

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM

Quassim Cassam

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1

Not long before Mohammad Sidique Khan killed himself and five other people by detonating a bomb at London's Edgware Road tube station on 7 July 2005 he recorded a so-called 'martyrdom' video in which he explained and justified his action in the following terms:

Your democratically elected government perpetrates atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible from protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.

Until we feel security, you will be our targets.... We are at war and I am a soldier.¹

A question that is often asked is: what leads a person to turn to political violence?² It has been suggested that we still don't know the answer to this question but if the person in question is Mohammad Sidique Khan then it might seem that we need look no further than his own words for a perfectly straightforward answer: he turned to violence because he had certain political objectives and believed his action would help him achieve those objectives.³ This explanation is in line with what might be called the Rational Agent Model (or RAM, as I will call it) of

¹ The full text of Khan's message is available here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm>. There is more about Khan and his background in Shiv Malik's much discussed 2007 *Prospect Magazine* article 'My brother the bomber' (<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/my-brother-the-bomber-mohammad-sidique-khan>).

² This is the question with which Marc Sageman begins his seminal paper 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014), 565—580. According to Sageman, we still don't know the answer to his question.

³ The idea that the motives and objectives of people like Khan are primarily political rather than theological is made much of by Arun Kundnani in chapter 4 of his book *The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014).

terrorism. RAM says that terrorism is the work of rational agents employing violent means to pursue political objectives. It is, or can be, what Martha Crenshaw describes as ‘a collectively rational strategic choice’⁴ involving ‘logical processes that can be discovered and explained’.⁵

RAM has not, on the whole, been accepted by Western governments or the majority of terrorism experts. As Richard Jackson notes, ‘with only a handful of notable exceptions, little effort has been made by terrorism experts and officials to try and understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words and messages, and seriously engaging with their subjectivity’.⁶ There may be several reasons for this: the assumption that it isn’t possible to engage with the subjectivity of people like Mohammad Sidique Khan, the conviction that their words offer little genuine insight into their deeds, or the worry that accepting that terrorists are rational agents comes perilously close to accepting that their murderous acts might, at least in principle, be justifiable. The model to which most Western governments subscribe is not RAM but one that focuses on the notion of *radicalisation*. According to the Radicalisation Model (or RAD for short), people turn to political violence because they have been radicalised. It is worth noting that this explanation is most popular in relation to Islam-related terrorism; there was little talk of radicalisation in relation to Irish terrorism in the late 20th century. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why RAD is more attractive to governments than RAM: for although RAD is not strictly incompatible with RAM it doesn’t require one to conceive of terrorists as rational agents, it doesn’t imply that terrorism might be justifiable, and it has policy implications that governments find congenial. The holy grail of counterterrorism is prediction, and governments and intelligence agencies are attracted by the idea that radicalisation predicts political violence.

⁴ Martha Crenshaw, ‘The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice’, in Walter Reich (ed.) *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990), 7 – 24

⁵ Crenshaw, ‘The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice’, 7

⁶ Richard Jackson, ‘The Epistemological Crisis of Counterterrorism’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* **8** (2015), 45. As Jackson notes, the voice of Osama Bin Laden has remained largely unheard among Western audiences despite a vast corpus of open letters, interviews, videos and statements.

Moreover, if radicalisation is the problem then the solution with respect to not-yet-radicalised Muslims is to prevent their radicalisation. With respect to the already radicalised the remedy is ‘deradicalisation’. Either way, the implication of RAD is that the key to explaining the turn to political violence is to understand ‘the radicalisation process’.⁷

I have three aims here. The first is to draw attention to some of the defects of RAM and the conception of rational agency to which it is committed. There are elements of RAM that are of value when it comes to explaining or understanding the turn to political violence but it also has serious limitations. My second aim is to draw attention to the limitations of RAD, which are even more serious than those of RAM. Not only are there serious theoretical objections to RAD, adoption of this model as the basis for policies designed to counter terrorism also causes harms of various kinds, including epistemic harms. As this model has been commonly understood, RAD leads to the stigmatisation of whole communities, gets in the way of a proper understanding of terrorism and increases rather than decreases the likelihood of a turn to political violence.

Some of these difficulties have their source in their failure of RAD and RAM to grasp a metaphysical point: terrorists, like people generally, are complex particulars that, as Gorovitz and MacIntyre put it in a rather different context, ‘interact continuously with a variety of uncontrollable environmental factors’.⁸ Our knowledge of complex particulars is necessarily limited and fallible in ways that models like RAD and RAM fail fully to take on board. As will become apparent, there are multiple pathways to terrorism and this means that there is little to be gained by the positing of a single generic process like ‘radicalisation’. Strictly speaking, and contrary to recent pronouncements by the British government, there is really no such thing as

⁷ *Contest: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism* (HM Government, 2011), 63

⁸ Samuel Gorovitz and Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility’, *The Hastings Center Report* 5 (1975), 16

the radicalisation process. When it comes to understanding the turn to political violence, radicalisation is if anything the effect rather than the cause

My third aim is to develop a different conception (rather than model) of the turn to violence that avoids the pitfalls of RAM and RAD and that is more realistic about complex particulars. My label for this conception is Moderate Epistemic Particularism (MEP). I call it a ‘conception’ rather than a ‘model’ because it raises questions about the very idea of modelling radicalisation or the turn to political violence. ‘Epistemic particularism’ is a view of psychological explanation that has been ascribed to Karl Jaspers.⁹ At the core of this view is a distinction between explanation and understanding. According to Jaspers, the former is achieved by ‘observation of events, by experiment, and the collection of numerous examples’.¹⁰ In explanation the focus is on the uncovering of general causal laws. In contrast, understanding ‘is not achieved by bringing certain facts under general laws established through repeated observation’.¹¹ In relation to terrorism, MEP focuses on making the turn to violence *intelligible* in specific cases, such as that of Khan, but without any expectation of general laws or the ability to *predict* violence. It works backwards from effects to causes and, instead of positing generic psychological mechanisms to explain why some people carry out acts of terrorism, emphasises the extent to which pathways to terrorism tend to be highly individual, idiosyncratic and contingent. As far as MEP is concerned there is no *general* answer to the question: what leads a person to turn to political violence?

In its most extreme form epistemic particularism would deny the existence of *any* interesting generalisations about the turn to political violence. In its more moderate form epistemic particularism allows that there may be such generalisations but insists that they are

⁹ See Christoph Hoerl, ‘Jaspers on explaining and understanding in psychiatry’, in Giovanni Stenghellini and Thomas Fuchs (eds.), *One Century of Karl Jaspers’ General Psychopathology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 107 – 120. ‘Epistemic particularism’ is Hoerl’s label.

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, 7th edition, translated by J. Hoenig and M.W. Hamilton (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 302

¹¹ Hoerl, ‘Jaspers on explaining and understanding in psychiatry’, 108

of limited value when it comes to understanding the actions of a specific individuals. It's not that the actions of someone like Khan are wholly unintelligible but neither RAM nor RAD casts much light on them. In many cases it is only in retrospect that an individual's turn to political violence makes sense, and what makes it intelligible is a particular form of empathy or perspective taking. MEP rises to Jackson's challenge and tries to do what RAD doesn't do: to understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words and messages, and engage with their subjectivity. I'll conclude with some thoughts about the policy implications of MEP and the various ways in which our ability to engage with the subjectivity of people like Khan is limited.

2

One of the merits of RAM is that it makes space for the idea that terrorism *can* be rational. For RAM 'efficacy is the primary standard by which terrorism is compared with other methods of achieving political goals'.¹² As has often been observed, terrorism is the weapon of the weak and employed by them as the most effective or in some cases only realistic means of achieving their political goals in adverse conditions. When dealing with repressive regimes or dictatorships terrorism may be the only means of bringing about change, given that the ballot box has been ruled out. Another scenario is one in which terrorist groups in democratic societies resort to violence when they fail to mobilise mass support for their cause. As Crenshaw notes, 'generally, small organizations resort to violence to compensate for what they lack in numbers'.¹³ Where there is no hope of achieving certain political objectives by democratic means it is not obviously irrational for those committed to these objectives to employ other methods, however objectionable this approach might be on other grounds. 'Not obviously irrational' means 'not obviously *instrumentally* irrational'. For present purposes, instrumental

¹² Crenshaw, 'The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice', 8

¹³ Crenshaw, 'The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice', 11

irrationality is the failure to adopt what one believes to be effective means of realising one's ends. It is, of course, another matter whether the belief that terrorism is an effective means of getting one's way in the absence of mass support is itself a reasonable belief. If it is then terrorists who have this belief can't be seen as instrumentally irrational, especially if their belief in the effectiveness of terrorism turns out to be correct.

One question that RAM doesn't address is how instrumentally rational terrorists select their political objectives. Relatedly, there is also the question whether their chosen objectives are themselves rational or coherent. Proponents of RAD will see an opening for their position in relation to the first of these questions. For example, if he hadn't been radicalised Khan would not have thought that avenging his Muslim brothers and sisters by killing innocent Londoners was a reasonable objective. He didn't think that his victims were innocent but that is again only a reflection of his radicalised world view. There is more about RAD below but RAM takes the terrorist's ends as given and offers no account of their merits or selection. It allows for the possibility that terrorists' objectives might be irrational or incoherent but only in cases where they have contradictory objectives or ones based on false beliefs. For RAM, it isn't a given that terrorists have irrational or incoherent objectives and many clearly do not. RAM focuses on means rather than ends and this points to another way in which terrorists might potentially be accused of irrationality: if their chosen means defeat their ends or are highly unlikely to lead to their preferred destination. The point of RAM is to suggest that in many cases terrorists can't fairly be accused of this form of irrationality. Their means may well be odious but they can be effective.

This question this raises is whether terrorism works. As Richard English notes, there are different ways of understanding what it would be for terrorism to 'work' but suppose we

can agree on a specific conception of what would constitute success in a given case.¹⁴ If terrorism works, at least by its own lights, then there is no mismatch between terrorists' means and their ends. Even if the verdict of history is that terrorism doesn't work, terrorism might still represent a rational strategic choice if, relative to what they know, it isn't unreasonable for terrorists to *believe* that terrorism works. For example, given that the U.S. withdrew its forces from Lebanon following the lethal truck bombing of its military barracks in Beirut in 1983 it was not clearly unreasonable for Osama bin Laden to believe that it was possible for Al-Qaeda to bomb its way to success against the U.S. Give the objective of inducing the U.S. to pull out of the Middle East, Al-Qaeda's strategy was far from irrational even though it was ultimately unsuccessful and, indeed, counterproductive.

Yet there are many examples of terrorists using means that they could and should have known to be ineffective. In such cases, talk of terrorists as 'rational agents' is hard to justify, even on an instrumental conception of rationality. The point has been well made by Thomas Nagel in a review of English's *Does Terrorism Work?*¹⁵ For English, there is no simple 'Yes' or 'No' answer to his own question, though he contrasts 'the profound uncertainty of terrorism achieving its central goals' with the near certainty that 'terrible human suffering will ensue from terrorist violence'.¹⁶ For Nagel, what is missing from what I have been calling the Rational Agent Model is any evaluation of the terrorists' ends or the sense that 'there might be something intrinsically wrong in deliberately killing and maiming innocent civilian as a means to bring about even a desirable outcome'.¹⁷ On the question of whether terrorist violence is an effective means of achieving political objectives Nagel comments on the effectiveness of four

¹⁴ Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), introduction.

¹⁵ Thomas Nagel, 'By Any Means or None', *London Review of Books* **38** (September 2016), 19–20.

¹⁶ English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History*, 265

¹⁷ Nagel, 'By Any Means or None', 20

specific organisations or movements, Al-Qaeda, the Provisional IRA, Hamas and the Basque separatist group ETA:

And here the record is dismal. What struck me on reading [English's] book is how delusional these movements are, how little understanding they have of the balance of forces, the motives of their opponents and the political context in which they are operating. In this respect, it is excessively charitable to describe them as rational agents. True, they are employing violent means which they believe will induce their opponents to give up, but that belief is plainly irrational, and in any event false, as shown by the results.¹⁸

This seems a fair assessment and brings out the limitations of RAM. For example, despite what happened in Lebanon in 1983, the idea that the 9/11 attacks would result in the US withdrawing from its bases in the Middle East could only have been seriously entertained by people with a very shaky grasp of political reality. Bin Laden overgeneralised from a single instance, though the American defeat in Vietnam might also have been at the back of his mind. Attacking US forces in the Middle East is one thing but attacking the US homeland and murdering thousands of civilians in the process is a completely different matter. It seems not to have crossed Bin Laden's mind that the 9/11 attacks would be, at least in the short term, a total disaster for Al-Qaeda. The American reaction could and should have been predicted, and Bin Laden's bizarre assumption that 9/11 would be an effective means of attaining his strategic objectives brings out the sense in which he was indeed delusional. Not all terrorist movements have been delusional in this sense but in the cases that Nagel refers to RAM has little to offer since there is little evidence in these cases of anything recognisable as rational agency, as distinct from wishful thinking. What remains true, and what RAM is right to point out, is that terrorism isn't *necessarily* irrational. What RAM fails to do is tell a plausible explanatory story about the

¹⁸ Nagel, 'By Any Means or None', 19

strategies of the most troublesome and active terrorist organisations in the world today. We can and should try to understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words and messages but sometimes their words and messages are hard to fathom.

3

Turning to RAD, the UK government's 2009 *Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare* Strategy for Countering International terrorism defines radicalisation as 'the process by which people come to support violent extremism and, in some cases, join terrorist groups'.¹⁹ The definite article is important in this formulation, and the assumption that there is such a thing as *the* process of radicalisation resurfaces in the *Prevent* strand of the government's 2011 CONTEST Strategy for Countering Terrorism. Indeed, the idea that there is such a process is one of its key planning assumptions. What, then, is the process of radicalisation? An idea that runs through *Prevent* is that while most people find terrorism repugnant there are a few people who are 'vulnerable to radicalisation'.²⁰ These people are targeted by 'radicalisers' who disseminate extremist ideologies and exploit 'vulnerabilities in people which make them susceptible to a message of violence'.²¹ The hypothesis is that individuals like Mohammad Sidique Khan turn to violence because they have been radicalised, and they were radicalised at least in part because they were vulnerable to radicalisation. Although this vulnerability doesn't have to be conceived of as a personal pre-disposition this is how CONTEST conceives of it.

The model of radicalisation to which many Western governments are committed is what might be called a 'contagion' model. This represents radicalisation as an ideological disease or virus to which some individuals are vulnerable, and they catch the disease by contact with infectious agents, in the form of radicalisers with extremist ideologies. Extremism is defined

¹⁹ *Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism* (HM Government, 2009), 11

²⁰ *Contest: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism*, 10

²¹ *Contest: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism*, 60

by *Prevent* as ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of difference faiths and beliefs’.²² This leads to the suggestion that vulnerable people can be prevented from catching the extremist virus by being prevented from coming into contact with radicalisers, and being provided with the appropriate prophylaxis in the form of an education in fundamental British values. The pious hope is that people who have absorbed such values will thereby be less susceptible to extremism.

What is wrong with RAD? The first thing to note is that radicalisation can be understood in at least two different ways. One type of radicalisation is cognitive and involves the formation or acquisition of extremist beliefs. Another type is behavioural radicalisation, which involves a turn to violence.²³ A person can be cognitively radicalised without being behaviourally radicalised and, as has often been pointed out, only a very small proportion of cognitively radicalised individuals become behaviourally radicalised.²⁴ This is one horn of a dilemma for RAD: if the hypothesis is that the turn to violence is explained by cognitive radicalisation then what are we to make of the very limited extent to which the cognitively radicalised actually carry out terrorist acts? Cognitive radicalisation is a notably poor predictor of political violence and the real challenge is to identify the additional factors that lead some but not other cognitively radicalised individuals to turn violent. If, on the other hand, the hypothesis is that *behavioural* radicalisation explains and predicts the turn to violence then RAD is vacuous since behavioural radicalisation *is* the turn to violence. This is the other horn of the dilemma for RAD and brings out the importance of distinguishing between cause and effect. Is radicalisation the cause of the turn to violence or is it the effect that RAD is trying to explain? RAD is not as

²² *Contest: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism* 62, note 52

²³ This distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation is due to Marc Sageman. See his *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 90

²⁴ Sageman notes that ‘very few people talking about violence actually go on to use it’ , *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 90

clear on this issue as one might wish and this is a reflection of a basic lack of clarity about the kind of explanation RAD is putting forward.

There are also questions about the notion of vulnerability to radicalisation. Is this a personal predisposition as *Prevent* implies? If so, what evidence is there that some individuals have this predisposition while others do not? If RAD has serious explanatory ambitions it had better not turn out that the only test for whether a person has this predisposition is that they are in fact radicalised. On reflection, however, perhaps this isn't the proposal. Perhaps the idea is that vulnerability to radicalisation is a contextual rather than a personal matter, and that people are vulnerable to radicalisation insofar as they move in extremist circles or are exposed to radical or extremist messages online. However, mere exposure to extremist ideas does not explain their adoption and many individuals who are exposed to such ideas don't become radicalised. Again, there is a question about cause and effect. Do people become radicalised because they have been exposed to extremist ideas or do they seek out extremist websites because they are already radicalised? The latter hypothesis is at least as plausible as the former.

Underlying these concerns is a deeper concern about RAD's conception of agency, or the lack of it. One of the implications of RAD and the contagion model that underpins it is that radicalisation is something that befalls a person, something that happens to them, somewhat in the way that catching flu is something that happens to a person. Just as people vary in their susceptibility to the flu virus and in their degrees of resistance to it so it might be thought that they vary in their susceptibility to the extremist 'virus' and their resistance to it. But why accept this picture? As Anthony Richards asks:

[W]hy is it assumed that those who aim to commit terrorist acts are *vulnerable* to violent extremism – that they have succumbed to (violent) extremist ideologies and need

guidance so that they can be rescued from manipulation by others (online or otherwise), and that they would not carry out such acts of their own volition?²⁵

In many cases, including that of Mohammad Sidique Khan, the story is not one of individuals being passively radicalised by external agencies. What we see instead is a process of active self-radicalisation in which manipulation by others plays no significant role. To convince oneself, as Khan did, that a given course of action is called for is not to *succumb* to anything in the way that one might succumb to a cold. One doesn't succumb to one's own reasoning even if that reasoning is completely misguided.

Another example that brings out the severe limitations of the notion of vulnerability to radicalisation is that of Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed by an American drone strike in 2011. Awlaki was born in New Mexico, the son of a U.S. educated pro-American Yemeni technocrat who went on to become president of Sanaa University. The younger Awlaki, who worked as an imam in San Diego after completing a degree at Colorado State University, condemned the 9/11 attacks and was seen by the American media as the voice of moderate Islam. Yet he became virulently anti-American over the next decade, and his role in plotting and inspiring terrorist attacks against U.S. targets led President Obama to instruct the C.I.A. to kill him. Yet there is no interesting sense in which Awlaki was 'vulnerable to radicalisation', and no reason to think that his radicalisation was the responsibility of anyone but himself, or an expression of anything other than his own agency. There is, however, some reason to think that his hatred of America was fuelled by his concern that, quite by chance, the FBI had found out about his use of prostitutes and contemplated using this information against him.²⁶

²⁵ 'The problem with "radicalization": the remit of "Prevent" and the need to refocus on terrorism in the UK', *International Affairs* **84** (2011), 150

²⁶ See the fascinating account of all this in chapter 6 of Scott Shane's *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).

Awlaki's story is of particular interest because, as well as helping to make the point that radicalisation needn't be passive, it brings out the extent to which an individual's radicalisation can be shaped by accidental and extraneous events that may have little to do with politics. This points to perhaps the most serious problem with RAD. Consider this analogy which, for all its apparent frivolity, makes an important philosophical point. In his book on philosophy and sport David Papineau has a nice illustration of what he aptly describes as the 'contingency of sporting affiliations'.²⁷ He was once told the following story by a friend, the psychologist Tony Marcel:

"My cousin and I were at my mother's bedside when she was in a seemingly terminal coma shortly before her death. We fell to discussing when we had become Arsenal supporters. I remember a photo of me at about three in an Arsenal strip, and wondered if it was a present from a family member. Suddenly, without opening her eyes, my mother said, "No, your uncle's friend Peter gave it to you to spite us. We were all Spurs supporters".²⁸

What happened to Marcel, one might say, is that he became 'Arsenalised', that is, went from not being an Arsenal supporter. Yet his Arsenalisation process was highly idiosyncratic and personal. At the same time that Marcel was being Arsenalised, the same thing was happening but in very different ways to many other children and adults in other places. Every Arsenal fan has their own story of their Arsenalisation and if an Arsenalisation scholar were to define 'Arsenalisation' as *the* process by which a person becomes an Arsenal fan then a natural reaction would be to say that there are countless Arsenalisation processes that may have very little in common beyond the fact that they are the steps by which a given individual moves from not being an Arsenal supporter to being an Arsenal supporter. Beyond that, there may be some broad generalisations that apply to multiple Arsenal fans - for example, many were

²⁷ *Knowing the Score: How Sport teaches us about Philosophy (and Philosophy about Sport)* (London: Constable, 2017), 117

²⁸ *Knowing the Score: How Sport teaches us about Philosophy (and Philosophy about Sport)*, 117

Arsenalised by their family or school friends- but not all Arsenal supporters will have been Arsenalised like that and even a story like Marcel's leaves some questions unanswered. For example, how did he come to be Arsenalised by being given an Arsenal strip? One thing that seems clear is that Arsenalisation depends on many factors, and there is no general answer to the question: how do people become Arsenal fans?

As well as the sheer variety of pathways to becoming an Arsenal supporter there is one other point to note. When an individual X is Arsenalised and we ask how they came to be Arsenalised as distinct from say, being Chelseafied, that is, a supporter of Chelsea, there is one thing we don't say: X became Arsenalised because she was vulnerable to Arsenalisation. If someone is raised in a family of passionate Arsenal supporters they might be described as vulnerable to Arsenalisation but that is a comment about their environment rather than about them. Being vulnerable to Arsenalisation is not a predisposition that some people have and others lack, and the only evidence that someone was vulnerable to Arsenalisation is that they became Arsenal supporters. Saying that they must have been vulnerable to Arsenalisation if they actually became Arsenal fans is not to explain their Arsenalisation.

What goes for Arsenalisation goes for radicalisation. There are multiple high personal and idiosyncratic pathways to behavioural radicalisation, as illustrated by the cases of Khan and Awlaki, and no such things as *the* radicalisation process. As a member of the tightly knit traditional Pakistani community of Leeds Khan might have been vulnerable to radicalisation in the environmental sense but there is no particular reason to think that Awlaki and many others like him were vulnerable to radicalisation except that they were in fact radicalised. There is, in the words of an Australian government publication on radicalisation, 'no single pathway of radicalisation towards violent extremism, as the process is unique to each person'.²⁹ As with Arsenalisation there may be some very broad generalisations about radicalisation, that is, 'some

²⁹ *Understanding the radicalisation process* (www.livingsafetogether.gov.au).

common elements in the experiences of most people who have become radicalised’, but these common elements are of little predictive value. For example, in his ground-breaking work on terrorist networks, Marc Sageman draws attention to the importance of friendship and kinship networks in radicalisation, to the sense in which terrorist groups are often just a ‘bunch of guys’ who self-radicalise and are bonded to one another by more than politics.³⁰ But knowing this will not enable one to predict which bunch of guys will self-radicalise and which bunch of guys will not. There is an essential contingency to what Charlotte Heath-Kelly describes as the ‘seemingly individualised and disconnected pathways of citizens into armed militancy’,³¹ and this contingency needs to be acknowledged and managed.

The contingency and unpredictability of behavioural radicalisation is a reflection of the metaphysics of complex particulars. In their seminal work on medical fallibility Gorovitz and MacIntyre argue that in the natural sciences the objects of knowledge are universals, that is, ‘properties of objects classified by *kinds*, and the generalizations that link those properties’.³² On this view, ‘to explain the behavior of a particular is nothing else than to subsume its particular properties under the relevant law-like generalizations’.³³ To *predict* the behaviour of a particular is to use the same law-like generalizations about the relevant properties. Gorovitz and MacIntyre argue that there are certain features of particulars that escape notice on this account. There are simple particulars such as ice cubes whose behaviour can be predicted with a high degree of reliability by law-like generalizations because ‘each example of the type is, roughly speaking, quite like any other’.³⁴ But not all particulars are like that. There are more complex particulars such as hurricanes, salt marshes and, above all, people that are such that

³⁰ See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

³¹ ‘The geography of pre-criminal space: epidemiological imaginations of radicalisation risk in the UK Prevent Strategy, 2007-2017’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* **10** (2017), 300

³² Gorovitz and MacIntyre, ‘Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility’, 15

³³ Gorovitz and MacIntyre, ‘Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility’, 15

³⁴ Gorovitz and MacIntyre, ‘Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility’, 16

no one particular of a given type is quite like any other particular of that type. No one hurricane is quite like any other since hurricanes ‘interact continuously with a variety of uncontrollable environmental factors’ and we can never know ‘what historically specific interactions may impact on such historically specific particulars’.³⁵ However, this is not intended as an *a priori* argument against the possibility of weather forecasting. There are some ‘for the most part’ generalizations that can be used to predict the behaviour of hurricanes at least to some extent, even if the precise point at which a particular hurricane is going to make landfall is virtually impossible to know in advance.

Predicting and explaining the turn to political violence is even harder. No one terrorist is quite like any other because each one has interacted throughout his or her life with a whole variety of uncontrollable and unknown environmental factors. We cannot know each influence on the individual terrorist and this is what makes it so difficult to predict their actions. So, for example, Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert give the example of the Adam brothers. Based on their exposure to extremist ideas one would have said that Lamine Adam was more likely to become violent but in fact it was his brother Rahman, who ‘seemed to embrace western secular values entirely’,³⁶ who was arrested for conspiracy to cause explosions. Githens-Mazer and Lambert regard the story of the Adam brothers as significant because in their view it indicates the ‘inherent unpredictability of who becomes violent and who doesn’t’.³⁷ This lack of predictability is what one would expect in the case of complex particulars. Exposure to certain ideas is one thing, whether those idea will have traction with a particular individual is another.

³⁵ Gorovitz and MacIntyre, ‘Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility’, 16

³⁶ ‘Why the conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse’, *International Affairs* **86** (2010), 892

³⁷ ‘Why the conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse’, 893

This way of putting things suggests that there are actually two distinct problems when it comes to explaining and predicting the behaviour of “extremists”. Not only is it impossible to know all the relevant environmental factors, it is also impossible to know how the same factors affect different individuals. As I have noted, of all the people who become cognitively radicalised only a small number actually turn to violence. Yet the environmental factors that confronted those who turn to violence might be hard to distinguish from those that confronted those who do not turn to violence, and there may be no further explanation of the difference. Not even the contagion model can eliminate this uncertainty, as G. E. M. Anscombe notes in a famous discussion of causality:

For example, we have found certain diseases to be contagious. If, then, I have had one and only one contact with someone suffering from such a disease, and I get it myself, we suppose I got it from him. But what if, having had the contact, I ask a doctor whether I will get the disease. He will usually only be able to say, “I don’t know – maybe you will, maybe not”.³⁸

In the same way, the contagion model attributes a person’s radicalisation to their contact with extremist ideas but if we had been asked to predict whether they would be radicalised the only answer that does justice to our epistemic predicament is “maybe they will, maybe they won’t”. If they are radicalised, and their radicalisation is attributed to their contact with extremist ideas, then we are being wise after the event. To quote Anscombe again, it’s easier ‘to trace effects back to causes with certainty than to predict effects from causes’ and we ‘often know a cause without knowing whether there is an exceptionless generalization of the kind envisaged’.³⁹

On this account, it would be appropriate to be somewhat sceptical about the project of modelling radicalisation and government programmes to prevent radicalisation. As far as the

³⁸ ‘Causality and Determination’, in E. Sosa (ed.) *Causation and Conditionals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 67

³⁹ ‘Causality and Determination’, 66

modelling of radicalisation is concerned, this has become a cottage industry in the intelligence community and university departments of terrorism studies. In order to make sense of terrorism we need to explain how and why people turn to political violence, and what better way could there be of doing that than to construct theoretical models of radicalisation? A 2012 systematic review published by the Youth Justice Board identified no fewer than eight models in the literature, ranging from the NYPD's proposed four stage radicalisation process to McCauley and Maslenko's 12 mechanisms of political radicalisation.⁴⁰ No doubt further models have been developed since then. However, even if there are some individuals to whom these models are applicable, they are unlikely to tell the whole story. What these models obscure are the points about contingency and unpredictability that I have been emphasising here. Schematic models of radicalisation can be illuminating, and some are, but their focus on general principles means that they are bound to fail to do justice to the full range of contingent and idiosyncratic factors by which individuals are influenced in transitioning from non-violence to violence. It only requires a cursory acquaintance with the disparate biographies of individual terrorists to grasp the limitations of the project of modelling behavioural radicalisation.

The impact of RAD's limitations on radicalisation prevention programmes is no less obvious. One-size-fits-all prevention or deradicalisation programmes are as improbable as one-size-fits-all models of radicalisation. In order to design effective prevention programmes one would require an intellectually rigorous and evidence-based theory of radicalisation but such theories are thin on the ground. In the absence of a proper understanding of radicalisation it is too easy for governments that are under pressure to be seen to 'do something' to substitute supposedly common-sense assumptions about how radicalisation works and devise programmes on this basis. The risk is that these assumptions are mistaken and that they lead to

⁴⁰ *Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence* (Youth Justice Board, 2012).

the implementation of radicalisation prevention programmes that worsen the problem they were designed to solve. The U.K. government's prevent programme perfectly illustrates these dangers. Leaving aside the perversity of categorising democracy, rule of law and individual liberty as *British* values, there is no real evidence that the teaching of such values is an effective means of preventing either cognitive or behavioural radicalisation. Indeed, research has shown that the emphasis on British values only serves to alienate Muslim pupils and encourage them to seek alternative identities within the Muslim community.⁴¹ In addition, as Anna Lockley-Scott has noted, the government requires British values to be taught rather than explored, and this 'prevents pupils from growing as open-minded explorers'.⁴² This is an example of the epistemic harms that ill-conceived prevention programmes can do. The result is that Muslim pupils feel unable to raise questions about British values for fear of being labelled extremists and there is some anecdotal evidence of Muslim pupils being identified as 'at risk of radicalisation' on the basis of apparently flimsy evidence. The stigmatising of entire communities is not a way to make them less prone to radicalisation. It is a way to make them to prone to radicalisation.

4

It might seem that the discussion so far is almost entirely negative. I have been critical of RAM and RAD and sceptical about the enterprise of modelling radicalisation and existing efforts to prevent radicalisation. Where does this leave the question: what leads a person to turn to political violence? Is there anything useful that can be said in response to this question, over and above exploring the role of friendship and kinship relations in behavioural radicalisation? What, in practical terms, can be done to tackle such radicalisation? It's easy to be dismissive

⁴¹ See Aminul Hoque, *British-Islamic Identity: Third-generation Bangladeshis from East London* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2015).

⁴² 'Re-examining the Mission of Education and the Meaning of Learning in an Uncertain World', paper presented at the 2017 Oxford Symposium for Comparative and International Education.

of programmes like *Prevent* but governments that implement such programmes and face demands for a response to political violence are entitled to ask: what is the alternative? Faced with this challenge it's helpful to distinguish two projects, the project of explaining and the project of understanding political violence. With his distinction in place moderate epistemic particularism (MEP) comes into focus as an alternative to RAD and RAM. At least in some cases MEP promises a kind of insight into political violence that can't easily be extracted from RAD or RAM. The next challenge is to identify MEP's distinctive contribution and reflect on its policy implications.

As I've noted, epistemic particularism' is a view of psychological explanation that has been ascribed to Karl Jaspers. At the core of this view is a distinction between explanation and understanding, and this distinction is explained as follows by Christoph Hoerl:

Explaining, Jaspers thinks, requires repeated experience – it is achieved by 'observation of events, by experiment and collection of numerous examples.... which allow us to formulate general rules and theories. Understanding, by contrast, is achieved (if it is achieved) directly upon confrontation with a particular case.... We might thus say that Jaspers subscribes to a form of *epistemic particularism* regarding understanding. Understanding is not achieved by bringing certain facts under general laws established through repeated observation.⁴³

How, then, *is* understanding achieved? The understanding that is at issue here is of how one mental event emerges from another, and the key is *empathy*. Suppose, to borrow one of Jaspers' own examples, one is trying to understand how the long winter nights might have contributed to a particular person's suicide. By empathising with the individual concerned and seeing things from their point of view one might see an intelligible connection in their case between the winter weather and *their* suicide even if, as a matter of statistical fact, there are actually

⁴³ Hoerl, 'Jaspers on explaining and understanding in psychiatry', 108

more suicides in the spring. To quote Hoerl once again, ‘the specific point Jaspers seems to be making here is that there can be an understandable connection, in a particular case, between one factor, A, and a certain event E, even if, in general, that type of event is less likely to occur in the context of A than in the context of another factor, B’.⁴⁴ In other words, a particular individual’s suicide might be made intelligible by the weather or some other even more idiosyncratic factor even if there is no general law connecting that factor with that outcome. Finding something intelligible is one thing, explaining it by reference to law-like generalisations is another.

What more is there to say about the nature of empathy and the kind of intelligibility it delivers? In her contribution to this volume Olivia Bailey helpfully characterises empathy as ‘the activity of emotionally charged perspective-taking’.⁴⁵ It involves ‘using one’s imagination to “transport” oneself’ and ‘considering the other’s situation as though one were occupying the other’s position’.⁴⁶ As Bailey understands it, empathising is not a purely intellectual exercise and draws upon the emotional resources of the empathizer. Take the case of Awlaki. Starting from where he started in New Mexico how did he end up as America’s international public enemy number two, second only to Bin Laden? Instead of looking for general causal laws or models of radicalisation that might explain his transformation one might engage in a bit of perspective-taking and see how things look when one considers his situation as if it were one’s own. This means trying to identify with his sense of being hounded by the FBI and his increasing anxiety about being outed for his misdemeanours. Then there was the increasing and perhaps, from his point of view, totally unexpected success of his recorded sermons and addresses. One can imagine a young man like Awlaki being tempted by his growing fame and reputation as a sage and scholar of Islam to develop more radical themes and ideas on account

⁴⁴ Hoerl, ‘Jaspers on explaining and understanding in psychiatry’, 108

⁴⁵ ‘Empathy and Testimonial Trust’,

⁴⁶ ‘Empathy and Testimonial Trust’,

of their popularity with his online audiences. Viewed from this perspective his gradual transformation becomes at least somewhat intelligible. On the one hand he felt cornered in the country of his birth. On the other hand, there was his growing celebrity abroad. It is not hard to imagine how these two factors might have contributed to Awlaki's transformation but it makes little sense to generalise from Awlaki's experience or attempt to construct a general theory of radicalisation on the basis of his experience. It is the particularity or specificity of his circumstances that does the explanatory work and there may be little to be learned about radicalisation 'in general' from that experience.

This is not to say, however, that radicalisation is only a response to contingent *personal* factors. It has a political as well as a personal dimension but an adequate understanding of its political dimension also requires empathy. A point that has often been made about radical Islam is that it is to some extent a response to feelings of humiliation: the humiliation of political marginalisation, of repeated military defeat and of occupation. It is one thing to understand this at an intellectual level and another to *feel* it by empathy. If one can feel another's political pain and resentment one might then be in a position to understand behaviours that would otherwise be unfathomable as well as unpredictable. Engaging in political perspective-taking is an effective way of rising to Jackson's challenge to engage with the terrorist's subjectivity in order to understand their motivations. The point is that listening to their own words and messages is insufficient for understanding without a serious emotional engagement with their humiliation and resentment.

What practical purpose could such perspective-taking possibly serve? What good does it do have the kind of understanding of terrorist motivations that perspective-taking supposedly delivers? One might argue that understanding is valuable for its own sake, or at any rate, that it satisfies a deep psychological need to make sense of the world we inhabit. When one hears of the latest terrorist outrage it is natural to ask how such things can happen and why they

happen. Answering the latter question requires an understanding of the political and other motivations of those who carry out such acts and perspective-taking may provide us with some insight into these motivations. Understanding also has possible policy implications. If, in 2003, those who planned the American invasion and occupation of Iraq had engaged in some serious perspective-taking and considered how the invasion would look and feel from the Arab standpoint they might have been less surprised by the sheer scale and violence of the insurgency that greeted American troops. More generally, trying to understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words and messages and engaging with their subjectivity should be an essential element of any realistic and worthwhile counterterrorism policy. How can one even begin to develop such a policy if one has no real understanding of why terrorists believe what they believe and do what they do?

One reason why the attempt to empathise with terrorist motivations is the suspicion that this exercise implies or even requires a degree of sympathy with those motivations, and this is regarded by many as morally and politically unacceptable. There is the view that, as Bailey puts it, ‘there is a deep connection between empathy and approval’ and that when we empathize with the passions of another ‘it is extremely difficult to dismiss them as wholly inappropriate’.⁴⁷ If this is right, and the idea of approving of the actions of someone like Khan or Awlaki strikes us as utterly repugnant, then doesn’t it follow that perspective-taking of the kind that I have been describing is something that most of us can’t and won’t do? One reaction to this might be to question the strength of the connection between empathy and approval. A simpler strategy is to insist on distinguishing sharply between a person’s motivations and their actions. Even if there is a genuine sense in which empathising with Awlaki’s resentment and feelings of humiliation requires one to regard these emotions as appropriate this doesn’t require one to

⁴⁷ ‘Empathy and Testimonial Trust’,

view Awlaki's *actions* as appropriate. There is, for example, no question of empathising with his plot to destroy a transatlantic airliner on Christmas Day 2009.

Even at the level of motivations there is a limit to how much genuine perspective-taking is possible for counterterrorism officials whose culture, values and political assumptions are utterly different from those of the people they are trying to understand. For example, Elisabeth Kendall has written compellingly about the significance and functions of poetry in winning hearts and minds for the jihadist cause, and it is hard to empathise with the words and deeds of individuals like Bin Laden and Awlaki without any knowledge of the literary background. For example, Bin Laden's so-called 'Declaration of War Against the United States' in 1996 contained something like fifteen poetry excerpts. As Kendall comments, by failing to take account of the key ways in which 'poetry refines and targets messages' Western intelligence agencies 'are approaching jihadist ideology through a skewed prism that is out of synch with that of its primary Arab audience'.⁴⁸ Other limitations to perspective-taking are not so much a reflection of cultural differences as of the incomprehensibility of the target actions and emotions. However hard one tries it is extraordinarily difficult to empathise with, say, the actions and emotions of Mohammad Atta as he piloted American Airlines flight 11 into the north tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

What are the practical implications of the particularist turn in terrorism studies that I've been recommending? The implication is not that there is nothing one can usefully say in general terms about the turn to political violence. It is one thing to shift the focus from explanation to understanding and another to reject all attempts at explanation. MEP is more than happy to take on board the explanatory insights of the terrorism researchers like Sageman, and accept that there are some things of a general nature that can be said about the processes or mechanisms

⁴⁸ 'Jihadist Propaganda and its Exploitation of the Arab Poetic Tradition', in Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (eds.) *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 224-5

of radicalisation. The formulation of general rules and theories which is at the heart of explanation is not ruled out by MEP but what this type of particularist is keen to emphasise are the inherent limitations of the explanatory project. When it comes to terrorism there is very little prospect of researchers being able to employ the experimental method or run randomised controlled trials. In this case, as in the case of much human conduct, a different perspective is required.

For those tasked with developing counterterrorism strategies, taking on board the lessons of MEP means giving up on the idea that the turn to violence in individual cases can be predicted by explanatory models of radicalisation. It means giving up on prevention and deradicalisation programmes that overlook the individuality and contingency of pathways to radicalisation and end up alienating the communities at which they are directed. It means hiring intelligence analysts who not only have the necessary linguistic skills and cultural knowledge but also a willingness to engage with the subjectivity of terrorists in order to develop a deep empathetic understanding of their motives and actions. Engaging with their subjectivity will help one to see that, in many cases, terrorists are authors of their own beliefs and actions rather than passive victims of radicalisation by others. There is the practical challenge of preventing terrorist attacks but models of radicalisations are of little help when it comes to doing that. There is really no substitute here for individual knowledge acquired by employing traditional methods of intelligence gathering rather than by the application of generic, simplistic and largely untested theories of behavioural radicalisation. Some terrorist attacks can be and have been predicted but on the basis of concrete intelligence rather than the application of abstract theoretical models. The hardest thing is to learn to live with the large element of chance and

contingency in terrorism and the inherent limits to our knowledge in this domain. In this field, as in others, epistemic humility is an underrated virtue.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I thank Olivia Bailey, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Anna Lockley-Scott for helpful comments, and John Campbell for the initial suggestion that Jaspers' work might be helpful for an understanding of terrorism. Earlier drafts of this paper were presented in 2017 at a workshop at the University of Warwick on the Epistemology of Counterterrorism, a conference at Sheffield University on Harms and Wrongs in Epistemic Practice and the Oriel Colloquium on Education, Security and Intelligence Studies. Work on this paper was supported by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellowship. I thank the AHRC for its generous support.