PART I

EXTREMISM AND CONFORMITY

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The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jeremy Bentham remarked that religious motivations are among the most constant of all motivations. And, although such a motivation need not be especially powerful, it can be among the most powerful. Because of the constancy of the motivation, "A pernicious act, therefore, when committed through the motive of religion, is more mischievous than when committed through the motive of ill-will" (Bentham 1970: 156). He explains this conclusion from fanaticism, which, of course, need not be religiously motivated and in the twentieth century has been as destructively motivated by ideological and nationalist sentiments as by religious sentiments. This is Bentham's explanation:

> If a man happen to take it into his head to assassinate with his own hands, or with the sword of justice, those whom he calls heretics, that is, people who think, or perhaps only speak, differently upon a subject which neither party understands, he will be as inclined to do this [at] one time as at another. Fanaticism never sleeps: it is never glutted: it is never stopped by philanthropy; for it makes a merit

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of trampling on philanthropy: it is never stopped by conscience; for it has pressed conscience into service. Avarice, lust, and vengeance, have piety, benevolence, honour; fanaticism has nothing to oppose it. (Bentham 1970: 156n)

Note especially the cruelty of his observation: "which neither party understands."

Bentham's remark is about the individual fanatic. My concern here will be, primarily, with groups of such individuals. Seeing the nature of a group of fanatics may help to understand why the fanatic never sleeps. When the fanatic is in a group of like-minded people, and especially when the group isolates itself from others, either by separating itself or by excluding others, that group reinforces the individual's "conscience," indeed, reinforces the individual's beliefs, both factual and normative. A fanatic who must live among others who do not share the fanatic's views may finally at least nod. It is generally the group that produces and sustains fanaticism.

Fanaticism is inherently, therefore, a sociological and not merely a psychological matter. A focus on the individual fanatic might lead one to suppose the issue is the nature of the belief, how it is different from other beliefs. This might typically be the fanatics' own account: that it is the content of the belief that justifies the fanaticism. Focus on the group leads us to ask how the belief gets inculcated and maintained. The latter focus suggests that fanaticism is less likely to be defined by its substantive content than by the way it is socially constructed. This suggests why Bentham's focus on religious fanatics was partly misplaced. In what follows, I will lay out a very short version of an economic theory of knowledge from which to attempt an understanding of fanatically held knowledge or beliefs. I will linger over the characterization of knowledge by authority, which is an especially important element of such an economic epistemology for fanatical, group-based beliefs. I will then turn to the nature of normal politics, in particular noting how it sets up fanatical politics. I will bring these discussions together in an account of the epistemology of extremism, and I will relate this to nationalism. Finally, I will discuss connections between fanatical beliefs and actions and the relationship between interests and knowledge, and I will suggest how crippled epistemology leads to fanaticism, which may in turn lead to fanatical nationalism.

2. AN ECONOMIC THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

What we need foremost to understand fanatical commitment is an adequate theory of belief – a theory of knowledge or an epistemology. One might suppose that, whatever it is, a theory of knowledge must be generally applicable to all knowledge. Hence, the explanation of extremist

political belief is merely a part of the explanation of beliefs more generally, although it might exhibit special characteristics, in part because of differing incentives on offer from the larger society of the believer. An ordinary person's knowledge must depend in general on the costs and benefits of discovering bits of it and of putting it to use. Once discovered, however, a bit of knowledge, X, will be counted as true to the extent it comes from a credible authority, it fits coherently with other beliefs, it corresponds with the world, or it once seemed to meet one of these conditions. One's belief in the truth of X might also depend on the rewards of counting it as true. I wish especially to address this last possibility as applied to fanatical beliefs.

In standard philosophy of knowledge or epistemology, knowledge is "justified true belief." It is specific pieces of knowledge whose belief is justified. Often, what is meant by justified is something well beyond what any individual is in a position to know or do. The reason for this way of conceiving the problem of knowledge is that philosophers have primarily been concerned with understanding and evaluating knowledge as in the content of a science – especially, of course, the content of physics. It is not *my knowledge* of physics that is at issue, but rather *the truth* of physics. The philosophical theory of knowledge applies to *the objects of belief*, not to the believers. It is typically about the criteria for counting something as knowledge. These criteria can be about the objects themselves or about the procedures followed in assessing the objects. On this kind of theory, fanatical political belief or knowledge is highly problematic. One could not give the criteria that make such belief justified to count as knowledge. Or, if one proposed criteria, they would almost surely be different from the criteria for other knowledge.

Philosophical epistemology is therefore largely about a kind of public, not personal, knowledge. What must interest a social scientist who wishes to explain behavior is the knowledge or beliefs of actual people. An *economic* theory of knowledge would address this question. Such a theory would not focus on the objects of belief but on the ways people come to hold their beliefs. By an economic theory, I mean merely a theory that focuses on the costs and benefits of having and coming to have knowledge or to correct what knowledge one has. An economic theory of knowledge would be grounded in three quite distinct facts that matter to anyone whose knowledge we wish to explain.

First, knowledge has value as a resource and is therefore an economic good; hence, people will seek it. Sometimes we seek it at a very general level, as when we get a general education. In this case, we may have little idea of how we are ever going to use the knowledge and we may not know in advance much about the range of the knowledge we will acquire. Sometimes we seek it for a very specific matter, as when we seek mortgage

rates when buying a home. In this case, we know exactly what we want the knowledge for and we know reasonably well where to get it and when we have enough of it.

Second, its acquisition often entails costs, so that the value of knowledge trades off against the values of other things, such as resources, time, and consumptions. Moreover, these costs are often very high. For example, the costs of gaining enough information to judge political candidates in an election are thought commonly to be far too high for most voters in the United States to be able to justify the expenditure, especially given that they have little to gain from voting anyway. Instead, they vote on the strength of relatively vague signals about issues they do not adequately comprehend.

And third, a lot of our knowledge, which we may call "happenstance knowledge," is in various ways fortuitously available when we use it. Some knowledge comes to us more or less as a byproduct of activities undertaken for purposes other than acquiring the knowledge, so that in a meaningful sense we gain that knowledge without investing in it – we do not trade off other opportunities for the sake of that knowledge. For example, you know a language because you grew up in human society. Much of what is loosely called social capital is such byproduct knowledge. Byproduct knowledge may simply be available to us essentially without cost when we face choices. Some knowledge may even come to us as virtually a consumption good. For example, your love of gossip may lead to knowledge that is quite valuable to you. Finally, the knowledge in which I deliberately invested yesterday for making a specific choice then may still be available to me today when I face some other choice to which it might be relevant. Fanatical political belief is very much a matter of happenstance knowledge (as is almost everything we know at any given moment).

3. KNOWLEDGE BY AUTHORITY

Because of the high costs of acquiring all knowledge on our own, we typically rely on authority for most of the knowledge we actually have (Hardin 1992). We could all say, with Wittgenstein (1969: 44), "My life consists in my being content to accept many things" – indeed, most things that matter. I rely on the authoritative knowledge of many people. Notoriously, most of us rely on the authoritative knowledge of professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and many others. But we all essentially rely on the authority of various historians for the bulk of what we claim to know about the world's past history and we rely on the authority of numerous writers and people in the media for the knowledge we claim to have about our own contemporary world. In all substantial areas of our

lives, we necessarily accept much of what we know from authorities of various kinds, some of them quite reliable, some of them not.

A very large part of our knowledge, which at this moment is essentially happenstance knowledge, is the residue of past acceptances of authoritative assertions. Yet, at the moment when we invoke any of that knowledge now, we may no longer even remember much about its acquisition, so that we may be in no position to question it by first questioning its authoritative source. As of now, I just do know that Caesar was a Roman. I cannot say how I first came to know this fact, although I can tell you of books that I read, mostly long ago, that discussed Caesar and his life and that, in a sense, reinforced or confirmed my knowledge of him as a Roman.

Even if I revise core beliefs from my early years, I may have great trouble revising all of the bits of understanding in my mind that were influenced by my prior beliefs and my upbringing in them, so that I may still have strong ties to my earlier beliefs. For example, I may continue to have a strong commitment to the golden rule of doing unto others what I would have them do unto me. But I may never again accept on dead authority the core of my previous beliefs that led to this commitment. Indeed, I may even come to view many of the commitments I still have as deeply contrary to those that I now question.

Of course, it makes eminently good sense to rely on knowledge by authority. The costs of checking out everything one knows even by hearsay would be catastrophic for actually living instead of merely deciding how to live. If we insisted on checking out every bit of putative knowledge, we would be virtually catatonic. Even checking out a single bit of knowledge might make little sense because the costs of having it wrong would seem to be less than the costs of being surer of getting it right. We can commonly rely on others to check some facts and to benefit from their judgment of the validity and usefulness of those facts.

These characteristics of ordinary knowledge in general are exacerbated for knowledge of moral and ideological matters, because the latter are not even well tested by anyone and because it would be difficult to imagine relevant tests of them. Moreover, such facts are not subject to being discovered from experience or by application of any kind of scientific method; rather, they are almost always invented. But the person who relies on authority for acceptance of various facts need not have any particular qualification to judge which facts are more likely to be authoritatively correctly held and which are merely invented, perhaps by some fanatic. Indeed, for the ordinary person, moral, ideological, and religious beliefs might well be indistinguishable in their sources from most objective beliefs. To cite standard examples, the beliefs that the earth is round or that men have walked on the moon are no more solidly objective for

many people than are their beliefs about God or the rightness of not telling a lie. The latter beliefs might get much stronger support from others in one's society, especially from others whom one knows and respects. And the benefits of believing them might be considerably greater than the benefits of believing that the earth is round or that men have walked on the moon.

That our beliefs depend in part on the larger society's assessments and reinforcements means that they can also be manipulated by that society. Or, even more significantly for ideological beliefs, they can be manipulated within small segments of that society so long as the larger society and its views are held at bay. If I am in a small community with beliefs that others would think very odd, I may find those beliefs not at all odd because, after all, they are held by everyone I know. They may be merely part of the vast catalog of beliefs that I hold from dependence on authority.

4. NORMAL POLITICS

Turn now to the context in which extreme politics may be played out. The median voter or Downsian model suggests that most voters must see themselves as relative losers at each election (Downs 1957). Some must always be losers. This follows for all views that display a roughly normal distribution of preferences over political outcomes.[1] Winning candidates or policies must be close to the views of some, but farther from the views of most voters. With multiple dimensions of issues, a typical voter might be close to the winner on one or a few issues but still must be far from the winner on most issues. A major trick of normal, non-extreme politics is to get people to think they do relatively well politically even though this superficially dismal implication of the median voter model is correct. In relatively prosperous times, it might reasonably seem true to most citizens that their interests are either relatively well served by politics or that those interests are not substantially affected by politics. Hence, that their preferences might not be those of the elected governors does not matter fundamentally or grievously.

Those in the tails of the distribution of preferences over major issues, however, cannot generally think they do well in normal politics. At best they can think they have done better this time than last time or than usually. For example, citizens on the far right in the United States must

[1] Preferences over many issues, such as those that are essentially yes–no, are not likely to be even roughly normal. For example, preferences on abortion in the United States are fundamentally bimodal, with a majority of the populace evidently in favor of a liberal regime on abortion and a majority of legislators prepared to vote great restrictions on abortion.

have thought the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 was a clear improvement over the previous half century.

For those who are always big losers in normal politics, exit from such politics might be a common response. In Albert Hirschman's (1970) account, they have three options: exit, voice, or loyalty. Loyalty seems incredible and self-denying. Voice has completely failed. Only exit is left. Exit can take at least two quite different forms. First, it might simply involve withdrawal in the form of reduced participation in normal politics with no other form of activity to replace it for its main functions. More worrisome for normal politics is that the permanent losers might hive off into groups whose intent is to oppose normal politics. Such groups are typically viewed as extremist by those committed to normal politics. As I will argue below, a group that hives off faces its members with epistemological constraints that may heighten the intensity of their beliefs in the wrongness of their nation's politics and strengthen their motivations to do something outside normal politics.

In the brief passage quoted above, Bentham concluded that, unlike other vices, fanaticism has no opposing virtue. Indeed, it has only normalcy to oppose it. Unfortunately, normalcy is merely a condition for living reasonably and it does not greatly motivate us unless, perhaps, we do not have it. Mere normalcy therefore may not be enough to stop overwrought fanaticism, especially when the fanatics exit from normal politics and even from normal society.

5. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EXTREMISM

A politically extreme view is likely to be a norm of exclusion that is self-enforcing, even self-strengthening. Norms of exclusion define groups to which those with the right views or with the right characteristics are admitted and from which others are excluded. Under the force of such norms of exclusion, the less intensely committed members of a group depart while extremists remain (Hardin 1995: Ch. 4). Daniel P. Moynihan (1993: 22) supposes that ethnicity is a new social aggregate and that the clear point to be made about the so-called melting pot in the United States is that it did not happen. Clearly, he is wrong if he means that there has been no or even no substantial intermarriage across ethnic lines with consequent loss of identification with such groups. But if some melt, those who are left are likely to be the more intensely committed. Hence, there may be both a lot of melting and a lot of residual ethnicity, as, for example, in the case of orthodox Jews such as the Lubavitch Jews of Brooklyn. As such residual ethnically defined groups shrink, they may become extreme in their beliefs and actions.

The logic of incentives here is the opposite of that in the account above of citizens in normal politics. In normal politics it is the extremists who depart and the less intense who remain behind. In fringe politics, the moderates exit, leaving the most intense behind. The outmigration of the less committed from an exclusionary group leaves the hard core in control (Hardin 1995: 101). But the exclusionary practices of an extreme group do more than this. *They affect the knowledge of the group's members.*

Recall Bentham's cruel remark about the fanaticism that flows from beliefs in heresies, "which neither party understands." He perhaps implicitly supposes there might be a truth of the matter and that neither of the opponents over the beliefs knows that truth. One might rather say that, those who assert the truth of some particular view have inadequate ground for their own assertions. But this is a claim from standard philosophical epistemology. In their own epistemology, they may genuinely suppose that they do have grounds or merely even that they do know the truth of what they assert (see further, Hardin 1997).

Argument from philosophical epistemology is unlikely to motivate a change in beliefs for anyone other than, perhaps, a deeply committed philosopher or scientist. Physicists have, for example, been convinced of the truth of quantum mechanics, biologists of the truth of the system of DNA structuring of life, and some philosophers of the relevance and correctness of Kantian ethics. All of these beliefs must sound incongruous and incredible to ordinary people, for whom the beliefs are dreamlike nonsense. Most of us do not have the time or incentive to be deeply committed philosophers or scientists and we need not even suspect that there is anything questionable about our beliefs.

It might seem astonishing that one could know that others generally believe differently and that one nevertheless insists strongly on the truth of one's own particular beliefs. But this capacity seems less astonishing if one's particular beliefs are those of a group or society in which one spends one's life and that those who believe otherwise are outside that group or society. In these conditions, my beliefs may get reinforced constantly by those around me even though those beliefs might be shared by at most a tiny fraction of the world's population.

If, however, we have beliefs that are contrary to widespread beliefs in our own society, we can partially protect our beliefs, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by keeping ourselves in the company only of others who share our beliefs. In our isolation, we may even begin to think those outside our group are hostile to us. We may therefore have openly hostile relations with those outside our group and we may harden our judgment of other groups over time. As an example of this self-reinforcing trend, consider the so-called ethnic hatred that was blamed

by many for the recent collapse of Yugoslavia. Such group hatred seems more likely to have followed than to have preceded the grisly violence in Yugoslavia. The hostility led to the destruction of longstanding friendships and to the break-up of marriages across ethnic lines. The fact of such friendships and marriages does not fit the brutal assertion of many observers that the hatred was prior and therefore was the fundamental cause of the civil strife (see, for example, Kaplan 1993). The supposed hatred followed the politics of hostility (Hardin 1995: 155–63).

Isolation of people in a group with relatively limited contact with the larger society generates paranoid cognition, in which individuals begin to suppose the worst from those they do not know or even from those with whom they are not immediately in communication. As Roderick Kramer (1994) describes this psychological phenomenon: when people feel that they are under scrutiny they tend to exaggerate the extent to which they are the target of attention. They therefore attribute unduly personalistic motivations to others and become increasingly distrustful of those others. Kramer calls this the sinister attribution error. Although his studies are of intra-organizational contexts, one might suppose this phenomenon would color relations between relatively separatist, isolated groups and the larger society. If so, it would clearly affect the beliefs of the isolated group members.

While psychologists might suppose that such phenomena as paranoid cognition and the sinister attribution error are the result of complex psychological motors, they may primarily be simple matters of the skewed epistemology that comes from lack of contact with and, hence, lack of accurate knowledge of relevant others. Separation in order to sustain a group's beliefs might go much further and actually reinforce or even partially determine those beliefs. The hostility of an isolated extremist group may flow more from this skewing of its members' beliefs than from genuine opposition to the larger society or some other group.

In a study of the ultra-orthodox Jews of Israel, Eli Berman notes that political demands by the group to restrict the activities of others, for example, by prohibiting commerce and motor traffic on the Sabbath, may cause antagonism from the others. He notes that such "secular antagonism toward the ultra-orthodox could be desirable and efficient from the point of view of the latter community if it discourages secular activity by [the ultra-orthodox]" (Berman 1998: 24). It may be beneficial to those strongly committed to the ultra position in other ways as well. In particular, it might strengthen the norm of exclusion of the ultras and it might strengthen commitments by members in reaction to the heightened hostility of the outside community. Hence, indirectly, the politics of imposing their views on others' actions may contribute to the crippling of the epistemology of the ultras, although their intent might merely be to