

9 Group Fanaticism and Narratives of Ressentiment

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9.1 Introduction

The current political climate is awash with groups that we might be tempted to label irrational, extremist, hyper-partisan; it is full of echo-chambers, radicalization, and epistemic bubbles. Philosophers have profitably analyzed some of these phenomena.¹ In this essay, I draw attention to a crucial but neglected aspect of our time: the way in which certain groups are *fanatical*.

Fanaticism might seem to be a mere term of abuse, lacking any interesting philosophical content. After all, it's undeniable that labeling a group fanatical can be mere rhetoric; perusing newspapers, you can find everyone from vegans to environmentalists to the Republican party to supporters of Bernie Sanders labeled as fanatical groups. Much of this is just invective, consisting of nothing more than insulting and condemning groups with whom one disagrees. But not all of it. I think there is a philosophically interesting phenomenon that we can uncover. There is a distinctive form of group pathology, worthy of philosophical attention and connected in intriguing ways to social and political problems, that we can call *group fanaticism*. This paper will attempt to bring the problem into view.

I begin, in [Section 9.2](#), by reviewing an account of individual fanaticism. [Section 9.3](#) considers a very simple but ultimately mistaken view of group fanaticism, according to which a group qualifies as fanatical if a sufficient number of its members are fanatics. The failure of this account indicates that features of the group, rather than merely features of the individual members, must be linked to fanaticism. [Section 9.4](#) clarifies this point by distinguishing between the features of fanatical groups and those of other types of problematic groups, such as extremist and cultish groups. This puts us in a position, in [Section 9.5](#), to argue for the *generative view* of group fanaticism. On this view, a group qualifies as fanatical only if it has features that promote individual fanaticism. This raises the question of *how* groups might promote individual fanaticism.

1 See, for example, Nguyen (2020), Cassam (2018), and Alfano et al (2018).

While I don't think there is any one unique way of doing so, I do think that there is a very common feature of fanatical groups: they encourage an affective condition that philosophers sometimes call "resentment," which differs from ordinary resentment. [Section 9.6](#) examines this point, explaining what resentment is, how it can be fostered, and how it can lead to fanaticism. I believe this account helps us to identify a disturbing and increasingly widespread feature of contemporary social and political groups.

9.2 Individual Fanaticism

To begin, we need an account of individual fanaticism. 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 acquired these connotations in the 1500's, when Martin Luther employed it to denounce his religious opponents (see La Vopa 1997).² Analogously, in the early modern period we find Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume, and others presenting the fanatic as the religious individual who diverges from the mainstream view and condones violence.³ 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. His values instantiate a community. And, of course, his ideals demand violence. Analogously, consider the violent white nationalist, whose fantasies of racial superiority are often taken to have religious justification, who views nonwhites as legitimately subordinated, and who condones acts of violence to achieve this end.⁴

In Katsafanas (2019), I argued that an individual qualifies as fanatical to the extent that he displays four features:

- (F1) Sacred values: the agent adopts one or more sacred values.
- (F2) Fragility of the self: the agent needs to treat a value as sacred in order to preserve his identity.
- (F3) Fragility of the value: the value's status is taken to be threatened when it is not widely accepted.

2 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.

3 See Locke (1975, Chapter 19); Hume (1985, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm"); Shaftesbury (1999, 10); and Kant (2007, 2:251n).

4 For an introduction to some of these individuals, see Stern (2003) and Berger (2018). Of course, I am not claiming that *every* member of ISIS or *every* white nationalist fits this description, only that the typical ISIS member or white nationalist is frequently described in this way.

- (F4) Group identity: the fanatic identifies himself with a group, where this group is defined by shared commitment to a sacred value.

I will offer a brief explanation of each feature.

Start with (F1). “Sacred value” is a technical term from empirical psychology. Here is a typical definition: 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 et al. 2000, 853). Although this definition has several ambiguities, the core idea that psychologists are attempting to capture is that some of our values are treated as inviolable, incontestable (in the sense that it is perceived as wrong to contemplate trading or abandoning them), and invulnerable to standard forms of rational critique (in the sense that justificatory reasoning does not affect one’s commitment to these values in the same way or to the same extent that it affects one’s commitment to other values). To illustrate, consider two ways of understanding the value of *human life*. Most of us agree that human life is immensely valuable. But there is a difference between thinking that human life is immensely valuable and thinking that its value is inviolable, incontestable, and invulnerable. Treating human life as immensely valuable is compatible with treating it as something that can be weighed against other goods, traded for those goods in certain circumstances, critiqued in ways that affect our degree of commitment to its value, and so on (here, we might consider a position such as Peter Singer’s, which treats human life as having a value that outweighs many competing concerns but also treats its value as fungible). To treat human life as having sacred value would be, for example, to accept the Catholic church’s claim 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). Insofar as these Catholic claims are treated as invulnerable to standard forms of rational critique (because they are taken to be sourced in divine revelation), they are expressions of sacred values.

Consider now (F2). People understand themselves under different descriptions: when asked who you are, you might cite your activities, your job, your skills, and abilities, various social roles that you occupy, groups that you align yourself with, goals that you have, ways in which you characteristically behave, traits that you take yourself to have, and so on. If we abstract from the individual’s participation in particular roles, groups, activities, and so on, we can speak of the agent’s identity in terms of the values that her various commitments express. Some people can preserve a sense of themselves independently of their commitment

to *particular* values. I value philosophy, but can envision myself living a different life that doesn't involve that valuation or that commitment. Other things are worthwhile and one isn't making a mistake by privileging them. But others are too firmly wedded to their particular values to envision their being optional: some people need to treat their values as unconditional in order to preserve their sense of identity. Recognition of contingency *would* disrupt the values. Perhaps aware of this at some level, the person blocks recognition of the contingency. He takes himself to have some source of special authority that legitimates and binds him to his value. Uncertainty and doubt are thereby eliminated, and self-integrity preserved. This is what (F2) expresses.

Turn to (F3). 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. Thus (F3).

Finally, consider (F4). The agent's sense of self is dependent on 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 identity. These relations of dependence make group orientation essential.⁵ And this is where the behavioral element of fanaticism 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.

Each of (F1)–(F4) lends support to the other. An agent who has a strong sense of identity independently of commitment to an unquestioned ideal won't be liable to treat the ideal as threatened by criticism,

5 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).

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.

So the above account picks out a constellation of mutually reinforcing traits. 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 (F1)–(F4) do tend to reinforce one another; and when all present to high degrees, we tend to have paradigmatic cases of fanaticism. For when these features are present to sufficiently high degrees, the agent will be disposed toward the type of violent intolerance that we associate with fanaticism. Thus, we could list a final feature:

(F5): the agent is disposed toward violent intolerant activities.

(F5) alone doesn't constitute fanaticism, as not all violently disposed individuals are fanatics. But when (F5) is produced via (F1)–(F4), we have a clear case of fanaticism.

9.3 The Simple Account of Group Fanaticism

Suppose we accept this account of individual fanaticism. How do we account for fanatical *groups*? Let's start with the most obvious possibility.

The simple account: a group is fanatical iff all or most of its members are fanatical.

The problem with the simple account is that it makes the connection between group and individual *accidental*. Suppose a group of fanatical neo-Nazis happens to form a knitting club. And suppose the knitting club focuses exclusively on knitting: during the hours they spend there, the neo-Nazis talk about nothing but knitting. The knitting group's members are entirely fanatical. But the knitting group itself is not fanatical in any interesting sense. We can see this by contrasting the neo-Nazi knitting club with a group that actually does encourage violence, such as the violent white supremacist group Atomwaffen. Consider the words of one Atomwaffen member, announcing the formation of this group and calling for new members:

We are a very fanatical, ideological band of comrades who do both activism and militant training. Hand to hand, arms training, and various other forms of training. As for activism, we spread awareness in the real world through unconventional means. (keyboard warriorism is nothing to do with what we are.). Joining us means serious dedication not only to the Atomwaffen Division and its members, but to the goal of ultimate uncompromising victory. With this means only those willing to get out on the streets, in the woods, or where ever we maybe in the world and work together in the physical realm.

As started earlier, no keyboard warriorism, (we do however do a lot of hacking, you won't hear about this though) if you don't want to meet up and get things done don't bother.

(October 12, 2015 post by Clint Russell on the "Iron March" website)⁶

Atomwaffen explicitly presents itself as encouraging its members to participate in violent activities in the real world, seeking "ultimate uncompromising victory" over nonwhites.

As a comparison of the knitting club and Atomwaffen makes clear, there is an important difference between genuinely fanatical groups and groups all of whose members are fanatics.

We can capture the difference in terms of collective intentionality. I won't defend any particular view of collective intentionality, but in rejecting the Simple View I will rely on the idea that there's a difference between collective intentions and aggregates of individual intentions. It's widely accepted that there's a difference between these two scenarios: (1) you intend to visit New York and I intend to visit New York; (2) we intend to visit New York. Sums of individual intentions aren't identical to collective intentions. A group may comprise individuals all of whom, individually, have the intention to participate in violent activities; but that doesn't mean that the group has a collective intention to participate in violent activities. And that's just what's on display in the above cases: the hypothetical knitting club members have a collective intention to knit, and individual intentions to participate in violent activities; but they lack the collective intention to participate in violent activities. Atomwaffen's members, by contrast, do have a collective intention to engage in violent activities.

That's the problem with the Simple Account. On the Simple Account, the group's features bear no connection to the individual fanaticism of its members. But presumably the *point* of labeling a group fanatical is to identify features of the group that bear some interesting connection to fanaticism. As I will discuss below, certain *types* of groups, or certain *features* of groups, either attract or are conducive to fanatics. An account that merely labeled groups fanatical when a sufficient number of their members were fanatical would ignore this fact. It wouldn't explain which features of the group were responsible for the fanaticism.

9.4 Distinctions Between Types of Problematic Groups

It's conceptually possible for there to be non-fanatical groups all or most of whose members are fanatics. So we will need a different account of

⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20170615224829/http://ironmarch.org/index.php?topic/5647-atomwaffen-division-central-topic/>

fanatical groups. How might we generate that account? Well, another straightforward possibility presents itself. I've just pointed out that we can distinguish violent groups in terms of their collective intentions. So why not employ a similar account to fanatical groups? Perhaps we can find something that fanatical groups collectively intend.

Already, though, I think we can see a problem with this proposal. Violent groups collectively intend to engage in violence but fanatical groups don't collectively intend to engage in fanaticism. Fanaticism, as I've been analyzing it, needn't involve any particular intention. Consider individual fanaticism: if my account is correct, fanaticism pertains to the manner in which one selects, relates to, and pursues various goals rather than to the contents of these goals. So, if we wanted to find a collective intention for fanatical groups, it's not clear what the content of the intention would be.

It is, however, true that fanatics tend to behave in certain ways: they tend to engage in violent intolerance. Might we then define fanatical groups in terms of their tendency to promote violent intolerance? Might we define fanatical groups in terms of collective intentions to engage in violent actions against other groups or individuals?

I think there are several problems with this kind of approach. First, the account is too broad. It captures too many groups that we'd ordinarily classify as non-fanatical. For example: during World War II, the Allied governments promoted violence against the Axis powers. But it would be odd to conclude that the UK was fanatical in responding violently to the Nazi attacks. Or: Nelson Mandela co-founded the armed branch of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation). At his behest, group members began attacking government installations and contemplated a campaign of guerilla warfare. This group certainly promoted violence, but it's not obvious that it should be characterized as a fanatical group. Many see its actions as rational. Examples can be multiplied.

We might also try to define fanatical groups in terms of the contents of their views; but this seems hopeless. There's too much diversity in the groups. There's very little ideological overlap in the views of ISIS and Atomwaffen, for example.

We might try to avoid this problem by stepping back from the particularities of the group's ideology and focusing on more general claims that tend to be accepted by fanatical groups. For example, in a recent book J.M. Berger defines extremism as follows: "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group" (Berger 2018, 44). This does seem to be a common thread in many fanatical groups: ISIS and Atomwaffen have different in- and out-groups, different methods, and different goals, but they do agree that the in-group is threatened by an out-group, which must be attacked.

Again, though, I worry that this account is too broad. Under this definition, most of the United States and Soviet administrations during the Cold War would have qualified as extremist groups. The Allied governments during WWII would have been just as extremist as the Axis powers; both meet the definition equally well. After all, as the WWII case demonstrates, it's sometimes *true* that in-group's success or survival can't be separated for the need from hostile action against an out-group. And, depending on how we define "hostile action," the notion could cover even more cases: groups fighting climate change will have success only if they overcome out-groups who deny climate change; groups fighting for universal health care in the US will be successful only if they overcome out-groups who fight against those plans; groups fighting for mandatory vaccinations will be successful only if they overcome anti-vaxxers; and so on.⁷

This brings us to another problem with the proposal: it risks conflating a number of different types of groups. Consider a few types of groups that are potentially problematic:

- Violent groups: groups that encourage violence.
- Intolerant groups: groups that attempt to overrule, suppress, or eliminate opposed views.
- Extremist groups: groups that endorse values that are considered extreme or who advocate extreme measures toward more widely accepted values.
- Cultish groups: groups whose members venerate a leader, treating the leader as having unquestionable authority to direct the lives of his followers.

Fanatical groups are often violent. They are often intolerant. They are often extreme. They are often cultish. But I don't think that any of these features are sufficient for a group to qualify as fanatical. A group can be violent, intolerant, extreme, or cultish without thereby being fanatical.

Of course, I'm not denying that we can always define *types* of violence, intolerance, extremism, or cultishness that correlated more closely with fanaticism. And certainly if a group has *all* of these features, it is likely to be fanatical. Still, I think we should keep these notions apart. I've already given some examples of the way in which the promotion of violence comes apart from fanaticism, so let's consider the other cases.

Let's start with intolerance. While fanatical groups tend to be intolerant, intolerance alone isn't sufficient for fanaticism. After all, there

7 More generally, we might consider whether a fanatical group could be defined roughly as follows: the members of the group have a shared intention to protect a sacred value that is perceived as threatened by outsiders. Again, I think this is too broad, as the examples above indicate. It might be a necessary condition, but it is not yet a sufficient condition.

are groups that are intolerant of hate speech, or anti-vaccination movements, or climate change denial, that don't seem to be fanatical.

Extremism is sometimes associated with fanaticism, but these don't have to align. The first thing to notice is that groups are labeled extreme in relation to some baseline of what's considered normal or acceptable (see Cassam 2018). But the standards for normalcy and acceptability shift over time. By the standards of the US South in the 1960s, the Freedom Riders were an extremist group. Analogously, the National Woman's Party, which picketed in front of the White House during World War I in order to promote female suffrage, was widely seen as extreme group. But I doubt that most of us would today see these groups as fanatical. Aside from that, it's possible for a group to be fanatical while aiming to realize values that are politically and socially moderate. Violent environmental groups are a good example: recent surveys show that the majority of participants endorse coordinated responses to climate change; but few would approve of the tactics of the Earth Liberation Front when it firebombs housing. Or: many people are opposed to nuclear power, but few would endorse Chaim Nissim's 1982 rocket attack on the French Superphénix nuclear power plant. The goals are moderate but the methods aren't.

Fanatical groups are often cultish—Aum Shinriko, which carried out the Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1995, is a good example. But fanatical groups needn't be cultish. Insofar as we take white nationalist and jihadist groups as examples, it's a familiar fact that many of them are organized as independent cells without a central authority figure. The various affiliates of Al Qaeda are exemplary in this regard. And, looking at this from the other direction, not all cultish groups are fanatical. For example, if we define cultishness as I've done above—treating a leader as having unquestionable authority to direct the lives of his followers—then many organized religions with central authority figures will qualify.

In light of these considerations, I think it makes sense to distinguish fanatical groups from violent, intolerant, extreme, and cultish groups. Of course, these considerations aren't decisive. Someone who wanted to identify group fanaticism with cultishness, extremism, intolerance, or violence could refine the view, adding qualifications or complications. That might work. But I will pursue a different strategy.

I suggest that it's helpful to think of fanatical groups in the following way: fanatical groups are groups that *encourage fanaticism amongst their members*. I will call this the *generative view* of group fanaticism.

Generative View of Group Fanaticism: a group qualifies as fanatical iff it promotes individual fanaticism.

Why might we want to accept that the generative view?

Presumably, the point of labeling a group as fanatical is to pick out some distinctive problem with the group. Many groups encourage violence,

intolerance, and so forth. But some groups are problematic for a different reason: they encourage the emergence of fanaticism. Insofar as fanaticism is a distinctive pathology, and insofar as we can identify the way in which certain groups promote this pathology, we would have reason to single out these groups with a special term.⁸

Turning to historical work on fanaticism, it's notable that many writers are concerned to study fanatical groups precisely because they see these groups as producing ever more fanatics. A number of writers treat fanaticism as *contagious*. Fanaticism spreads on contact, like a disease. This claim is endorsed by several early modern philosophers, including at least Shaftesbury and Voltaire. Consider again a quotation from Shaftesbury:

Fury flies from face to face, and the disease [fanaticism] 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; emphasis added)

Fanaticism spreads: it is “no sooner seen than caught.” And Voltaire agrees, claiming that fanaticism is a “spiritual pestilence,” “a malady of the mind, which is taken in the same way as smallpox” (Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*, “Fanaticism” entry). Martin Luther warns of the same thing: his term for fanatics, *Schwärmer*, was intended in part to draw attention to the way in which the “insane peasants in their raging” *swarm*, like flies or locusts, across the countryside. For, he warns us, they “betake themselves to violence, and rob and rage and act like mad dogs.” These peasants are “like a great fire, which attacks and lays waste a whole land ... Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish” than these fanatics (Luther, “Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants,” 1525).

8 Note that condition F4, above, already linked individual fanaticism to a certain form of group identification. Thus, a particular form of collective belonging is part of the definition of individual fanaticism; and, I will be arguing, a particular form of relation to individuals is part of the definition of group fanaticism. So individual fanaticism and group fanaticism are often intertwined. That said, it is possible for individuals to be fanatical in relation to groups that are not themselves fanatical. An individual could manifest features F1–F4, and thereby qualify as a fanatic; in virtue of F4, he would be related to some group that defines itself in terms of a sacred value; but the group itself could be non-fanatical (assuming it has no tendency to encourage the emergence of individual fanatics).

Disease; pestilence; swarms; great fires. These claims are metaphorical and are certainly imprecise. But I think they contain a truth. Fanaticism tends to flare up at certain times and in certain conditions; it can be dormant for a long while, then spread quickly. In some cases, mere exposure to fanatical groups seems to draw ordinary individuals into fanaticism. For example, a recent review article sifted through over 5000 empirical studies of radicalization and concluded that there is “tentative evidence that exposure to radical violent online material is associated with extremist online and offline attitudes” (Hassan et al 2018, 1). If correct, this is striking: *mere exposure* to a radical position is associated with affective changes.

Let’s look more carefully at how this might work. How might a fanatical group generate new fanatics? I think there are two main pathways. Sometimes, the spread of fanaticism is individually managed: some fanatical groups actively try to recruit new members on an individual basis. At other times, fanaticism seems to spread without this kind of overt contact and management of individuals. Due to space constraints, I will focus only on the second mechanism.

There’s a large literature on what’s sometimes called radicalization. The stories of radicalization are as multifarious as the stories of any other attachment: people are drawn into relationships with fanatical groups at times through loneliness, at times through rage; at times through despair, at times through certitude. Nonetheless, there are massive research projects underway on this topic. Most of these projects focus on how individuals become terrorists or members of terrorist groups. Terrorism and fanaticism aren’t equivalent: you can be a fanatic without being a terrorist, and vice versa. But, insofar as fanaticism involves a disposition toward violent intolerance, it could be factor in explaining individual’s commitment to terrorism. So some of these points will be transferable.

The first potential explanation of radicalization treats it as analogous to any other form of human activity: some individuals turn to terrorism or join fanatical groups because, in light of their beliefs and evaluative commitments, doing so is instrumentally rational. For example, given certain beliefs a person might conclude that terrorist activity is the best way of achieving a putatively valuable political goal. Al Qaeda, at least in its early days, justified its actions in that way: it produced at least two versions of a seven phase, 20-year plan, which began with provoking the US to attack Muslim countries, inciting local resistance and opposition to the US, broadening the conflict into new territories, and so on. Several phases of this plan have come to pass exactly as predicted, and Bin Laden correctly noted that “All we have to do is to send two mujahideen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda in order to make the generals race there.”⁹ So we

9 “Full Transcript of Bin Ladin’s Speech,” Al Jazeera, 1 November 2014. See also Crenshaw (1990).

shouldn't discount a very straightforward explanation for radicalization: certain beliefs and evaluative commitments will make radicalized behavior appear eminently rational.

The question, though, is how we get to those beliefs and values. And this is where the real work begins. There is little agreement in the work on radicalization; theories abound.¹⁰ Let me give a few examples. Proponents of *Significance Quest Theory* argue that people—especially people in precarious social or economic circumstances—seek goals or quests that provide them with a sense of meaning (Kruglanski et al 2014). People are attracted to fanatical groups insofar as these groups offer a significant goal toward which one can strive. Another strand of research focuses on *peer groups*. To simplify, this research project relies on the idea that fanatical groups provide a welcoming community for otherwise isolated individuals (see, for example, Klausen 2016). Finally, some researchers advocate *Identity Theory*, which states that “experiencing identity conflict or confusion—whether because of a struggle to adapt to a new culture, one’s stage of life (e.g., adolescence), or other challenges—is often viewed as potentially leaving individuals more open to adopting new ideas and behaviors, including those associated with terrorism” (Smith 2018). One could go on, but these are three of the major theories. In short: interviews and studies reveal that radicalized individuals are often driven by three factors: a desire for something that gives life importance or provides a goal toward which one can strive; a longing for a sense of acceptance or community; and the attempt to forge a new sense of identity.¹¹

Suppose something like that is right. It’s certainly true that paradigmatically fanatical groups tend to offer narratives that would be attractive to those seeking goals, community, and identity. But one thing that’s left out of these explanations is the simple fact that *lots of groups* do this. To be sure, ISIS provides goals, community, and identity; but so does a knitting club. Stormfront provides goals, community, and identity; but so does Oprah’s book club. So, while I certainly don’t want to dispute the idea that some people join radical groups because they seek goals, community, or identity, this explanation isn’t particularly illuminating.

10 McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) is a helpful recent overview.

11 There are disputes about whether one of these factors is more powerful than the other. For example, Sageman claims that “social bonds play a more important role in the emergence of the global Salafi jihad than ideology” (Sageman 2008, 178). But even he admits that evaluative changes or changes in ideals are also central: “With the gradual intensity of interaction within the group and the progressive distance from former ties, they [members of the group] changed their values. From secular people they became more religious. From material rewards, they began to value spiritual rewards, including eventually otherworldly rewards. From the pursuit of short term opportunities, they turned to a long term vision of the world.” (Sageman 2008, 86–87). See also work by Jessica Stern, Deeyah Khan, Eli Saslow, Graeme Wood, and Jerrold Post.

These are reasons for joining groups in general, rather than fanatical or extremist groups in particular.¹²

In sum: the accounts with which we've been provided are just general explanations of why individuals join groups. They don't single out any distinctive features of fanatical groups. So, we have a question: is there anything distinctive about the way in which fanatical groups generate fanatics? I will suggest that there is.

9.5 Group Fanaticism as the Tendency to Encourage Individual Fanaticism

We've struggled to identify a distinctive mechanism by which fanatical groups would generate new fanatics; the existing literature on the topic doesn't seem particularly helpful, insofar as it specifies mechanisms that are not unique to fanatical groups. I will try to specify a unique mechanism.

The first thing to notice is that the account of group fanaticism relies on an account of individual fanaticism. For the remainder of this paper, I will simply assume that the account given in [Section 9.2](#) is correct. If we work with this account of individual fanaticism, the Generative View says that a group qualifies as fanatical iff it promotes features (F1)–(F4) in its members.

It's relatively easy to see how feature (F1), the presence of sacred values, could be promoted. All that we'd need is for the group to promulgate the idea that some particular value is inviolable, incontestable, and dialectically invulnerable. Many groups do this. Consider Catholic statements about the sacred value of human life. Here are a few: "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," so that "the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral" (John Paul II 1995, 57). These are clear and explicit statements of sacred values.

So condition (F1) is straightforward. But conditions (F2)–(F4) are more complex. No doubt (F2)–(F4) can be encouraged in a number of ways. But

12 Of course, proponents of these views do have responses. For example, proponents of Identity Theory can agree that knitting clubs also provide the agent with a sense of identity, but argue that they do so *to a much lesser degree* than fanatical groups. After all, fanatical groups tend to provide extremely clear criteria for belonging to the group; they encompass many or all aspects of the person's life, rather than providing merely an isolated diversion; and so on. In short: while the knitting club and the fanatical group don't differ in the functions that they perform, they do differ in the *degree* to which they perform these functions. While I lack the space to do full justice to this point, I think my objection retains its force: if it is to be more than a mere accident that fanatical groups clearly demarcate of their members, are all-encompassing, and so on, we need some further explanation of why this is so. Below, I will postulate a mechanism that explains why fanatical groups have these kinds of features.

I will focus on just one method, which I take to be quite common among fanatical groups, and which does distinguish them from more innocuous groups: the fostering of *ressentiment*. To be clear, I'm not trying to specify the *single correct* account of how groups promote fanaticism. Rather, I'm trying to elucidate one common but underexamined process.

9.6 Narratives of Ressentiment Encourage (F2)–(F4)

In this section, I will argue that a common and perhaps universal feature of fanatical groups is their tendency to foster an affective condition that Nietzsche describes as “*ressentiment*.”¹³ When a person accepts a resentment-fostering narrative, features (F2)–(F4) are likely to emerge. Thus, by promoting resentment-fostering narratives, groups can promote the emergence of fanatical individuals. To see this, though, we need to do several things. Section 9.6.1 explains what resentment is. Section 9.6.2 explores the way in which certain narratives can promote the emergence of resentment. Section 9.6.3 argues that resentment and certain kinds of narrative can generate a feedback loop, with each strengthening the other. Section 9.6.4 shows how these features jointly promote conditions (F2)–(F4), and thereby encourage individual fanaticism.

9.6.1 What is Ressentiment?

To start, we need to say what resentment is. Resentment is just the French word for resentment. But it acquired a special technical sense in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*. There, Nietzsche uses “*ressentiment*” rather than the ordinary German word for resentment, *Groll* (or related words such as *Abneigungen*, or speaking of someone who is *nachtragend* or *übelnehmerisch*). He uses this French word to pick out a state that differs from ordinary resentment. While I won't be endorsing every aspect of Nietzsche's account, I will follow him and other philosophers in distinguishing resentment from ordinary resentment.

First, let's define ordinary resentment as *indignation resulting from the belief that one was wronged*. Although nothing that I say will depend on accepting exactly this definition of resentment, I do think this corresponds to the standard usage.

Notice that resentment needn't involve individual wrongs; it can also be responsive to perceived collective wrongs. I can resent someone for shoving me on the subway; or I can resent someone, or some group, for wronging a group or collective with which I identify (Stockdale 2013). A black US citizen who has never himself been subject to mistreatment by the police could nonetheless experience resentment when considering the

13 Although I lack the space to explore this point, *ressentiment* is probably best regarded as an “affective mechanism,” as analyzed by Szanto (this volume).

way in which black people are wronged by the police; a Palestinian living in the US, with no direct connection to people in Palestine, could nonetheless experience resentment when reading of Israeli interactions with Palestinians; a white nationalist, who has never himself experienced any economic hardships or episodes of oppression, could nonetheless experience resentment when contemplating the perceived oppression or diminution of his group. This type of collective resentment, though subject to less philosophical attention than the individual cases, is extremely common.¹⁴

So resentment can be individual or collective. In either case, it's crucial that resentment requires the agent to perceive herself or her group as wronged. It thus has fairly complex presuppositions and will be dependent upon certain beliefs about the world. Minimally, the agent will have to be capable of identifying a wrongdoer, an act of wronging, and so on. And the resentment will be responsive to these beliefs: if the agent ceases to believe that Bill has wronged her, she should cease to feel resentment; if she believes that Bill has corrected or atoned for the wrong, she should again cease to feel resentment.

Resentment shares some of these features. It, too, involves indignation resulting from the belief that one (or, more commonly, one's group) was wronged. But it's more complex. Briefly: resentment is a form of resentment coupled with a self-reinforcing, self-perpetuating narrative. I will explain. Although I won't be doing exegetical work, I do think that Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler have identified core features of resentment. So let's look at their account.

First, Scheler claims that resentment has a particular etiology: it originates from a desire for revenge. But what is revenge? As Scheler understands it, a desire for revenge emerges when (i) the agent perceives himself (or his group) as in some way slighted, injured, or wronged by (ii) some person or group and (iii) seeks some response to this wrong, but (iv) is unable to respond *immediately* to this wrong in a way that he regards as satisfactory, so that (v) gratification is delayed. For example: someone insults me, but I'm unable to respond immediately; instead, I fantasize about ways of getting back at him. By contrast, if someone insults me and I immediately respond, it would be at least a little odd to speak of my desiring revenge; the desire for revenge arises only when immediate compensation is unavailable. If we understand revenge in this way, then all cases of desiring revenge will involve a perceived inability to respond immediately to some wrong; and this constitutes an awareness of one's own impotence. In experiencing the desire for revenge, one *wants* to respond, but can't yet do so; so gratification is delayed.

Scheler is here emphasizing the way in which resentment is linked to a feeling of impotence. Originally, the feeling of impotence need not have

14 There is a large literature in political theory that addresses these cases. See, for example, Brown (1995).

any particular source; the agent could feel impotent because of perceived personal failings, inadequacies, the objective difficulty of attaining what he seeks, and so forth. However, resentment leads the agent to see this impotence as attributable to some person or group who is wronging the agent. The feeling of impotence can relate to any number of things: a goal that I see myself as blocked by others from achieving; a social status that I see others as denying me; or, in more complex cases, a particular self-conception, a particular sense of my own identity, that I see others as threatening or preventing me from attaining.

Let's dwell on that last case for a moment. Resentment can arise when an agent wants to attain or preserve some self-conception, but sees others as illegitimately threatening this. One is wronged because one is prevented from attaining or maintaining one's self-conception. In many cases, the person of resentment wants to attain a sense of identity that presents him as superior to or at least equal to the person or group that he resents. And this desire is not met.

This desire for acknowledgement is always present in resentment, though it doesn't have to be fully explicit. Unrequited love, unacknowledged talent, unreciprocated admiration, and so forth can give rise to resentment even if the person never conceptualizes himself as spurned, unacknowledged, or in any way lacking.¹⁵ And this is what distinguishes resentment from mere desire for revenge, which needn't be linked to this desire for acknowledgment. I might seek a secret revenge on someone, sabotaging his romantic prospects without caring whether he ever learns what I've done; or I might damage someone's property without concern for whether he discovers that *I* was the one who damaged it; and so on. But resentment is more demanding: it wants not only revenge but also acknowledgement of superiority or at least equality. So in resentment the desire for acknowledgment persists; in revenge it needn't.

Third, resentment is a dynamic, ramifying psychological process. The desire for revenge can be stable and discrete: I can feel wronged in some specific way and seek some specific compensation. This desire can be satisfied once vengeance is taken. But, all else being equal, resentment grows. It is not extinguished by vengeance. It seeks objects, but doesn't dissipate even if these objects are attained. Consider an example: someone embarrasses me by drawing attention to my disheveled appearance; a few days later, I call attention to the food stuck in his teeth; and then I feel restored. The issue is dropped. By contrast, in a case of resentment I might feel humiliated by a colleague; and I might continuously seek, over the years, to get back at him in a variety of ways, grimacing

15 For a nuanced, insightful discussion of the way in which some cases of resentment involve unreciprocated emotions, see Carlsson (2018). For accounts that treat a need for mutual acknowledgment as playing a fundamental role in social relations and the development of the self, see for example Honneth (1992) and Fraser and Honneth (2003).

as he talks, pointing out his faults to other colleagues, making fun of him behind his back, keeping an eye out for opportunities to point out his faults. So whereas revenge can be directed at a specific, limited act or circumstance, resentment recurs. Scheler writes that resentment involves “the repeated experiencing and reliving of a particular emotional response reaction against someone else” (Scheler 1994, 2).

Why is this? Why does resentment grow? Different answers are available. We might think that resentment, like some other emotional processes, has a typical trajectory. Some emotions extinguish quickly, whereas others take the form of long arcs in which they grow and then subside (compare surprise and grief). But there’s also a deeper explanation: insofar as resentment arises from the attempt to maintain a self-conception, and insofar as this self-conception is seen as threatened by another, the person of resentment can find himself in a situation where his very identity is dependent upon the rejection of some out-group. Maintaining one’s self-conception requires maintaining one’s antagonistic, negating stance toward the one who purportedly threatens it. So the person of resentment will be motivated to seek out new occasions for rejection and negation.

This is an important difference between resentment and resentment. Some philosophers think that resentment aims at reconciliation; it motivates the agent to seek a form of redress, which eliminates or mitigates the original wrong. Maybe that’s true of resentment but it’s not true of resentment. Eliminating resentment would eliminate the agent’s identity, or at least a core component of it. Thus, rather than aiming at extinction, resentment aims at expansion, growth, perpetuation.

This brings us to the fourth key feature: resentment leads to fantasies, imaginative compensation, and the construction of vindictory narratives. Scheler describes this by saying that resentment is a “falsification of the worldview [*Weltanschauung*]” (Scheler 1994, 47); and Nietzsche famously chronicles the process by which resentment can lead to a shift in a group’s evaluative commitments. Resentment tends to draw the person into a new perspective on the world. It doesn’t leave things as they are. “Regardless of what he observes, the world has a peculiar structure of emotional stress,” so that the person of resentment “concentrates increasingly” on the negative: “he has an urge to scold, to depreciate, to belittle whatever he can” (Scheler 1994). The characteristics of the resented person or group are belittled, demeaned, mocked, disparaged.

Scheler offers a helpful characterization these resentment-inspired fantasies. He writes that in resentment, the person “seeks a feeling of superiority or equality, and he attains his purpose by an illusory *devaluation* of the other man’s qualities or by a specific ‘blindness’ to these qualities. But secondly—and here lies the main achievement of *resentment*—he falsifies the *values themselves* which could bestow excellence

on any possible objects of comparison” (1994, 34). The person of resentment first ignores A’s qualities, but second begins to regard those qualities as disvaluable. So, suppose Bill feels threatened by intellectual attainments: never much educated himself and holding on to a vague suspicion that intellectuals would look down on him, Bill disparages intellectuals as effete, as charlatans, as self-important buffoons. He is aware of these judgments. But he is not aware that these judgments and attitudes are manifestations of resentment. So the surface attitudes have connections and presuppositions of which Bill is unaware.

We don’t have to accept the details of Scheler’s account in order to see its power. In essence, he is describing a characteristic feature of resentment: it arises from impotent vengefulness and gives rise to fantasies that involve recharacterizing the world. It is also tied to a desire for acknowledgment of one’s status, either as superior or equal or at least as not inferior; and it rankles all the more when this status as inferior is legitimated by the values that one accepts.

Scheler sometimes suggests that resentment is just an expression or consequence of a “psychological law” which he states as follows: “we have a tendency to overcome any strong tension between desire and impotence by depreciating or denying the positive value of the desired object” (1994, 45–46). I don’t know if that’s a psychological law but it’s certainly a common occurrence. Everyone will experience episodes of resentment from time to time; we’ve all had a day or an hour when we lapse into these experiences. But, for some, these episodes become pervasive. Nietzsche speaks of the *person of resentment* to pick out those in whom this tendency is firmly entrenched. So I now want to ask: is there an explanation for why people of resentment arise?

9.6.2 *Fanatical Narratives*

I think there is. The structure of the explanation is present in Nietzsche’s story about the ancient world: the person experiencing resentment gropes for some way of reconceptualizing his felt impotence and attaining a feeling of superiority over the resented group; certain *stories*, especially stories that vindicate the person of resentment and demean his opponent, become attractive; once these stories are accepted, they legitimate the resentment while offering the agent a way of experiencing himself as superior or at least as unjustly oppressed; and, once that happens, a feedback loop emerges, with the narrative enabling the resentment to grow and spread, while the growing resentment then more firmly entrenches and supports the narrative.

That’s the quick version. But let’s take it more slowly.

Like resentment, resentment is bound up with certain ways of interpreting the world. Ordinary resentment requires that the agent perceive herself as wronged. Resentment requires that but also more:

not only am I wronged, but by fixating on this wrong and demeaning the person or group who perpetrates the wrong, I bolster my sense of my own identity.¹⁶

If we consider the narratives, worldviews, or perspectives offered by various fanatical groups, there is a common core: many fanatical groups view themselves as oppressed or threatened by an out-group; and they see violent or coercive responses to this out-group as the only way of rectifying the threat. That general structure is present in ISIS, in Al Qaeda, in Stormfront and the various branches of white nationalism.¹⁷ Call these *fanatical narratives*. These fanatical narratives, of which we've already seen some examples, have several intriguing features.

First, the fanatical narrative is *goal-providing*: it provides group members with something toward which to strive. Second, the fanatical narrative is also *exculpatory*: it treats the faults, failings, and negative features of the in-group as forced upon them by the out-group. Third, the fanatical narrative is *fixated on a rejected group*: it offers a rather simple account of the source of negative features in one's life. Fourth, the fanatical narrative tends to be *all-encompassing*. While the agent may initially focus on some particular wrong, the scope of the wrong tends to grow. In the extreme case, the agent sees most of his (or his group's) shortcomings and failures as explained by the wrong that is being perpetrated against him by others. Fifth, the fanatical narrative tends to present individuals as *impotent on their own but powerful as a collective*; while the putative wrongs are beyond the individual's power to rectify, collective action can correct them. Sixth, and relatedly, the agent is thus offered *deferred compensation*; the agent tends to envision a future in which the perceived wrongdoers are punished, eliminated, or rendered

16 I have been arguing that in resentment, the person's self-conception incorporates as an essential element the idea of being rejected or damaged by the other. It is important that this sense of being aggrieved is fostered and maintained, rather than contingently present. Consider two people, Pia and Ted, who have been wronged in a significant way, such that they regard the wrong as part of their identities (we might, for example, consider victims of oppression). Suppose time passes and the wrong is addressed adequately; some form of amends, which the agents take to be adequate, occurs. Suppose Pia ceases to regard *being wronged* as a significant constituent of her identity, whereas Ted immediately seeks to identify some new sense or new way in which he is being wronged. Whereas both people initially regarded *being wronged* as a constituent of their identities, Pia is willing to alter this conception when conditions change. Ted, on the other hand, is not; he seems more interested in maintaining his condition of *being aggrieved* rather than in correcting any particular aggrieving condition; the particular wrongs are adventitious, whereas the state of being aggrieved seems desired. It is the latter condition that I am associating with resentment.

17 Indeed, this structure is so widespread in extremist groups that some authors identify extremism with its acceptance. For example, as I mentioned in [Section 9.4](#), J.M. Berger tells us that extremism is "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group" (Berger 2018, 44).

subordinate. These six features aren't universal in fanatical groups, but they are extremely common.

I will give a few examples of narratives with these features. First, consider Al Qaeda's best known propaganda film, *The State of the Ummah*, which was released in 2001. The film is divided into three parts. The first part describes a series of problems facing Muslims around the world: it lists atrocities committed against Muslims in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Chechnya, Bosnia, and other countries. It claims that hundreds of thousands of Muslims have been killed, maimed, and raped, providing graphic detail. The second part, entitled "Causes," then defines al Qaeda's enemies: the "near enemy" is a series of allegedly corrupt Arab regimes (including Saudi Arabia and Egypt), whereas the "far enemy" includes the United States and the Jewish people. The film connects these groups by presenting the near enemy as propped up and supported by the far enemy. The third part, "Solution," is introduced by Osama bin Laden. He claims: "Thus if we know the disease, this is the remedy. Hijrah [emigration] and Jihad So it is incumbent on the Muslims to migrate for the sake of Allah, and find a place where they can raise the banner of jihad, and revitalize the Ummah to safeguard their religion and life. Otherwise they will lose everything."

Second, consider an excerpt from a June 2009 speech by Yahia Al Libi, an Al Qaeda commander (who was killed in 2012):

This path, and I mean the path of jihad, despite the calamities, sufferings, difficulties, and all forms of ordeals and distress, is the path which pleases the Almighty God and achieves his obedience. It is the evidence of truly loving God and the distinguisher between the people of honesty and faith from the people of deception and trickery. The path of Jihad is the way to purge the ranks of Muslims and the mean to uphold the banner of monotheism, and exterminate the infidelity and desecration.

So the jihad for the sake of God is the refuge of the weak, the shelter of the oppressed, the peace of mind of the faithful and the hermits, the place of safety for the frightened and petrified, and the way to lift the humiliation from the suppressed and restrained. The corruption will not be eliminated from this world except with jihad and fighting.

Today, jihad in Algeria is your hope; God's willing, in order that you should be salvaged from the Hell of the unjust regimes whose prisons have become full of your youths, sons and even your women. In addition, they have made their armies, police forces and intelligence agencies hold sway over you, and have opened the doors to them to practice tortures against you. ... Unify your efforts in cooperation with them [Al Qaeda members in Algeria], provide them with your capabilities, and unify your ranks under their banner, command and

emirate ... Be aware of the fact that their victory is your victory, their empowerment leads to your empowerment, and their salvation leads to your salvation.¹⁸

In both of these cases, we have all of the features that I mentioned above: the narrative provides a purpose; it treats current problems as traceable to the activities of an outgroup, on which it focuses; the narrative is all-encompassing, treating a vast array of social, political, economic, and religious problems as having a singular cause; it treats these wrongs as capable of being rectified through unified action, thus offering a form of deferred compensation.

The same features arise in many white nationalist narratives. The white nationalist Richard Spencer believes that the “white race” should be unified in “white ethnostates” in the US and Europe. In these proposed states, citizenship would be limited to white people. Spencer bases this claim on the idea that America’s white population is oppressed and endangered due to immigration and multiculturalism. The American Identity Movement (formerly called Identity Evropa), which is open only to “those of European, non-Semitic heritage,” advocates the same goal: their slogan is “You will not replace us”; they warn of “white genocide” and they present themselves as opposing “those who would defame our history and our rich cultural heritage.” The leader of the American Identity Movement, Nathan Damigo, has repeatedly compared the plight of modern white people to that of Native Americans.¹⁹ In a 2016 speech, he said:

Even though horrible things did happen to the indigenous people ... there was land set aside where they could be who they were and express themselves how they wanted to, and they could have a form of government that reflected them. And I think that is something that we want.

(Branson-Potts 2016)

In other words: Damigo thinks that white Americans are being persecuted in a way that’s comparable to the nineteenth-century persecution of Native Americans; and he thinks that, as a result, white Americans should be given or should form a separate nation.

Again, the fanatical narrative provides a purpose; it treats contemporary failings or difficulties as traceable to a root cause; it focuses on an out-group (non-whites); the narrative is all-encompassing, again treating

18 Accessible through the Global Terrorism Research Project at <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4707/AYL20090622.pdf?sequence=4>

19 For an overview, see <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/nathan-benjamin-damigo>

a vast array of social, political, and economic problems as having a singular cause; and it treats these wrongs as capable of being rectified through unified action, thus offering a form of deferred compensation.

9.6.3 *Feedback Loops Between Fanatical Narratives and Resentiment*

What's interesting about the structure of these fanatical narratives is that they seem tailor-made for stoking resentment. Recall that resentment issues from felt impotence, coupled with a sense that one's impotence is due to a wrong perpetrated by some other person or group; this feeling grows; and it motivates reconceptualization of one's experiences. A person with incipient resentment—or even just a person who feels slighted or impotent—could latch on to these fanatical narratives, finding in them strong support for his emotional state; but, at the same time, in working himself into one of these narratives, the resentment would find new outlets, new targets, becoming ever more encompassing.

Nietzsche and Scheler are interested in resentment in part because they see how it can arise from simpler and more innocuous states. We are all susceptible to desires for revenge, desires to correct wrongs, feelings of impotence when we can't, and so on. We are all attracted to stories that present us as capable of overcoming faults, of getting back at those who have wronged us. Narratives of the sort that I've examined in the previous section can feed on these states, generating a feedback loop between resentment and the perspectives that it induces. For the narrative can make resentment seem appropriate; once resentment begins to emerge, it then cements the agent's attraction to that narrative. And, to the extent that the narrative presents not just some but many or all failings as traceable to a singular cause; to the extent that it treats this cause as a group; to the extent that it presents a path toward the correction of this wrong; to the extent that it does all of this, the narrative encourages resentment to spread. Fanatical narratives are narratives of resentment.²⁰

20 Or, to be more precise, we could say that fanatical narratives are *one kind of* narrative of resentment: whereas all fanatical narratives are narratives of resentment, not all narratives of resentment are fanatical narratives. For fanatical narratives present a goal or a path to recovery, whereas narratives of resentment needn't do so. Part of what makes the fanatical narrative attractive is that it (at least implicitly) offers a putatively reasonable response to resentment. That said, a person who doesn't experience resentment could still embrace fanatical narratives. In general, a person can accept a narrative that promotes and characteristically accompanies a particular affective condition without experiencing that affective condition. For example, I can accept a narrative of loss, or grief, or bereavement, without experiencing a sense of loss, or grief, or bereavement. Just so, a person could accept a fanatical narrative without experiencing resentment. I am not arguing that resentment is a *necessary* feature of fanatics or of fanatical groups, only that it is a *typical* or *characteristic* feature.

9.6.4 Resentment Encourages (F2)–(F4)

We're now in a position to pull some threads together. Recall that I've said that a group qualifies as fanatical if it in some way aims to generate individual fanatics. I then pointed out that some of the groups that are paradigmatically fanatical provide perspectives or narratives that generate resentment. I will now argue that resentment encourages individual fanaticism.

Here's the short version: in defining the individual in terms of group membership, and in defining the group as wronged by some out-group, the resentment narrative fosters features (F2)–(F4). How so? The resentment narratives tend to become all encompassing, treating the central failings of one's life as traceable to some singular root cause. One's identity is seen as fundamentally damaged or wounded by some other. The injury, damage, or wound is not just some past causal factor which is eventually overcome; it provides a central, continuous focal point. So resentment *fixates* on some object. The object fixated upon is defined as evil, threatening, and so on. So one's identity becomes bound up with opposition to that object; one defines oneself in opposition to it. Insofar as one's identity is dependent on a characterization of X as Y, revaluing X, interpreting it differently, will be costly. To the extent that one's perspective on the world is in this way all-encompassing and fixated, breaking out of it requires not just local adjustments but abandoning classifications, distinctions, and beliefs that create larger upheavals in the perspective.

Let's look at this in more depth. We'll start with feature (F2): fragility of the self. To the extent that certain components of one's identity are sacralized (by being treated as nonfungible and dialectically invulnerable), the agent will be psychologically fragile. This kind of fragility can arise in any number of ways: certain people might be more predisposed to it than others; one's culture will impact it; one's relationships to others will affect it. But it can also be encouraged.

Suppose an agent accepts a narrative with features that make it seem indispensable. These could include (i) treating other, competing narratives as untenable; (ii) encouraging close-mindedness or cognitive inflexibility; (iii) encouraging the agent to define himself wholly in terms of commitment to the narrative, so that departures from it become more costly and less imaginable; (iv) presenting those who reject the narrative as vicious or even as enemies; (v) making the narrative all-purpose, covering many aspects of the agent's life. Insofar as these features are in place, departures from the narrative will become increasingly costly and imagined alternatives to it more difficult. By contrast, the person who accepts a range of relatively localized narratives; or who sees each of his commitments as important yet dispensable or modifiable; or who sees the possibility of standing back from and altering each of his commitments;

or who sees situations as complex and ambiguous; that person will be less likely to exhibit psychic fragility.

Ressentiment narratives have features (i)–(v). Given this, they will encourage psychological fragility.

Let's now turn to feature (F3): fragility of the value. Some groups treat values as fragile and some don't. Take the Amish or the Hasidic: when we consider their basic principles, they don't care whether non-Amish or non-Hasidic people share their values. What matters is that everyone in the community accepts the values. The Amish are a particularly clear case, given that it is encouraged for individuals to go out into the world and explore other ways of life before committing fully to the Amish values. If you're going to be Amish, you need to accept the value; but it doesn't matter whether non-Amish people respect the values.

But contrast this with extremist groups. If we consider jihadist and white nationalist groups, we can see that these groups typically *do* claim that it matters whether the value is widely accepted. The group's values are presented as endangered by dissent. I've already given several examples of this, ranging from ISIS to white nationalism.

By presenting the value as endangered by dissent, you encourage feature (F3) in group members. I think this is a common feature of the groups that we're inclined to label extremist or fanatical: they present their core values or beliefs as under threat. Indeed, if you can get individuals to regard *mere disagreement* about a value as a *threat*, then you've moved most of the way to fanaticism. Ressentiment narratives, which trace disagreement about a value to a perceived systematic wrongdoing, are particularly effective ways of doing this.

So let's turn to feature (F4): group identification. The group identity condition (F4) states that the fanatic identifies himself with a group, where this group is defined by shared commitment to a sacred value. Again, it's easy to see how a group can encourage this. All we need is a group that identifies itself in terms of acceptance of a sacred value. If the group encourages its members to define themselves in terms of group membership, and if the group is centered on a sacred value, we will have this feature.

Some groups do this and some don't. For example, consider a hiking club that treats environmental enjoyment as a sacred value. It may be that the group doesn't particularly encourage its members to define their identities in terms of hiking. Suppose it's just a casual group, with members who enjoy getting together now and then but have diverse interests. We can contrast this with a group that does try to foster a particular sense of identity. The clearest cases of encouraging one to define one's identity in terms of a group will be cases in which the group advocates an us/them dichotomy, where being one of the "us" requires endorsing some sacred value. Again, resentment narratives do this. They strongly encourage the individual to classify the world into two groups: the damaged/wronged and the wrongdoers.

So an individual gripped by a resentment narrative will tend to exhibit features (F1)–(F4). Thus, by promoting resentment, groups can encourage fanaticism.²¹

I haven't claimed that resentment is unique. It's clearly not the only way that a group can induce its adherents to manifest features (F1)–(F4). But it is a powerful and widespread mechanism.

Given the above features, resentment tends to grow and spread. Incipient resentment, sometimes merely in the form of felt impotence, disposes the person to accept resentment-narratives; these narratives give the agent further opportunities for expressing resentment; they also focus the negative emotions on some person or group; which gives resentment more opportunities for expression; and so on. The process ramifies.

9.7 Conclusion

I have argued that we should reject the Simple View of group fanaticism. Instead, we should accept the Generative View of Group Fanaticism, according to which a group qualifies as fanatical iff it promotes individual fanaticism.

How can a group promote individual fanaticism? There's a problem in the empirical literature on this topic: the mechanisms on which that literature focuses are too broadly applicable. They explain attraction to groups in general rather than extremist or fanatical groups in particular. However, I've suggested that there is a feature that seems present in many fanatical groups (and in many extremist groups, as well): the provision of narratives of resentment. Resentment encourages the emergence of individual fanaticism. By promoting resentment through promulgating certain kinds of narratives, groups can qualify as fanatical. Agents gripped by resentment define their identities in terms of a grievance against some out-group; the narrative encourages agents to see this grievance as encompassing most or all of the problems that the agent experiences; and the narrative presents reconciliation as impossible. It would be an exaggeration to claim that this is the only pathway to

21 I have been focusing on fanatical narratives, which have two important features: they present their members as oppressed or threatened by an out-group and they present violent or coercive responses to this out-group as the only way of rectifying this threat. But fanatical narratives are not the only types of narratives that encourage resentment. For example, Salmela and von Scheve (2018) argue that right-wing populism tends to involve the production of resentment: as they put it, right-wing populist narratives transform "fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived 'enemies' of the precarious self" (2018, 434). If my analysis is correct, and if we accept Salmela and von Scheve's claims, this would imply that the relevant forms of right-wing populism are also productive of individual fanatics, and hence qualify as instances of group fanaticism.

fanaticism, or that every fanatic exhibits resentment. Nonetheless, I have suggested that this is a common and underappreciated component of the fanatical mindset.²²

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