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Empathy, extremism, and epistemic autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Are extremists (incels, neo-nazis, and the like) characteristically answerable for their moral and political convictions? Is it necessary to offer them reasoned arguments against their views, or is it instead appropriate to bypass that kind of engagement? Discussion of these questions has centered around the putative epistemic autonomy of extremists. The parties to this discussion have assumed that epistemic autonomy is solely (or at least primarily) a matter of epistemic independence, of believing based on epistemic reasons one has assessed for oneself. Here, though, I make the case for shifting the terms of the debate. Epistemic independence is not sufficient to make one answerable for one's beliefs. Epistemic autonomy, in the sense that matters for answerability, is also a matter of what I call epistemic receptivity. Extremists may be fiercely epistemic independent, but that commitment is characteristically paired with severe deficiencies in empathic orientation. Severe deficiencies in empathic orientation undermine extremists' ability to adequately engage with competing evaluative perspectives, and thus compromise extremists' epistemic autonomy. I consider how this conclusion should inform our thinking about what we owe to extremists.

I. Introduction

In his recent book *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis,* Quassim Cassam describes a mindset or a cognitive personality characteristic of extremism. The person with an extremist mindset is not just someone who happens to have political or moral convictions well outside of the norm for their community and time. Nor are they just someone who embraces violent or otherwise coercive means to achieve their ends. Rather, the person with an extremist mindset (henceforth: the extremist) is distinguished from others, even others who share some of their convictions and methods, by a cluster of preoccupations and mental dispositions.[1] The proud boy, the militant jihadist, the ecoterrorist and the incel all have in common an obsession with purity, an extreme opposition to compromise, a quickness to resentment, and, most crucially and distinctively, a tendency to Manichean thought that divides reality sharply into good and evil, 'us' and 'them'. Extremists' patterns of thought and feeling are unusual. But, Cassam argues, there is good reason to think that extremists' moral and political convictions typically reflect the exercise of what

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he calls their 'epistemic autonomy', just like more moderate people's convictions do (2021, 182). Extremist beliefs are commonly analyzed as the product of autonomy-undermining, epistemically crippling social forces. Cassam claims that in embracing this standard analysis, theorists and policymakers have (ironically) made one of the mistakes typical of extremist thought: they have drastically overestimated the gap between the 'normal' 'us' and the 'extreme' 'other'.

Why does it matter whether extremists are epistemically autonomous, or more particularly, whether extremists' moral and political convictions reflect the exercise of their epistemic autonomy? It is of course true that if we do not properly understand the etiology of extremist ideas, we are more likely to waste time, money, and political goodwill on ineffective de-radicalization strategies, but the matter also has a moral weight quite independent of its consequences for resource management. Respect for autonomy is a common polestar in liberal theorizing. And on at least some views of what we owe to each other as citizens (and what the state owes us), our duties of respect will take a somewhat different form, depending upon how autonomous individuals' moral and political judgments actually are.[2] What is owed to the person who is already maximally epistemically autonomous is plausibly quite different from what is owed to the person whose autonomy is faded, wholly absent, or present only in prospect. If epistemic autonomy is respect-worthy, and if that respect needs to be somehow keyed to whether or to what extent individuals actually are epistemically autonomous, then failing to properly assess extremists' epistemic autonomy might set us up to do *them* a real injustice.

For Cassam, if a person is epistemically autonomous, and if a belief of theirs reflects their epistemic autonomy, then these are the upshots for how others ought to relate to them as the bearer of that belief (call this collection the *regard suite)*. First, the belief should be considered 'genuinely theirs' (2021, 183). Second, the bearer should be regarded as 'responsible' for their belief (2021). And third, the appropriate way to go about trying to change their belief is by offering counterevidence or pointing out weaknesses in their reasons for belief.[3] Cassam contrasts these latter interventions with 'advice and support' that does not directly engage with the substance of an individual's epistemic reasons (2021, 197). He also implies that the regard suite norms apply only if an individual's beliefs reflect their epistemic autonomy. If extremists were not epistemically autonomous, then they would not be apt targets for the kinds of treatment and consideration that figure in the regard suite.

On Cassam's view, epistemic autonomy is what makes the regard suite as a whole apt. I will not challenge that starting point. In fact, I will here simply assume that the regard suite is apt with respect to a belief if, only if, and insofar as that belief is reflective of its bearer's epistemic autonomy. But with that assumption fixed in place, I do want to raise some doubts about Cassam's judgment that extremist beliefs typically reflect their bearers' epistemic autonomy. And to do that, I will reopen the question: What does it actually take to be epistemically autonomous (in the sense that matters for the regard suite)?[4]

One initially appealing answer to that latter question is that epistemic autonomy simply boils down to epistemic independence, that is (roughly), judging or having judged for oneself. And indeed, when it comes to extremist beliefs, both defenders of the standard analysis and critics of it like Cassam seem to embrace that same substantive conception of epistemic autonomy. The primary locus of disagreement has therefore

been the empirical question: do extremist beliefs actually reflect their bearers' epistemic independence, or not?

Here, I will make the case for shifting the terms of the debate. When it comes to evaluating eligibility for at least some elements in the regard suite, we should be asking not just whether a believer judged for himself, but also whether he was receptive to countervailing evidence. We are epistemically autonomous, and thus eligible for all the elements of the regard suite, only if we are capable of weighing epistemic reasons for *and against* our belief. Other things being equal, greater impairments in what I will call epistemic receptivity correspond to greater reductions in epistemic autonomy.

I will also provide some reason to think that extremists tend to lack epistemic receptivity, at least when it comes to their core moral and political convictions. Extremists are characteristically epistemically hobbled by major deficiencies in what I will call empathic orientation, and these deficiencies in empathic orientation tend to inhibit the receptivity epistemic autonomy requires. The epistemic independence of which extremists are admittedly capable cannot simply make up for these serious and self-retrenching deficiencies. In fact, a qualified form of epistemic dependence or deference may be crucial to securing eligibility for elements of the regard suite. As it turns out, epistemic autonomy is not just a matter of thinking for oneself. It requires a form of regard for and engagement with others' perspectives that the Manichean mindset effectively chokes off.

II. Epistemic autonomy as epistemic independence

One popular conception of epistemic autonomy *qua* trait or virtue treats it as the antipode of epistemic dependence. This is the sense of epistemic autonomy that Heather Battaly has in mind when she writes:

> Agents who have this trait are disposed to think independently– to think for themselves and make up their own minds. So, when the goal of inquiry is to arrive at beliefs about a particular matter (e.g. whether anthropogenic climate change is real, where the Sears Tower is located, whether I left my keys somewhere on campus), intellectually autonomous agents are those who want, and tend, to see things for themselves, and to grasp matters 'via [their] own cognitive resources'. (2022, 155; citing Pritchard 2016, 38)

Sandy Goldberg likewise claims that an epistemically autonomous subject is one 'who judges and decides for herself, where her judgments and decisions are reached on the basis of reasons which she has in her possession, where she appreciates the significance of these reasons, and where (if queried) she could articulate the bearing of her reasons on the judgment or decision in question' (2013, 169).[5] To be clear: Battaly's and Goldberg's formulations are not concerned with epistemic autonomy as a quality of particular beliefs, nor are they expressly designed to specify conditions under which something like the regard suite is either appropriate or inappropriate. Still, we can ask whether the formulations are in fact fit to play that role. To that end, let us consider this candidate conception of epistemically autonomous belief, one that draws on Battaly's and Goldberg's shared core understanding of epistemic autonomy:

> *Epistemic autonomy as epistemic independence:* A belief is epistemically autonomous (that is, reflective of its bearer's epistemic autonomy) just in case and insofar as it is believed on the basis of epistemic reasons that its bearer has herself appreciated as such.

What is it to believe on the basis of an epistemic reason or reasons? Perhaps too simple-mindedly, let us say that a subject *s* believes *p* on the basis of an epistemic reason *r* if and only if *s's* believing that *p* is explained by *s's* taking *r* to justify her belief that *p*.[6] I will assume here for the sake of simplicity that an epistemic reason is necessarily an item of evidence, a consideration that tells in favor or against the truth of some belief.[7]

If *Epistemic autonomy as epistemic independence* were correct, which kinds of conditions might undermine the epistemic autonomy of one's belief? 'Brainwashing', or belief instal-lation that bypasses our rational faculties, would. So too would unconditioned deference, where one entirely and unconditionally outsources one's belief formation to others. If one were to adopt a cognitive self-management policy according to which *all* one's beliefs were made to unquestioningly reflect the beliefs of another, one would thereby effectively obviate one's epistemic autonomy. Note that that would be true whether one's abdication were initially motivated by epistemic reasons (I have evidence that this person is always correct) or by practical reasons (this person is beautiful or powerful).

Extremism has sometimes been identified with a 'lack of independence in the for-mation of one's judgments', arising from 'a process of socialization (and or resocialization) … through which an individual's beliefs are molded– a process which, in its most extreme expression, takes the form of brainwashing and indoctrination' (Breton and Dalmazzone 2002, 47). If we were to accept that once-dominant characterization of extremism, it would trivially follow that extremist beliefs are not epistemically autonomous, *per* the conception of epistemic autonomy now under consideration. But if by 'extremist' we instead mean *people with an extremist mindset*, it is not at all clear that extremists are on the whole much less epistemically independent than non-extremists, much less inter-ested in or less prone to making up their own minds via their own assessment of episte-mic reasons. As Cassam points out, evidence provision is a core mechanism of radicalization (2021, 165–189). Propaganda videos for terrorist *jihad*, for example, feature arguments that aim to persuade audiences that violence in the name of Islam is religiously acceptable or mandated. Indeed, all across the spectra of extremist move-ments, we find efforts to sway audiences by furnishing them with epistemic reasons for belief.[8] Why is this strategy so common? The most straightforward explanation is that it is common because it is successful, and that it works by harnessing, rather than under-cutting, the epistemic independence of its audience.

In calling into question extremists' supposed unusual epistemic dependence, I do not mean to deny that extremist beliefs are shaped by pressures to conform, to seek approval, and to self-soothe. It is undoubtedly true that such pressures influence extremists' beliefs, and those pressures could in some cases sap extremists' epistemic independence.[9] But we are looking for reasons to think that extremists are characteristically *much less* epistemically autonomous than non-extremists are. And it must be acknowledged that everyone's beliefs are to some extent shaped by a-rational forces, including the kinds of pressures to conform, to seek approval, and to self-soothe that are frequently cited as fueling radicalization.[10]

Suppose we were to grant, then, that extremists' characteristic moral and political beliefs do often reflect their epistemic independence. I have assumed, following Cassam, that if a belief is epistemically autonomous, then all the elements in the regard suite are apt with respect to it. So, if we also accept *Epistemic autonomy as episte-mic independence,* we will be led directly to the conclusion that extremist beliefs are often the apt object of all the elements in the regard suite. The question we now face, then, is

whether to accept *Epistemic autonomy as epistemic independence*. Should we think that mere epistemic independence really does suffice to make beliefs epistemically autonomous, such that all the elements of the regard suite are apt? Or should we instead think that there is actually more to epistemic autonomy than independence, and (perhaps) that extremist beliefs characteristically lack that something more? To answer those questions, let us revisit the individual elements of the regard suite and consider whether epistemic independence alone clearly makes each of them apt. If it does not, then we will have reason not to accept *Epistemic autonomy as epistemic independence*.

III. From epistemic independence to epistemic receptivity

If an individual's belief reflects their epistemic independence, that does seem to entail that we ought to regard that belief as their own. After all, it could hardly be said to belong to anyone else, having been formed based on the individual's own consideration of epistemic reasons. We can also allow that there is a minimal sense of responsibility (call it responsibility as attributability) that one incurs vis-à-vis a belief simply in virtue of the fact that that belief is one's own.[11] That still leaves us with the question of whether epistemic independence guarantees epistemic responsibility for one's belief in any other, richer sense. And it also leaves open the question of whether counter-arguments and counter-evidence are the uniquely appropriate means of addressing one's belief. Regarding these latter two questions, we need to proceed more cautiously.

The grounds for caution can be expressed quite simply. Believing in an epistemically independent way is compatible with an inability to consider counterevidence (that is, epistemic reasons to believe otherwise or to suspend judgment). A persistent failure to consider counterevidence may sometimes serve as a powerful *sign* that one's belief is not itself based on epistemic reasons. We might infer from the intransigence of our friend's belief, in the face of mountains of counterevidence, that her belief is an article of faith not based on any epistemic reason at all.[12] Still, it is nevertheless true that believing on the basis of an epistemic reason is one thing, and being able to consider alternative epistemic reasons is another. To illustrate the difference cheaply: If someone finds themselves in an epistemic environment where literally all available evidence tells in favor of her belief that *p,* she will in a real sense be unable to consider any evidence that ⟨?⟩*p*, but that fact does not give us any reason to think that her belief that *p* is not based on epistemic reasons.

Consider, now, how that distinction might matter to responsibility for one's belief. Gary Watson insightfully observes that to hold people responsible (rather than to merely judge their actions to be their own) is to 'demand (require) certain conduct from one another and respond adversely to one another's failures to comply with these demands' (1996, 230). It is inappropriate to make demands of others that they cannot hope to meet. In the case of belief, it would be inappropriate to demand of another that they weigh evidence that they cannot weigh. If Watson's observation is indeed as sound as it seems, then a believer cannot appropriately be held responsible for those flaws in their belief that stem from their inability to weigh evidence, even if their belief is entirely epistemically independent.[13]

The fact that epistemic independence is compatible with an inability to consider counterevidence also bears on how we may endeavor to change others' minds. We generally

think it is at least *pro tanto* wrong to endeavor to change someone's beliefs via anything other than the provision or illumination of epistemic reasons.[14] Respect for others' epistemic agency requires that we stick doggedly to this sort of treatment, even if other means of installing new and better beliefs in our fellows would be more efficient.[15] But it is surely misguided, rather than noble or respectful, to offer contravening evidence in cases where our addressee will in any case be totally unable to weigh it. So, we should reject the view that an epistemically independent belief is one that it is necessarily appropriate (let alone *uniquely* appropriate) to try to change through the provision or illumination of evidence or argument.

These considerations militate in favor of a revised understanding of what it is required for epistemic autonomy.[16] I offer this alternative:

> *Epistemic autonomy and epistemic receptivity:* A belief is epistemically autonomous (that is, reflective of its bearer's epistemic autonomy) only if 1) it is believed on the basis of epistemic reasons and 2) the bearer is epistemically receptive: that is, they can weigh epistemic reasons, if there be any, that tell against that belief. Other things being equal, greater impairments in one's ability to weigh countervailing epistemic reasons amount to greater reductions in epistemic autonomy.

A few notes about this proposal are in order. First, while this proposal introduces one new necessary condition for epistemic autonomy, it does leave open the possibility that there are others. The considerations that led us to this proposal directly support only the conclusion that epistemic receptivity is essential for epistemic autonomy. So, I have shied away here from the more ambitious (and admittedly tempting) claim that the two featured conditions are jointly sufficient for epistemic autonomy. Second, on this proposal, epistemic autonomy comes in degrees. The extent and quality of one's epistemic autonomy will be a function of several variables. It matters how many countervailing epistemic reasons one can weigh. It also matters how evidentially significant those weighable considerations actually are, objectively speaking.[17] One's belief that, say, birds are government spy devices is not rendered highly autonomous just in virtue of one's capacity to weigh one sliver of objectively insignificant and remote contrary evidence, such as a single 'Birds are real!' graffitied on an alley wall.[18]

When will a believer count as able to weigh counterevidence? For one thing, as I already suggested with my 'cheap' illustration, the believer must inhabit a sufficiently information- and argumentation-rich epistemic environment. Some might argue that this requirement already excludes the typical extremist. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule argue that many extremist beliefs are the product of epistemic bubbles and other information deserts: 'In some domains, people suffer from a "crippled epistemology," in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. Many extremists fall in this category; their extremism stems not from irrationality, but from the fact that they have little (relevant) information' (2008, 9). The extent to which modern extremists are actually 'enbubbled' in this straightforward sense is debatable, though.[19] Extremists are often exquisitely cognizant of the fact that others have different beliefs and have at least heard others express reasons for their competing convictions. This is especially true of members of geographically dispersed but highly technologically literate extremist groups such as the incel community, which is characterized by the Southern Poverty Law Center as 'part of the online male supremacist

ecosystem' (Janik 2018). Violent misogyny forms the core of incel ideology. Incels share a strong sense of grievance over their lack of sexual access to women, an access to which they believe they are morally entitled. And yet it is not as though most incels are generally *unaware* of arguments for the moral importance of women's bodily autonomy. Indeed, irritation at the apparent omnipresence of such arguments is a major theme on online incel message-boards, where incels incessantly express resentment at having been bombarded with 'feminist brainwashing' (Ging 2017).

In any case, it would be a mistake to reduce the question of extremists' epistemic receptivity to the question of how impoverished extremists' epistemic environments are. I can know that others do not share my political and moral convictions, I can even have heard their reasons for demurring, without actually being able to weigh the reasons that others take to support their alternative convictions. Features of my own psychology might prove as serious an obstacle to my epistemic receptivity as features of my epistemic environment are. Alessandra Tanesini (2022) points out that thoroughgoing epistemic narcissism is a psychological feature that undermines epistemic responsibility by completely undercutting one's ability to weigh alternative evidence. If my own narcissism, my truly unassailable confidence that whatever I believe is true, barred me from ever weighing reasons to believe otherwise, I would not be epistemically responsible for my beliefs in the sense that I would not be answerable for them.[20] That is, it would be inappropriate to demand of me that I consider and explain why my belief is *better than* some alternative, as I would be psychologically incapable of seriously considering epistemic grounds for alternative beliefs.

Epistemic narcissism is incompatible with epistemic receptivity, then, but extremists are not all epistemic narcissists. Some readily defer to the judgment of those they admire (think, for instance, of Q-Anon members' responsiveness to 'Q's' missives), and even non-deferential extremists are not typically incapable of revising beliefs in the light of at least some sorts of counter-evidence.[21] It is not unusual for extremists to update their evaluative convictions in light of new evidence that their enemies are still worse and more depraved than they had initially thought, for example. Still, the case of narcissism is helpful because it points to a related psychological trait that looks more like a characteristic feature of extremist psychology. A hallmark of extremist thought is a deficient or absent empathetic orientation. Like epistemic narcissism, this can be a serious barrier to epistemic receptivity, and by extension to epistemically autonomous belief. A person is empathetically oriented (in my sense) to the extent that they are (1) open to the possibility that other people, crucially including people with different evaluative perspectives, have epistemic reasons for *their* beliefs, and (2) disposed to seek to grasp others' epistemic reasons *as* epistemic reasons through imaginative perspective-taking, that is, empathizing.[22]

Empathic orientation matters to epistemic receptivity insofar as the epistemic reasons that actually tell for or against some belief are 'perspective locked'. A reason to believe that *p* is perspective locked if it is not available (or, more modestly, not as readily available) as a reason to believe that *p* from any and every perspective. Understand 'perspective' broadly, here, to encompass everything from physical vantage points, to aesthetic sensibilities, to ethical orientations. If a given perspective is not one I can take up, either literally or through the work of my imagination, then epistemic reasons 'locked in' to that perspective will not be available for my consideration.

We take what are in fact perspective-locked considerations to play an important role in grounding and justifying at least some of our moral and political beliefs. Some of these considerations wear their perspective-locked nature on their sleeve. Take what-it's-like considerations, such as how it feels to endure extended solitary confinement, or to live through the physical and mental stresses of a forced pregnancy. We access those considerations either by actually living through the relevant experiences, or by first-personally imagining them. And we form our beliefs about, for example, the moral permissibility of our penal practices and of abortion at least partly based on these sorts of considerations. Sometimes, that is because we take subjective experience to be powerfully or uniquely revelatory of further evaluative facts (my experience of rage reveals injustice to me) and sometimes that is because we take the subjective experience to itself make certain evaluative facts true (the particular quality of my agony makes it especially wrong to ignore). Our ordinary moral reasoning relies heavily on the question: 'And how would I feel if it were done to me? What would it be like to be subject to this rule?' Epistemic receptivity is a matter of one's ability to consider objectively significant counterevidence, and it is true that our ordinary reliance on what-it's-like considerations does not itself prove that they are objectively evidentially significant. Still, denying the objective evidential significance of what-it's-like considerations means admitting that commonsense moral reflection is dramatically flawed, and it brings with it the burden of explaining how our ordinary patterns of moral analysis could have gone so off the rails.

Other epistemic reasons relevant to moral and political beliefs are less conspicuously perspective-locked. They are not ineffable or incommunicable in quite the way that what-its-like considerations tend to be. Consider, for instance, the fact that some action is cruel. Let's say, plausibly, that that *is* very strong albeit defeasible evidence for the moral badness of said action. Most people's moral perspectives build in some sensitivity to considerations of cruelty, but we can imagine two sorts of people whose perspectives don't conform to this norm. One is a person who has no notion or sense of cruelty at all. This concept is not at all available to mediate her engagement with the world. Another is a person who does have some notion or sense of cruelty, but whose own sense of moral goodness is attuned exclusively to facts about how honest people's intentions are. It has never even occurred to this rather strange person that other sorts of considerations could bear on the truth of moral goodness assessments. Our honesty obsessive might know that the action will be cruel, but he will not be able to weigh that as a reason either for or against affirming its goodness, at least not so long as he remains rigidly confined to his own evaluative perspective. Neither the perspective of the honesty obsessive nor the perspective of the person who is utterly unaware of cruelty as such leaves room for the fact of an action's cruelty to be recognized as evidence relevant to the action's moral qualities.

If epistemic reasons that bear on the truth of moral and political beliefs are in one or both of these senses perspective-locked, then an agent can only weigh them by accessing the relevant perspectives. Hence the importance of perspective-taking (actual or imaginary) for epistemic receptivity and thus epistemic autonomy. If I cannot access a relevant perspective, then I cannot weigh some counterevidence that is relevant to my own belief. My responsibility for my belief will be correspondingly diminished. It will not be appropriate to simply offer me that locked-off counterevidence, either. Indeed, it is hard to see what that offering could even amount to.

People vary in their perspective-taking dispositions. Some are especially keen and able perspective shifters. They combine the interest in 'seeing it for themselves' characteristic of the constitutionally epistemically independent with an unusual readiness to step away from their native evaluative frames. Interestingly, a conditional form of deference may facilitate this perspective-shifting activity. A default assumption that there is something to be said in favor of others' contrasting judgments, what we might call a tendency to take others seriously, motivates the continued search for epistemic reasons in support of others' initially puzzling beliefs. The stronger this default assumption, the more willing one will be to suspend one's own background commitments in an effort to bring others' reasons for belief properly into view.

Not all of us are such enthusiastic and reliable perspective takers, and we need not and should not say that an occasional thoughtless failure to empathically engage with competing evaluative perspectives utterly undermines our epistemic autonomy. Extremists do not just occasionally fail to empathize, though. In the case of extremists, deficiencies in empathetic orientation toward outgroup members are systematic, enduring, and mandated and reinforced by exclusionary judgments. Exclusionary judgments are judgments that either contain or rationally entail the content: these are not the sort of people or beings with whom one could properly empathize.

Extremists' aforementioned Manichean tendency to split the social world into the 'good, higher' ingroup and the 'bad, lower' outgroup is most potently and chillingly expressed in the widespread characterization of outgroup members as subhuman. Descriptions of outgroup members as 'animals', 'pests', 'vermin', 'demons', or 'monsters' proliferate across extremist circles.[23] Let us examine how judgments about outgroup members' subhumanity might erect barriers between incels and epistemic reasons to reject a core incel conviction, namely, that men are morally entitled to sex with non-consenting women, and that women should therefore be compelled to provide sex on demand.

IV. Empathetic orientation and epistemic receptivity: an illustration

Consider the epithets for women that proliferate on incel message boards. The 'official' dictionary of r/redpill, one of the largest online incel communities, explains the forum's often-reiterated characterization of women as 'hamsters' or 'rationalization hamsters' like so: 'Used to describe the way that women use rationalization to resolve mental conflict and avoid cognitive dissonance. The core mechanism that allows women to say one thing and do a different thing' (Van Valkenburgh 2021). In various online fora, incels also conventionally refer to women as 'femoids' or 'NPCs' (that is, 'non-playable characters', as in video-games) (Bogetić et al. 2023; Chang 2022; Glace, Dover, and Zatkin 2021).

These labels express slightly different views of women. 'Rationalization hamsters' most clearly communicates a representation of women as creatures who do not actually believe on the basis of epistemic reasons. On this picture, women may reach for ways of tying their mental states together, but they are not concerned to respond to evidence or to preserve the coherence of their beliefs. Women's mental lives are instead dominated by efforts to juggle practical imperatives, such as the drive to satisfy sexual interest in dominant men and the drive to preserve social standing through systematic dishonesty. The

terms 'femoid' and 'NPC' suggest a still more degraded conception of women's epistemic lives. They imply that while women may appear to form beliefs, they really have no more epistemic agency than a rudimentary robot or bit of code does.

It is straightforwardly not possible to adopt the perspective of an individual who does not have a perspective at all. And if the other's inner life is just a chaos of competing drives and beliefs not held for any epistemic reason, then their perspective rationally must be written off as utterly irrelevant to one's efforts to weigh reasons to believe other than one does. From the perspective suggested by those characterizations of women, then, the project of empathizing with women must be either incoherent (there's nothing that supposed project could consist in) or at least utterly without rational justification (there is no chance that the project will be revelatory of epistemic reasons). At least when it comes to women, the incel outlook does not countenance empathic orientation as a viable possibility.

An incel might know that I reject his belief that women should be compelled to provide sex to men on demand. He might have even heard me spell out my reasoning: such a policy would offend against women's dignity. But if he cannot appreciate for himself how that could even count as a candidate epistemic reason, then he will not be capable of weighing this reason for rejecting his belief against his own reasons for holding it. In order to see for himself how that could even count as a candidate reason, he would need to imaginatively step outside of the evaluative perspective characteristic of inceldom. That evaluative perspective leaves no space for the possibility that women could have dignity. 'Women's dignity' is, for incels, an oxymoron, not a potentially evidentially significant consideration. Nor does the incel's own perspective afford access to reasons for rejecting his belief grounded in subjective experience. The traumatic quality of the experiences to which the incel's favored policy would subject women are not available as counterevidence from within his perspective. However, the incel's lack of empathic orientation (a lack that is, plausibly, sustained and reinforced by his exclusionary judgements) means that he cannot simply access these important and relevant epistemic reasons through perspective-taking, either. The scope of the epistemic reasons available for his assessment is dramatically narrowed, and the epistemic autonomy of his belief is thereby compromised. That is not to say that it is necessarily entirely undermined. We can grant that some objectively significant counterevidence may still be perfectly available for him to weigh. But if the perspective-locked epistemic reasons are objectively significant, as they seem to be in the case at hand, then so is the impact on his belief's epistemic autonomy.

I will now consider two worries about this analysis. First, one might object that I have taken incels' own characterizations of women too seriously: It is just not true that incels actually affirm the contents of their purported exclusionary judgments, in a way that effectively rationally bars them from weighing evidence specially accessible via women's perspectives. In support of that objection, one might point to the wildly obvious implausibility of the idea that women are not epistemic agents, or to the internal incoherence of incels' various representations of women. Surely (the objection continues) sometimes the problem is not that a sincere background judgment blocks access to counterevidence, but rather that incels simply find it convenient not to consider that counterevidence, even though they are perfectly able to do so. Exclusionary judgments might function less as a genuine obstacle, and more as (at most) an excuse that is not really believed.

In response, it is first worth observing that many incels do appear to be deathly sincere in their moral and political beliefs, as most tragically evidenced by the distressingly frequent acts of terroristic and domestic violence associated with the movement.[24] Those beliefs are also wildly implausible by any reasonable measure, so by the same token we should not be too quick to assume that incels cannot really believe that women are epistemically akin to robots. Additionally and more importantly, even if such characterizations reflect not full-blown belief but something more like a default way of picturing, such defaults can exercise a powerful influence on one's habits of thought. Empathetic perspective taking is an acquired skill that is sustained and refined through practice. It stands to reason that if non-doxastic default representations systemically incline one away from empathy with outgroup members, one's ability to empathize with them will eventually wither, too, with the result that relevant perspective-locked epistemic reasons will become less and less readily accessible to one. Unwillingness could thus easily slide into inability.

One might also worry that my analysis has not given due weight to the reasons *why* incels or other extremists form exclusionary judgments, or more generally lack empathetic orientation. The explanation might sometimes lie in social, psychological, or material factors beyond extremists' control. Oppressive and distracting conditions, such as living under the threat of violence, could unavoidably preclude or diminish empathic orientation, as could some kinds of neuro-atypicality or pathology. Still, I have supplied no reason to think such conditions are always or often to blame for lack of empathic orientation. It seems possible that many incels' deficits in empathic orientation are ultimately born not of incapacity, but rather of corrigible epistemic errors such as hasty or motivated reasoning. Perhaps some incels form the exclusionary judgment that women are unfit for empathy not because they cannot help themselves, but because (say) they happen to neglect relevant counter-evidence that they are nevertheless perfectly able to weigh.

To put the objection bluntly: if incels' empathic deficiency is itself at least partly the product of their autonomous epistemic agency, it seems a bit rich to let them off the hook for their misogynistic beliefs about sexual assault's permissibility on the grounds that they are deficient in empathetic orientation. If an incel came by his exclusionary judgment in an epistemically autonomous way, then isn't it therefore true that he could now revise that judgment? And if he could now revise that judgment, and come to recognize women as viable subjects for empathy, isn't there a sense in which it is also now true of him that he *could* consider perspective-locked evidence against his beliefs about sexual assault– albeit not without undertaking a major shift in his overall evaluative perspective?

My first response is concessive. My position is not that all incels, much less all extremists, are equally incapable of considering perspective-locked evidence that bears on their extremist beliefs. Even if two incels share the same equally influential background exclusionary judgment, that judgment may be more susceptible to evidence-based revision for one than it is for the other. That fact would indeed make a difference to their comparative epistemic autonomy. On the conception we have been developing, epistemic autonomy is not an all-or-nothing affair. It comes in degrees, and if there is an extremist whose exclusionary judgments are comparatively shallow-rooted, it will be appropriate to treat or address them in ways that reflect this fact about them.

That said, it is also important to recognize that exclusionary judgments are insidiously self-retrenching. Regardless of how one initially forms the belief (or, more modestly,

adopts the default representation) that women are 'hamsters', 'NPCs', or otherwise unfit for empathy, once that judgment is in place, it puts up powerful roadblocks to its own revision. Empathy with women is not a live option for one so long as one is in the grip of such a judgment. To take up women's perspectives and consider evidence locked therein, one would need to suspend or otherwise circumvent that judgment. But if one does not take up women's perspectives, one will not be positioned to access at least some powerful epistemic reasons not to accept that judgment. If one could encounter the rich texture of women's subjective experience from a first-personal perspective, that would provide one with powerful, effectively undeniable reasons to reject the belief that women are quasi-robots and thus not suitable targets of empathy. Unhappily, though, that is just the sort of evidence that exclusionary judgments help to place beyond consideration.

V. Conclusion

Unfortunate travelers to New England are sometimes informed by grim-faced locals that 'You can't get there from here'. Generally, this is received as a joke: there must always be some route, however, circuitous, from point A to point B. I do not claim that there are no ways to move an extremist off his epistemic 'point A'. Nevertheless, I have made the case the extremists' embrace of exclusionary judgments fuels and is fueled by the erosion or deficient development of their empathetic inclinations and abilities, and that this toxic symbiosis lands them in a kind of epistemic trap. The fact that they are trapped in this way makes a difference to their epistemic receptivity, and thus to their epistemic autonomy, regardless of how epistemically independent they may be.

I will end with a brief note about these reflections' implications for deradicalizing interventions. Since extremists are not characteristically unable to revise their beliefs on the basis of considerations accessible from their own evaluative perspective, arguments that deploy only such considerations might still persuade them. So, for instance, one could challenge the classic incel belief that women morally ought to be legally compelled to be monogamous by pointing to evidence that such a policy would limit incels' own effective sexual access to women. It is not clear that this ought to be considered a fully *respectful* form of reason-giving address, though, since it involves offering incels objectively poor evidence that their belief is false.

If I am right that the (or more modestly, *a*) crucial barrier to extremists' deradicalization is their lack of access to perspective-locked evidence, then an alternative and more palatable strategy presents itself: stakeholders could aim to make extremists more receptive to counterevidence by fostering or restoring their deficient empathic orientations. This could involve environmental inventions, such as reducing the background stresses that social isolation, poverty, or threats of violence impose. It might also involve building empathetic skill by gradually extending whatever abilities extremists do retain. In an interesting recent study in Bosnia–Herzegovina, for instance, youth deemed at high risk of ethno-religious extremism engaged in workshops aimed at incrementally enhancing perspective-taking skills (Savage and Fearon 2021). Participants practiced adopting a series of different perspectives in the context of low-stakes, politically neutral conflicts, such as disagreements over which film to watch. They were then invited to reflect on this experience. The workshops delivered striking results. Remarkably, outgroup amity and neutral

curiosity about others' perspectives increased much more substantially and more durably than in comparable studies which deployed methods of direct persuasion through logical argumentation and evidence provision. Methods like those deployed in this study could be understood as honoring extremists' epistemic autonomy *in prospect,* without ignoring the ways in which deficient empathetic orientation compromises their epistemic autonomy in the present.

Notes

1. Cassam also recognizes the distinct categories of ideological extremism and methods extremism, into which individuals may fall simply in virtue of the aberrant content of their convictions or the extreme nature of their preferred tactics, but he does hold that the extremist mindset disposes individuals to both of these latter forms of extremism (2021, 11–114).
2. For the deliberative democrats Amy Guttman and Dennis Thompson, for example, respect for others' autonomy dictates that we should not write off their judgments as 'products of unfavorable conditions, such as impaired judgment, misguided motives, or cultural influences', unless we cannot realistically interpret them in any other light, in which case respect might instead require that we draw attention to the judgment's epistemically faulty etiology (1999, 270).
3. A form of address could be inappropriate in virtue of being impotent, and/or in virtue of being disrespectful or otherwise immoral. Cassam himself seems primarily but not exclusively concerned with the former possibility (see 2021, 197).
4. Henceforth, I will mostly skip over that parenthetical qualification. 'Epistemic autonomy' could sensibly be used to pick out a number of different traits or conditions, some of which may have little to do with the regard suite. But since I am ultimately concerned with how we should treat or address extremists, I will focus just on the kind of autonomy that matters to the regard suite.
5. Fricker (2006) and Zagzebski (2007) offer characterizations of epistemic autonomy strikingly similar to Goldberg's and Battaly's.
6. This formulation draws inspiration from Neta (2019) and Lord and Sylvan (2019).
7. For discussion of challenges to such an assumption, see e.g. Reisner (2012), Gardiner (2018), and Moss (2018).
8. On the significance of persuasion as a mechanism of radicalization, see e.g. Nuraniyah (2018), Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010), and Heath-Kelly (2013).
9. Note, though, that the influence of the aforementioned pressures *need not* interfere with the epistemic independence of one's belief, on my characterization of epistemic independence. The pressures might, for instance, influence which epistemic reasons one attends to, without making it any less true that one's eventual belief is formed on the basis of epistemic reasons one has oneself appreciated as such.
10. The ubiquity of wishful believing, for instance, is well-evidenced: see e.g. Borkenau and Liebler (1993), and Brown and Dutton (1995).
11. I adopt the notion of attributability as a form of responsibility from Shoemaker (2015).
12. For a defense of the view that belief *can* be based on non-epistemic reasons, see McCormick (2019).
13. This is true even if the inability to weigh evidence is, as it were, a self-inflicted wound. If I deliberately epistemically hobble myself, the consequent flaws in my belief are still not liable to be the subject of Watsonian 'demands' and 'censure', unless it is now within my power to restore my own evidence-assessing powers (see section IV below). For other landmark analyses of *holding responsible,* see e.g. Wallace (1996) and Smith (2007).
14. The provision or illumination of epistemic reasons can, of course, take many forms. It is by no means limited to the dry recitation of arguments.
15. See e.g. Gutmann and Thompson (1999, 270), Larmore (2008, 148), and Hill (1980, 96).

16. One might argue that they instead militate in favor of revising our assumption that epistemic autonomy necessarily makes the whole regard suite apt. I have opted to treat that assumption as a fixed point, but even if one were to abandon that assumption, the broader point stands: epistemic independence alone is not sufficient to render the whole regard suite apt.
17. I prescind here from worries about the nature or possibility of objective epistemic reasons; see e.g. Sylvan (2016) and Schroeder (2008) for discussion.
18. Lorenz (2021) summarizes the fascinating history of the Birds Aren't Real 'conspiracy theory'.
19. See e.g. O'Hara and Stevens (2015), Nguyen (2020), and Cassam (2021) for important contributions to this debate.
20. Tanesini draws from Shoemaker (2015) in developing her notion of epistemic responsibility as answerability, according to which 'agents are answerable for those views and behaviors that they are capable of justifying by supplying reasons in their support and by considering whether their conduct and beliefs are better than some relevant alternatives' (2022, 233).
21. On the epistemology of Q-anon, see e.g. Marwick and Partin (2022).
22. 'Empathy' has many meanings apart from the one I invoke here. For an overview see Wispé (1987). Shoemaker (2015) also points out that empathy deficits may bar consideration of counterevidence and thus preclude epistemic responsibility. My account is thus significantly indebted to his, although Shoemaker confines his analysis to empathy deficits secondary to psychopathy or congenital neuro-atypicality and does not consider the role of what I call *exclusionary judgments* in compromising epistemic responsibility.
23. See Baele, Brace, and Ging (2023) for a survey of dehumanizing language in incel communities, and Betus, Jablonski, and Lemieux (2017) for a more general survey of dehumanization in extremist rhetoric.
24. See Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro (2020) for a sobering review.

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