**Extremism, multidimensionalism, and myopia**

*Extreme Beliefs and Responsibility 30/6/23*

1. **Preliminaries.**

Two main claims: (i) our explanations of extreme beliefs should be **multidimensionalism** but (ii) are too often **myopic** – ie characterised by problematically narrow and/or shallow stances on the origins, nature, persistence, functions, and attractions of extreme beliefs.

Extreme beliefs and behaviours are extremely diverse: I will focus on *terrorism*.

1. **Multidimensionalism.**

General claims: with extreme beliefs, (i) there are different **kinds of explanation**, (ii) each has different degrees of relevance and usefulness, and (iii) complex phenomena will typically call out for multidimensional kinds of explanation (cf. Cassam 2019: 23-27).

Consider some main general kinds of explanation (cf. Cassam 2020):

1. cognitive-explanations
2. character-explanations
3. situational explanations
4. political-ideological explanation
5. interpersonal explanations
6. socio-structural explanations

Caveats: we could add (i) other kinds of explanation, (ii) sub-variants of each, and also note (iii) kinds of explanation can interrelate in different ways – cooperatively (eg critical character epistemology) or antagonistically (situationists vs. vice-ists; structuralists vs. individualists).

General epistemic principles of multidimensionalism:

1. explanatory sufficiency will typically require a plurality of kinds of explanation
2. relevance and priority of kinds of explanation can vary cross cases
3. relevance and priority should not be prejudged
4. pluralism in one case need not entail pluralism in another case

In practice, matters are much more complicated! Multidimensionalism is messy, difficult.

Multidimensionalism is also vital because

1. different kinds of explanation are necessary for different kinds of complexity
2. different kinds of explanation are salient given different explanatory interests
3. **Explanatory myopia.**

Worry: many explanations of extremism are guilty of **explanatory myopia**: a problematically limited or constrained range of explanatory stance on, or understanding of, extremism.

Dimensions of myopia:

1. **shallowness** – failing to attend to relevant **levels of explanation**.
2. **narrowness** – failing to engage with a wide **range of explanatory factors**.

Shallowness and narrowness collectively conspire to delimit the range of explanatory possibilities which one can experience and engage with appropriately.

Opposing positive epistemic values are **depth** and **breadth** – values whose realisation will typically require well-delegated and carefully coordinated collective epistemic agency.

Example of explanatory myopia: **conspiracy theories** – narrowly psychological explanations, in terms of us being ‘natural-born conspiracy theorists’ (Brotherton) – occlude *expressive* and *promotional* functions of CTs (Cassam) – ‘conspiracy entrepreneurs’ (Sunstein and Vermuele).

Explanatory myopia can cause different kinds of epistemic failure – omission, occlusion, obliviousness to explanatory possibilities, underrating or overrating of aetiological factors etc.

Caveats:

1. recognise **bad faith** calls for multidimensionalism – Big Tobacco delaying strategies of ‘doubt-mongering’ – the aim is perpetual research without conclusion (Proctor).
2. distinguish **explanatory myopia** from **explanatory monism**.
3. distinguish **motivated myopia** from **acquired myopia** – not all myopia is plausibly deliberate or intentional (cf. epistemology of ignorance).

Explanatory myopia has many sources – eg deficiencies in our epistemic socialisation, failure to cultivate alternative explanatory practices, dogmatising for a preferred kind of explanation.

**Individuals**, **collectives**, and **institutions** can be – or become – myopic.

**Organisational myopia**: ‘the persistence in an organisation of beliefs and practices that lead to decisions whose effects result in a higher probability that a negative event will take place’ (Catino)

I now turn to explanatory myopia concerning *terrorism*.

1. **The epistemology of terrorism.**

Main claim: certain explanations of the origins, nature, persistence, functions, and attractions of terrorism are guilty of shallowness and/or narrowness (exceptions: Crenshaw, English).

* ‘debates around the topic of terrorism very often display a degree of intellectual and political myopia and a lack of self-awareness that can come close to hypocrisy’ (Coady).

One could be myopic about:

1. *aetiology of terrorist beliefs*
2. *definitions of terrorism* – eg ‘deliberate targeting of civilians’ (Richardson)
3. *identity of terrorists* – eg ‘only Muslims can commit terrorist acts’ (cf. Coady)

- debate about whether occupation of Malheur Wildlife Refuge was terrorism

1. **Rational Agent Model.**

Core conviction: terrorism is the work of rational agents employing violent means to pursue political aims – ‘a collectively rational strategic choice’ (Crenshaw 1990: 7).

RAM originally intended to show terrorists ‘often to act according to thinking which is no less strategic or rational than that of other actors in various conflicts’ (English).

RAM is not widely accepted within terrorism studies:

1. terrorist movements are not plausibly cases of rational agency (Nagel)
2. inefficacy of terrorist methods – ineffectual, disastrous (US response to 9/11)
3. availability of other rational methods of achieving aims (cf. English)

RAM as double myopia: narrow exclamation of T in terms of **rationality** narrowly defined in **instrumental rationality** – occluding wider explanatory factors.

RAM is **motivated myopia**: adopting narrowly instrumental-rationalist framework will (i) encourage epistemic derogation of terrorists and (ii) discourage attempts at understanding and negotiation and (iii) justify violent ‘war on terror’.

‘New terrorism’ conviction: terrorists are ‘divorced from rational thought’ (Lacquer 1999: 5) with ‘an altogether different logic’ (Sprinzak 2001: 73).

RAM myopia explains why ‘little effort has been made by terrorism experts and officials to try and understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words and messages, and seriously engaging with their subjectivity’ (Jackson 2015: 45 – cf. Cassam on ‘false humility’).

1. **The Radicalisation Model.**

Core conviction: people turn to political violence when they have been **radicalised** – so not committed to, but consistent with, idea that terrorists/terrorism are rational.

RAD claims **predictive** **power** and motivates **deradicalization**: ‘if radicalisation is the problem then the solution with respect to not-yet-radicalised Muslims is to prevent their radicalisation’ (Cassam 2018: 189) – cf. UK Prevent strategy (cf. Richards).

Several problems – eg obscure notion of vulnerability to radicalisation – but focus on the triply myopic character of RAD:

1. It presupposes a single **path to radicalisation**: disguising broader and deeper range of aetiological options (other causal possibilities, deeper aetiological processes)

‘multiple highly personal and idiosyncratic pathways to behavioural radicalisation (Cassam 2018: 199) – ‘seemingly individualised and disconnected pathways of citizens into armed militancy’ (Heath-Kelly 2017: 300).

1. It confines **explanatory attention** to specific, often ill-defined religious/cultural groups – Muslims, ‘Arabs’ – that reflects politically-convenient Islamophobic prejudices.
2. It employs a **shallow conception of agency** of actual/potential radicalisees.

Those ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’ are essentially passive, lacking deeper reflective and deliberative capacities (cf. Richards 2011: 150) – a denial of Kantian-style dignity.

Symptoms: failures to consider *explanadum*: (i) cases of **active self-radicalisation** (Cassam 2018: 197) and (ii) **contingent idiosyncratic radicalization** (Anwar al-Awlaki).

RAD is multiply myopic – narrow aetiology of terrorist beliefs, narrow scope of explanatory attention, and shallow conception of the agency of actual/potential radicalisees.

Critics argue this is **motivated myopia** – the UK Prevent strategy partly resulted from pressure on intelligence community to come up with a simplified explanation of radicalization which suggests policy responses.

Stampnitsky’s thesis – ‘expert and popular discourse on terrorism after 9/11 were both characterized by a politics of “anti- knowledge” – the active rejection of explanation itself’. It is a critique of a kind of entrenched collective myopia.

1. **Cynicism and myopia**.

Why do myopic explanations of the aetiology of terrorism persist? No single answer – one must engage the disciplinary history of terrorism studies, cultural contexts of counterterrorist discourses, etc.

Jackson on ‘epistemological crisis’ of counterterrorism: Western social preference for ‘bizarre counterterrorist practices’ that are ‘costly and counterproductive’ – which manifest a powerful ‘paranoid logic’.

Here are two general epistemological considerations:

1. **The demands of multidimensionalism.**

Advocates of multidimensionalism must appreciate it incurs serious demands:

Our epistemic agency is embedded and conditioned by our epistemic environment, trust relations, and communicative possibilities. Moreover, our rationality is bounded: we have limited resources and capacities, and our ways of thinking are easily led astray by personal and political motivations.’ (Kloosterboer 2022: 1030)

The demands are diverse – social organisation of terrorism studies; the tenets and taboos of counterterrorism studies; complex and conflicting concerns and priorities of stakeholders (politicians, researchers, intelligence security agencies).

* ‘relatively weak, “undisciplined”’ state of terrorism studies and influence of post-9/11 funding/interest (Stampnitsky) – cf. Sageman’s ‘stagnation in CT studies’.

1. **The attractions of myopia.**

Myopic explanations of terrorism are politically and epistemically attractive – clear and simple and morally Manichean: ‘[t]he only motivation is evil’ (Bush). Terrorists are construed as ‘wild-eyed expressions of evil, diabolical but two-dimensional, somehow alien – in a word, inhuman’ (Jenkins) – many examples in Stampnitsky ch.8

* RAM deters empathetic understanding and deflects attention to aetiologically salient role of US policy and justifies lucrative open-ended ‘war on terror’.
* RAD legitimates discrimination against and surveillance and control of Muslim communities and sustains politically-convenient xenophobic narratives.

Myopia also reflects generic human epistemic failings – preferences for simple stories, easy explanations, self-serving narratives, demonisation of Others, avoidance of epistemic labour.

Suggestion: adopt a stance of **cynicism**: our professed explanatory motivations and goals are different to and typically normatively inferior to our actual ones (Kidd). Specifically:

1. **most myopia is motivated myopia**: most of the time we are not necessarily, sincerely seeking appropriately broad and deep explanation of extreme beliefs.
2. **explanatory myopia is not confined to the ‘bad guys’** – humans are prone to myopic explanations of any beliefs we see (or want to see) as problematically extremist (critics of lockdowns, environmental pessimists).

IJK

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