

Fanaticism and sacred values

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Abstract:

What, if anything, is fanaticism? Philosophers including Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Kant offered an account of fanaticism, analyzing it as (1) unwavering commitment to an ideal, together with (2) unwillingness to subject the ideal (or its premises) to rational critique and (3) the presumption of a non-rational sanction for the ideal. In the first part of the paper, I explain this account and argue that it does not succeed: among other things, it entails that a paradigmatically peaceful and tolerant individual can be a fanatic. The following sections argue that the fanatic is distinguished by four features: (4) the adoption of sacred values; (5) the need to treat these values as unconditional in order to preserve a particular form of psychic unity; (6) the sense that the status of these values is threatened by lack of widespread acceptance; and (7) the identification with a group, where the group is defined by shared commitment to the sacred values. If the account succeeds, it not only reveals the nature of fanaticism, but also uncovers a distinctive form of ethical critique: we can critique a way of understanding values not on the grounds that it is false, but on the grounds that it promotes a particular form of social pathology.

Fanaticism and Sacred Values

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The term “fanatic” has lately come to enjoy a central place in discussions of political orientation, religion, and, especially, terrorism.¹ We’re told that proponents of certain political views are fanatics; that fanaticism inspires terrorism and religious extremism; that fanaticism drives us to violence; that fanaticism is becoming increasingly widespread. But what, if anything, is fanaticism? Does the term pick out a single condition? Or does it merely serve as a term of abuse, picking out any class of passionate behavior that the speaker views as misguided?

Today, philosophical analyses of fanaticism are rare.² But it was not always so: in the early modern period, the “fanatic” or the “enthusiast,” as he was alternately called, was one of the central targets of ethical theory. Philosophers including Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, Wolff, and Kant endeavored to provide an account of fanaticism. While the details varied, there was agreement on three central points: fanaticism was analyzed as (1) unwavering commitment to an ideal, together with (2) unwillingness to subject the ideal (or its premises) to rational critique and (3) the presumption of a non-rational sanction for the ideal. Thus, the prototypical fanatic is the person who “raves with

¹ Google ngram shows a 40% increase in uses of “fanatic” and “fanaticism” between 2000 and 2008 (which is the last year available).

² There are a few exceptions, including Colas (1997), Toscano (2010), Crosson (2003), and Passmore (2003). And there are many explorations of the early modern accounts; see, for example, La Vopa (1997) and Zuckert (2010). I’ll discuss some of these works below.

reason” (Kant 1999: 5:275), insisting on a personal sanction for some ideal or goal to which he is committed, while refusing to submit this ideal or goal to rational critique. Call this the Enlightenment account of fanaticism.

This paper has two goals. First, I argue that the Enlightenment account of fanaticism is inadequate. The Enlightenment account does define a particular type of rational failing, which I call being a *true believer*. But you can be a true believer without being a fanatic. Which brings me to my second goal: while their account fails, Enlightenment thinkers were right to attempt an analysis of fanaticism. For, I argue, there is a particular type of *vice* or *practical defect* that merits the label fanaticism. And it’s a peculiar kind of vice: it blends a purely rational failure with a distinctively moral failing. In characterizing this state, I’ll try to bring into view an underappreciated mode of ethical critique: we can show that certain ethical views, or certain ways of understanding ethical distinctions, are defective not because they are false or incoherent, but because they promote distinctive forms of individual or social pathology. (This is a mode of philosophical critique that certain nineteenth century thinkers, including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, discuss and rely upon; but it has been largely forgotten. When remembered, it is usually dismissed as a mode of *ad hominem*.)

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 1 introduces central cases of fanaticism and considers the possibility that the term “fanatic” fails to pick out any unified class. Section 2 explicates the Enlightenment account of fanaticism. Section 3 argues that this account does not succeed: it characterizes a rational defect that I call being a *true believer*, but the true believer is not necessarily a fanatic. The following sections argue that the fanatic is distinguished by four features: (4) the adoption of one or more sacred values; (5) the need to treat these values as unconditional in order to preserve a particular form of psychic unity; (6) the sense that the status of these values is threatened

by lack of widespread acceptance; and (7) the identification with a group, where the group is defined by shared commitment to the sacred value. If my account succeeds, it not only reveals the nature of fanaticism, but also uncovers a distinctive form of ethical critique.

1. Central cases of fanaticism

First, let's address a concern about the very attempt to analyze fanaticism. Might fanaticism be nothing more than a term of abuse? After all, one person's fanatic is another person's rational actor. History indicates that this is a danger. The early modern period witnessed various branches of Christianity each accusing the other of fanaticism.³ More recently, the Abolitionists declared the proponents of slavery to be fanatical, and were, in turn, labeled fanatical by their opponents.⁴ Kant tells us that Taoists are fanatics; Nietzsche says that Kant himself is a fanatic.⁵ Today, the label is often applied to proponents of religious fundamentalism and, most notably, to members of terrorist groups. But not exclusively: witness Newt Gingrich's claim that "secular fanaticism" is responsible for attempts to ban displays of crosses on public property, or the Discovery Institute's missives against "animal rights fanaticism."⁶

³ For example, Melancthon writes, "The Anabaptists scorn both priests and their ordination and imagine it necessary to wait for new revelations and illuminations from God, which they seek to obtain by means of bodily macerations such as monks and other enthusiasts have invented. Their fanatic ravings should be abominated" (quoted from Colas 1997: 12).

⁴ In 1836, Calhoun addressed the US Senate, claiming that abolitionists wage "a war of religious and political fanaticism... the object is to humble and debase us [i.e., white men]" (Cralle 1864: 483-4). In 1816, Wilberforce had responded to this trope of identifying abolitionists with fanatics as follows: "If to be feeling alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large."

⁵ Kant 2001: 8:335-6 and Nietzsche 1997: Preface §3.

⁶ See, for example, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/27/gingrich-blasts-secular-fanaticism-at-prayer-breakfast/comment-page-1/>; <http://www.discovery.org/a/25261>; and http://www.evolutionnews.org/2016/09/the_human_cost103118.html.

It's tempting to conclude that the charge of fanaticism is based on nothing more than denunciation of commitments that the speaker regards as unreasonable. And the term surely does function in that way in ordinary discourse.⁷ But it would be a mistake to take this as decisive. Terms such as "psychopath," "nihilist," "skeptic," and "egoist" also have loose uses in ordinary discourse, but can be rendered precise enough to pick out philosophically interesting kinds. Just so, I'll argue, with fanaticism.

To see this, let's focus on some paradigm cases. Although the term is widely used, the prototypical western image of the fanatic is the violent religious extremist, who takes himself to have divine sanction for terrible acts of cruelty and oppression. The term acquires these connotations in the 1500's, when Martin Luther employs it with alarming frequency to denounce his opponents: he never tires of warning of the dangers of the frenzied swarms peasants and field preachers, raving about illusory religious revelations and upending the social order: these *swarms* of fanatics, compared to beasts and herds driven mad, must be stopped at all costs (see La Vopa 1997).⁸ Analogously, in the early modern period we find Locke, Shaftesbury, and others presenting the fanatic as the religious individual who diverges from the mainstream view and condones violence. Today, the idealized member of ISIS makes a nice case: imagine a jihadi who embraces a set of values that are extremely demanding, requiring devotion and great personal sacrifice. He views his activities as profoundly meaningful. He views his values as excluding competing ways of life. And his values instantiate a community. And, of course, his ideals demand violence.⁹ Violent white nationalism has

⁷ Consider just how broadly the term is applied: we might speak of the football fan who riots after his team's win as a fanatic, or we might speak of the fanatical tendencies present in the Trekkie who goes to each convention, or the groupie who appears at each performance of the band. Here, too, we have little more than denunciation of commitment that outsiders judge to be unreasonable.

⁸ Before Luther, the term wasn't strongly associated with violence. In antiquity, for example, the term simply picked out those who were inspired to passionate or frenzied behavior by temple rituals.

⁹ My concern isn't whether this is accurate; all that matters, for my purposes, is that this is the way that those who use the term "fanatic" envision its target. For this type of reading of ISIS, see Wood 2015.

the same structure, with individuals making extreme personal sacrifices and engaging in horrific violence in pursuit of (what they take to be) divinely sanctioned ideals that confer meaning on their lives (see Stern 2004 for interviews with some of these individuals).

But I think it will help to consider an actual case, described at some length. Although the DSM-5 doesn't treat fanaticism as a psychological condition, it used to be recognized as a mental disorder. In 1880, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (which later became the *New England Journal of Medicine*) published case histories of fanaticism. Examining one such case in detail will be useful.

Charles Freeman worked as a farmer and mail carrier in a small Massachusetts village. He lived with his wife and two daughters. In February 1878, at the age of 33, he was struck by a sermon while attending church: "he heard the Old Testament preached" and reflected that "no one lived up to the religion which he professed to believe" (Folsom 1880: 265). He resolved to "lead a new life of devotion to the Word and Spirit of God" (Folsom 1880: 265). Shortly thereafter, he began experiencing personal "communications" from God, which constituted "direct relations with God" (Folsom 1880: 266). He described these communiques thus: "In these communications from the Lord there was no act of the will, but they came beyond his power to bring them or prevent their coming. They were always accompanied with a peculiar, indescribable sensation" (Folsom 1880: 265). In one of these communications, he determined that "the Lord required him to give up [sexual] relations with his wife."

A few months later, on April 29, his wife read him a paper discussing Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and asked him if he could perform such a great sacrifice. Within a day, Freeman concluded that the Lord required him to sacrifice someone, though he was not sure whether this was his wife or one of

his children. On April 30, a “tramp” asked Freeman for food; Freeman provided him with a generous meal, and, in gratitude, the tramp gave Freeman an old knife. That night, around 1am, Freeman woke and believed himself to have a vision: “the Lord meant to test his faith by asking him, as did Abraham, to kill his beloved child” (Folsom 1880: 266). His wife tried to dissuade him, but he collected the knife. He assured his wife that “all God wanted was a test of his faith... He would not require the deed to be done.” He went to his child’s room, where she was sound asleep. “He then raised [his knife] to the highest, kept it up a long time to give God plenty of time, brought it down and struck the bed. He then raised it again, and, on bringing it down pierced the walls of the heart, when the child died almost instantly” (Folsom 1880: 266).

Freeman was untroubled by the murder of his daughter. Almost immediately after the murder, he experienced a new revelation that the child would be resurrected by the morning. After convincing his wife of this, they went to sleep. In the morning, when the child remained dead, “he had another revelation that she would [rise] on the third day” (Folsom 1880: 267). He invited twenty Adventists over to his house, explaining his revelations and showing them the corpse of the child. “He finally convinced them of her resurrection on the third day” (Folsom 1880: 267). The following day, having learned of the murder, the constable arrested Freeman and his wife. The pair still believed that his act was justified and that the child would be alive the next day: “He told his family physician that he should kill the other child if the Lord required it, and his wife sat quietly by darning stockings...sure that whatever happened the resurrection on the third day would fully justify the deed.” The passage of the third day, with the child remaining dead, had no effect on Freeman’s certainty: “When the child did not rise on the third day he was not troubled in the least, as he said the word day was used in the scriptural sense, and he did not know its length” (Folsom 1880: 267).

The author of the case history tells us that the fanaticism of “Mr. F. and his wife cannot be a matter of dispute among competent persons” (Folsom 1880: 271). I’ll take this as an uncontroversial case: if anything is fanaticism, this is.

These cases display several intriguing features:

Unwavering commitment to an ideal: the fanatic is willing to make extreme sacrifices, including even his own life, in order to promote or preserve his ideal. The costs of this course of action do not sway him. So, whereas most individuals make trade-offs, abandoning their commitments when the costs of holding to them prove too high, the fanatic treats his ideal as warranting any sacrifice. Relatedly, the fanatic is willing to persevere in his ideal even when the prospects for achieving or promoting his ideal seem, at best, highly dubious. Instrumental calculations of the likelihood of attaining that ideal do not feature prominently in his reasoning.

Unwavering certainty about the ideal: the fanatic’s confidence in his ideal does not track what others would describe as its rational warrant. Most of us would experience some doubts about the veracity of these experiences; most of us would take their outlandishness and peculiarity to undermine them. But not the fanatic. Although he sees that others do not accept the ideal, he treats them as making a profound mistake. Rational critiques of the ideal hold no force for him.

Localization of this certitude: the fanatic is unconditionally committed to the truth of some set of claims, and won’t let contrary evidence sway him. But what’s astonishing about the fanatic is the degree to which the rational defect is localized. Freeman is calm, collected, with a veneer of rationality. He doesn’t rave. He sincerely believes that he is correct, that his actions are justified.

Contrary evidence is explained away, often quite skillfully. For example, it's true that Biblical terms such as "day" are often interpreted as having ambiguous or uncertain meanings. He's not being irrational in insisting on this point; it's actually quite clever. And this is typical of the fanatic: he embraces goals that we view as unsupported or misguided, but he's entirely sensible in his pursuit of them. The prototypical proponents of ISIS, too, fit that mold: although we see their goals and their methods as abhorrent, they reason quite well about the implications of those goals, the strategies for implementing them, and so on. Thus, ISIS's online magazine contains FAQs about permissible behavior, reasoning about whether it's permissible to rape children (yes, so long as the child is old enough for it to be physically possible; otherwise, you must be content with forcing the child to perform other sexual acts) and enslave women (yes for Jews and Christians; no for apostates.)¹⁰ The answers, grotesque as they are, are not arbitrary: they are reasoned conclusions from accepted premises. They aspire to norms of consistency and coherence. So what's odd is that the fanatic's rational defect is quite local: the fanatics themselves don't display a generalized inability to assess evidence, to draw rational conclusions, and so on. Rather, they display fixity in just one area or even on just one point.

Intolerance and violence: what stands out about fanaticism is its intolerance, its violence. The central cases of fanaticism involve attempts to impose some ideal or value on others who do not share it. The child doesn't consent to her murder; the person enslaved by ISIS doesn't consent to

¹⁰ See the pamphlet entitled "Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves." A translation and excerpt is available in Roth 2015. "Question 13: Is it permissible to have intercourse with a female slave who has not reached puberty? It is permissible to have intercourse with the female slave who hasn't reached puberty if she is fit for intercourse; however if she is not fit for intercourse, then it is enough to enjoy her without intercourse." "Question 3: Can all unbelieving women be taken captive? "There is no dispute among the scholars that it is permissible to capture unbelieving women [who are characterized by] original unbelief [*kufr asli*], such as the *kitabiyat* [Jews and Christians] and polytheists. However, [the scholars] are disputed over [the issue of] capturing apostate women. The consensus leans towards forbidding it, though some people of knowledge think it permissible. We [ISIS] lean towards accepting the consensus..."

enslavement; even the looser uses of fanaticism, such as Gingrich's tirades against "secular fanaticism", focus on the perceived attempt to impose values on one who doesn't share them. So the fanatic manifests a particular form of intolerance: he attempts to impose his values on those who do not share them, and is often willing to undertake violent means in order to do so.

Religious provenance of the ideals: the ideals accepted by fanatics often have a religious provenance. Both of my examples fit that mold. It's commonly assumed that fanatics are religiously inspired. Locke tells us that the fanatic has unrestrained "fancies" of personal revelation; Kant tells us that the fanatic "believes itself to feel an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature"; A.P. Martinich defines a fanatic as "a person who purports to place all...value in things of some transcendent realm [and attaches] ...no or only derivative value...to this world" (Martinich 2000: 419). Nietzsche extends this: for him, it is not necessarily a religious belief that motivates fanaticism, but it will at least involve an aspiration to something beyond this world, as in Kant. (Below, I'll suggest that fanaticism needn't be religiously inspired.)

Group orientation: the fanatic is part of a group and thinks of his identity as constituted by his commitment to this group. Freeman, for example, is an Adventist and sees this as a central feature of his identity. There is no such thing as an isolated fanatic. The fanatic needs a community of like-minded individuals. And, typically, he also needs another group to react against. For the fanatic takes his personal revelations to legitimate the elimination or overturning of widely accepted norms. He takes those who don't accept his ideals not to be embracing valid alternatives, but to be contended with, dealt with, or simply eliminated.

The prototypical fanatic, then, is the individual who is unconditionally committed to the truth of some claim, unwilling to let his degree of certainty in the claim track rational assessment of its warrant, intolerant, willing to resort to violence, typically religious, and oriented toward groups. But this is an odd cluster of features. They seem unrelated: people can manifest some of them without manifesting others. I can be supremely confident in some ideal (equality, environmental preservation, justice, etc.); this confidence can outstrip my rational warrant for the ideal; and yet I can be perfectly tolerant and peaceful. Or, I can be exceptionally intolerant, forcibly and even violently imposing my ideals on others, without displaying any deep commitment to these ideals and while thinking that these ideals are questionable. And so on.

So we might wonder: is there anything philosophically interesting about fanaticism? Or is it just a cluster of unrelated features, together constituting a type of dogmatism and intolerance that we regard as objectionable?

2. The Enlightenment account of fanaticism

Several Enlightenment thinkers offer a philosophical diagnosis of fanaticism. These thinkers don't see fanaticism as a haphazard series of disconnected states. Instead, they treat it as arising from a defect of rationality. In this section I'll introduce the defect; in the next section I'll argue that the Enlightenment account is inadequate.

Sparked by Enlightenment optimism and pervasive religious conflicts, philosophers including Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Kant offered philosophical analyses of fanaticism.¹¹ Many of these thinkers treat fanaticism as a product of irrational commitments fostered by religious dogma. The excessive enthusiasm cultivated and promoted by religion could, they argue, be reduced by the development of more rational approaches to meeting human needs.

To see this, consider some characteristic accounts of fanaticism. Locke emphasizes the way in which the fanatic is impervious to rational argumentation:

Reason is lost upon [fanatics], they are above it: they see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken; it is clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine; shows itself, and needs no other proof but its own evidence: they feel the hand of God moving them within, and the impulses of the Spirit, and cannot be mistaken in what they feel. (Locke 1975: Chapter 19)

For Locke, the fanatic is the person who presumes to have religiously sanctioned, unerring insight about some point. He cannot be reasoned with; rational argumentation won't dislodge his presumed insight.

Hume makes the same point:

The inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favorite of the Divinity; and when this frenzy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsy is

¹¹ The term "enthusiast" is initially more common than "fanatic," but I'll take these as equivalent.

consecrated: Human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides: And the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly, and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the spirit, and to inspiration from above. Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of ENTHUSIASM. (Hume 1985: “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm”)

Again, the fanatic is the person who presumes to have divinely inspired insight, which goes beyond the domain of rational thought. Hume notes that this presumption leads to unreserved devotion to the ideal.

And, of course, unreserved devotion sanctioned by ideals that are taken to be unassailable can be quite dangerous. Here’s Shaftesbury:

Fury flies from face to face, and the disease [enthusiasm] is no sooner seen than caught.

They who in a better situation of mind have beheld a multitude under the power of passion, have owned that they saw in the countenance of men something more ghastly and terrible than at other times expressed on the most passionate occasions. Such force has society in ill as well as in good passions, and so much stronger any affection is for being social and communicative. (Shaftesbury 1999: 10)

There’s palpable fear of the fanatic here. His refusal to entertain doubts about his belief makes him unwilling to compromise, unwilling to tolerate alternative views. So the fanatic is not only irrational and immune to argument: he is also dangerous.

One more example, from Kant. Kant complicates this standard account by introducing a distinction between *mere enthusiasm* and *fanaticism*.¹² He writes,

Fanaticism [*Schwärmerei*]¹³ must always be distinguished from *enthusiasm* [*Enthusiasmus*]. The former believes itself to feel an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature, the latter signifies the state of the mind which is inflamed beyond the appropriate degree by some principle, whether it be by the maxim of patriotic virtue, or of friendship, or of religion, without involving the illusion of a supernatural community. (Kant 2007: 2:251n)

For Kant, enthusiasm is simply heightened, excessive attachment: the enthusiast is “inflamed beyond the appropriate degree.” The football fan who celebrates his team’s win by cheering with friends is not an enthusiast; the fan who riots, destroying property in an orgy of feeling, is an enthusiast.

Fanaticism is different: the fanatic takes himself to have some access to a “higher nature,” such as a divine revelation. As Kant puts it elsewhere, the fanatic “is properly a deranged person with presumed immediate inspiration and a great familiarity with the powers of the heavens. Human nature knows no more dangerous illusion” (Kant 2007: 2:267). So the fanatic, for Kant, is

¹² Zuckert (2010) offers a helpful reconstruction of Kant’s views on this topic.

¹³ Those who speak German may be puzzled by the translation of “*Schwärmerei*” as “fanaticism”. Today, “*Schwärmerei*” is typically used to pick out a kind of gushing, raving enthusiasm. However, this is a case of changing connotations. Although Germans today employ “*Fanatiker*” and its cognates to describe the fanatic, that term was less common than “*Schwärmerei*” until the middle of the nineteenth century. Martin Luther used “*Schwärmerei*” for (what he took to be) socially disruptive religious fanaticism, and the word still had those connotations in Kant’s day. Thus, Kant writes: “*der Fanatiker (Visionär, Schwärmer) ist eigentlich ein Verrückter von einer vermeinten unmittelbaren Eingebung und einer großen Vertraulichkeit mit den Mächten des Himmels [the fanatic (visionary, Schwärmer) is properly a deranged person with presumed immediate inspiration and a great familiarity with the powers of the heavens]*” (Ak 2:267). He thus treats “*Fanatiker*” and “*Schwärmer*” as interchangeable. (Interestingly, in a letter of Feb. 11, 1793, Kant refers to Maria von Herbert as “*die kleine Schwärmerin*” and claims that she suffers from a “curious mental derangement”. Although Kant is clearly wrong to label Herbert a “*Schwärmer*”, it is revealing that he interprets her condition in this way. See Langton 1992 for an illuminating discussion of this episode.) Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this point.

enthusiastic, but takes this enthusiasm to be certified by some insight that is beyond the realm of rational inquiry. Once you calm down the riotous football enthusiast, once the passion dissipates and he heads home, he won't try to certify his behavior by appeal to divinity; if he's an ordinary enthusiast, he'll admit that he was carried away, that his behavior was inappropriate, and so on. Not so with the fanatic: the fanatic will insist that his behavior is correct or justified. So, while enthusiasm is principally an affective or emotional matter—it consists simply in having and acting on passions to an inappropriate degree—fanaticism is, additionally, a defect of *reason*. The fanatic is the enthusiast who presumes an authoritative justification for his “inflamed” passions and actions.

As these passages indicate, there is substantial agreement between Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Kant on the nature of fanaticism.¹⁴ All four of these philosophers take the fanatic to be characterized by the following traits:

1. Unwavering commitment to an ideal.
2. Unwillingness to subject the ideal (or its premises) to rational critique.
3. The presumption of a non-rational sanction for the ideal (or its premises).

The first claim picks out a certain type of behavior: the individual is wholehearted with respect to his ideal. One form of this is Kantian enthusiasm: inflamed passions consume the individual.

Enthusiasm needn't devolve into fanaticism, but it can. Suppose the second feature is present: the individual refuses to engage in serious critique of the ideal. The individual may, of course, offer elaborate arguments for his ideal, may reason about his ideal's implications, and so forth. But at

¹⁴ Although Locke, Hume, and Shaftesbury use the term “enthusiast” more often than “fanatic,” I'll take them to be referring to fanaticism.

some point, there will be something about which the fanatic refuses to entertain doubts. And claim (3) explains why: the fanatic takes his ideal to have some kind of non-rational sanction, some support beyond the domain of shared rational inquiry. When these features are present, we have fanaticism.

Conditions (2) and (3) require some clarification. In particular, consider condition (3)'s appeal to the presence of a non-rational sanction for the ideal. What, precisely, is the distinction between rational and non-rational sanctions?

Several of the quotations above mention refusing to entertain doubts and abstaining from rational critique (condition 2); accordingly, we might conclude that the Enlightenment accounts treat a justification as non-rational if the person is unwilling to entertain doubts about it. However, this would be too hasty. Strictly speaking, the Enlightenment account is not committed to the claim that *unwillingness to doubt* is always problematic. After all, it might be perfectly rational to refuse to doubt that triangles have three sides or, more controversially, that one's cognitive faculties are systematically unreliable. What distinguishes the fanatic is not simply the refusal to entertain doubts (condition 2) but the *ground* for this refusal (condition 3). The Enlightenment thinkers emphasize that the fanatic refuses to entertain doubts *for a particular reason*: he takes himself to be in possession of distinctive type of ground for his belief; specifically, a ground that the Enlightenment thinkers judge to be non-rational.

So condition (3)'s distinction between rational and non-rational sanctions plays a crucial role. The philosophers I've mentioned tend to illustrate this distinction with examples involving direct experiences of divinity. In the quotations above, Locke speaks of feeling the "hand of God moving

within”; Hume focuses on giving oneself over “to inspiration from above”; and Kant cites “an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature.” Thus, the Enlightenment account treats claims about direct experiences of divinity as paradigmatic examples of non-rational sanctions. Notice that this upends traditional claims about the authority of religious revelation. Take the Biblical tale of Saul on the road to Damascus: Saul certainly took himself to have an immediate experience of an extraordinary communion with a higher nature.¹⁵ The Enlightenment account thus seems to classify him as a fanatic. Some philosophers—notably Hume—would presumably welcome this result. Others do not directly address the Biblical examples and focus, instead, on cases that their audiences are likely to regard as less controversial: thus, following the above passage on “extraordinary communion with a higher nature,” Kant cites Mohammed and John of Leyden (a sixteenth-century Anabaptist who led a rebellion in Münster).

Of course, the claim that these sorts of religious experiences constitute non-rational sanctions for belief is controversial (to put it mildly). It is also dispensable. We could accept the Enlightenment account of fanaticism while rejecting the claim that *all* grounding in religious experience is non-rational. And this brings us back to the original question: how, exactly, does the Enlightenment account draw this distinction between rational and non-rational justifications for ideals? We need more than just examples; we need a good account of the distinction.

And, in fact, we’re given it: each of the Enlightenment thinkers I’ve mentioned (Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Kant) does provide such an account. Familiarly, they defend comprehensive and

¹⁵ Acts 3-6: “As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.””

systematic epistemic theories which aspire to provide us with a way of distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate grounds for belief. Thus, for example, Kant doesn't attempt to explain this rational/non-rational distinction merely in the case of the fanatic; instead, he offers a systematic epistemological and metaphysical theory that, if successful, would enable us distinguish legitimate and illegitimate grounds for belief in general. This theory can then be applied to the particular case of the fanatic and his beliefs, explaining why, for example, Freeman's appeals to divine revelation would count as non-rational.¹⁶

As this discussion indicates, while the general idea that there is a distinction between rational and non-rational justifications for beliefs is a truism, any *particular* way of drawing this distinction will require substantial argumentation. Kant, Hume, Locke, and other Enlightenment thinkers do provide that argumentation: they each defend systematic theories. Their accounts of condition (3) are thus embedded in much larger philosophical projects. An examination of those projects is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, we can step back from the details of these projects and focus on a more restricted point. We can grant, for the sake of argument, that there is a distinction between rational and non-rational justifications for beliefs, as expressed in condition (3). We can then ask whether this distinction, together with (1) and (2), enables us to account for fanaticism.

Thus, while there will be some obvious cases of meeting condition (3) (Freeman, perhaps), there will also be some controversial cases (Saul on the road to Damascus). Fortunately, our goal in this paper is not to adjudicate particular cases, but to investigate and analyze the conditions for fanaticism as

¹⁶ To simplify a bit, Kant claims that the fanatic's ground for his belief counts as non-rational because the fanatic presumes to have experience of something which is, in fact, beyond the bounds of possible experience. See Zuckert 2010 for discussion

such. I rely on the distinction embedded in condition (3) in what follows; if it turns out that there is no way of drawing that distinction, then the account of fanaticism will not succeed.

3. Problems with the Enlightenment account of fanaticism

The Enlightenment account treats fanaticism as enthusiasm for some ideal that is taken to be warranted in a non-rational manner. At a certain point, the fanatic is cut off from rational argumentation and unwilling to entertain doubts. He seeks to secure a certainty that is, in fact, inaccessible. His certitude blinds him to potentially legitimate competing ideals, and therefore makes him dangerous. Or so, at any rate, the Enlightenment thinkers argue.¹⁷

The Enlightenment account does capture certain traits of the fanatic. The religious extremist, for example, manifests (1)-(3). But is this account sufficient?

There's one glaring difficulty with the account: a crucial feature of the fanatic is *intolerance*, which is often manifest in violent behavior. The Enlightenment thinkers agree on this; Shaftesbury, Locke, and others emphasize the fanatic's intolerance. But the rational defects that these thinkers focus upon—features (1)-(3)—have no direct connection to intolerance.

To see this, it suffices to note that there are individuals who exhibit features (1)-(3) to very high degrees, yet do not seem properly describable as fanatics. Imagine a committed but tolerant Christian, such as Pope Francis. There's good evidence that Pope Francis exhibits extremely high

¹⁷ Hegel offers a rather different account, which links fanaticism to excessive abstraction: fanaticism is “enthusiasm for something abstract—for an abstract thought which sustains a negative position toward the established order of things. It is the essence of fanaticism to bear only a desolating destructive relation to the concrete...” (Hegel 1900: 358).

degrees of features (1)-(3). First, his commitment to Catholic doctrine has been lifelong and unwavering (feature 1). Second, though he is open to debate about the applications and implications of Christian ideals, he insists that the core ideals are not subject to rational scrutiny (feature 2): as he puts it, the Apostles' "revealed truths of faith were theologically formulated and transmitted as our nonnegotiable inheritance ... There are things that are debatable, but – I repeat – this inheritance [i.e., the "revealed truths of faith"] is not negotiable. The content of religious faith is capable of being deepened through human thought, but when that deepening is at odds with the inheritance, it is heresy" (Bergoglio and Skorka 2010: 26). Third, these ideals are not subject to rational scrutiny precisely because they have a distinctively religious sanction: as he puts it in the quotation above, they are "truths of faith."

So Pope Francis appears to meet conditions (1)-(3).¹⁸ (Of course, the specifics don't matter: if you don't think Francis meets these conditions, imagine a hypothetical individual who does.) But does he seem like a good case of fanaticism? Francis isn't dangerous, or at least isn't dangerous in the way that we associate with fanaticism. Shaftesbury's description—the "ghastly and terrible" countenance, the violence—seems out of place here. On the contrary, he is peaceful, condemns violence, preaches religious toleration, and so on. I think most of us will hesitate to label Francis a fanatic.

¹⁸ The evidence here is not dispositive. I've read the Francis quotation, above, as indicating that he refuses to entertain doubts about certain "non-negotiable" religious commitments. But, as a reviewer points out, we could instead read him as claiming that certain teachings are fixed commitments of the Catholic faith: although one can reason critically about them, privately doubt them, and so forth, one must remain committed to them in order to be a Catholic. This is a fair point, and if we do read Francis that way, then he wouldn't manifest feature (2). Nonetheless, this doesn't affect the larger point: we can imagine a slight variant of Francis who does manifest feature (2). Presumably there are many individuals who manifest unwavering commitment to an ideal, refuse to submit the ideal to rational scrutiny, assume a non-rational sanction for the ideal, and yet remain peaceful and tolerant.

If an account of fanaticism entails that a paradigmatically peaceful and tolerant individual qualifies as a fanatic, then the account misfires. And it misfires on grounds that the Enlightenment thinkers accept: they associate fanaticism with violent intolerance.

If that example isn't convincing, consider another one. Surprisingly, Kant claims that Taoists and Buddhists are the ultimate fanatics. He tells us that the meditative quest for a release from self is the most extreme form of fanaticism (Kant 2001: 8:335-6).¹⁹ We can see why he says that. Consider an idealized Buddhist sage who is utterly committed to his ideal of, as Kant puts it, annihilation of the self. Several branches of Buddhism take progress toward this ideal to require a kind of insight that goes beyond ordinary rational thought. In other words, the ideal is taken to have a non-rational sanction.²⁰

The prototypical Buddhist sage, of the sort Kant is envisioning, manifests conditions (1)-(3) to an extremely high degree. So Kant is right that, if we accept the received account, the Buddhist sage is the paradigmatic fanatic. But again, this result seems quite peculiar. The Buddhist sage does presume a sanction for his ideal that is not accessible by standard rational inquiry. And he does

¹⁹ Specifically, Kant derides the “monstrous system of Lao-kiun [Laozi, the founder of Taoism] concerning the highest good, that it consists in *nothing*, i.e. in the consciousness of *feeling* oneself swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead by flowing together with it, and hence by the annihilation of one's personality; in order to have a presentiment of this state Chinese philosophers, sitting in dark rooms with their eyes closed, exert themselves to think and sense their own nothingness” (Kant 2001: 8:335-6).

²⁰ Traditionally, Buddhists claim that attainment of nirvana requires “Right Insight” into the nature of reality; this is the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path to Buddhism's goal. Different Buddhist schools interpret Right Insight in divergent ways, but several schools take it to require something beyond ordinary rationality. For example, consider Garfield's discussion of Nāgārjuna: “to see things as Buddha sees them...one must see things independently of the categories that determine an ontology of entities and a dichotomy of existence and nonexistence. That this is inconceivable to us...only indicates the fact that we are trapped in conventional reality through the force of the delusion of reification.... Emptiness is the final nature of all things... This fact entails, for Mahāyāna philosophers, the possibility of any sentient being to be fundamentally transformed—to attain enlightenment” (Garfield 1995: 282). As Garfield's explication indicates, while the claims about Right Insight are rationally articulable, the full understanding and appreciation of them is taken to require something beyond discursive rationality. In this sense, the justification of the ideal is non-rational.

display an admirable degree of commitment. But is he a fanatic? Again, that seems to me to miss something essential.

So far, we have two cases that, I think, won't strike us as fanaticism, but which qualify as paradigmatic fanaticism on the received account. This gives us good reason to question the account. But there are two additional problems.

First, notice that conditions (1)-(3) are degreed; people can manifest these traits to greater or lesser extents. My examples of Pope Francis and the Buddhist, above, involve people who score exceptionally highly on these traits. They thus indicate that manifesting high degrees of (1)-(3) is not correlated with fanaticism. Indeed, I suspect that many paradigmatic fanatics are less strongly committed to (1) than Francis or the Buddhists. Freeman is a prototypical fanatic, yet the particular commitments that he embraces seem to vary based on what he's read or experienced in the past few days. Insofar as we want to count certain members of ISIS as fanatics, we know, from interviews, that many of them display remarkably little knowledge of the ideals to which they are purportedly committed. Indeed, an interesting feature of fanatics is that the *content* of their commitment often seems less important than the *manner* of their commitment. Eric Hoffer says of fanatics from opposed camps: "They hate each other with the hatred of brothers. They are as far apart and as close together as Saul and Paul" (Hoffer 2010: 85). His suggestion is that what appeals to the fanatic, what motivates unconditional commitment, is not the particular content of the ideal, but the way in which the ideal demands unflinching devotion. I'll return to this point.

A second problem is that the Enlightenment criteria are instantiated very widely. Many ordinary individuals exhibit, to some degree, (1)-(3). (2) and (3) in particular may be pervasive: many

adherents of religions manifest them, and yet it's odd to attenuate the notion of fanaticism to such an extent that they'd qualify as fanatics.

In light of these problems, there are reasons for doubting that (1)-(3) properly characterize the fanatic. Now, (1)-(3) do characterize a particular type of rational failing. Just to have a label for this, let's call it being a *true believer*. The true believer, so defined, is strongly committed to some ideal, unwilling to critique the ideal, and takes the ideal to be justified in some non-rational manner (whether by divine revelation, some non-rational ability to limn the structure of reality, etc.). This is a unified phenomenon, exhibited in many religious individuals to a high degree, but also by many nonreligious individuals. It has, as far as I can tell, only a contingent connection to the intolerant behavior that we associate with fanaticism.²¹

It is important to note that this is not just a linguistic dispute about the connotations of "fanatic" in the early twenty-first century. What matters is not whether the word "fanatic" seems applicable to the Buddhist. What matters is whether there really is a unified trait shared by the Buddhist and the violent extremist. That's possible. It's possible that conditions (1)-(3) sometimes result in peaceful tolerance, and sometimes in violent behavior; it's possible that when the latter occurs, we label the individual fanatical. So fanaticism would just be (1)-(3) plus violence. But this wouldn't be especially interesting as a philosophical phenomenon.

²¹ I describe true believers as exhibiting a rational *failing* or *defect*. This is tendentious. The Enlightenment thinkers, with their commitment to the idea that we should embrace only those commitments that survive critical reflection, do regard being a true believer as a defect of rationality. But subtler views are available. I pass over this complication here, as nothing in my argument turns on it.

What would be interesting, philosophically speaking, is if there were some way in which the rational defect characterized by (1)-(3), when coupled with an additional feature, did generate fanaticism. Of course, any number of things could cause a true believer to become a fanatic. A propensity toward aggression, the acceptance of values whose content directly mandates oppression, a craving for excitement, or a bump on the head might spark violence. But these would be contingent external factors, of no philosophical interest. What I want to do is explore whether there's an internal logic to the true believer-to-fanatic transition. I'll suggest that there is. And it involves a defective way of conceptualizing one's values. (This, I think, is an underappreciated mode of philosophical critique: we can show that some value or some way of conceptualizing ethics is defective because it promotes a form of individual or social pathology. This is a mode of critique that's common in Nietzsche, though hardly unique to him.)

4. Sacred values

The Enlightenment account focuses on unwavering commitment to an ideal, together with unwillingness to submit the ideal to rational scrutiny and the presumption of some non-rational mode of justification for the ideal. Let me relate this to what I think is a deeper feature: the distinction between sacred and profane values.

It's a perfectly familiar point that values and reasons differ in their perceived significance. It's natural to assume that we can capture this point by saying the reasons or values differ in their *weights*. I think I have some reason to keep my seat on the subway (after all, it's more comfortable than standing), but I also think I have a stronger or weightier reason to give up my seat to the elderly man tottering along on his walker (after all, he's going to have much more trouble standing than I am).

Or, I have some reason to order the tea, but more reason to order the coffee (I like tea, but prefer coffee).

Some people treat certain values as if they have infinite weight: it is not just a contingent fact that they outweigh other values; they do so of necessity. In empirical psychology, these are referred to as sacred values. Here's a typical example of the way in which they're defined: a sacred value is "any value that a moral community explicitly or implicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with bounded or secular values" (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner 2000: 853).²² One peculiarity of sacred values is that individuals are unwilling to deliberate upon them. Merely considering the violation of a sacred value, or merely weighing it in some hypothetical scenario against mundane values, generates a characteristic set of negative affects: the individual feels polluted, defiled, contemptible, in need of atonement.

An illustration may help. Compare the Roman Catholic view on inviolability of human life to Peter Singer's view. The Roman Catholic church holds that "human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence" (John Paul II 1995: 61). "The absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth" (John Paul II 1995: 57), so that "the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral" (John Paul II 1995: 57). Singer, by contrast, writes that "during the next 35 years, the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological, and demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every

²² The idea derives from Emile Durkheim (1995), who argued that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is one of two essential features of religion.

human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct” (Singer 2009). Both Singer and the Roman Catholic church treat human life as immensely valuable. But for Singer, trade-offs, weighings, and balancings are perfectly fine: to use one of his examples, “We may not want a child to start on life's uncertain voyage if the prospects are clouded” (Singer 2009). For the Roman Catholics, who treat human life as a sacred value, this is perverse.

Let's be more precise. Consider final values (things valued for their own sake). A subset of final values has several features:

- (i) Inviolable: these values present themselves as not to be compromised or attenuated.
- (ii) Unquestionable: they present themselves as not to be doubted, critiqued, or weighed against other values.
- (iii) Associated with characteristic emotions: they are associated with love, hatred, veneration, contempt, reverence, dread, awe, etc.

Call values with these features *sacred values*. Then we can say that the true believer, as characterized by the Enlightenment account, treats some ideal or value as sacred. In other words, we can condense (1)-(3) as follows: the true believer has and acts on sacred values. So let's make this a fourth condition:

- (4) Sacred values: the individual adopts one or more sacred values

For the reasons I discussed in the previous section, having sacred values doesn't by itself entail intolerance. However, in the following sections I'll suggest that a particular way of understanding sacred values does promote fanaticism.

5. Fragility of the self

Let's begin by considering how we relate to our values. Kant sometimes associates fanaticism with an attempt to escape from the demands of autonomy: he tells us that the fanatic is "kept ever distant from the good based on self-activity" (Kant 2001: 6:83). The fanatic seeks a form of passivity: he wants to be directed from without.

Of course, that's not distinctive of the fanatic; many people escape self-direction. But we escape self-direction for different reasons. There's a difference between someone who is *unwilling* to self-direct and someone who is *unable* to do so. The latter—a *need* for external regulation—is one of the features that Nietzsche associates with fanaticism. He claims that for certain individuals, lack of fanaticism would "lead to crumbling and disintegration" (Nietzsche 1989: §30). For "fanaticism is the only 'strength of the 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 (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling that henceforth becomes dominant..." (Nietzsche 1974: §347).²³

While the language is imprecise, I think Nietzsche is pointing to an important phenomenon. There is a family of views about self-constitution which take the self to be constituted by its commitment

²³ For a helpful analysis of this point, see Reginster (2003).

to either principles, ideals, values, or narratives. There is a vast literature on this topic, and the differences between these views have been explored in depth. I wish to focus only on the common ground: there is a sense of the term “self” which picks out a particular type of orientation toward a principle, ideal, value, or narrative. Absent that commitment, the self evaporates. Thus, Frankfurtian theories hold that the self is constituted by the person’s identifying with elements of her mental economy (Frankfurt 1988). Kantian views take the agent to be constituted by her identification with principles of choice (Korsgaard 1996). Narrative identity theories hold that what makes an event or psychological characteristic properly attributable to a person is its incorporation into a narrative of the person’s life, as told by that person (MacIntyre 1984; Schechtman 1996). And so on. If some view of this form is correct—and the details don’t matter—then, in order to preserve a unified self, the agent needs to commit herself to some ideal, principle, value, or narrative.

Suppose Nietzsche is right—suppose some of us can achieve unity of selfhood only by becoming fanatics. The “strong” individuals, in Nietzsche’s language, can bind themselves to an ideal that they see as rationally optional. Part of my identity is constituted by my commitment to my profession and my wife; if I had been a doctor instead of a philosophy professor, or if I had married a different partner, I would be a very different person. I can admit to myself that nothing mandated my commitment to these ends. I could have chosen a different profession; I could have met and married a different partner, or none at all. The recognition of the contingency of these commitments doesn’t disrupt them.

But Nietzsche’s suggestion is that, for some of us, the recognition of contingency *would* disrupt our ends. Aware of this at some level, we block recognition of the contingency. Although we see that the ideals can’t be rationally justified as non-contingent, we take ourselves to have some source of

special authority that legitimates and binds us to these ideals. Uncertainty and doubt are thereby eliminated, and self-integrity preserved.

So let's add a fifth condition:

- (5) Fragility of the self: the agent needs to treat a value as sacred in order to preserve unity of the self.

What Nietzsche is suggesting, in other words, is that some individuals exhibit an inability to preserve unity of the self absent a commitment to something unconditional and incontestable. The *content* of this value is less important than the fact that it is treated as sacred.²⁴

Notice that Nietzsche seems to be assuming that any ideal to which we bind ourselves will be rationally optional; thus, he takes *all* treatment of ideals as non-optional to result from factors such as confusion, ignorance, or motivated reasoning, including the type of motivated reasoning picked out by (5). It's important to note that we need not follow him on this point in order to accept claim (5) as a condition for fanaticism.²⁵ Suppose there is a rationally obligatory sacred value. Still, we can ask whether a particular agent's commitment to this value is driven primarily by epistemic factors or, instead, by motivations that hinge on the preservation of psychic unity. In the former case, condition (5) would not obtain; in the latter case, it would. This distinction may be clearer in a

²⁴ For a particularly vivid example of this phenomenon, consider the recent case of Devon Arthurs. In May 2017, police arrested Arthurs for murdering his two roommates. Arthurs confessed as follows: he and his roommates were active neo-Nazis (they participated in online neo-Nazi groups, their apartment was full of neo-Nazi documents, they had a framed photo of Timothy McVeigh, and so on). However, Arthurs had very recently decided to convert to Islam. Given that neo-Nazis encourage violence against Muslims, Arthurs decided that he should retaliate by killing his neo-Nazi roommates. Here we have an astonishingly clear case of the structure mattering more than content: one authoritarian ideology (neo-Nazism) is substituted for another (a violent interpretation of Islam).

²⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

straightforwardly factual case: suppose a husband believes that his wife is unfaithful. We can ask whether the husband's belief is primarily driven by epistemic factors (evidence of infidelity, etc.) or by other factors (jealousy, possessiveness, etc.). Determining this in any particular case will be difficult, but the distinction can nonetheless be drawn and is important (contrast Othello with a dispassionate investigator of potential infidelity). Just so with sacred values.

6. Fragility of the value

Condition (5) focuses on fragility of the self. But we can also look at this from the other side. It's not just the *self* that is fragile, but the value as well.

Suppose you took yourself to need external legitimation for some value, found this legitimation unavailable through standard rational argumentation, and accordingly lapsed into being a true believer about the value. Suppose, in other words, that you manifested features (1)-(5). Still, this wouldn't by itself constitute fanaticism. To return to Kant's example, a Buddhist could do this. So could Pope Francis. But again, they don't seem to qualify as fanatics. Knowing that they exhibit fragility of the self would make us think that they were unfortunate, that they displayed some defect of autonomy; but it wouldn't, just by itself, render them fanatics.

But what if you also thought the value itself were fragile? That is, what if you thought that the value's status could be imperiled by the way in which *other people* relate to this value?

Some individuals do treat values in this way. Compare the rhetoric surrounding protecting the integrity of marriage, with some groups arguing that allowing same-sex marriage threatens or

undermines the institution of marriage itself.²⁶ Or, to take a relatively trivial example (trivial because not yet dangerous), consider the idea of a “war on Christmas”, wherein ostensibly non-religious corporations are taken to be attacking, demeaning, or threatening Christianity by acknowledging the possibility of non-Christian holidays.²⁷ In these cases, we have groups that take the status of their own values to be threatened by the fact that other groups do not share them.

Let’s put the point this way:

(6) Fragility of the value: the value’s status is taken to be threatened when it is not widely accepted.

To understand (6), we need to distinguish it from closely related claims. First, some values can only be *realized* when they are widely accepted. Suppose, for example, that Genevieve values environmental preservation. She can do her part to realize this value, but she’s one among many; in order for environmental preservation actually to occur, the value needs to be held not just by Genevieve, but by a sufficiently large percentage of the population. So, in valuing environmental preservation, she might also aspire to have others accept this value. This seems sensible and entirely unproblematic; it bears no interesting connection to fanaticism.

Condition (6) is not meant to be a claim about the *realization* of values. It is a claim about the *status* of values. To illustrate the distinction, consider the debates concerning same-sex marriage. Suppose Arthur thinks that traditional marriage has sacred value; he opposes same-sex marriage, which he

²⁶ For an overview of court cases on this matter, see Busch 2011. I return to this example below.

²⁷ For an introduction to this topic, see Stack 2016.

sees as in violation of this value. Let's stipulate that in opposing same-sex marriage, Arthur isn't worried about the realization of his value; he doesn't think that allowing same-sex marriage will cause fewer traditional marriages to occur. Rather, he worries that allowing same-sex marriage will render traditional marriage less significant, less sacred. So, the lack of broad acceptance of Arthur's value seems to him to imperil not the realization but the status of his value. He thus meets condition (6).

I take it that this stance is familiar. A common form of argument against same-sex marriage hinges on the claim that allowing same-sex marriage undermines the value of traditional marriage.²⁸ How should we understand this claim? Suppose traditional marriage is held to be sacred, to have a value that other forms of committed relationship lack. By allowing other forms of committed relationship to carry the title "marriage," opposite sex marriage is no longer publically marked off as something with a distinctive form of value. It is no longer publically acknowledged as possessing a different status than same-sex committed relationships. And this seems, to some opponents of same-sex marriage, to render traditional marriage less significant, less valuable, or less sacred.

Notice that not everyone shares this concern about whether their sacred values are widely shared. Some individuals and communities hold distinctive sets of values and practices, and yet evince no concern whatsoever about whether the broader society acknowledges these values and practices. The Amish and the Hasidic are, perhaps, two examples of communities that traditionally maintain

²⁸ For a typical statement, consider the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in 2013: allowing same-sex marriage "weakens" marriage, for "The concept of marriage as a normative place for procreation is lost; the idea as marriage as covenant is diminished; the family in its normal sense, predating the state, and as our base community of society, as we have already heard, is weakened" (quoted from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10096579/Gay-marriage-weakens-society-says-Archbishop-of-Canterbury.html>). In a 2003 Pew Poll, 73% of Americans who opposed same-sex marriage said that allowing it would "undermine" traditional marriage and/or traditional families.

certain sacred values without staking their own acceptance of these values on the stance of the broader (non-Amish/non-Hasidic) community.

As these examples illustrate, some individuals and groups see the status of their own values as threatened by the absence of widespread acceptance, whereas others don't. I think that it is precisely those individuals and communities that accept the former claim that are most strongly associated with fanaticism. Take violent religious extremism, neo-Nazism, and so forth; a distinguishing feature of many of these communities is the attempt to enforce compliance with and acceptance of a particular set of values. The fanatic typically wants his values to be accepted by everyone; he is not content to acknowledge alternative sets of values as acceptable for other individuals. Thus, whereas the non-fanatic might be strongly committed to his values without attempting to enforce compliance with these values on all, and without seeing these others as needing to hold these values in order for the values to preserve their legitimacy for him, the fanatic tends to have the opposite reaction.

For these reasons, I think feature (6), when coupled with (1)-(5), brings us quite close to an analysis of fanaticism. (I'll shortly suggest that one additional feature is needed.) In other words, part of what's criterial for fanaticism is having values that are treated as uncompromisable and incontestable; where this is coupled with and supported by the idea that these values are fragile, that failing to accept them imperils their status.²⁹

7. Group orientation

²⁹ Durkheim claims that one of the characteristic features of the sacred is that it must be continually protected from incursions by the profane (1995: 33-44).

Are features (1)-(6) sufficient? Is the fanatic a true believer about sacred values who exhibits psychic fragility and also sees his values as fragile? I think this takes us almost all the way to fanaticism. But perhaps someone could be characterized by (1)-(6) and yet fail to manifest intolerance. After all, a true believer might be merely resigned to his own fragility and to his ideals' fragility. He might accept this, passively, without struggling against it. And then we'd be reluctant to label such an individual a fanatic. Suppose, for example, a Buddhist sees with despair the collapse of his ideals, yet watches, impassively. Suppose the tolerant Christian sees his world as increasingly departing from his ideals, sees his psychic integrity as receding and his ideals' existence as slowly collapsing, but greets this merely with detached, accepting, and private grief. These are not fanatics, but they do exhibit (1)-(6).

I mentioned in the introduction that the individuals we typically think of as fanatics are members of groups, rather than isolated individuals. There's no such thing as an isolated fanatic, and there's no such thing as a fanatic who bears ordinary relations to other individuals. As Gabriel Marcel writes,

The fanatic cannot be an isolated being... he exists among others and ... between these others and himself there is formed ... a unity of identity or harmonic range. This unity... is felt as a link which exalts, and the fanaticism of one man is always kept alight by contact with the fanaticism of another. (Marcel 2008: 102)

The fanatic's group is constituted by shared commitment to a sacred value, as well as the sense that membership in the group is necessary for preserving this value. To be clear: the fanatic may *in fact* be physically isolated, adrift in a society in which he feels unwelcome or alienated. But he sees himself as defined by membership in some group. The group can be merely notional; physical or

even temporal proximity isn't necessary. The fanatic can identify with some group that lives across the world (think of the cases of teenagers in affluent liberal democracies identifying with or even attempting to join ISIS). The fanatic can identify with a group all of whose members are dead (think of the individual who identifies with a lost movement or a past age).

More precisely:

(7) Group identity: the fanatic identifies himself with a group, where this group is defined by shared commitment to a sacred value.

Let's link these features together. 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. These relations of dependence make group orientation essential.³⁰

And this is where the behavioral element becomes prominent. The relations of value-dependence makes opposition to other groups essential. 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.

³⁰ Passmore focuses on a similar feature. He claims that fanatics treat some set of beliefs as authoritative, and that what "fanatics have in common is the notion that those who do not share their beliefs are in some way morally inferior to them" (2003: 219). Crosson agrees: analyzing Marcel's account of fanaticism, he claims that fanaticism is a group-phenomenon in which outsiders are seen third-personally, as objects to be contended with rather than agents to be reasoned with (Crosson 2003).

This oppositional tendency can be present to different degrees. In the minimal case, the individual simply notes that outsiders exist and are potentially threatening. In the extreme case, the fanatic sees these outsiders as to be dealt with rather than reasoned with. After all, the fanatic accepts some ideal which is not itself subject to rational justification. Rational argumentation won't sway the other side. They are to be contended with, suppressed, or simply eliminated. The fanatic thereby denies them their status as potential subjects of rational engagement, i.e., persons. It is a short step from there—the denial of personhood—to the characteristic life of the fanatic: the rage, the propensity toward violence.³¹

Consider Foucault:

The polemicist ... proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorising him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game does not consist of recognising this person as a subject having the right to speak, but of abolishing him as an interlocutor, from any possible dialogue; and his final objective will be, not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth, but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning. The polemicist relies on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied.

(Foucault 1984: 382)

³¹ Of course, this violence isn't exclusively directed at the out-group. It's common for groups of fanatics to participate in ritualized violence directed at their own members. But this violence may have a different explanation: it can serve as a way of ensuring total compliance with the group's ideals.

Foucault is discussing “polemicists” rather than fanatics, but his points carry over. Fanaticism is a constellation of traits that make this disposition to deny humanity to outsiders quite likely; the psychic dependence on an unquestionable ideal, when coupled with the sense that the ideal is threatened by non-acceptance by outsiders, promotes thinking of those outsiders not merely as fellow persons with different values, but as enemies. And this disposes the fanatic to violence.

Notice that the constellation of traits generates a *propensity* or *disposition* toward violence; it does not *necessitate* violence.³² Given the vagaries of human psychology and the complexity of situational factors bearing on individuals’ behavior, it would be foolhardy to claim that (4)-(7) guarantee violence. And this point generalizes: I doubt that there is *any* trait, commitment, or view which would, independently of other psychological and situational factors, necessitate violent behavior. Consider a more familiar example. Racist beliefs tend to promote morally problematic behavior (people with overtly racist beliefs are more likely to discriminate, to treat members of other races unfairly, to favor policies that disadvantage members of other races, and so forth). Nonetheless, there may be particular cases in which racist beliefs are accompanied by morally acceptable behavior (perhaps the racist individual has no opportunity to act on his beliefs, or faces social pressure against doing so, or—as in the case of Huck Finn—finds his racist beliefs overruled by other passions or commitments). This does not reduce the interest in analyzing the way in which racist beliefs generate a propensity to morally problematic behavior. Just so with (4)-(7) and violent intolerance.

So (4)-(7) generate a disposition to violence. This disposition to violence can be blocked, and some of the ways in which it can be blocked are philosophically interesting. In particular, there may be cases in which the *content* of a value puts it in tension with some of the conditions for fanaticism.

³² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to address this point.

Put differently, there may be certain values that are unlikely to generate fanaticism. By way of illustration, suppose we have a group whose members treat freedom from coercion as a sacred value. Could members of this group be fanatical with respect to that value? I think the answer is no, or at least not wholeheartedly. To the extent that the person wholeheartedly accepts the value of freedom from coercion, he will not attempt to coerce others into accepting this value (though, of course, he might *wish* or *hope* that others will come to these values on their own). He will see that some others do not accept this value; but he'll see this as something that they themselves must put right. Thus, he will be unlikely to exhibit conditions (6)-(7). Or, if he does exhibit these conditions, he will experience some tension or fragmentation of his commitments. We can generalize this point: certain values will be in tension with fanaticism. I hope to explore this claim in a future paper.³³

8. Conclusion

I've attempted to provide an account of the fanatic. The Enlightenment accounts of fanaticism focus on three features:

1. Unwavering commitment to an ideal
2. Unwillingness to subject the ideal (or its premises) to rational critique
3. Non-rational provenance of the ideal (or its premises)

³³ A side note: I focus on individual fanaticism. But, given that the fanatic is necessarily a member of and oriented toward groups, would it make sense to start there? That is, should we first define group fanaticism and work backwards to individual fanaticism? I don't think this would work. Certainly, analogues of (1)-(7) can be present in groups. But there can be fanatical groups not all of whose members are fanatics.

I've argued that (1)-(3) do not offer an adequate characterization of fanaticism. They do characterize a state that I've called being a *true believer*. These are purely rational moves that can go wrong; they consist in displaying inappropriate certitude about some ideal, which is preserved by refusing to subject the ideal to rational critique and taking it to have a non-rational provenance.

But this alone doesn't constitute fanaticism—the peaceful Buddhists and the tolerant Christians are fully committed on these fronts, and may even exceed the fanatic in the degree to which they meet each of these conditions, but are not properly characterized as fanatics. For they lack the *intolerance* that's characteristic of fanatics. In short: (1)-(3) have no direct bearing on whether the individual is intolerant.

I've argued that the true believer can develop in a certain way, and when he does fanaticism emerges. Suppose we have a true believer about some sacred value. There are four mutually reinforcing properties that can jointly lead such an individual to fanaticism:

4. Sacred values: the agent adopts one or more sacred values
5. Fragility of the self: the agent needs to treat a value (or its premises) as unquestionable in order to preserve unity of the self.
6. Fragility of the value: the value's status is taken to be threatened when it is not widely accepted.
7. Group identity: the fanatic identifies himself with a group, where this group is defined by shared commitment to a sacred value.

Each of these lends support to the other. An agent whose self is robustly unified independently of commitment to an unquestioned ideal won't be liable to treat the ideal as threatened by criticism, nor will he see those who share his ideal as a unified front against an enemy who, by rejecting or questioning the ideal, puts the ideal at risk.

I began by asking whether “fanaticism” picks out anything objective or is a mere term of abuse. The above account does pick out a constellation of mutually reinforcing traits. Conditions (1)-(3) are common, perhaps pervasive. But (4)-(7) are not. None of these connections are necessary; an agent could exhibit a few of these traits without exhibiting all of them, or could exhibit some to a high degree and others to a minimal degree. There will be borderline cases. But (4)-(7) do tend to be reinforce one another; and when all present to high degrees, we tend to have paradigmatic cases of fanaticism.

In this essay, I have merely tried to get the phenomenon of fanaticism into view. Thus, my account does leave several unanswered questions. Is there a way of blocking the progression from (1)-(3) to (4)-(7)? In other words, is there a way of blocking the progression from true believer to fanatic? Nietzschean accounts tell us to be stronger, to be more self-reliant—in effect, to get rid of condition (5). But is that realistic? Is it desirable? Toleration-based accounts might focus on (6): let the ideal be questioned. Do not reject those who oppose it. But can it then serve its function of promoting psychic integrity? I can't answer these questions here. But my hope is that the account of fanaticism at least puts us in a position to investigate them.

I conclude by noting that what is philosophically interesting about fanaticism is that a purely rational failure—being a true believer—can, when coupled with an additional practical defect concerning

one's psychic integrity and a particular view of the fragility of value, produce a moral defect. A tacit philosophical view concerning the status and fragility of value can promote a dangerous pathology.³⁴

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