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Defining Fanaticism, essentially.

Rovers, Joep

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Defining Fanaticism, essentially.

Written by Joep Rovers

Studentnumber: S1491296

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Introduction

0.1 Introduction

Fanaticism is and has been a subject of debate for a number of centuries now. It has been defined in many ways and has been slapped on all sorts of people and movements. The careless use of words like fanatic lead to the polarization of fanatics and non-fanatics. If groups of people of people refuse to interact, it is likely they will exclude each other, the exclusion of fanatics from conversations about fanaticism probably cause more fanaticism. I think the only way to tackle this issue from a philosophical point of view is to try and clarify why and how we have made distinctions between fanatics and non-fanatics. Trying to get to a point where the definition of fanaticism describes the phenomenon of fanaticism rather than tries to explain when the word is used. If we can distinguish the instances where the word is defined to explain the use of fanaticism, lexically, and when it is defined to describe the phenomenon, essentially, we can set a higher standard to the use of the word fanaticism; giving at least a reason to distrust reckless use of the word and at best a way to create a basis of understanding between both fanatics and non-fanatics. This is why in this thesis I will be trying to define fanaticism essentially. This makes my research question: What should an essential definition of fanaticism be? This means I will be trying to define the phenomenon, and not the use of the word fanaticism. Making the underlying question: What is fanaticism? An essential definition should be understandable for everyone barring people not speaking the language or knowing the words in the definition, while defining the phenomenon and not the use of the word. Which brings us to the first problem: Many definitions cater to the non-fanatic, or moderate person (Toscano 2017, 1 - 54). While it is intuitively understandable, fanatics do have the reputation of considering themselves indubitably un-fanatic and justified, making for a tough crowd, it seems to me there is no structural reason why fanaticism should be defined in a way which only a moderate can grasp. The next issue with definitions of fanaticism as I have found them is that many authors leave an actual definition of fanaticism up for grabs, using the word as if fanaticism was at least partially self-evident, relying on a shared normative judgement. Of course this has to do with the fact that fanaticism can be interpreted as a thick concept: a concept with both a descriptive and a normative component and which is irreducible to either one (Williams 2014, 143 - 144). Furthermore some definitions are prone to lapse into relativism, making everyone or no-one a fanatic, which defeats the point of defining fanaticism at all. After all, the whole point of relativism is to explain away difference to solve conflict (Williams 2014, 174). Take for example William

James' definition of fanaticism: "Loyalty carried to the convulsive extreme" (James 2008, 482 - 483). In illustrating this issue I will be taking for granted that an extreme appears as normal to the extremist as the normal appears extreme to the normal. This would mean that any extreme has another extreme on the other side of it. For some definitions a similar view is in play. This would make it hard to distinguish extreme from non-extreme, for the purpose of an essential definition this view is fallacious. I aim to make a definition which will be able to take into account both the perspective of a fanatics and non-fanatics, perhaps serving as a basis of understanding. Along the way I hope not only to give my own definition, but also show which issues come into play when defining fanaticism and demonstrate ways to solve them.

0.1.1 Method

The way I will set out to find this essential definition is by looking at a number of definitions and treatises on the matter of fanaticism. Because there are hundreds if not thousands definitions available I will use three which I argue represent all other definitions. These three are Voltaire's, James' and Hegel's definition. I will answer the following three questions with each definition: Which aspects of fanaticism does this definition consider essential? Does this definition define the phenomenon or the use of the word fanaticism? Is this definition understandable to fanatic and non-fanatic alike? I will conclude that fanaticism is best defined without mentioning the word religion, because we do not typically understand fanaticism to be exclusively religious. After this I will conclude that the exclusivist nature of fanaticism is something essential to fanaticism. In the second chapter I will explain that these definitions of fanaticism become circular when using thick concepts. After having concluded that in order to avoid circularity we ought to avoid normative definitions we move on to the second debate which is the matter of which specific type of descriptive definition we should to use, a substantive one, referring to specific ideas, values and beliefs as defining of fanaticism, or a formal one, which defines fanaticisms not in terms of its contents but in terms of an attitude. It is also in the second chapter that I will come to a conclusion about the essential definition. After this I will summarize and outline my conclusions. In short the problem is that there are many definitions of fanaticism that are not suited to my purpose: they exclude fanatics or can lapse into relativism, sometimes they do not even define fanaticism as much as explain when the word is used. In order to address this I will review three concerning fanaticism, judge definitions on their merits and try to propose criteria through which we may judge definitions of fanaticism. After doing this I will ask certain questions aimed at clarifying the phenomenon

in order to further crystalize these criteria. The long aim of this review is to clarify the different positions that are possible vis a vis types of definitions and to get started on selecting certain types of contents to in or exclude from my own definition. Concretely this means I will try to see in what ways these definitions are limited or if they help me get to an essential definition. Beyond this I will look at the specific attributes these definitions bring to the table, seeing if they are essential to fanaticism or frequent side-effects of fanaticism. The question I am trying to answer with each of these definitions is whether they make for an acceptable essential definition and in what ways they help to get closer or are limited to do so.

Chapter 1: Reviewing literature

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will go through three texts definitions of fanaticism, for each definition I will answer the following questions:

Which aspects of fanaticism does this definition consider essential?

Does this definition define the phenomenon or the use of the word fanaticism?

Is this definition understandable to fanatic and non-fanatic alike?

At the end of the chapter I will try to divide these definitions into groups that share certain strengths or certain issues, (in particular, their commitment to the positional fallacy, or to circularity), determine why these definitions have these issues and try to find ways to avoid them. The first of which is the debate between normativism and descriptivism. In other words; should we define fanaticism in terms of judgement, normatively, or in terms of objectively ascertainable properties, descriptively. The second debate is that between substantivism and formalism. This is the matter of what properties we must use in our definition; specific ideas beliefs and values or something more general like an attitude. These two axes will be discussed in chapter 2 and 3 respectively. Before I start, why these three texts and not others? Voltaire's (1975, 10) definition is illustrative of most other definitions, like Hume's (1985, 73) or Kant's (2006, 131) and even James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition, the latter of which we will come back to later. Each of the previously mentioned definitions refers to a normal or proper state of mind, by way of telling us what is not normal or proper in the fanatic state of mind, in Voltaire (1975, 10) "excessive passion", in Hume (1985, 73) an "unaccountable elevation" in Kant (2006, 131) raising something to the level of Moral law. Furthermore

Voltaire's definition in specific mentions religion which is an important topic to discuss and gives us room to clarify how conceptions of fanaticism have changed. After analysing these definitions by way of Voltaire, we will turn to James, whose definition is similar although more direct and has some implications like exclusivity and closedmindedness, which are present in other definitions but not as visibly as in James' definition. Finally we will turn to Hegel's definition. which represents formal definitions, which differ from substantive definitions like Hume's or Voltaire's in that they do not speak of specific ideas, values or beliefs.

1.1 Voltaire

Voltaire's (1975, 10) definition is one of the more comprehensive ones available. In the *Philosophical Dictionary* he claims that ‘*FANATICISM is the effect of a false conscience, which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions*’ (Voltaire 1975, 10). Fanaticism, that is, is caused by a narrow view or too broad an application of regulations (Voltaire 1975, 10). In other words it is an ideological structure that somehow dominates religion and uses it for its own purposes, caused by the all-too-reckless acceptance of stringent legislature. We can interpret this in a number of ways but the soundest interpretation is that Fanaticism is that which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination (Voltaire, 1975, 10). Before we can evaluate this definition I must first clarify some historical context surrounding the word religion and determine how we will interpret the relations between religion and fanaticism.

1.2 History, Fanaticism and religion: interlude

At Voltaire's time fanaticism was only used in the context of religion, which during the time of the Enlightenment was seen as something that should not play a large role in civil society or the state (Cavanaugh 2011, 231 - 33); only around the French revolution are there accounts of political or ethical fanaticism (Kant 2006, 131) (Hegel 2014, 41), meaning that in Voltaire's time, fanaticism denoted only “religious fanaticism.” Let us choose a position about the relation between religion and fanaticism before going further, to avoid complicating the rest of the text with discussions of religious exclusivity. The most likely positions with regards to the relation between religion and fanaticism are the following:

- a.) Fanaticism is a specific form of religious thought and non-religious fanaticism (for example political fanaticism) is therefore *stricto sensu* not fanaticism.

b.) The modern consensus is that there is political fanaticism, they different types of fanaticism share a common source non-exclusive to either religion or politics.

c.) Political fanaticism is a part of religious thought, political fanaticism is a form of religious fanaticism.

Option b is more intuitive than the first as the existence of non-religious fanatics implies that it is not religion in specific that enables fanaticism but a specific aspect of religion which in principle may be shared with other kinds of thought. Route c is to say that regardless of the consensus around the existence of political fanaticism, it is still exclusively religious, it is just that the political views that have relations with fanaticism are actually, crypto-religious. The project here is not to reiterate the relations between political and religious thought, and so I will for the sake of defining fanaticism assume that there is such a thing as political fanaticism, based on consensus. This does not mean c is not an equally viable option. This is important to remember when defining because by choosing option b religion is excluded from being the sole cause of fanaticism; it could however still be one of many, whereas if I had chosen option c a case could still be made for exclusively religious fanaticism, but religion would have to be reinterpreted.

1.3 Back to Voltaire

I have chosen to assume the existence of fanaticism as non-exclusive to religious fanaticism, this means that for our purposes Voltaire's (1975, 10) definition is now flawed in that it uses religion as a criterion for fanaticism. However the word religion can be replaced by worldview, allowing for both religious and political fanaticism circumventing this problem. This is not the only issue we can find in Voltaire's definition or descriptions like Hume's; as I stated in the introduction my goal is to define fanaticism the phenomenon and not the use of the word. This means that we have to ask the question of whether Voltaire is defining the word or the thing. Is that which makes "*religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions*" (Voltaire 1975, 10) fanaticism or is it a description of when the word fanaticism is used? I argue that it is describing the use of the word because excess and caprices are not objectively ascertainable properties of a fanatic but rather normative judgements as a result it is a definition that goes a longer way in explaining what we mean when we call someone a fanatic than explaining what fanaticism is. This means that we seem to be unable to use this definition as an essential definition. What we should take away from the analysis of this definition is that normative judgements, like in this

case any reference to “excess,” seem related to defining the use of the word fanaticism rather than the phenomenon. Moreover the usage of a term like excess, which is both a judgement and a description of an amount, could mean that this definition of fanaticism is circular, if the judgement in both fanaticism and excess are the same. I will further analyse the matter of normativity and circularity in chapter 2.

1.4 James

William James defines fanaticism as ‘*loyalty taken to the extreme*’ (James 2008, 482 - 483). He does this in his text on saintly virtues in which he points out that virtues taken too far lead to issues, one of these issues is fanaticism and he argues it is caused by loyalty (James 2008, 482-483). Perhaps the most direct version of all definitions so far. After all for both Voltaire (1975, 10) and Kant (2006, 131) one could say fanaticism is “too much” of something, it is indexed on excess. The thing which sets James’ definition apart from these is however the implied emphasis on dedication or commitment; whereas for Voltaire fanaticism is a matter of passion and caprice, and for Kant a matter of vanity. Loyalty implies the commitment to one thing coupled with the disregard for others; being loyal to the state means not being loyal to anything undermining it. A counter to this could be that someone can be loyal to for example their children and their spouse without conflict. Not all loyalties are opposed to one another. The idea in this text seems to be that loyalty, when it becomes extreme also becomes more exclusive: loyalty to your children could at some point become leaving your spouse for example because they do not take proper care of the children. This is an important aspect of fanaticism because thinking that something is important is not structurally a problem, yet doing it to the exclusion of all else, most other things, or potentially all things, is another matter. The problem with this is that if we problematize exclusivity or closed-mindedness wholesale, we are unable to account for ‘normal’ degrees of closedmindedness or exclusivity in non-fanatics. Both exclusivity and closedmindedness are to a degree basic human functions (Kruglanski 2004, 5 - 10). In turn this means that we ought to distinguish total closedmindedness or exclusivity from acceptable kinds. James (2008, 482 - 483) solves this problem in which a degree of closed-mindedness must be seen as acceptable in order to accommodate normal states of mind by totalizing the exclusive attitude of the fanatic; you are only a fanatic when you exclude everything or potentially everything. We should keep this in mind when defining fanaticism ourselves. This definition, like Kant’s (2006, 131) is in between defining fanaticism using objectively ascertainable properties and judgements and defining the use of the word fanaticism, on the one hand loyalty and its

implications seem to describe an objectively ascertainable property of a fanatic, yet the “extreme” is something that only ever could be identified from a non-fanatic standpoint. This is because when an “extreme” is posited the norm which it refers to is as far from the extreme as the other way around. Meaning that any “extreme” can posit itself as the norm or vice versa; making all positions potentially extreme, making it impossible to distinguish between fanatics and non-fanatics, This problem, called the positional fallacy¹, which will be further explored in chapter 3. When it comes to the essential definition this means we should include the exclusivist nature of fanaticism. Moreover we have seen that words like “extreme” in any definition of fanaticism will make the definition commit to the positional fallacy, and that we ought to avoid a definition that is based on the location of beliefs with regard to some norm (Breton et al. 2002, xiii).

1.5 Hegel

Hegel (2014, 41) explains fanaticism as something that stems from the drive towards negative freedom caused by the use of the will to abstract from all content. Concretely this means that fanaticism is a state of mind of those determined to be free by getting rid of resistance and that this leads to a worldview in which all things can be seen to obstruct the drive to freedom of the fanatic. To put it in the form of a definition: ‘the will to rid the world of all perceived impairments to negative freedom’. This definition is the first entirely formal one we have reviewed so far because it is based on the notion of negative freedom which is formal. Negative freedom for Hegel can be freedom from anything and does not refer to a specific content. The reference to a “will towards” or a “drive towards” is also best interpreted as formally as possible, for it refers to an attitude or an inclination, not to a set of beliefs, values or behaviours. This formulation of fanaticism is however quite idiosyncratic, as phrases like “abstraction from all content,” “negative freedom” and “actualisation” mean quite specific things in Hegel’s system. Hegel (2014, 41) then argues that fanatics do not have any positive goal, because that would involve a commitment to order, and to restrictions. Hegel (2014, 41) then tells us that this is a will that in determining itself towards negative freedom is only abstractly determined by freedom whilst in practice, it is driven towards destruction. This approach to defining fanaticism is promising, it is however not very understandable because of the idiosyncratic formulations used.

1.6 Conclusion

Based on this review we can see that all definitions have at least some of the following issues that prevent them to support an essential definition. I will investigate these issues in the next chapter(s), this will allow me to avoid having them myself:

1. Normativity and Circularity Fanaticism is typically considered to be a thick concept, meaning that using a purely descriptive definition may lead to it becoming impossible to define fanaticism whereas using a normative one may lead to circular definitions. This is likely related to the fact that fanaticism is a thick concept.

2. Positional Fallacy. The most prevalent issue is that of the positional fallacy. When the definition works in terms of measurement, the extreme and the norm can be reversed, leading the definition into relativism or giving the impression that fanaticism does not exist. The definitions most affected by this issue in particular are substantive definitions; they require a specific content.

We have had suspicions of circularity only when normative language was used. Therefore, in the rest of this thesis, I will ask: *Is Fanaticism best defined normatively or descriptively?* This question will determine the nature of the language used; if normative language leads to circularity we must consider a descriptive definition, or a possible middle way. The positional fallacy, we have seen, occurs when we interpret definitions substantively. The question that follows is: *Should we define fanaticism formally or substantively?* The answer to this question will determine whether we will define fanaticism with reference to ideas values and beliefs or with reference to an attitude.

Chapter 2: Normative versus descriptive definitions

2.0 Introduction

One of the issues at hand is the following: Fanaticism seems to be both a judgement and a descriptive term, which means we have to choose to either choose a normative definition, which makes normative value or disvalue a defining factor of fanaticism or a descriptive definition, which identifies certain beliefs, ideas or attitudes as defining fanaticism. In this chapter I will argue that normative definitions of fanaticism commit to circularity. I will show this by comparing a normative and a descriptive interpretations of James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition of fanaticism. The reason why I chose James' definition

to interpret is because it is explicit about the normative judgements made, nonetheless terms and concepts similar to those James' uses are present in most definitions, be it explicitly or implicitly, see for example Voltaire's definition in chapter one, Kant's or Hume's definition. Consequently, I will be pointing out their respective shortcomings when using such a definition for an essential definition. I will conclude that the normative route does not seem to be an option for defining fanaticism and that that descriptive definitions are more usable. William James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition of fanaticism is: "Loyalty taken to the extreme". Let us for the sake of brevity rephrase it as "excessive loyalty." Excessive loyalty can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is quite simple: to be a fanatic is to be excessively loyal to something. The second interpretation is slightly less intuitive and goes as follows: Fanaticism is a great measure of commitment . These two interpretations coincide with the distinction between normative and descriptive. The first expresses a judgement and the second does not. For the second interpretation I used alternatives to the words extreme and loyalty which do not have the same normative implications. Whereas loyalty has the connotation of virtuous, commitment merely implies engagement, the same holds for extreme and a great measure, excessive implies an unacceptable amount, whereas a great measure is just a large amount; regardless of how acceptable it is.

2.1 Normative definitions and thick concepts

When looking at the first interpretation of James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition we should wonder which word in the definition is doing the most work: loyalty or excess. Given that "loyalty" by itself does not seem to have any a priori association with fanaticism, it is likely that the word "excessive" is the aspect that turns loyalty into fanaticism in this definition. Excessive as it turns out, is a thick concept. Thick concepts are concepts which contain both a normative and a descriptive element, but cannot be reduced to either (Williams 2014, 143 - 144). In the case of excess, the descriptive component of meaning can be said to be "a great degree or measure of something" and the normative component would be the part deeming this great amount unacceptable, in other words; the judgement with regards to the fittingness of the amount. Neither of these components constitute excess, yet together they would constitute a fitting definition of excess: an unacceptably great degree or measure of something. The issue with defining fanaticism in terms of a thick concept such as excess is that fanaticism is also a thick concept or at least is often interpreted as such. As we have seen in the previous chapter definitions of fanaticism are typically not far away from normative judgements about fanaticism, be it explicit or implicit. What we must ask ourselves now is:

does defining a thick concept using a thick concept make it a circular definition and if so why?

2.2 Thickness and circularity

When both thick concepts express the same normative value, this seemingly makes definitions circular. Fanaticism seems to be a form of excess already, so if excess is not explained to a satisfactory degree the definition will be circular (Kyle 2020, 923 – 925). A simple demonstration of this point can be done by relieving definitions that use thick concepts of their thick concepts and seeing if anything resembling fanaticism remains. In the case of James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition, very little remained; loyalty implies certain elements of dedication and exclusivity but dedication and exclusivity can describe some marriages as well as the local fanatic. Even adding the descriptive element found in the notion of excess to the mix, making it a large degree of dedication and exclusivity does not get us close to fanaticism. In other words James' definition, interpreted as I did, is reliant specifically on the normative element of thick concepts to identify and demarcate fanaticism. This means that James' definition is circular; the normative disvalue, which here denotes the irreducible normative aspect, in fanaticism and the normative disvalue that is built into in the notion of excess are needed to identify fanaticism and to distinguish it for example from a stereotypical marriage. In everyday definitions this reliance upon a shared norm would not necessarily be a problem; people often know, share or are able to discern each other's normative positions by way of conversation. In this project however this is a problem because it would prevent us from building a definition of fanaticism that does not presuppose a shared norm.

Another possible issue seems to be that, when defining it normatively, fanaticism becomes less a philosophical object, a way of thinking or a worldview and more an expletive. Defining fanaticism as an object of criticism is, in essence, the view Cavanaugh criticises (2011, 229 – 230). To him, the phenomenon of fanaticism is irrelevant, rather, the word alone can be defined and it can only be defined in terms of its strategic use: it is used to promote a societal agenda, it opens up possibilities for violence and contempt towards those deemed fanatic without needing more than an intuitive ground for deeming someone a fanatic. It serves to greatly expedite violence and exclusion (Cavanaugh 2011, 229 – 230).

In short, when taking James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition as a definition of the phenomenon fanaticism, a number of issues come into view. The first and major issue is that of circularity: fanaticism is a thick concept, which means that it is partly used as a normative term and if we are to take another thick concept to define it we are letting the normative part go undefined.

2.3 Descriptive definitions

Let us turn to the second interpretation of James' (2008, 482 - 483) dictum in my slightly reworked version: Fanaticism is a great measure of commitment. I am not arguing that this is what James' thought to be fanaticism, rather I use this definition for the sake of demonstrating how descriptive definitions can circumvent the issue of circularity. In this interpretation the normative judgement is left out of the definition. In contrast to the previous interpretation where the judgement was implied in the definition. All descriptive aspects of fanaticism are covered: someone is committed and this commitment is to a great extent, this is new information not to be found in the word fanaticism itself. Whereas the circularity was caused by the lack of new information because of the normative aspect of thick concepts.

This interpretation has two main issues. Firstly issue that can be seen with this definition is that it applies to more than just fanatics. This is important because, distinguishing mundane things like marriage from fanaticism without at least some reference to a normative judgement becomes difficult; which is detrimental to a definition as it tries to distinguish precisely this. To solve this issue we could make this definition refer to excess; this would however make the definition commit to the positional fallacy; there is no reason why fanatics could not perceive moderates as people who are committed excessively to for example the status quo, or moderation. This means that where the first interpretation was perhaps too exclusive, the second is inclusive to the point where it is no longer possible to discern fanatics from non-fanatics. Moreover we are forced to make a judgement in order to describe fanaticism properly, which is precisely what we sought to avoid with a descriptive definition. The positional fallacy is an issue for any definition aiming to inform readers on how to discern between fanatics and non-fanatics. This second interpretation of James' (2008, 482 - 483) definition avoids circularity but lacks the capacity to discern between fanatics and non-fanatics. However for example Hegel (2014, 41) who, as we have seen in the introduction, is possibly able to define the phenomenon without using normative language without committing to the positional fallacy. All in all this gives hope that there is some way around both the circularity of normative definitions and the positional fallacy in this type of descriptive definition, for now we will settle the score between normative and descriptive definitions and return to this topic in the next chapter. Unlike normative definitions, descriptive definitions seem to suffer not from circularity (because they attempt to define a thick concept with a thick concept), but rather from an issue of their own: the positional fallacy. However we saw in the introduction that a formal definition like Hegel's (2014, 41)

definition, may not run into this issue, which is why in order to avoid circularity we must investigate whether descriptive formal definitions offer a solution. In any case for our definition we will have to use a descriptive definition because not only is circularity a fallacy it also undermines the usefulness of a definition. This means we will have to determine whether formal definitions offer a solution to this.

2.4 conclusion

In short, when analysing normative definitions we have seen that thick concepts make definitions of fanaticism circular and that when we pursue a descriptive definition, fanaticism seems impossible to describe. Descriptive definitions may provide an answer to this issue, providing we can somehow avoid the positional fallacy. From the introduction we have learned that the positional fallacy appears every time a definition is substantive. This means that the way around both the positional fallacy seen in some descriptive definitions and circularity seen in all normative definitions is likely a formal definition.

Chapter 3: Substantive versus formal definitions

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that in order for an essential definition of fanaticism to avoid the positional fallacy the definition needs to be formal rather than substantive. I will do this by showing that all substantive definitions of fanaticism are reliant on notions of excess. This reliance on the notion of excess in turn involves a commitment to the positional fallacy. I will then use Hegel as providing a paradigmatic example of a formal definition and establish why Hegel is able to avoid the positional fallacy. Hegel (2014, 41) is able to do so because he isolates the formal mechanism which underpins all cases of excess. I will then bring together the conclusion of the previous chapter and this chapter leading us towards an essential definition of fanaticism in the form of a formal descriptive definition of fanaticism.

Before I reduce all substantive definitions of fanaticism to notions of excess, let me first explain the difference between a formal and a substantive definition. Substantive definitions of fanaticism seek to identify ideas, beliefs or values, which are taken to be defining of fanaticism in general for example a fanatic may believe that their religion is above the law or that the only way to prevent climate change is a massacre. Formal definitions on the other hand, are aimed at identifying the *way* in which ideas, beliefs or values become fanatical. In

other words, indifferently to any specific actions or thoughts; all of them can be affected by this attitude. This means that at the core there is an ontological difference in how a substantivist and a formalist will view fanaticism, one as concrete mental contents: as ideas, beliefs or values, and the other as a way of interacting with such ideas, beliefs and values. In the first part of this chapter I will be answering the question: Why do substantive definitions have references to things like excess or extremes? Then I will relate extremes to the positional fallacy and finally I will argue for a way that circumvents this issue.

3.1 Substantive definitions and excess

In order to show that substantive definitions are committed to the positional fallacy I must first demonstrate the relation of excess to both the positional fallacy and to substantive definitions. The William James (2008, 463 - 530) illustrates that all saintly virtues without the notion of moderation become troublesome, one of these virtues is loyalty, and as such he comes to the conclusion that fanaticism is “Loyalty carried to the convulsive extreme”(James 2008, 482 - 483). As we saw in the introduction all substantive definitions of fanaticism are entirely reliant upon the notion of excess. Voltaire explicitly uses the word excessive, Kant (2006, 131) mentions the overstepping of practical reason and the raising of something to the level it should not be, the level of moral law and James’ uses the term extreme.

The cause for this reliance upon words like excess is the usage of ideas, beliefs or values to explain fanaticism, when fanaticism is taken to be a thick concept. The defining factors of fanaticism, in this context, are ideas, beliefs and values held by individuals deemed fanatic; what they are used to describe is a thick term, something that aside from having regular attributes also has a normative components (Williams 2014, 143 - 144). Because there is no description sufficient to prove that certain values, beliefs and ideas are fanatical, there is a gap between the terms that can be used to describe fanaticism and the normative component implied in the word fanaticism. Descriptive definitions, when they are substantial, fall short of the normative judgment required in order to describe fanaticism in its thickness. To bridge this gap authors will use a normative judgement or term of measurement to supplement the specific values beliefs and ideals they believe are at the core of fanaticism. This is what the appeal to the notion of excess is meant to achieve. This judgement however is dependent on the position of the author or what the author deems normal.

The intuition behind most definitions of fanaticism seems to be that fanaticism is a number of more regular values or ideas taken to extreme levels. In other words, the intuition is that fanaticism is excessive. As such substantive definitions use notions of excess to bridge the

gap between the contents (beliefs ideas and values) at their disposal and add to it the normative judgement of excessive, to suit this intuition. As I argued above, excess leads straight into the positional fallacy.

3.2 The positional fallacy and excess

This is a problem because excess is a term which cannot account for the fact that the extreme appears as far from the norm as the other way around; de facto creating two extreme positions one being the fanatic, appearing extreme to the moderate and the moderate, appearing extreme to the fanatic. This duality of extremes causes a lapse into relativism; we could all appear extreme to some other individual. The problem with this is that it makes the identification of fanaticism impossible, which is problematic for a definition, but it could also mean that the very notion of fanaticism becomes meaningless. If all positions are extremes to some others, extreme no longer holds meaning because it is no longer avoidable to be in some way extreme in regards to some other position. This means that substantive definitions are bound to become subject to the positional fallacy: the usage of ideas, values and beliefs as definition leads to a gap when defining fanaticism, this gap must be filled by a notion of excess, yet it is this specific notion that leads to the positional fallacy. Any definition reliant on the notion of excess is committed to the positional fallacy and as we have seen any substantive definition relies on the notion of excess. In turn this means that any definition without the notion of excess, thus avoiding the positional fallacy, will be non-substantive. This means that the last option left is a formal definition.

3.3 Formal definitions and mechanisms of excess

The issue at hand is that on the one hand excess seems to aptly describe what fanaticism is, but on the other side it is subject to the positional fallacy and therefore undermines our capacity to distinguish between fanatics and non-fanatics. Hegel (2014, 41) in his text on fanaticism, and my consequent interpretation of his definition, seems to have a solution for this. The reformulation of his position, as I gave it above, was: “the will to rid the world of all perceived impairments to negative freedom”. In this definition we can do justice to the intuition that fanaticism is linked to excess, without committing to the positional fallacy. What Hegel does is simple; by using a word that implies commitment, like “will” and a term that makes sure there is no room for moderation; “all impairments,” or in Hegel’s own words: “negative freedom” (Hegel 2014, 41). Both “commitment” and “negative freedom” are formal. Negative freedom perhaps most obviously; it can by definition mean anything;

any specific idea value or belief in other words anything which makes something substantive can be interpreted through the lens of negative freedom. Commitment is formal when interpreted as a form of life, rather than the determination to do something specific. Take for example a commitment to Christianity and the commitment to go to church each week. These two are different kinds of commitment, the first is a commitment to an all-encompassing ideology which influences all actions but does not determine them like a commitment to go to church does. The second is the determination of a certain act, in the form of a specific idea belief or value; ‘‘I must go to church every week’’. This means that the first is formal; it is a general attitude and the second is substantive. Combining ‘‘commitment’’ and ‘‘negative freedom’’ unsurprisingly makes for a formal definition, when commitment is interpreted as a form of life. Hegel defines that which makes onlookers of fanatics deem something excessive; a commitment to negative freedom, which from the perspective of a non-fanatic may well look like excess. The key is however that a commitment to negative freedom is not the same as excess: there is no reference to the amount or to the acceptability of the amount of commitment. What he describes is the process that causes the change in attitude that moderates describe with words like extreme or excess. This mechanism allows for an explanation of excess without using notions of extreme or excess.

3.4 The essential definition.

Taking what we have learned into account we should be able to define fanaticism. First, we should favour a descriptive definition. Secondly we want a formal definition to avoid the positional fallacy by having to use words like excess. This can be done by using the strategy I identified in Hegel’s (2014, 41) text on fanaticism. Hegel’s (2014, 41) strategy is to identify a general mechanism which is a term that describes in the broadest sense the attitude which makes values beliefs and ideas into fanaticism. Hegel (2014, 41) calls this a ‘‘commitment to negative freedom.’’ In order to make this definition more generally understandable, albeit at the cost of brevity, I will refer to ideas, beliefs and values in general rather than negative freedom. Furthermore we must add the exclusivity we found in James’ definition in chapter one, this means adding a clause describing getting rid of all impairments and a disregard for what these impairments are. As a result, my definition of fanaticism is the following:

Fanaticism is the state of mind in which one’s value, idea or belief takes precedent over all other values, ideas and beliefs which when acted upon strives to get rid of all

perceived impairments to this value, idea or belief regardless of the nature of these impairments.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, substantive definitions need to use words like excess because they use values, ideas and beliefs to be central to fanaticism. Values ideas and beliefs do not seem to be intrinsically value laden and because fanaticism is a thick concept, there arises a need to compensate for this deficiency. This deficiency is solved with appealing to terms like excess, which in turn makes the definition vulnerable to the positional fallacy making extremes, or in this case excess, indistinguishable from non-extremes. In order to solve this issue, I took to Hegel, who served as an example for how a formal definition might dodge this fallacy. I concluded that in order to avoid both circularity and the positional fallacy we need a *descriptive* and *formal* definition that uses the mechanism I identified in Hegel or one like it. The eventual definition became:

Fanaticism is the state of mind in which one's value, idea or belief takes precedent over all other values, ideas and beliefs which when acted upon strives to get rid of all perceived impairments to this value, idea or belief regardless of the nature of these impairments.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have constructed an essential definition of fanaticism. I did this by first analysing other definitions of fanaticism. The first chapter allowed us to see the division of definitions of fanaticism across two axes: the normative-descriptive axis and the substantive-formal axis. The issue we came across on the first axis was circularity and on the second axis we found out that the positional fallacy was a risk. We have explored all possible combinations of these types of definitions. I concluded that in order to avoid circularity in our definition we should favour a descriptive definition, then in order to avoid the positional fallacy the descriptive definition should be formal. The circularity in normative definitions of fanaticism is an effect of fanaticism being a thick concept, which ends up being defined using another thick concept (as normative definitions are wont to do). The positional fallacy is caused by the reliance of such definitions on concepts like excess, which, when used to define fanaticism will reduce the word to a relativist blame game, making it impossible to distinguish

between extremes. This is caused by substantivism: substantive terms; specific ideals beliefs or values, which cannot convey the normative aspect of fanaticism without referring to something like excess. My research question was: How do we get to an essential definition of fanaticism? In the end I concluded that a formal descriptive definition could get around both circularity and the positional fallacy using Hegel as an example of how to do it, and as such was the best answer. The underlying question ‘‘What is fanaticism?’’ was answered as follows: *Fanaticism is the state of mind in which one’s value, idea or belief takes precedent over all other values, ideas and beliefs which when acted upon strives to get rid of all perceived impairments to this value, idea or belief regardless of the nature of these impairments.* This definition is able to do justice to the intuition at work in most other definitions. Yet, it avoids their pitfalls while also not relying on the broader context of Hegel’s metaphysics, for those who do not like that. The relevance of what I have done is quite apparent to me; definitions are after all quite useful. Although it does not end there: the relevance of being able to grasp fanaticism without judging it to be some issue can serve as a foothold for a broader debate about this prevalent phenomenon, without excluding the people who are the subject matter in this debate; the fanatics. One of the more important implications of this work is the idea that looking at fanaticism as a set of specific ideas and values rather than something open to the notion that anything can become fanatical leads to a partial view of fanaticism. This can teach philosophers, and maybe some social scientist to shift their view away from these specific attributes and try to contemplate what it is that causes these fanatic attitudes rather than assuming their fanatic nature beforehand. Nonetheless this research is seriously limited in how much attention could be spent on actually identifying the phenomenon of fanaticism and trying to rid the phenomenon of its more ideological attributes. It seems to me after all that calling someone a fanatic, in many situations, is just as much a way of excluding someone from a conversation as becoming a fanatic. Even though having a more neutral definition may help prevent careless use of the word fanatic. In short fanaticism is best defined, when looking for an essential definition, in a descriptive and formal way, this avoids both the positional fallacy and circularity found in many other definitions.

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¹ Cassam (n.d., 11) names views based on a "position along some [political] dimension" (Cassam n.d., 11)

"the positional conception of extremism" this text is accessible on <https://www.quassimcassam.com/papers>.