# The Call of the Wild: How Extremism Happens

**SAGE**

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## Abstract

Behavioral extremism (e.g., violent extremism, extreme humanism, or extreme athleticism) elicits fear, revulsion, pity, or admiration depending on the context. Its common image as exotic and esoteric makes extremism fascinating to audiences worldwide. The negative, antisocial and positive, prosocial cases of extremism are generally regarded as poles apart and as based on qualitatively different psychologies. By contrast, we propose that all cases of extremism, across different manifestations and levels of phylogeny, involve the same psychological mechanism. This mechanism consists of a motivational imbalance wherein a given need becomes dominant to the extent of overriding other basic concerns and liberates behaviors that the latter formerly constrained. We discuss the antecedents and consequences of such imbalance and provide empirical evidence to support our claim.

The term *extremism* brings to mind excitement and danger, thrilling adventures, hair-raising escapades, and daredevil exploits. It makes one think of people like Alex Honnold, who scaled "free solo" (i.e., without protective equipment) the formidable El Capitan peak in Yosemite Park, and Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who redeemed his humiliation by the police through an act of public suicide. The question we ask in this article is whether the psychological process that governs such people's behavior is any different from that which spawned Mother Teresa's limitless commitment and enormous self-denial or that which led Henri Matisse to remark, "I had nothing in my head other than painting" (Spurling, 1998, p. 61). We propose that it is not, and that despite the striking differences in specifics, what characterizes their extremism is explicable in terms of a common psychological mechanism. Some forms of extremism are antisocial and/or destructive. Others are necessary and indispensable (e.g., in coping with emergencies). But regardless of the form they take, extreme behaviors are underlain by the same psychological mechanism. We discuss this mechanism, provide evidence for its operation, and draw the implications of our analysis for future research.

## Motivational Balance and Imbalance

### Balance and moderation

Humans possess a set of basic needs, some biological in nature (nutrition, rest, hydration) and others psychogenic (autonomy, meaning, control; Fiske, 2010; Maslow, 1943). The very concept of *basic* needs suggests that most people try to satisfy them. The balanced attempt to satisfy all one's basic needs defines the state of *moderation*. The several needs exercise constraints on each other such that behaviors that gratify one need while neglecting or undermining other needs tend to be avoided. For instance, although hunger could be satisfied by consuming any number of foods, some unhealthy and others tasteless, individuals typically avoid eating tasteless or unhealthy substances. Instead, they try to eat foods that are both healthy and tasty (Köpetz et al., 2011). Balance, or moderation, among needs does not imply moderation in the magnitude of needs. Indeed, some people experience their needs more intensely

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than others do. Yet a motivational balance may exist among several high-level passions, a type of balance described as "harmonious passion" (Vallerand, 2015).

## Imbalance and extremism

On occasion, however, the balance gets upset, and one need becomes so dominant that it overrides the others and crowds them out. In such a case, the organism is wholly dominated by that need and "all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background" (Maslow, 1943, p. 373). This happens through a goal-shielding process (Shah et al., 2002), whereby a highly salient and important goal cognitively inhibits other goals, decreasing their accessibility and importance. When that happens, the constraints that basic needs exercise on behavior are relaxed. Consequently, actions that have been normally avoided are permitted. For instance, whereas under moderate hunger, one may choose foods that are tasty, yet nutritious and low in calories, under extreme hunger, one may eat whatever becomes available, even if it is unhealthy, tasteless, and disgusting (Köpetz et al., 2011). Or when "insanely" in love, one may sacrifice one's work, health, and finances to please the object of one's affection, thus acting in extreme ways most people would avoid (Kruglanski et al., 2020).

Momentary spikes in magnitudes of given needs may occur often, resulting in temporary imbalances wherein important concerns are temporarily put aside in favor of other salient needs. For instance, one may "drop everything" in order to attend to an emergency, suppress or minimize more important overall dietary concerns, and succumb to tempting, yet highly caloric foods. However, people are typically quick to restore their motivational balance. After an emergency is over, one is likely to resume previously disrupted activities; after succumbing to temptation, one returns to the original regimen.

People typically speak of *extremism* when the motivational imbalance is enduring. As Maslow (1943) noted, an unsatisfied need dominates the whole organism, but it stands out only "if it is extreme enough and *chronic* [emphasis added] enough" (p. 376). Shorter and weaker states of imbalance are not threatening; to the contrary, they are often essential for making progress toward a goal (one often needs to prioritize one task over others in order to bring it to completion). It is long-lasting addiction to alcohol or drugs (rather than occasional use), long-lasting commitment to violent pursuits (e.g., terrorism), and enduring obsessions with particular activities (e.g., a dangerous sport) that are typically viewed as examples of extremism. Because people generally strive to have all their basic needs

gratified, such prolonged obsession is rather rare. Thus, although extremism is the result of regular processes underlying goal prioritization and goal pursuit, it refers to infrequent phenomena whose rarity results from a pronounced intensity or magnitude of their underlying motivation.

## Empirical evidence

The mechanisms that enable imbalance manifest themselves in organisms at nearly all levels of the phylogenetic spectrum. For instance, fruit flies tolerate a higher concentration of bitter (and potentially toxic) contaminants in food as they get hungrier. Their "concern" for taste seems to decline the greater their concern for nutrition as such. At the brain level, the mechanism for this change is that taste neurons become more sensitive to sweet-tasting substances and less sensitive to bitter tastes (Inagaki et al., 2014).

In mice, neurons activated during male-male aggressive encounters are suppressed in the presence of females and during copulation (Lin et al., 2011), which suggests that when mating or courtship becomes a predominant concern, the importance of other needs, such as self-defense (against possible aggressors), declines.

Drug addicts experience pathological "wanting" coupled with reduced pleasure from activities that were pleasurable earlier on (Robinson & Berridge, 2004). In the realm of close relations, Maner and colleagues (2009) showed that when participants had a salient goal to maintain a long-term relationship, their attention to other highly attractive individuals was reduced.

## What Creates Motivational Imbalance?

A motivational imbalance can happen in one of two general ways: Either the focal need is aroused at an exaggerated magnitude so that it crowds out alternative needs, or the saliency of alternative needs subsides because of individuals' reduced ability to gratify them, so that mental resources are channeled disproportionately toward a more attainable need.

## Need arousal

Arousal of a given need results in the channeling of one's resources toward its satisfaction. As a consequence, resources are withdrawn from alternative needs, and a systemic disequilibrium is created. The dominant need is, by definition, the most motivationally relevant. Thus, it has the highest accessibility and inhibits other needs (Eitam & Higgins, 2010; Shah et al., 2002). In turn, behaviors that would not be acceptable otherwise may be permitted.

Needs may be aroused through deprivation or incentivization (see Hull, 1943; Spence, 1956). Deprivation lowers the need state to below the satisfactory range, whereas incentivization offers an opportunity to increase satisfaction within that range. Humiliation may create a state of esteem deprivation and evoke the motivation to restore esteem to a satisfactory level. By contrast, an opportunity to do something of supreme social value (e.g., save a child's life) presents an incentive that may motive action intended to boost one's self-esteem above its current level (Kruglanski et al., 2013, 2018).

### Need abatement

A need's magnitude may abate for biological reasons (e.g., the sex drive is known to subside with age; Araujo et al., 2004) or situational ones, when the expectancy of its satisfaction falls below a threshold (see Kruglanski et al., 2014). When a need wanes, the constraints it exercises over behavior are reduced, and resources may be disproportionately channeled into satisfaction of a different need. This should increase the likelihood of behaviors that would be prohibited otherwise. For instance, Lalande et al. (2017) demonstrated that low levels of need satisfaction in other life domains predicted obsessive engagement in an activity participants were passionate about. When the salience of one's need for relatedness is reduced (e.g., because of seclusion and unavailability of interaction partners), one might "throw oneself" into work with abandon, thus exhibiting workaholism (e.g., Scott et al., 1997). And if (as a consequence of ideological "brainwashing") one no longer cared about one's physical survival, one might be more inclined to volunteer for a suicidal mission (Kruglanski et al., 2013).

## What Are the Consequences of Motivational Imbalance?

### Cognitive consequences

Enduring motivational imbalance promotes a pronounced rumination about the object (or objects) of one's desire. For instance, in cases of obsessive love, people may muse about their love object up to 85% or 100% of their waking hours (Tennov, 1979). High degrees of motivational imbalance are also associated with ruminative thoughts across other content domains of passion, such as soccer fanship, work, or gambling (e.g., Vallerand, 2015).

### Affective consequences

In a state of motivational imbalance, individuals put all their resources into a single motivational concern. This "all eggs in one basket" state makes them highly emotionally dependent on gratification of their dominant motivation. Its satisfaction engenders, therefore, a highly positive affect, and its frustration, a highly negative one. The self-complexity model (Linville, 1985) suggests that people lower in self-complexity, whose self-worth depends on the satisfaction of fewer, less distinct goals, are susceptible to greater swings in affect in response to success and failure. Extreme swings of affect in extreme dieters is one of the diagnostic criteria for anorexia and bulimia nervosa (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Obsessively (hence, motivationally imbalanced) passionate recreational golfers have been found to exhibit particularly high levels of positive affect after success in their golf game and high levels of negative affect after failure (Verner-Filion et al., 2018). The life happiness of workaholics depends primarily on how satisfied they are with their work (Ng et al., 2007).

Individuals in intense romantic love report a "rush" of exhilaration (akin to a drug "high") when they see or merely think of their beloved (Fisher et al., 2006). When their love is unfulfilled or unrequited, however, they may experience great suffering and despair.

### Behavioral consequences

Perhaps the most important consequence of motivational imbalance is the legitimation of behaviors that greatly undermine other basic needs. For instance, extreme dieting often involves unhealthy and potentially dangerous methods, such as skipping meals, throwing away food to avoid gaining weight, or taking up smoking to avoid eating (Daee et al., 2002).

Practitioners of the extreme sport known as BASE (buildings, antennae, span, earth) jumping do not utilize safety devices, such as warning technology and a second parachute. They leap from cliffs, bridges, or buildings that often stand only a few hundred feet above the ground, which gives them little or no chance of surviving should anything go wrong.

Self-sacrifice for a religious cause is recommended by some devout orders as a path to the virtuous life that lends one worth and significance. The Missionaries of Charity organization followed Mother Teresa's rule of "giving until it hurts" (Chawla, 1992, p. 171).

When experiencing obsessive love, people are ready to sacrifice all for the idolized other; they may reorder their daily priorities and change their clothing, mannerisms, habits, or values to become appealing and available to the target of their affection (Carbonneau & Vallerand, 2013).

Whether the extreme behavior takes a prosocial or an antisocial form (e.g., a virtuous life of surrender and giving vs. volunteering for a suicidal mission as a means

to self-worth) depends on "evidence" of the instrumentality of the specific behavior to the dominant need. Such evidence is often articulated in narratives to which one is exposed (e.g., the propaganda of a terrorist organization) and that are supported by shared reality (Higgins, 2019) of one's reference group, a network of significant others whose opinion one reveres (Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019; Kruglanski, Webber, & Koehler, 2019).

## Conclusions

Whether they entail negative social consequences or yield desired outcomes, extreme behaviors evoke an intense response from observers; they may strike observers as bizarre or fanciful, admirable or despicable. Though diverse in its manifestations, behavioral extremism is a product of uniform psychological dynamics. We propose that it is the result of a motivational imbalance involving the focusing of one's mental resources on a given prioritized need and the proportionate withdrawal of those resources from other needs. As a consequence of this reallocation of resources, the constraints that the latter needs normally exert on behavior are relaxed, which allows actions that are neglectful of or detrimental to those concerns and that would not be considered otherwise.

These psychological processes are essential to mundane goal pursuit. They enable people (and other organisms) to channel their resources toward a single, overriding purpose and to broaden their strategic considerations in order to fulfill momentarily important goals and to cope with challenges. However, they typically result in momentary goal prioritization followed by a restoration of balance among different needs. Obviously, individuals' capacity to develop a motivational imbalance may be misused and thereby result in various forms of extremism.

The evidence we have provided suggests that the processes at the roots of extremism are fundamental to living organisms and documents their existence across levels of phylogeny from fruit flies to humans. Their manifestations, reflecting the imbalanced prioritization of a given concern, appear at the neuronal stratum, as well as at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. There is by now abundant empirical evidence attesting to the workings of motivational imbalance in the various extremisms of great personal and societal significance, including substance abuse, workaholism, exaggerated ("fatal") romantic attractions, and engagement in political or religious violence.

Yet future research should investigate several thus far unexamined aspects of motivational imbalance, such as conditions of its initiation, conditions for its maintenance, and individuals' orientation toward motivational constraints as a moderator of the link between imbalance and extremism.

We believe that understanding the core psychological mechanisms that promote motivational imbalance may facilitate the regulation and control of diverse extremisms for the benefit of society. Specifically, prevention and control of antisocial forms of extremism require (a) reestablishing motivational balance by enhancing the magnitude or saliency of the formerly suppressed concerns and/or (b) substituting a behavioral means to the dominant end that does not undermine the latter. By contrast, augmenting prosocial forms of extremism may require (a) promoting a motivational imbalance by stressing the importance of a given need and reducing the perceived importance of other, competing concerns and (b) highlighting the effectiveness of the extreme behavioral means for meeting the given need.

## Recommended Reading

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Köpetz, C., Faber, T., Fishbach, A., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2011). (See References). Presents evidence for the mechanisms underlying motivational balance and imbalance.

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Vallerand, R. J. (2015). (See References). Summarizes the work on harmonious and obsessive passion.

## Transparency

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