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# Higher-Order Evidence and Moral Epistemology

Edited by Michael Klenk

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## 10 The Fragile Epistemology of Fanaticism

Joshua DiPaolo

### 1 Introduction

Westboro Baptist Church is labeled by the Southern Poverty Law Center as the "most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America."<sup>1</sup> They are the fire-and-brimstone, anti-gay religious group that pickets military funerals while displaying deeply offensive signs that say things like "God Hates Fags," "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," and "Same-Sex Parents Doom Kids." The sheer breadth of their hate-mongering is remarkable; no one outside the church escapes their vitriol. They stomp on the American flag. They burn the Koran. They say God hates Jews. They even blame other Christians for same-sex marriage.

What's more remarkable than their fanatical hate speech is how they interpret their own behavior. According to the church, these are acts of *love*. By spreading this intolerant message, they are obeying the commandment to "love thy neighbor." They appeal to Leviticus 19:17–18, the famous dictum's first appearance in the Bible, to justify this interpretation.

Thou shall not hate thy neighbor in thine heart; thou shall in any wise rebuke him and not suffer a sin upon him. Thou shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.

To hate your neighbor is to not rebuke him when you see him sinning; to love your neighbor is to warn him of the consequences of his sins.

During the filming of a BBC documentary on the church, documentarian Louis Theroux at one point tries to help a young church member, Jael Phelps, acknowledge the pain that the group causes. When Westboro members respond to criticism, they rapidly recite rehearsed rebuttals, appearing to be on "autopilot." However, in a moment of unexpected vulnerability and candor, Jael slowly, calmly, and thoughtfully answers (Theroux 2007):

Well, it's very simple. We read the scriptures and we tell people what the standard is. We don't do violence to people. We warn them that

their sins are taking them to Hell. We do a courteous and loving thing to them. That's courteous and loving. And they hate us, and they beat on us, and they don't want to have anything to do with us. They're just down right mean to us sometimes, ya know? What did we do to them? Nothing but a courtesy.

As twisted as this all sounds, there's logic to it. Love can require intolerance and hurtful honesty. If a friend were planning on performing some heinous crime, I would try to stop them – not only for the sake of their potential victims but out of love and for their own sake, to prevent a corruption of their character. When silence would cost a loved one more than the pain associated with hearing a hard truth, telling the truth is the right thing to do. This is how Westboro members see their actions. *Not* sharing their message with the world would be wrong. It would be like letting my friend perform the heinous crime or remaining silent when the costs to a loved one are severe. Their beliefs are criticizable for many reasons, but not for being completely illogical.<sup>2</sup>

Consistent with this assessment of the Westboro belief system, several recently developed theories imply that the beliefs of fanatics, terrorists, and other extremists are often epistemically rational. Far from being wholly irrational creatures or crazy psychopaths, these characters are often embedded in social dynamics and informational networks that justify their hateful and intolerant worldviews. Perhaps these individuals have an informationally impoverished crippled epistemology that supports their worldview (Hardin 2002; Sunstein 2009). Or perhaps they're embedded in echo chambers, groups that foster disparities in trust between like-minded insiders and dissenting outsiders (Nguyen 2018; Sunstein 2009). According to these views, when beliefs are products of crippled epistemologies or echo chambers, those beliefs may be completely rational.

Although I don't take issue with these theories per se, neither adequately accounts for the distinctive relationship between fanaticism and higher-order evidence. Like other acts of extreme intolerance, Westboro's morally repugnant behavior targets precisely those people whose worldviews differ from their own. Jael doesn't see the hateful backlash against church members as providing reason to engage in soul-searching or to rethink her view. Holding fixed her interpretation of the church's behavior as loving and courteous, the backlash is incomprehensible to her as anything but unprovoked and undeserved hostility. This intellectual behavior is characteristic of fanaticism. To be completely committed to their worldview, fanatics must have absolute confidence in its source. To avoid questioning their creed, fanatics must lack confidence in their own judgment. To steadfastly adhere to their doctrine, fanatics must interpret dissent and disagreement either as expressing straightforward, answerable objections to their worldview or as a hostile threat

to their identity rather than as a reason to step back and engage in critical self-reflection.

I'm not going to epistemically evaluate fanatics' beliefs here. But I'll put my cards on the table. I tend to think the crippled epistemology and echo chamber stories too quickly grant rationality by neglecting the higher-order evidence that people have at their disposal even when they're operating with a crippled epistemology or stuck in an echo chamber. While defending the rationality of extremist belief, for instance, Cass Sunstein (2009, 121) acknowledges that extremists "frequently assume that their own group is not skewed or biased; they fail to make proper adjustments for the motivations and limited information of group members." But then he adds, "it is not easy to describe this failure as a form of irrationality." I don't see why not. Failing to adjust your beliefs in response to what you know about the quality of your evidence certainly *looks* epistemically irrational. If we're going to say fanatics' and other extremists' beliefs are epistemically rational, then we need to think seriously about the higher-order evidence that they typically possess.

These theories imply that fanatics are rational because what little they know supports their worldviews or because they're taught to distrust people with different worldviews. But, I'll argue, these theories don't take into account the higher-order evidence that fanatics typically possess that, on its face, undermines the rationality of their beliefs. Any theory that implies fanatics' beliefs are rational but fails to explain why this higher-order evidence doesn't undermine the rationality of those beliefs is inadequate. In this chapter, I explain how fanatics, given the nature of fanaticism, *treat* or *respond* to their higher-order evidence. I do this to show what an argument for the rationality of fanaticism must do. The fanatic treats higher-order evidence, in particular disagreement from others, not as reason to rethink their worldview but as a threat to their identity. This treatment of higher-order evidence derives from how they understand their values qua fanatic: they're not to be questioned, and when they are questioned, their status is thereby threatened. If fanatics treat higher-order evidence in this way and their beliefs are rational, then their treatment of their higher-order evidence must be rational. Thus, this chapter lays the groundwork for further research: is the fanatic's treatment of higher-order evidence, which derives from the nature of his fanaticism, rational? Because the "nature of fanaticism" involves a distinctive stance toward the nature of certain values, this question blends the epistemology of higher-order evidence with moral epistemology: under what conditions is it rational to take this stance towards one's values?

I won't weigh in on whether fanatics' beliefs are rational or defend their treatment of higher-order evidence. Rather, I *explain* why fanaticism leads people to treat higher-order evidence in this way to lay the groundwork for a more adequate assessment of the rationality of their beliefs. This inquiry will also provide guidance on what must be done to help

fanatics change their minds. If we want higher-order evidence to make a dent in the fanatic's belief system, we may need to unseat their convictions about the nature of the fanatic's values.

## 2 Fanaticism: Pretheoretical Basics

The paradigmatic fanatic is the violent religious extremist who takes themselves to have divine sanction for terrible acts of cruelty and intolerance (Katsafanas 2019, 2). On 21 April 2019, nine suicide bombers attacked several Sri Lanka locations, ultimately killing 258 people and injuring another 500. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for these coordinated attacks. Jihadis like these who embrace demanding values that require devotion and great personal sacrifice look like paradigmatic fanatics. But fanaticism needn't be religiously inspired or violent. The clearly fanatical Westboro Church doesn't engage in (physical) violence. And some forms of white nationalist fanaticism aren't religiously inspired. Just five weeks before the Sri Lanka bombings, an Australian man shot up two New Zealand mosques, ultimately killing 51 people and injuring another 49, in the name of white supremacist, anti-Muslim ideals rather than specifically religious values.

Katsafanas (2019) identifies six pretheoretical features associated with fanaticism. First, the fanatic has an *unwavering commitment to some ideal*. The fanatic is often willing to make extreme sacrifices to promote or preserve their ideal. Second, the fanatic typically has *unwavering certainty about this ideal*. Often aware of others' non-acceptance of the ideal, the fanatic remains steadfast in their absolute confidence in this ideal.<sup>3</sup> Third, this certainty is often *localized*. Fanatics don't display a general inability to assess evidence or draw rational conclusions; they display rigid certainty in a narrowly circumscribed domain. Fourth, fanatics are *intolerant and often violent*. They typically attempt to impose their ideals or values on others who do not share them. Fifth, the fanatic is usually *group oriented*. They think of their identity as partly constituted by reference to a like-minded group and to a group to react against. Finally, Katsafanas notes that the ideals accepted by fanatics often have *religious provenance*, claiming divine revelation as the source of their unwavering commitment and certainty.

For the sake of understanding fanaticism, it's important to emphasize its logical independence from religion. Although I'll focus on a case of religious fanaticism, the chapter's implications should be understood more generally. Fanatics have strong moral commitments, derived from religion or elsewhere. These moral commitments are typically among their most troubling beliefs. Theories that imply that fanatical beliefs are rational imply that these commitments are rational. My purpose is to clarify what needs to be defended if we're going to accept the rationality of these moral beliefs.

Shortly, I'll describe Katsafanas's more theoretical, broadly Nietzschean account of fanaticism. First, I'll focus on the rational warrant that fanatics have for their beliefs. Although the fanatic's confidence *seems* to outstrip its warrant, the crippled epistemology and echo chamber theories question this. In the next section, I'll explain how these theories attempt to rationalize fanatical belief, and I'll argue that they fail to account for the higher-order evidence that fanatics typically possess.

## 3 Crippled Epistemologies and Echo Chambers

Why should we think that the beliefs of fanatics, extremists, terrorists, and other radicals are rational? The crippled epistemology and echo chamber theories both begin with the fact that we unavoidably, and uncritically, depend on others for information about the world. Few of our beliefs would be rational if it weren't rational to regularly trust the testimony of those around us. Because it usually *is* rational to believe what we are told by like-minded people, we are susceptible to *rationally* believing and maintaining belief in fanatical or extremist worldviews. Thus, dependence on others for information is the theoretical background shared by these two theories. But they differ in details.

The crippled epistemology (CE) story focuses on *ignorance*. The idea is that extremists know little, and what they know supports their extremism (Sunstein 2009, 41). Why are fanatics so ignorant, according to CE? Their group provides them only with information that supports the group ideology. They are exposed to little if any contrary information. And open questioning of this ideology is strongly prohibited. Furthermore, fanaticism essentially depends on exclusionary practices that affect the information that group members possess, keeping them largely ignorant of alternatives (Hardin 2002, 18). Anyone who disagrees with the group's creed exits – willingly, through excommunication, or worse. So why are fanatics often rational in their beliefs? They just don't know any better. The limited information, evidence, and knowledge they possess, most of which is supplied by like-minded group authorities, supports their beliefs.

In contrast, the echo chamber (EC) story focuses less on ignorance and more on *trust*. An echo chamber is, roughly, a group that fosters disparities in trust between like-minded insiders and dissenting outsiders (Nguyen 2018). Just as we rationally depend on others to provide ordinary information about the world, we also rationally depend on others to tell us whom to trust. Echo chambers are often constituted by an alignment between outputs of these two dependencies: group members agree about the truth of some ideology because purported authorities inform them of its truth, and this ideology tells its adherents to trust only those who share this commitment. For instance, Westboro relies on the Bible for its doctrine, which includes passages that the church interprets as encouraging distrust of those who don't, like James 4:4: "friendship with

the world is enmity with God." Thus, fanatics in echo chambers needn't be ignorant of contrary information. Even if an outsider exposes them to information that contradicts their worldview, they can rationally dismiss it as coming from an untrustworthy source.

Thus, we have two arguments that fanatics' beliefs are often rational. Since fanatics have crippled epistemologies or are in echo chambers that favor their fanatical ideology, their beliefs in that ideology are rational. Rather than arguing against this conclusion, I want to show how both arguments rely on not taking into account higher-order evidence that fanatics typically possess, whether they're operating with a crippled epistemology or embedded in an echo chamber. I will do this to show what *more* needs to be said to defend this conclusion and to set the stage for the next sections, where I'll link fanaticism to higher-order evidence.

First, what is higher-order evidence? It can be two things: evidence about the quality of a body of evidence (e.g. about which relations hold between one's evidence and certain propositions, about how strong it is, about how representative it is, etc.) and evidence about a person's relation to evidence (e.g. about whether they have correctly assessed their evidence, about the capacities they have to assess evidence, etc.) For my purposes, information, empirical data, and a priori reasons all count as evidence. *Epistemic considerations* might better designate what I have in mind, but I'll stick with *evidence*. One of the main examples I'll use of higher-order evidence is disagreement, understanding it as potentially providing evidence of rational error.

### 3.1 Crippled Epistemology

Now let me explicitly state the argument from crippled epistemology to the rationality of fanatics' beliefs. (The argument from echo chambers is similar.)

#### Crippled Epistemology Argument

- C1. If fanatics have a crippled epistemology that favors a certain ideology, then fanatics have been told that this ideology is true and that the people they know who agree with this ideology have given them only (and perhaps lots of) information that confirms it.
- C2. If fanatics have been told that this ideology is true and that the people they know who agree with it have given them only (and perhaps lots of) information that confirms it, then all the information that fanatics possess all things considered supports this ideology.
- C3. If all the information fanatics possess all things considered supports this ideology, then it's rational for fanatics to believe this ideology.
- C4. Therefore, if fanatics have a crippled epistemology that favors a certain ideology, then it's rational for fanatics to believe this ideology.

- C5. Fanatics have a crippled epistemology that favors a certain ideology.
- C6. Therefore, it's rational for fanatics to believe this ideology.

I won't question C1 or C3: C1 partially articulates what a crippled epistemology is, and C3 expresses a plausible total evidence principle. Instead, I'll question C2 and C5.

The idea behind these claims is that the only relevant information fanatics possess is

- (1) Testimony that the ideology is true.
- (2) Any additional evidence they've been given that confirms this ideology

(because if this were all the information they possessed, then all the information they possess *would* all things considered support their ideology).

Even if this information is misleading, and even if there exists veridical evidence out in the world that decisively refutes this ideology, those facts don't bear on the rationality of fanatics' beliefs. Only evidence, misleading or otherwise, that fanatics possess determines whether their beliefs are rational. The thought is that since (1) and (2) exhaust the relevant evidence that fanatics possess, their evidence all things considered supports their ideology.

The problem with this argument is that fanatics typically possess more evidence that bears on the rationality of their beliefs. I'm not merely claiming that *there is* evidence out in the world that *would* undermine their beliefs if only they possessed it. Rather, I'm claiming fanatics *do* typically possess information that bears on the rationality of their beliefs that isn't included in (1) and (2). According to the crippled epistemology argument, if the fanatic's relevant evidence is wholly constituted by (1) and (2), then their beliefs are rational. That may be true. But the claim that the fanatic's beliefs are rational follows only if their relevant evidence is wholly constituted by (1) and (2) – that is, they don't possess any additional relevant evidence. This is the claim that I'll argue against.

First, unlike children born into Westboro, many fanatics aren't raised to be fanatics. They radicalize. For instance, between 2014 and 2016, thousands living in Western liberal democracies fled their countries of residence to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Far from only being exposed to confirming information, these people would have had plenty of information contradicting ISIS doctrine.

More importantly for our purposes, even fanatics raised in their fanaticism often have evidence that goes beyond (1) and (2) and that *prima facie* tells against the rationality of their fanaticism, namely several forms of higher-order evidence. One form of higher-order evidence that fanatics often possess is disagreement with outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Because there are only 70–80 members in the Westboro Baptist Church, including children,

Westboro members know that nearly the entire world disagrees with them. Of course, epistemologists of disagreement argue that disagreement is epistemically significant only against a background of agreement (Vavova 2015). I think it's worth asking how strong this consideration is when the extent of disagreement is *this* massive. And there's nothing special about Westboro here: fanatics typically adopt fringe beliefs.

But even if we grant that disagreement's significance depends on agreement, we can still say fanatics possess evidence of epistemically significant disagreement, since fanatics often encounter disagreement from those who largely agree with them. For instance, there are plenty of Christians who disagree with their practices but who nevertheless accept fundamentally similar worldviews.

Moreover, the exclusionary practices that sustain crippled epistemologies have systematic higher-order import. Often relative moderates *exit* fanatical groups, by choice or force, when they disagree with the direction in which the group is headed or when they themselves have changed their minds (Hardin 2002, 10). These are people who have shared, and may still share, a large background of agreement but who nevertheless disagree with those remaining in the group. Importantly, fanatical groups don't keep dissent-based exits secret. Enforcing prohibitions against dissent requires informing group members of its consequences. This means that when people exit or are excommunicated due to disagreement, the remaining members will know that people with shared backgrounds disagree with them.

Of course, disagreement's epistemic significance depends not only on background agreement but also on the relative epistemic abilities of disputants. Whereas disagreement with epistemic superiors or peers may demand belief revision, disagreement with epistemic inferiors arguably doesn't. It's open, then, to these theories to claim that outsiders and exiters are by the lights of Westboro members their epistemic inferiors and that this is why such disagreement doesn't affect the rationality of their beliefs.

To assess the plausibility of this move, we need to know *why* it might be reasonable for Westboro members to judge these people their inferiors. If it's the mere fact of disagreement, this runs afoul of the independence principle (Christensen 2010), which says, roughly, that evaluating the epistemic credentials of those who disagree with you must be done independently of the disagreement. If it's not *just* the disagreement that rationalizes this stance, then what is it? It's true that many outsiders and some exiters see the world completely differently from how Westboro members do. But it's also true that *many* outsiders are in almost complete agreement with them, *except* when it comes to their more extreme commitments (e.g. the obligation to picket soldiers' funerals). These people trust the same sources, draw many of the same inferences, and think *just* as seriously about these issues as Westboro members do. What *reason* do Westboro members have for doubting their credentials if not merely

the disagreement? They might be *told* that outsiders and exiters are their epistemic inferiors, but that's just one piece of evidence that needs to be considered in conjunction with the rest.

At the very least, if defenders of these theories want to claim that it's rational for fanatics to be unmoved by disagreement with outsiders and exiters, they need to explain why it's rational for fanatics to treat these people as their inferiors. As I've suggested, this may require denying independence. In any case, defending the rationality of fanatics' beliefs must go beyond merely identifying some of the skewed and limited information that they possess. It must also seriously contend with the higher-order evidence that they possess.

I think it's implausible to claim that the only information that fanatics possess that bears on the rationality of their beliefs, even if they have grown up with a crippled epistemology, is limited to information that confirms those beliefs. Fanatics typically possess higher-order evidence unaccounted for by CE. It may be possible to concoct a case where fanatics have only the information that CE says they have – though, the relation between a crippled epistemology and exclusionary practices might provide grounds for pessimism. But regarding real-world cases, like the ones that CE was constructed to account for, it's implausible to make this claim.

### 3.2 Echo Chambers

What about echo chambers? EC has to contend with many of the same issues as CE does. To its credit, it does state how fanatics can dismiss disagreement with outsiders: they're not to be trusted. Information about whom should be trusted when it comes to assessing evidence is a sort of higher-order evidence, so EC doesn't completely miss the phenomenon. Whether this strategy plausibly carries over to exiters and outsiders who *largely agree* with them should be investigated. But I want to identify a different form of higher-order evidence overlooked by EC.

The idea behind echo chambers is that asymmetries in trust between insiders and outsiders can rationalize resistance to contrary evidence and reasons for doubt presented by outsiders. But the insider/outsider asymmetry isn't the only trust asymmetry that fanatical groups rely on. These groups often require members to severely distrust *themselves*. Group members are encouraged to distrust their own faculties insofar as those faculties lead to questioning the group's core commitments. To illustrate, consider remarks by Megan Phelps-Roper, a former rising star in Westboro before she left the church in 2014. During an interview after her departure, she explains how church members are taught to distrust their own thinking (Harris 2015):

If you have a doubt or a question about these standards which are so clearly laid out in scripture, then you're doubting not just scripture,

but God himself . . . and trying to substitute your judgment for God's. "And how dare you! How dare you! Who the Hell are you . . . to question?"

She continues by describing the cognitive effects of this rhetoric:

When you're hearing that as you grow up, *you have no confidence in your own thoughts and your own thinking*. . . . You have to separate everything you think and feel and everything you see, and see it *this* way.

The encouragement to distrust herself was relentless. A few weeks before she left, presumably as doubts were bubbling over, her mother attempted to console her by continuing to instill this self-distrust: "You're just a human being, my dear sweet child." Megan understood this as a call for humility: "not to question but to trust God, and my elders" (Phelps-Roper 2017).

If EC is going to claim that fanatical beliefs are rational, then it must claim not only that trust disparities between insiders and outsiders are rational but also that such disparities between insiders are rational. Characteristic of how higher-order evidence works (Christensen 2010), insiders are encouraged to *bracket* their own thinking whenever that thinking conflicts with doctrine or views of purported doctrinal authorities. But it's not obvious that this demand for self-distrust, often based in recognition of group members' human fallibility, can be quarantined. After all, the authorities are themselves only humans who must rely on their own imperfect faculties to interpret doctrinal sources. EC recognizes our inescapable reliance on others for information about the world, including about whom to trust. But fanatical groups further rely on trust disparities within their groups to forestall questioning of group commitments. When the grounds for self-distrust is human fallibility, it's hard to claim that this disparity is warranted. And if authorities deserve as much distrust as lower-tiered individual group members do, it may be difficult to maintain sharp trust disparities between insiders and outsiders.

Again, my aim is merely to identify gaps in the argument from echo chambers to rational fanatical belief. These gaps are based on failures to take into account the higher-order evidence that fanatics in echo chambers possess. To succeed in explaining why fanatical beliefs are rational by appealing to trust disparities, EC must also explain why trust disparities *within* the group are rational.

CE and EC both appeal to the social embeddedness of individual fanatics in order to explain why fanatical belief is rational. Although studying social dynamics when assessing fanatical belief is a good idea – fanaticism is an essentially social phenomenon – doing so makes it easy to lose track of the higher-order evidence possessed by individuals caught up in these

dynamics. Disagreement with outsiders and exiters and disparities in self-trust among insiders provide higher-order evidence that must be reckoned with by these individuals and accounted for by theories of fanatical belief if those theories aim to explain how fanatical belief is rational.

In the next section, I describe and adopt a theory of fanaticism. In the following section, I'll show how the nature of fanaticism explains why fanatics respond to higher-order evidence as they do. Again, this will illuminate what must be done to defend the rationality of fanatical belief.

#### 4 Fanaticism

We noted six pretheoretical features associated with fanaticism: unwavering commitment to and certainty about an ideal, localization of this certainty, intolerance of those who oppose the ideal, group orientation, and religious provenance. What, then, is fanaticism?

Adler (2007) claims that fanaticism resides in a lack of commonplace "self-restraints." The fanatic can reason themselves to the conclusion that they should kill non-believers, say, and they often act on this conclusion. In contrast, not only would the rest of us not act on this conclusion, but we also wouldn't even reach it in the first place. Seeing its conclusion, we would be convinced that this reasoning is distorted, because the conclusion evokes in us a response that amounts to a restraint on our reasoning (Adler 2007, 268). The fanatic lacks such self-restraints.

Adler blames supernatural religious faith for this lack of self-restraint because, he claims, it promotes their denial. How? It encourages

- (i) Following divine commands when justification for them isn't understood.
- (ii) Making exceptions of religious ideas.
- (iii) Limiting sources of critical control to only those who agree with the faith.
- (iv) Self-deception.
- (v) Shrinking the "belief-action gap."

Regarding (5), Adler has in mind the gap between the forming of a belief that I *should* do something and the forming of the intention to do it. Most of us rely on a "delay principle": as the costs of acting increase, we hesitate to follow the belief's guidance out of respect for our fallibility. By delaying action, we increase our opportunities to discover whether the action-guiding belief is mistaken (Adler 2007, 276). But, Adler claims, the fanatic closes this gap by going immediately from the belief that they should do something to forming the intention to do it.

Nietzsche, who has written extensively on fanaticism, would agree that fanaticism is *related* to faith and lack of self-restraint, but he wouldn't

accept Adler's explanation. Rather than being the source of fanaticism, Nietzsche thinks faith meets the fanatic's distinctive needs: regardless of what the fanatic believes or what their actual grounds for belief are, they need to believe that they possess unconditional truth. This need gives rise to narrow-mindedness; the fanatic clings to one point of view at the expense of others. And it makes the fanatic a "willing slave": they not only submit to the regulation of an external authority but also actually seek it out (Reginster 2003, 75). Nietzsche explains (Nietzsche 1974, 347) that

Faith is always coveted most and needed most urgently where will is lacking; for will, as the affect of command, is the decisive sign of sovereignty and strength. . . . the less one knows how to command, the more urgently one covets someone who commands, who commands severely – a god, prince, class, physician, father confessor, dogma, of party conscience.

Nietzsche continues by linking this to fanaticism:

Fanaticism is the only "strength of will" that even the weak and insecure can be brought to attain, being a sort of hypnotism of the whole system of the senses and the intellect for the benefit of an excessive nourishment . . . of a single point of view.

An absence or weakness of practical and intellectual "will" gives rise to a desire or need to be commanded – that is, to be told what to do and think.<sup>5</sup> When you lack the ability or have a substantially diminished ability to decide what to do or think and yet you have a need to possess unconditional truth, what emerges is a desire to outsource your reasoning. But to meet this need, this source must be seen as expressing unconditional truth.

These remarks explain some features of fanaticism. Why doesn't the fanatic exhibit self-restraint? The governance of their thinking has been outsourced to external authorities, whom they see as needing no regulation. Adler claims that the fanatic *reasons* to unacceptable conclusions. However, for Nietzsche, the fanatic does not restrain themselves, because they, in a sense, don't participate in this reasoning. The belief-action gap is closed because they are a sort of functional algorithm; inputs lead directly to outputs. Earlier I said Westboro members appear to be on autopilot when they respond to criticism; Nietzsche would say they're hypnotized. This also explains the localization of the fanatic's certainty. Where the fanatic thinks that they possess unconditional truth, they have abdicated their reasoning responsibilities. Elsewhere, however, the fanatic reasons like the rest of us because they admit contingency and uncertainty in these other domains.

All of this is suggestive. Katsafanas (2019) has developed a detailed account of fanaticism that captures many of these insights.<sup>6</sup> His theory analyzes fanaticism in terms of seven properties:

- (i) Unwavering commitment to an ideal.
- (ii) Unwillingness to subject the ideal to rational critique.
- (iii) Non-rational provenance of the ideal.<sup>7</sup>
- (iv) Sacred values, in which the agent adopts sacred values.
- (v) Fragility of the self, which involves the agent needing to treat a value as sacred to preserve unity of the self.
- (vi) Fragility of value, in which the value's status is taken to be threatened when it isn't widely accepted.
- (vii) Group identity, in which the fanatic identifies themselves with a group defined by shared commitment to a sacred value.

The first two features should be clear: the fanatic's behavioral devotion to their ideal is absolute, and they refuse to subject their ideal or its basis to serious rational scrutiny. The third feature partly explains why. Often fanatics take their worldview to have religious provenance. But what's essential is that the fanatic sees the source of their worldview as distinct from sources like human reason and empirical evidence and thinks it needn't be constrained by these other sources, because it has more credibility or authority.

An account of fanaticism comprised of these three features has been inherited from Enlightenment thinkers like Locke, Hume, and Kant. But Katsafanas rightly notes that analyzing fanaticism only in terms of (1)–(3) doesn't suffice, since there is no clear link between (1)–(3) and the intolerance characteristic of fanaticism. Katsafanas contends that fanaticism resides not only in unwavering commitment and certainty toward a non-rationally sanctioned ideal but also in the *nature* of this ideal, how the fanatic *relates* to it, and how *other people* relate to it. This leads to properties (4)–(7).

According to the fourth condition, fanatics adopt "sacred values." These are values that cannot be questioned and don't admit of trade-offs or violations. According to Katsafanas, for those who adopt sacred values these values are

- (i) Inviolable and uncompromisable.
- (ii) Unquestionable and not to be critiqued or doubted.
- (iii) Associated with emotions like love, hatred, veneration, contempt, etc.

The fourth condition says that fanatics treat their favored ideals as sacred in the sense of (i)–(iii).

Why does the fanatic treat their values as sacred? For the Nietzschean reasons already discussed: the fanatic *needs*, in order to preserve unity of



self, to think of themselves as possessing unconditional truth. On a standard picture, the self is constituted by its commitments. It's an orientation toward certain principles, ideals, values, or narratives. But for some of us – like fanatics – self-integrity is inconsistent with viewing these ideals as uncertain or contingent. By treating certain values as sacred, the fanatic eliminates uncertainty about some of their commitments, thereby satisfying their existential need to think of themselves as possessing unconditional truth. Hence, the fanatic has a fragile self; only the most rigid commitments can sustain it.

Not only does the fanatic have a fragile self, but they also think that their own values are, in a sense, fragile: the status of their sacred values is threatened by the fact that other people do not share them. An example will help illustrate this idea. Some people oppose same-sex marriage because they think it threatens or undermines the institution of marriage. On this view, allowing same-sex marriage imperils the significance or status of opposite-sex marriage by no longer publicly marking it off as possessing a distinctive form of value (Katsafanas 2019, 14). This opponent of same-sex marriage therefore treats the value of marriage as fragile; the value's status is threatened when it is not widely accepted. Plenty of people do *not* treat their own sacred values as fragile. The Amish and the Hasidic both maintain certain sacred values without viewing their status as dependent on how they're treated by the wider society (Katsafanas 2019, 15). The fanatic, on the other hand, wants their values to be widely accepted because for them, the status of those values depends on others sharing them. This partly explains why the fanatic imposes their values on others.

Finally, the fanatic sees their identity as defined by membership in a group that shares their commitment to their sacred values, as well as the sense that membership in the group is necessary for preserving the status of these values.

What I argue now is that if we take this account of fanaticism for granted, we should expect fanatics to treat higher-order evidence in certain ways.

## 5 Sacred Values, Fragility, and Higher-Order Evidence

In Section 3, I identified three types of higher-order evidence that fanatics typically possess: disagreement with outsiders, disagreement with exiters, and trust disparities within their group. I claimed that CE and EC didn't have enough to say about this evidence. Without explaining and evaluating fanatics' treatment of this evidence, it's premature to claim that fanatics caught up in crippled epistemologies or echo chambers have, for that reason, rational beliefs. In this section, I'll argue that if a fanatic has a fragile epistemology, we can expect them to handle this higher-order evidence in the ways that fanatics typically do.

Among the interesting things that Megan Phelps-Roper has revealed about Westboro since she left is that church members were explicitly instructed on how to construe any evidence that pertained to their core beliefs (Harris 2015):

We were taught how to interpret evidence, how to see everything in the world. And to have every objection that might ever arise and have the answer to that objection all ready, having repeated it over and over again.

The epistemically troubling result, as she saw it, was that “there was literally no evidence that could be introduced to us to change our opinions.” She illustrates this with the following example:

If somebody [outside the church] says they love us, that they care about us, then they're either lying or delusional. And if they say they hate us, then of course they hate us. So everybody hates us!

Westboro members aren't given only one side of the religious story, as CE predicts, and they weren't merely taught to trust insiders and distrust outsiders, as EC predicts. Their epistemic instruction was pervasive. From theological objections to professions of love, they were taught how to think about everything. This is a general feature of the fragility of fanaticism: its import isn't merely psychological or axiological but also thoroughly epistemic.

To illustrate how a fragile epistemology works, let's work with an example of an idealized fanatic, Frank. I'll focus on the last four conditions of fanaticism.<sup>8</sup> Frank adopts sacred values for the sake of psychic unity. Moreover, he treats these values as fragile: he sees them as threatened when they aren't widely accepted. And let's suppose that he knows they aren't widely accepted. Finally, he partly defines himself by membership in a group that shares these commitments. How will Frank interpret intellectual opposition to these values?

First, because Frank sees these values as sacred, he'll think that they must not be questioned, doubted, compromised, or violated. Insofar as Frank's opponent *does* violate these values, Frank will see her as morally depraved. And since her opposition consists in her doubting these values, Frank will think she's doing something that must not be done. This might be interpreted as a moral, prudential, or epistemic “must.” If moral, this violation will count as further evidence of her moral depravity. If prudential, this violation will show, by Frank's lights, that she fails to act in her own self-interest, in which case Frank will likely see her as practically irrational. If the “must” is epistemic, then she will be violating her epistemic obligations. In this case, Frank will think that she has manifested a grave epistemic failure. Thus, the fact that Frank's opponent violates and

questions the values that Frank treats as sacred makes her, by Frank's lights, deserving of various forms of (severe) criticism.

Second, since Frank treats these values not only as sacred but also as fragile, this has implications for how he'll interpret widespread intellectual opposition. For Frank, this opposition doesn't provide grounds for critical self-reflection or questioning of these values: they're not to be questioned! Instead, because Frank treats these values as fragile, he sees this opposition as a *threat* to their status.

Finally, given how tightly bound up Frank's individual and group identity is with these values, he'll see the disagreement that threatens his values as also threatening his group and himself. Katsafanas (2019, 16) nicely explains this point that

The agent's psychic integrity is vouchsafed by his commitment to a sacred value, where the value is taken as definitive of a group. The value is seen as compromised by dissent. Thus, the group's identity, which hinges on its adherence to the value, is seen as compromised by dissent. So, too, the agent's psychic integrity. . . . The fanatic sees outsiders as opposed to his group. These outsiders threaten not only his value, and not only his group, but his very identity.

Thus, the people who disagree with Frank's values appear to Frank as deserving serious criticism for questioning something that mustn't be questioned, and the fact that they're questioning his values is also seen as a personal threat. It's no surprise, then, that disagreement with outsiders or even exiters doesn't move Frank. Given his worldview, their dissent is evidence not of his error but of their own questionable moral and intellectual characters. Moreover, for Frank, there is no such thing as unthreatening dissent regarding these core values. Disagreeing with him is threatening him.

This also explains why it's important for fanatical group members like Frank to bracket their own thinking and not trust it when it leads to doubts about the group's values. If they allowed these doubts to surface, they would be doing something that must not be done (because they'd be doubting sacred values): they would be threatening the values (because those values are fragile) and even threatening themselves (because their selves are fragile).

Of course, fanatics do sometimes respond to disagreement. Given our present analysis of fanaticism, this might seem strange. Why would you engage with disagreement if you think it's a threat to your identity? This is where the autopilot/hypnotism point returns. I think while the fanatic remains in the grips of their fanaticism, they *don't* genuinely engage with the disagreement-based reasons for doubt. Evidence of disagreement can be treated as higher-order evidence, evidence about what the evidence actually supports, and evidence of error. Or it can be demoted to

a first-order objection to one's views. When treated as evidence of error, genuinely responding to it requires taking seriously the possibility of one's own error. In this case, those of us who aren't fanatics might take such evidence to provide reason to step back and take a detached view, considering whether the error lies with us. But agents in the grips of fanaticism can't do this. So, instead, fanatics respond to disagreement by demoting it to a first-order objection. Then they do what Megan was trained to do: appeal straightforwardly to their doctrine to rebut the objection. Because in these instances, the *agent* isn't really involved, it makes sense that they don't step back and take a detached view.

The fanatic has two modes of orientation toward disagreement. When they are truly engaged with the disagreement, it's a threat to their identity. When they're not truly engaged – when they're “hypnotized” – disagreement is simply answerable by appeal to claims derived from their worldview. Either way, *because* they're a fanatic, their beliefs are impervious to this form of higher-order evidence.

## 6 Theoretical and Practical Upshots

CE and EC, I've argued, base their assessment of the fanatic's beliefs on only a proper subset of the evidence available to the fanatic by leaving out of the picture higher-order evidence that fanatics typically possess. The fragile epistemology story is meant to do better in this respect. Not only do fanatics have ordinary evidence and higher-order evidence provided by disagreement, but they also have commitments – commitments that constitute their fanaticism – that tell them how to interpret this higher-order evidence in ways that prevent them from seeing it as providing reason to rethink their beliefs.

In theoretical terms, this theory builds in a defeater for any potential higher-order defeater provided by disagreement. EC does a better job of this than CE, but neither accounts for as much of the higher-order evidence that fanatics possess as the fragile epistemology story does, and neither accounts for the distinctive ways that fanatics, *qua* fanatics, must think of higher-order evidence. A general recommendation, then, for theories attempting to explain the rationality of fanatical belief is to identify the higher-order defeater defeaters that fanatics possess.

Still, fanatics' beliefs will be rational only if their treatment of higher-order evidence is rational. It's one thing to *treat* disagreement as a mere threat to one's identity or as an answerable objection, rather than as evidence of error, because you have a fragile self committed to sacred values that you view as fragile. It's quite another to do this *rationally*. While I haven't taken a stand on this issue, I've attempted to identify what defending the rationality of fanatics' beliefs requires.

For instance, we need to know under what conditions it's rational to consider your values fragile. There's a debate in the higher-order evidence

literature about whether there can be all things considered misleading evidence about what a body of evidence supports. There's also a debate in the moral epistemology literature about the epistemic status of normative beliefs based in testimony. I think we'll need to consider both to answer questions about the rationality of believing one's values are fragile since this belief will often be based in testimony and it has implications about how higher-order evidence should be interpreted. If normative testimony doesn't rationalize belief and if there's no other way to rationally believe your values are fragile, then perhaps fanatics' beliefs cannot be rational. Or if facts about when certain evidence has defeating force are in some sense objective (Klenk 2019) and if a fragile epistemology necessarily gets some of those facts wrong, then perhaps fanatics' beliefs cannot be rational. In any event, by drawing our attention to the nature of fanaticism, I hope to have shown that questions about the rationality of fanatics' beliefs are intertwined with questions in moral epistemology and the epistemology of higher-order evidence.

In conclusion, these questions aren't of merely theoretical interest. If fanatics are generally rational beings and if we want to prevent the persistence and growth of fanaticism, then we should want to know how to make it *irrational* for people to believe that their values are fragile. One strategy that experts use to fight terrorism combines radicalization prevention with the de-radicalization of radicals. However, I'm not aware of work dedicated to preventing the encroachment of fragile values. That may be exactly what's needed to stall the growth of fanaticism.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. "Westboro Baptist Church." <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/westboro-baptist-church>.
2. Much of the Westboro belief system strikes me as deeply confused, downright false, and completely incoherent. But what they're most known for isn't wholly illogical, even if it rests on mistakes.
3. Action characteristic of the fanatic doesn't require fanatical belief, but in this chapter, I'm focusing on those who truly believe.
4. David Christensen is a prominent defender of the higher-order defeating power of disagreement. See *inter alia* his (2010).
5. Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief organizers of the Holocaust, exemplified this condition. Eichmann lamented the fall of the Nazi Party at the end of WWII because it meant he would no longer receive external directives: "I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life; I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult" (Arendt 1963, 27).
6. Due to space limitations, I must refer readers to Katsafanas (2019) for a fuller statement and defense of this account.
7. *Non-rational* doesn't mean irrational; it doesn't prejudice the question of the epistemic rationality of relying on these sources. Rather, the term derives from a contrast with reason, as understood by early modern philosophers.
8. My purpose is to illuminate how the fanatic's relations to sacredness and fragility, in particular, predictably lead to their treatment of higher-order evidence, leaving discussion of the other conditions for another time.

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