruism', Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/100\\_for\\_100/007](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/100_for_100/007)
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  - 31 Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Parts I-II, translated by Thomas P. Whitney. (New York: Scribner, 1974), p. 173.
  - 32 *Ibid* p. 174.
  - 33 Mary Midgely *Wickedness*, 2nd edition. (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 5.
  - 34 The speech can be read here: <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-human-behavior/himmler-speech-posen-1943>
  - 35 Richard Pipes observes that the leaders of the Cheka, the secret police that served the Bolsheviks, justified atrocities using similar reasoning: In the literature which it lavishly subsidized, Chekists are depicted as heroes of the Revolution who carried out harsh and unpleasant duties without sacrificing their moral integrity. The typical Chekist is portrayed as uncompromisingly severe in his actions and yet sentimentally tender in his feelings, a spiritual giant with the rare courage and discipline to stifle in himself an inborn humanitarianism in order to accomplish a vital mission on humanity's behalf. Few deserved to join its ranks. . . . The effect of such remarks is to make terror seem harder on its perpetrators than on its victims. (*The Russian Revolution*. (New York: Scribner, 1990), p. 822.
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  - 40 Quoted from his letters in Horwitz 2011, p. 386.
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  - 43 *Ibid* p. 251.
  - 44 Susan Neiman, 'Victims and Heroes', Tanner Lectures on Human Values, given at the University of Michigan March 26, 2010: [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/n/Neiman\\_10.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/n/Neiman_10.pdf)
  - 45 Horwitz opt. cit., p. 210.
  - 46 *Ibid* p. 49.
  - 47 Robert L. Tsai. 'John Brown's Constitution', *Boston College Law Review*, 51, 1 (2010), p. 198.
  - 48 William J. Cooper. *The Lost Founding Father: John Quincy Adams and the Transformation of American Politics*. (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2017), pp. 362–368.
  - 49 *Ibid* p. 360.
  - 50 Michael Slote, 'Admirable Immorality', in his *Goods and Virtues*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) pp. 95–96.
  - 51 Special thanks to Mylan Engel, who offered incisive comments on an earlier draft for the 2020 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress and also effectively chaired the online session. I'd also like to thank Tim Perrine, Daniel A. Kaufman, Justin Kalef, Tyler Paytas, Stephen Kershner, and all those who attended my session. Finally, the anonymous referees at *Journal of Applied Philosophy* were especially helpful.