

Confronting fanaticism: theoretical and applied perspectives

International Conference, 20-22 November 2019

Dep. of Philosophy, University of Vienna, Austria

Although understanding *fanaticism*—its character, its causes, and its cures—was a major theme in the work of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Locke and others, it is a topic that receives very little philosophical attention today. This is a pity, since not only does fanaticism appear to be thriving in contemporary society, it also seems to be changing in ways and at a pace we are yet to fully understand. This suggests that renewed attention to various questions about fanaticism is merited. What exactly is fanaticism? What are its distinctive features? What are its causes? Is *religious* fanaticism—in its disconcerting contemporary return—an exemplary or rather the paradigmatic form of fanaticism? And how can it be combatted or curtailed? Our workshop aims to address these and other questions by focusing on the following four themes: the epistemology of fanaticism; fanaticism and affectivity; fanaticism and collectivity; and political aspects of fanaticism. We welcome contributions from disciplines as diverse as philosophy of religion, anthropology of religion, phenomenology, social and political philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of emotions, with interdisciplinary accounts being especially encouraged.

The epistemology of fanaticism

Bertrand Russell once reportedly remarked that ‘fanaticism is primarily an intellectual defect’, and it does seem correct to say fanaticism involves *some kind* of epistemic or intellectual failing. But what exactly is the nature of this failing? Is the fanatic someone who is not appropriately sensitive to evidence; someone who lacks key epistemic virtues; or someone who fails to properly identify and defer to epistemic authorities? As far as religious fanaticism goes, is there an epistemic basis for distinguishing the ‘true believer’ or dogmatist—someone who refuses to allow his dearly held religious convictions to be swayed by counter-evidence or rational critique—from the full-blown fanatic?

If fanaticism is, at least in part, an intellectual or epistemic failing, then we might also ask how it might be *addressed*. Russell himself reportedly proposed philosophy as the antidote to fanaticism, but we might wonder whether there is any point in engaging and trying to reason with fanatics. Should we rather take steps to cultivate epistemic virtues in those most susceptible to fanaticism? Should we dismantle the closed epistemic networks and echo chambers in which fanaticism thrives?

Fanaticism and affectivity

Fanaticism is commonly associated with emotions and other affective phenomena. Historically, it used to be discussed under the labels of “enthusiasm” (Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury) and “Schwärmerei” (Kant); today, it is characterized as “passionate commitment” (Toscano) or “ardent devotion” (Olson) and associated with characteristic emotions such as (religious) zeal, “love, hatred, veneration, contempt, reverence, dread, awe, etc.” (Katsafanas). Yet, the exact nature of this relation remains unclear. Fanaticism is defined as loving devotion but also as destructive hatred. It is explained with reference to the affective makeup of individual persons such as the need for sacred values but also with reference to partisan movements defining themselves by shared values, practices and feelings.

This raises the question of how exactly fanaticism and affective phenomena relate to each other: Is fanaticism itself an affective phenomenon, and if yes: what kind of phenomenon is it? How does it relate to cognate affective phenomena? Moreover, in overlap with the other three themes, one may consider the (ir/a)rationality of fanaticism as an affective phenomenon; the relevance of groups for fanatic feelings; and the role of fanatic feelings for politics.

Fanaticism and collectivity

A number of writers have suggested fanaticism has a collective dimension—that a fanatic necessarily sees himself as part of some kind of movement or group. Etymologically, this aspect of fanaticism can be instructively traced back to the German term ‘Schwärmerei’, which (unlike its English translations, ‘enthusiasm’, and later, ‘fanaticism’) denotes not only the intense passion or zeal of fanaticism but also its *swarm-like* character.

The collective dimension of fanaticism raises a number of questions. Might fanaticism be fundamentally a *group-level* phenomenon, such that the primary locus of fanaticism is certain kinds of community rather than individual fanatics? What connections might fanaticism have to phenomena discussed in the collective intentionality literature, such as collective belief, shared values and group agency? What kinds of groups or communities (esp. religious communities) are most apt to produce and sustain fanaticism, and what can be done, from the perspective of policy-making or of institutional design, to stop fanaticism from taking root or spreading?

Political aspects of fanaticism

Traditional philosophical discussions confronting fanaticism in terms of a *defect* date back to Enlightenment thought: in this context, fanaticism was discussed in terms of (religious) *madness*, a discussion not only to be found in classic German philosophy but also in Voltaire, Hobbes, Locke, and Shaftesbury. In *political* philosophy after Hegel—who refrained from considering fanaticism as madness but uncovered it as a moment in the dialectics of free will—it was more and more reflected in terms of extreme violence. Given this, fanaticism rather exposes mankind to a sort of *radical enmity* that is threatening to transcend the confines of conflict and every "bond of separation" (Heraclitus). This problematic leads us to core problems of political philosophy: How may we think a kind of conflict that escapes the idea of a reconcilability of opposites and what would this mean for the future of political philosophy? Is fanaticism becoming still more brutalized and excessive in the context of late modern technological progress and the speed of globalization? How does such radical violence affect our ideas of tolerance, respect, and reconciliation? May we also talk about a "fanaticism of tolerance" (Rousseau), a fanaticism of "ideological secularism" ("Fanatismus der Ohngötterei" in Mendelsohn'), and a "rationalized fanaticism" (Bloch & Febvre)? Do our traditional concepts of political philosophy, such as conflict, compromise, recognition, or deliberation carry a yet unplumbed potential to confront fanaticism without dialectically playing into its hands?

The Organizing Committee (J. W. Alvis, H. B. Schmid, R. R. Tietjen, L. Townsend, & M. Staudigl)