

Responsibility for Extremism without Extremists

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Abstract: Who is responsible for extremism? It is tempting to answer that *only extremists* are responsible for extremism. We argue that this position is false. Neither extremism nor responsibility for extremism requires extremists. And even people who hold extremist beliefs are not exclusively responsible for those beliefs. Focusing solely on individual epistemic responsibility judgments – judgments that assign responsibility for the truth or justification of beliefs strictly to the individuals who possess those beliefs – obfuscates the extent of our social epistemic dependence. Given the social nature of our cognitive lives, responsibility for all beliefs, including extremist beliefs, is socially diffuse. Rather than thinking that this blunts the force of moral responsibility for extremism, we contend that this illuminates the epistemic responsibilities we have to one another. We owe it to one another to create *epistemically healthy third places* that enable virtuous belief management.

Keywords: Extremism; Social Epistemology; Epistemic Responsibility; Moral Responsibility; Agency; Echo Chambers

1. Introduction

Who is responsible for extremism? It is tempting and utterly natural to think that *extremists*, and extremists alone, are responsible for extremism; otherwise, non-extremists could be responsible for extremism. We will argue that this tempting view is misguided. In particular, we will argue that in theoretical and practical inquiry the question of *who is responsible for extremism* ought to be divorced from the question of *who is an extremist*. Discussions of extremism tend to reduce to discussions of individual extremists. This trend should be replaced with two kinds of more fruitful work. First, theorists should develop tools for assessing responsibility for extremism even when there is no culprit in the vicinity of the extremism who can easily and aptly be labeled an extremist. Second, theorists should focus less on individual responsibility for extremist belief and more on social responsibility for enabling the exercise of free epistemic agency. Pursuing these avenues of inquiry will result in more productive discussions surrounding responsibility for extremism.

We develop this argument by making three points. First, assessments of responsibility for extremism should not be narrowly focused on the psychological profiles of the perpetrators of extremism. Extreme consequences can be imposed on others even if the agents behind those consequences are not in any meaningful sense extremists. We should focus first and foremost on the victims of extremism. Responsibility for harms they suffer ought to be the central subject of investigation. In making this point, we draw a parallel between extremism and misogyny. Just as there can be misogyny without misogynists so too there can be extremism without extremists.¹ And if extremism does not require extremists then neither does responsibility for extremism.

¹ Neither claim entails that there are no misogynists or extremists, only that something can be an instance of misogyny or extremism even if it is not directly perpetrated by any misogynist or extremist.

Of course, even if we grant all of this, it leaves an important question unanswered, namely, how *should* we assess responsibility for extremist belief when it *is* present? This question must be answered because there is an epistemic condition on moral responsibility. Whether we can be held responsible for an action depends on what we know or ought to know. Sometimes ignorance excuses, sometimes it doesn't.² It's reasonable to think that if agents happened not to be epistemically responsible for their extremist beliefs, then they would not be morally responsible for actions that flow from those beliefs. Our view about responsibility for extremism, then, seems to call for an answer to this question about responsibility for extremist belief when it is present.

Again, but for different reasons, we deny that looking exclusively to extremists will answer this question. This is where our second and third points come in. Consideration of processes of epistemic success and development favors adopting a *deflationary, social-practical* approach to epistemic responsibility, for extremist and non-extremist belief alike; the fact that the conditions in which beliefs develop are not meaningfully of individuals' own making attenuates their responsibility for those beliefs while also implying that people generally bear responsibility for contributing to conditions in which their own and others' reliable belief-formation thrives. In other words, we argue that responsibility for belief is surprisingly *diffuse*. No individual straightforwardly or exclusively bears responsibility for their own beliefs. Neither is any individual free from the responsibility for the beliefs of others in their community. We are each somewhat collectively responsible for each other's beliefs, which in turn generates epistemic obligations to one another. This conclusion is not tied specifically to extremist belief, but examining extremist belief helps make this conclusion perspicuous.

In §2, we defend the claim that responsibility for extremist acts rather than the psychological profiles of extremists should be our primary concern. In §3, we explain why we ought to take a deflationary, less individualistic approach to epistemic responsibility for extremist belief. In §4, we conclude by describing our conception of the resulting social epistemic duties we have to each other.

2. Responsibility for Extremism without Extremists

A prominent view claims agents are only responsible for what reflects central aspects of their selves—including their beliefs, values, and commitments; responsibility is about *attributability*.³ In the context of extremism, a natural extension of this view says that agents are only responsible for extremism if extremism is attributable to them, in other words, only if they are extremists—i.e., they have the psychological profile of an extremist, whether one cashes that out in terms of extremist beliefs, values, commitment to an extremist leader, etc. We want to resist this view.

² See Robichaud and Wieland (2017).

³ See Scanlon (1998, 2008), Smith (2005, 2007). Aspects of this view are controversial (see Shoemaker (2011)), but the central idea has enough plausibility to get us started.

Consider Adolf Eichmann—in particular, Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann.⁴ Eichmann was an S.S. Lieutenant Colonel in the Third Reich during World War II. After the war, he fled to Argentina, where he was eventually captured, and then brought to Israel to stand trial for his crimes. Whether his regularly applied moniker the “architect of the holocaust” is perfectly apt, it is undeniable that Eichmann enthusiastically played central administrative and organizational roles in the genocide carried out by the Nazi regime. There is no question that Eichmann bears a significant proportion of the blame for what happened to the Jews under the Third Reich.

Knowing nothing else about his case, one might naturally conclude that Eichmann was a fanatical anti-semitic, an extremist *par excellence*. However, Arendt came to a different conclusion. Eichmann was no anti-semitic ideologue. Indeed, she found him characterized by a striking form of *thoughtlessness*.

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. ... It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Arendt 1963 287-288)

Arendt’s reflection on these aspects of Eichmann’s psychological profile led her to coin the now notorious phrase “the banality of evil.” By this, she meant:

No theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer...However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past...was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity, but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. (Arendt 1971 417)

Two parts of Arendt’s analysis need to be distinguished. First, the evil deeds Eichmann committed could not be traced to any “wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction” in him. He did horrendous evil without possessing a distinctively, horrendously evil character. Second, Eichmann did this evil, in part, because he was “thoughtless.” We focus on the first part of her analysis.

⁴ Arendt (1963). Arendt’s interpretation of Eichmann is controversial. Moreover, in light of the Sassen tapes, there is now more reason to think Eichmann was, in fact, an ideologue. (An excellent recent documentary on the tapes, and how they bear on Arendt’s interpretation of Eichmann, is *The Devil’s Confession*.) However, nothing in our argument depends on Arendt’s interpretation of this specific case being accurate, if it accurately portrays a *type* of real case. Below we briefly describe several other cases that we believe exemplify the type we’re describing.

Suppose Arendt's analysis is roughly correct. If someone is an extremist only if they have extremist beliefs, values, and commitments that constitute a central aspect of their selves, then Eichmann was no extremist. Yet, he clearly bears responsibility for the suffering and death of millions of Jews during the Holocaust—extremism if anything is. If only extremists can be responsible for extremism, something is amiss.

There are two sets of characters in this example: Eichmann, someone who might be labeled an extremist if it weren't for Arendt's analysis, and those who suffer extreme consequences at his hands. While it may be natural to locate extremism in the perpetrator of those extreme consequences – in his heart and mind – we could instead locate it in the experience and welfare of his victims. Then the question of whether Eichmann was an extremist becomes irrelevant. Extremist or not, he imposed extreme consequences—consequences that perpetuate or enforce an extremist ideology. This is something, we think, an account of responsibility for extremism must capture. But capturing this requires abandoning the intuitive thought that there must be an identifiable extremist responsible for every instance of extremism.

For contrast, consider the kind of inquiry we would need to engage in when assessing responsibility for extremism if it required extremists. We would first provisionally identify something – an act, a consequence, a state of the world or mind – as extremism. And then we would need to find an extremist responsible for it. Suppose we've got a candidate; Eichmann, in this case. Then to know whether he is responsible for extremism we would need to know whether he is an extremist. We might ask whether he was a “methods extremist,” “ideological extremist,” or “mindset extremist,” for example.⁵ Does he use extreme methods to achieve his political ends? Does he endorse ideologies that fall on the extreme ends of some spectrum? Is he preoccupied with purity, victimhood, virtue, or hierarchy? Some might find it easy to confidently answer these questions in the affirmative, while others might struggle. However, suppose again that we couldn't reasonably conclude that Eichmann was an extremist. Then we would need to conclude that there was no extremism for him to be responsible for.

This gets the analysis of the case backwards. The fixed point of our inquiry into responsibility for extremism should be extremism itself, as experienced by its victims. The results of this inquiry should not hinge on whether there is a methods, ideological, mindset, or any other kind of extremist on whom we can pin the responsibility. Call the kind of extremism we are interested in “behavioral extremism.” It consists in one of two things: either the enforcement, promotion, or perpetuation of an extremist ideology – regardless of whether one believes this ideology – or the extreme enforcement or perpetuation of an ideology, *extremist or not*.⁶

Extremist ideologies, in our sense, are marked not by their position on contextually defined spectra, nor by the relative size of the population who believes in them. An extremist ideology is not necessarily a fringe view. Extremist ideologies are marked by their content. They typically

⁵ Cassam (2022).

⁶ While our account focuses on extremism as experienced by its victims or targets, we are not saying that extremism occurs whenever someone believes or feels they have been the victim of extremism. Whether behavior perpetuates an extremist ideology is not solely determined by the felt experience of the victim.

have three components: *vision*, *appraisal*, and *response*. An extremist ideology's vision consists in rigid normative expectations about the way the world ought to be, relating to purity, virtue, identity, hierarchy, and manichean postures. Extremist ideologies appraise the extent to which the world is living up to its ideals; these appraisals are generally negative insofar as they identify strains of impurity, victimhood, and conspiracy. Finally, extremist ideologies detail fitting responses to the poor state of the world they have identified in terms of emotion – e.g., humiliation, anger, shame, and resentment – and behavior – e.g., violence, intolerance, and deprivation. Extremity of these ideologies gets measured in each category. The more rigid the normative expectations, the more negative and detached from reality the appraisal, and the more intense the response the more deserving an ideology will be of the extremist label.

What does it mean to say that a behavior enforces, promotes, or perpetuates an extremist ideology? This occurs when the (potential) harm caused by the behavior cannot be fully explained or understood without reference to the extremist ideology. An extremist ideology could feature in an explanation of the perpetrator's motivations, either because they were motivated by their commitment to the ideology or by a drive to wield the social power of the ideology to their own advantage. But the psychology of the perpetrator is not the only way an extremist ideology can factor into an explanation of harm. An action could reinforce an extremist ideology by creating a policy or fortifying an institution that operates on the central tenets of an ideology. An agnostic pencil-pushing manager for an extremist organization engages in behavioral extremism even if they don't think much of the organization's core commitments.⁷ Consider too, extremist ideology can factor into the explanation of the victim's experience. The experience of violence or disrespect is distinct when the victim is also marginalized by a pervasive extremist ideology.

One might be concerned that on our account mere accidents can turn into acts of extremism. For example, imagine a person who gets a tattoo of a "43" for any number of morally innocuous reasons (e.g., to commemorate a meaningful year in their life). They could be completely ignorant of the fact that the number is a white supremacist hate symbol.⁸ Does our view entail that their tattoo is extremist? After all, victims of white supremacy may experience fear on seeing their neighbor with such a tattoo and we can't understand or explain that suffering without reference to white supremacist ideology. While it may seem implausible that a tattoo acquired for morally unproblematic reasons could be extremist, we don't want to resist this result.⁹ Instead, we contend that this result is part of the broader, societal harm of extremism. Part of the insidiousness of extremism, and what makes it a subject of moral concern, is its power to co-opt the innocuous and transform it into something harmful.

⁷ To clarify: we are offering an account of a particular class of actions without any commitment to a corresponding view regarding *the kind of person* who engages in this behavior. All sorts of people, with various and diverse psychologies and motivations, can engage in behavioral extremism.

⁸ Anti-Defamation League, 2025.

⁹ To be clear, the view is not that the person with the tattoo is an extremist, just that the tattoo itself is. It's also worth emphasizing, what should be obvious, that not all token acts of extremism, or extremist objects, are equally bad even if they are tokens of the same type.

In addition to enforcing, promoting, and perpetuating extremist ideologies, one can also engage in behavioral extremism via extreme enforcement or extreme perpetuation of an ideology whether that ideology is extremist or not. Indoctrination into an ideology is an example of the sort of content neutral extreme perpetuation of an ideology we have in mind. And someone can go to extreme lengths to enforce a milquetoast ideology.

A particularly worrying form of extremism would combine all of these elements: extreme enforcement and perpetuation of an extremist ideology. But for conceptual clarity's sake, these two forms of extremism should be distinguished. Crucially, engaging in these forms of extremism does not require *belief* in or *commitment* to any extremist ideology.

Now, let us emphasize that one could choose to just *derivatively* label any perpetrator of extremism as an extremist. Even if Eichmann is not an ideological *extremist*, he is surely, one might insist, a behavioral *extremist*: a person who perpetrates behavioral extremism. So, it might seem that our thesis of “extremism without extremists” is simply mistaken. However, our thesis is not linguistic; it's psychological and methodological. Call any perpetrator of behavioral extremism an extremist if you like. But if we intend to use this label substantively to capture something significant about a person's psychological profile, about what is *attributable* to them – about the means they adopt, the ideas they endorse, etc. – we contend that the results of an inquiry into responsibility for extremism should be independent of an inquiry into who is an extremist in this sense.

Consider a parallel between the view we endorse and recent work on misogyny. In her book *Down Girl*, Kate Manne convincingly argues against what she labels the “naive conception” of misogyny. This is the idea that misogyny is primarily a property of individual agents who are prone to feel hatred and hostility toward individual women simply because they are women. One of Manne's central arguments against this conception is epistemic. If the naive conception is correct, then misogyny would be exceedingly difficult to detect; it would frequently be epistemically inaccessible to others, including the women who suffer at its hands. For whether a person feels as the naive conception says misogynists must feel *is* often epistemically inaccessible to others. It can be difficult to know whether a person feels hatred toward others simply because of their identity. Not impossible, of course. Words and deeds often express genuine thoughts and feelings about these matters. But misogyny is detectable in the absence of such explicit and obvious manifestations of hatred towards women. In other words, even when this aspect of a person's psychological profile remains hidden to others it is nevertheless possible for the misogyny they perpetrate to be utterly accessible. You don't need to know whether a person hates women to know you've suffered misogyny at their hands. So even if the naive conception describes *some* form of misogyny, it misses another.

Something similar applies to extremism.¹⁰ The fact is that the deeper in the mind an analysis buries extremism, like misogyny, the more difficult it will be to know whether a particular thing

¹⁰ Indeed, rather than drawing an analogy with Manne's argument, our view here is perhaps best described as aiming to generalize from Manne's more specific claim. Misogyny or patriarchy can be an extremist ideology, and misogynistic acts can be acts of extremism. Moreover, misogynistic acts performed by someone who is not a

is extremism. Again, not always: plenty of people regularly showcase their inner selves to others, intentionally or otherwise. But, crucially, even when these deep psychological facts are opaque the extremism is often crystal clear. So there must be an aspect of extremism that is independent of these deep psychological facts, one that does not require for its identification direct or indirect detection of these deep facts.

One might claim that Manne's argument for misogyny without misogynists is more plausible than our argument for extremism without extremists. One might contend that the fact that misogyny is (unfortunately) normalized, it easier to see how someone could perpetrate misogyny without having the corresponding psychological profile. The thought would be that, in contrast, extremism is uncommon, not normalized, and that is part of what makes it extreme. We disagree with this analysis. On our view, extremism is not marked by its low degree of commonality or normalization. As we explain above, an extremist ideology is a vision that consists in rigid normative expectations about the way the world ought to be, relating to purity, virtue, identity, hierarchy, and manichean postures. Even if such visions are normalized, they may still be extremist ideologies.¹¹

If extremism doesn't require extremists, then we can bypass the question of whether a person is an extremist when assessing their responsibility for extremism. Although responsibility for misogyny is not Manne's primary focus, we find further inspiration in her work. Of people who spew misogynistic propaganda and ideology, she writes:

Whether or not these powerful people are merely exploitative and cynical (e.g., trying to gain votes or drive up the ratings), or actually subscribe to the poison they peddle, is irrelevant ... What matters is the contributions they make to a misogynist social environment—that is, the extent to which they tend to police and punish women, in accordance with patriarchal law and order. (2018: 62)

Just as it is irrelevant whether these people genuinely believe the "poison they peddle," it is similarly irrelevant whether people are *actually* extremists when assessing their responsibility for extremism.

Similarly, we think it is important to account for cases in which people perpetuate extremism all while not "buying" what they are "selling". Consider "extremism entrepreneurs." These are people who drum up fear, spread conspiracy theories, and encourage others to carry out hostility towards others *without believing any of this* simply for personal gain.¹² Their actions contribute to a social environment where extremist hostility and violence are more likely to occur. Even if they are not extremists themselves – because, for instance, they are convictionless

misogynist can be acts of extremism. Consider any number of characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* who comply with and carry out Gilead's theocratic, misogynistic, extremist policies out of fear.

¹¹ Indeed, considering recent increases in political violence in the United States, it is not difficult to imagine a high degree of normalization of extremism.

¹² The Alex Joneses of the world.

individuals whose aim is to turn a profit – their actions contribute to extremism. The parents targeted by Sandy Hook deniers, for example, surely do not care whether those responsible for spreading false flag conspiracy theories about the killing of their children are themselves true believers. And yet, we submit, they would be *right* to hold these people responsible for the extremism they have endured even if these people are mere extremism entrepreneurs.¹³

There are other good candidates of extremism without extremists. For example, those who have deradicalized but still engage in extremist activities. Or the “extremism curious,” people with inchoate attitudes towards extremist ideology who propagate mainstreamed extremist ideologies. Or political leaders who incite others to hostile action via extremist rhetoric to cement their political power.¹⁴ Or non-extremist members of a judiciary who act as conduits for extremism by granting legal license to political leaders enacting extremist policies.¹⁵ This list is not exhaustive. But in all these cases we believe there is extremism for which these agents are responsible even if they are not themselves extremists. And if that is right, that is enough to show that responsibility for extremism does not require attributability of extremism.

3. Responsibility for Extremist Belief

We now want to switch gears. Our contention that the primary focus of inquiry should be on the effects extremism has on its victims yields the surprising result that assessing responsibility for extremism doesn’t require identifying extremists. As such, determining whether an individual is responsible for extremist behavior is more similar to determining whether someone is responsible for *any* behavior than we might have thought. We don’t need a special theory of responsibility for a specific kind of moral agent. But that does not mean that investigations into responsibility for extremism aren’t valuable. After all, even if extremism doesn’t require extremists, we might still reasonably ask about the conditions under which genuine extremists are, in fact, responsible for their extremism. In what follows, we argue that investigating responsibility for extremist beliefs illuminates the truly social nature of moral and epistemic responsibility.

We will examine the case of young people – children, teens, young adults, etc. – growing up in extremist groups. These young people often engage in extremist activities, thereby contributing to an extremist social environment. And they often *profess* commitment to the extremism of their milieu, albeit reflexively, in a trained fashion. Now, we hesitate, for many reasons, to attribute genuine extremist belief to them on the basis of these professions and activities.¹⁶ These young people often grow up in epistemic enclaves – e.g., socially isolated echo chambers and epistemic bubbles¹⁷ – where they have, at best, negligible opportunities to seriously

¹³ See Williamson (2023) on the Sandy Hook case.

¹⁴ Donald Trump is a good candidate. Consider California Senator Adam Schiff’s claim that Trump “has no ideology” (ABC News, 2017).

¹⁵ The current (2025 Roberts) US Supreme Court is a good candidate.

¹⁶ Cf. Horgan et al.’s (2017: 5) discussion of children. Also, observe the young children featured in Louis Theroux’s documentary examining the Westboro Baptist Church.

¹⁷ See Jamieson & Capella (2008), DiPaolo (2020), Nguyen (2020), Anderson (2021), Ranalli & Malcom (2023) for pertinent discussion of echo chambers.

consider alternatives to the dogma pervading their environment, and they are often subjected to forms of indoctrination, including explicit or implicit threats of abandonment and exclusion for *refusing* to engage in these activities and profess these commitments.¹⁸ These are hardly conditions in which robustly genuine belief, reflective of a free uncoerced exercise of epistemic agency, thrives. So, we are reluctant to label these people extremists.¹⁹

But set our reluctance aside. Suppose that these professions are genuine and that, for this reason, these young people are not only perpetrators of extremism but actually *extremists*. What should we make of their responsibility for their extremist beliefs? Is this a straightforward case of extremists being responsible for extremism? Our answer is, yet again: No. We think reflection on this kind of case should motivate us to downplay the significance of individual responsibility for extremist belief and, instead, adopt a social approach to epistemic responsibility.

To reiterate our general concern, we think the study of responsibility for extremism has been too focused on individuals' psychological profiles. So far, in arguing that extremism doesn't require extremists, we've challenged the focus on psychological profiles. The rest of the paper challenges the focus on *individuals*. While the possibility of extremism without extremists prompts us to subsume questions of moral responsibility for extremism under the general category of moral responsibility, focusing on epistemic responsibility for extremist belief leads us to defend the claim that moral responsibility is subject to a social epistemic condition, one that may often be unmet in the case of young extremists.

3.1 *The Epistemic Condition on Moral Responsibility*

First, why might we be particularly interested in responsibility for extremist beliefs? Curiosity about the nature of justification, rationality, or belief might motivate such an inquiry. But it's not obvious why these concerns would compel us to focus on responsibility for *extremist* belief rather than other more mundane beliefs. For us, the question is compelling because it forces reexamination of the epistemic condition on moral responsibility. The epistemic condition on moral responsibility dictates, roughly, that an agent must know or be aware of certain features of their action to be morally responsible for it.²⁰ This is not to say that ignorance always exculpates; willful or culpable ignorance may not.²¹ The idea is that an agent is only morally responsible for an action if she is also "on the hook" for the beliefs that motivated her action. In an important sense, epistemic responsibility is taken to be "upstream" of moral responsibility. To put it in broad strokes: If you didn't, couldn't have, or shouldn't have known that your action would cause harm, then you are not responsible for that harm. If you knew, could have known, or should have known, then you are responsible.

¹⁸ On indoctrination, see Callan & Arena (2009), DiPaolo & Simpson (2015), and Ranalli (2022).

¹⁹ If responsibility for extremism required being an extremist and if young people growing up in extremist groups should not be considered extremists, it would follow that these young people could not be responsible for extremism. On our view this does not follow. Since responsibility for extremism does not require being an extremist, even if these young people are not extremists, this would imply *nothing* about their responsibility for extremism.

²⁰ See Rudy-Hiller (2022) for an overview. See also Peels (2023) for discussion of when ignorance excuses.

²¹ E.g., Moody-Adams (1994).

It might seem this condition entails that people without extremist belief cannot be held responsible for extremism. After all, if a person has no extremist beliefs to speak of, it might be said they aren't "on the hook" for any criticizable extremist belief upstream of the extremist act. This would be a misapplication of the condition. There has been much debate about what an agent must (dis)believe to count as responsible for related actions.²² However these debates get resolved, we should not assume such a tight connection between the contents of one's beliefs and what one can be responsible for. An important upshot of our view is that moral responsibility for extremism is not a matter of being epistemically culpable with respect to doxastic states with extremist content. We think this is the correct result. Imagine a political leader who is a narcissist: all he cares about is gaining supporters and being the center of their attention and admiration. He will say anything that he believes will have this effect, regardless of whether it is true and, indeed, regardless of whether he *thinks* it is true. If his speech is extremist, if his words inspire extremist violence, then he is morally responsible for extremism regardless of whether he believes what he is saying. He doesn't hold extremist beliefs as a result of reckless epistemic conduct for which he is responsible. Indeed, he doesn't hold extremist beliefs at all. Psychologically speaking he is a narcissist, not an extremist. Thus, the way epistemic responsibility bears on moral responsibility for extremism doesn't merely concern responsibility for beliefs with extremist content.

That said, plenty of people *do* have extremist beliefs, and these beliefs often play a role in motivating action.²³ That there can be extremism without extremists doesn't settle the question of whether those who are in fact extremists are epistemically or morally responsible for their beliefs and actions.

3.2 Deflating Individual Epistemic Responsibility Judgments

Although we think this is a fair line of questioning, we think it is nevertheless appropriate to downplay the significance of individual epistemic responsibility judgments. It's true that a significant portion of 20th century epistemology treated individual epistemic responsibility as the heart of epistemic appraisal. The picture was that the central epistemic notion (knowledge) fundamentally requires individual epistemic responsibility: a lone thinker reflectively inquiring into some matter for the purpose of uncovering the truth. We conjecture that the intuition driving the epistemic condition on moral responsibility is prompted by this same traditional, individualistic epistemic theorizing that would have us believe that we are exceptionally discrete epistemic agents with the capacity to autonomously weigh reasons and reliably evaluate evidence all on our own. We believe the reality is far more complicated.²⁴ Over the last several decades epistemologists have rightly broadened their perspective beyond this atomistic picture of epistemically unrelated individual thinkers, taking into account thinkers' epistemic dependence on others. The extent to which our beliefs result from causal forces individuals have no epistemic control over is far greater

²² Cf. Rudy-Hiller (2022).

²³ Merely having extremist beliefs might be insufficient for being an extremist. We don't take a stand on that point.

²⁴ See also Hieryonimi (2008).

than traditional epistemology admits.²⁵ Given the extent of our epistemic dependence on others, our beliefs are in no small part a function of social epistemic forces.

Reflection on our deeply social epistemic dependence undermines the significance of individual epistemic responsibility judgments. To explain, we want to take a different tack than one might expect. The usual cases used to minimize the role of epistemic agency are ones in which forces outside the agent's control exculpate *false* belief and consequently morally *bad* action. Instead, we think it more fruitful to examine cases of everyday epistemic and moral *success*. Focusing on these cases illuminates how the influence of social forces on an individual's beliefs is far from an exceptional circumstance that disrupts the individual agential status quo and undermines responsibility. Rather, these social forces *constitute* the status quo.

Imagine a young student at school who sees his teacher approaching a door with her arms loaded, overflowing with supplies. He notices that she will struggle to open the door herself and consequently forms the belief that he should hold the door open for her.

This simple story invites a positive reaction to the student's thought process. He attends to his surroundings, focuses his attention, takes in relatively complex information, engages in imaginative activities, makes accurate predictions, and forms correct normative judgments. There is certainly a sense in which he does this all on his own. No one is pulling levers to operate his mind.

However, even in the best of epistemic cases, isolated processes of epistemic deliberation are not the whole story of why people believe as they do. This student's habits of attention, information processing, imagination, prediction, and normative judgment were not of his making alone. Recognizing this should impact how we think about the significance of individual responsibility judgments. We need a more social perspective. Credit is due not to the student alone, but also to those in his community who helped shape the contents of his beliefs and provided resources for his epistemic deliberations. Understanding the student's moral and epistemic success requires looking at the behavior of his caregivers: how they taught him to be aware of those around him and believe they are deserving of kindness. We must look to other teachers, who encouraged him to be considerate. We must look at the attitudes of his peers. When believing and doing the morally right thing doesn't prompt sanction from those we look to for friendship and support, our community members enable or support our true belief and good deed. This is not to say that the student qua individual isn't responsible for his belief or good deed. It is just to say that the individual epistemic responsibility judgment for his belief is not particularly illuminating.

Focusing on this completely mundane case of epistemic and moral success might seem odd. However, the thought is it requires thinking about the role of social forces in all of our beliefs, not just the classic, more obvious cases of epistemic dependence, e.g., a scientist depending on the experimental results from another lab, or a patient relying on the expertise of their physician. Our everyday moral beliefs and actions are shaped and supported by our communities. Moreover, it

²⁵ In saying this, we don't mean to be weighing in on debates surrounding the extent to which our beliefs are under our direct voluntary control—i.e., debates surrounding what is known in the epistemological literature as “doxastic voluntarism.” We are making a different point, namely, that our epistemic lives are deeply social.

highlights how our beliefs are socially supported not only by those more knowledgeable members of our community, but also by our peers – even those we take to be less reliable. Holding a belief is all the easier when we can maintain and act on it without social sanction. Individual epistemic responsibility judgements will never tell the full story. Credit for beliefs is diffuse throughout our epistemic community.

How should this insight affect our thinking about responsibility for extreme beliefs? Such responsibility will never be fully illuminated by making an individual epistemic responsibility judgment. Just as we should resist giving all the epistemic credit to the student in the good case, we should likewise resist placing all the epistemic blame on individuals growing up in extremist social environments. The reason for this matters, though. It's not only, or even primarily, because we judge them to have fewer truth-conducive resources to work with in the first place. And it's also not simply because the costs they would pay for engaging in epistemically responsible conduct by questioning their extremist beliefs are prohibitively high. Of course, these factors certainly don't *increase* their epistemic responsibility for their extremist beliefs or make them *stronger* candidates for being targets of individual epistemic responsibility judgments. Rather, the point is that *like each of us*, their beliefs are simply not of their own making.

This point isn't limited to extremist belief. It may be that the content of extremists' beliefs or the processes through which they acquire them are epistemically different from non-extremist beliefs or non-extremist processes of belief acquisition.²⁶ But whatever process extremists use, and whatever the contents of their beliefs, neither is solely an expression of the extremists' *individual* agency. This is true of extremists and non-extremists alike. The social influences are often more visible in the case of extremist belief. The heartbreaking stories of former extremists paying costs in terms of loss of love and connection to their communities highlight the pressures they faced prior to their apostasy.²⁷ Those costs are real, and they should be tallied. But, for us, reflection on these costs encourages us to examine how, and conclude that, the *absence* of those barriers to epistemically appropriate conduct is *itself* a social influence on belief that diminishes the importance of individual epistemic responsibility for belief in the "good", non-extremist case.²⁸

3.3 Rethinking The Epistemic Condition

If individual epistemic responsibility judgments are not terribly consequential – because individuals are not exclusively, individually responsible for their beliefs – then we are faced with a dilemma. Either no individual is morally responsible for their actions because no individual meets the epistemic condition on moral responsibility or individuals can be morally responsible for their actions without satisfying an epistemic condition on moral responsibility. In addition to being radically revisionary, the first horn contradicts what we have already argued, namely, that

²⁶ E.g., DiPaolo (2020).

²⁷ There is no shortage of moving stories from those who have paid those costs by abandoning their extremist communities. See Saslow (2018), Westover (2018) and Phelps-Roper (2019). For a philosophical analysis of two of these cases, see Llanera (2019).

²⁸ To be clear, our claim is not that the absence of social barriers *always* leads to epistemic success. It doesn't.

people are responsible for extremism because they are indeed responsible for actions and their consequences. So we reject the first horn.

Does that mean that individuals can be morally responsible for their actions without satisfying an epistemic condition on moral responsibility? Not quite. While we want to avoid claiming that there is no epistemic condition on moral responsibility, we do want to insist that however this condition gets analyzed it must account for the fact that responsibility for belief is rarely an exclusively individualistic affair. Unfortunately, we do not have space here to take up the project of providing such an account in full. For now, we will offer a brief sketch and defense of why we do not think taking up this horn of the dilemma is worrisome.

3.4 Forward-Looking, Community-Oriented Moral Responsibility Judgements

To start, we need to loosen our grip on the view that moral responsibility is backward-looking. This is the attitude that prompts us to look at beliefs that are “upstream” of the action being evaluated. Motivating a shift away from this attitude requires thinking about why we care about individual moral responsibility judgments in the first place. We contend that we care about individual moral responsibility because we want to know whom we can hold accountable. Harmful actions have consequences for other morally significant beings. Justice requires that victims be able to hold those who harm them accountable. Things must be done to prevent similar harm in the future. Figuring out who is responsible for the harm allows us to take measures to prevent that person from causing that kind of harm again. In essence, we care about moral responsibility because we live in community with others and we need to figure out how to move forward when harm occurs. Understood in this way, moral responsibility is fundamentally forward-looking.²⁹

We can never clearly distinguish between the extent to which a person’s belief is the result of their upbringing and the extent to which it is a function of their individual epistemic agency. The same applies to teasing apart the extent to which a person’s action is the result of their “jewel-like” good will and the extent to which it is a function of the opportunity they had to perform that action.³⁰ One can acknowledge the presence of moral and epistemic luck and then become a skeptic regarding moral responsibility.³¹ Alternatively, one can try to precisify a sense of individual agency that doesn’t take total control to be a condition of moral responsibility.³² Or, one can instead insist, as we do, that when we started theorizing about these concepts, we were mistaken about the distinctive kind of creatures we are.

In thinking about the issue of moral luck, Thomas Nagel writes:

The inclusion of consequences in the conception of what we have done is an acknowledgment that we are parts of the world, but the paradoxical character of moral luck

²⁹ For others who share this framing, see Pickard (2017) and Zheng (2016).

³⁰ Nagel (1976: 323).

³¹ E.g., Rosen (2004).

³² E.g., Smith (2005).

which emerges from this acknowledgement shows that we are unable to operate with such a view, for it leaves us with no one to be. (1976: 328)

Our view is that the mistake here is in thinking that “being someone” requires being able to cordon oneself off from the world we are a part of – particularly the social world we are a part of. The kind of epistemic and moral creatures we are is (perhaps) a deeply frustrating kind. We are individuals in a meaningful sense. We believe our own beliefs and perform our own actions.³³ Despite this inescapable individuality, the beliefs we have and the actions we perform are products of our social environments. There is no getting around this.

Recognizing this isn’t a heavy burden for forward-looking attitudes towards moral responsibility, as it is for backward-looking ones. On a forward-looking framework, we care about moral responsibility judgements not because we are individuals that are distinct from the world. We care about moral responsibility because of the social world of which we are a part. Our relationships with other people are the focus. We must figure out what to do next when harm occurs: how to respond to victims, how to prevent future harm, etc. In this way, the forward-looking approach decentralizes concerns about the arguably backward-looking evaluation of attributability. As such, robust theorizing about moral responsibility is compatible with the claim that individual epistemic responsibility judgements are thin and non-consequential.

3.5 The Social Epistemic Condition on Moral Responsibility

In lieu of a purely individualistic epistemic condition on moral responsibility, we suggest one that includes a social dimension. Consider again how people raised or residing in extremist echo chambers face significant socially-imposed barriers to epistemic success. The dearth of epistemic resources (reliable epistemic mentors, access to non-misleading evidence, etc.) creates these barriers. So too do the nonideal emotional and social conditions. Seriously engaging with evidence that undermines the extremist community’s beliefs can deteriorate relationships with loved ones. Moreover, the deterioration of these relationships can result in real material hardship. Finally, one’s extremist beliefs can be fundamental to one’s sense of self.³⁴ When embedded in an extremist community, changing one’s mind can threaten the very things that make life worth living.³⁵ Many of us raised in non-extremist, relatively supportive communities face no-such barriers. But more than that, the epistemic, social, and material support we have makes the flat road we travel even smoother.

Acknowledging the role of the social in our epistemic lives allows us to see that individual epistemic agency – any semblance of individual epistemic control – requires that certain social epistemic and material conditions be satisfied. Whether an individual has reliable epistemic capacities that license holding them accountable for many of their beliefs depends on whether their epistemic agency is supported by their social context. Social support for an individual’s epistemic

³³ Set aside action by proxy.

³⁴ Cf. Kruglanski et al. (2018) and Bloom and Moskalenko (2021).

³⁵ See Van Prooijen (2022). Cf. DiPaolo (2023).

agency involves provision of epistemic resources: opportunities and mentorship that aids in the cultivation of reliable reasoning capacities, access to trustworthy evidence, etc. However, it also includes support that might not seem epistemic on its face: the opportunity to reflect on and change belief without fear of social or material sanction.

The view we're developing yields a straightforward verdict regarding young people's individual epistemic responsibility when they have been raised in extremist echo chambers. For youth in such a position, the *social* epistemic condition on moral responsibility is not met. Their epistemic community has not given them the epistemic – or attendant material and emotional – resources their epistemic agency needs to flourish.

We believe this verdict accords with pretheoretical intuitions. It is hard to see a child on an extremist picket line holding a sign with egregious, hateful text and think that they need to be held accountable or punished.³⁶ Pity or the feeling that the child needs to be “saved” seem the more appropriate reactions. Our view makes sense of this. For this child, the social epistemic condition on moral responsibility has not been met, and so a judgment of moral responsibility is not appropriate.

Our view will not give straightforward verdicts in other cases. For example, it is difficult to say whether the social epistemic condition on moral responsibility has been met when an adult raised in a non-extremist community is radicalized online. However, we believe this messiness both reflects the world *and* helpfully prompts us to expand our focus to think about how epistemic and moral responsibility is diffuse.

Consider: We look at the eight-year old on the picket line and think that they are responsible for neither their beliefs nor their actions. However, if we just wait ten years, our attitudes towards that person change. What causes our intuitions regarding their epistemic and moral culpability to shift? Part of the story will appeal to cognitive development. But also as a person gets older, the extent to which the social epistemic condition is satisfied has changed. In many cases, the adult has access to epistemic resources the eight-year-old did not (e.g., freer access to the internet). And, as we argued above, the social epistemic condition involves material and emotional social support. Children are more materially and emotionally dependent than adults. Adults have greater access to opportunities to become financially independent from their communities and to form meaningful relationships with those outside. Exit becomes easier. The adult can buy their own bus ticket out, the child cannot. But at the same time, age doesn't make us *completely* independent. Family connection, friendship, and purpose aren't fungible even if there are opportunities to cultivate new versions of these goods. The adult raised in an extremist echo chamber typically must pay a real cost if they leave, even if they do age into resources that go some way in satisfying the social epistemic condition on moral responsibility. The point is that our view can explain the discomfort felt in assigning responsibility to individuals in these cases.

³⁶ This resonates with a common intuition prompted by Wolf's widely discussed case of JoJo, the son of an evil and sadistic dictator who raised JoJo in their image (1988).

Our view has other important upshots, as well. In contrast to views that adopt a deficit approach to childhood, social factors, or material conditions – seeing these factors as resulting in diminished agency, which in turn renders a subject nonculpable³⁷ – we believe our social relationships and material conditions are part-and-parcel of our epistemic and moral agency. As such, they are not merely relevant to exculpatory judgements.³⁸ Our proposal is that we ought to consider how we are *all* implicated in one another’s epistemic lives, and how that complicates our theorizing of responsibility.

4. Our Responsibility to Create Epistemically Healthy Third Places

Let’s sum up. First, we argued that responsibility for extremism does not require extremists, urging a greater focus on the implications behavioral extremism has on responsibility. Then we defended three big claims: (1) Individual *epistemic* responsibility judgments are thin and not particularly consequential. (2) This “thinness” doesn’t gut the force of individual *moral* responsibility judgments if we understand them as forward-looking community-oriented evaluations. (3) This attitude is all the more plausible if we accept that the epistemic condition on moral responsibility has a social dimension. If you accept these claims, we submit that you should also accept that there is an important socially diffuse responsibility to create social epistemic spaces in which community members’ epistemic agency can thrive. This is the final piece of the puzzle; we’ve talked about responsibilities of those who engage in behavioral extremism and of those who are, psychologically, extremists. Finally, this last thought concerns the responsibilities for extremism of those who have nothing to do with any form of extremism (including behavioral extremism). We conclude by briefly sketching our conception of these responsibilities.

Respecting one another’s epistemic agency is not simply a matter of non-interference. How I think affects you. How extremists think affects their victims. Epistemic agency is a matter of active community building. Insofar as we have the power to enable (or undermine) one another’s epistemic agency, we owe it to each other to create social epistemic environments where we all can thrive. Focusing on extremists, satisfying this responsibility means making sure these people are equipped with the requisite epistemic resources, yes. However, it also means creating spaces that mitigate the social, emotional, and material costs they must pay should they reject their community’s extremist beliefs. What does this look like?

Borrowing a term from Ray Oldenburg, we suggest that there is a diffuse social responsibility to create *epistemically healthy third places*. A third place stands in contrast with home (the first place) and work (the second place). It is a “core setting” of “informal public life,” a playful conversational space for forming connections with others (Oldenburg 1989, 15). Supporting exit from extremist communities doesn’t merely require providing any old third place. Many extremist communities are themselves already third places. For example, for a person who

³⁷ Wolf (1988), Fricker (2010), Levy (2003).

³⁸ This resonates with the work of feminist theorizing about relational autonomy and agency. See Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) and Westlund (2009). We aim to connect that insight to theorizing about responsibility.

is radicalized online, their online community may constitute their “third place.”³⁹ Instead, we have a responsibility to create *epistemically healthy* third places: places where true and justified belief is enabled through the provision of epistemic, emotional, and material resources.

Though this may sound abstract, many cases of deradicalization and exit from extremist communities can be understood on this framework. In these cases, someone external to the extremist community extends not only epistemic resources, but emotional and material support as well.⁴⁰ They enable the epistemic agency of the person embedded in the extremist community not only by providing evidence and epistemic mentorship, but also by mitigating emotional and material costs through community and friendship. Of course, it is obviously not everyone’s or even any particular person’s duty to befriend individual extremists, or to significantly sacrifice one’s own well-being to provide direct support to individual extremists on the brink of exit from their communities. More than this, the victims and targets of an individual’s extremism bear no responsibility in easing an extremist’s exit by directly engaging with or connecting to such a person. The sort of responsibility we all have towards others is socially distributed and defeasible in principle, and how each of us must meet the demands of this responsibility can vary in complicated ways.

Nevertheless, our view casts the net of responsibility wider than traditional individualistic accounts would. Hyperfocus on individual epistemic responsibility is not only incompatible with the kinds of epistemic and moral creatures we are, it also obscures the responsibility we have to enable each other’s epistemic agency. Answering questions about responsibility for extremism requires looking at non-extremists as well, and the extent to which we have genuinely taken up that mantle.

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³⁹ Rosanne Boyland’s case might fit this description (Mohyeldin and Varathan 2022).

⁴⁰ See the cases of Derek Black (Saslow 2018) and Megan Phelps-Roper (Phelps-Roper 2019) for detailed accounts of these dynamics.

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