

How can educators prevent idealism of youngsters running astray?

Doret de Ruyter

Immoral means can never lead to moral ends. Bad means can lead to something, which might even look like the ideal, but it can never be the ideal.

Aldous Huxley

Currently, the Dutch media is filled with reports about Muslim youngsters who are accused of intending to commit terrorist acts to realise their ideals. The so-called Hofstad group (also known as Polder Mujahideen), Mohammed B., are in the centre of attention of politicians and citizens. This is not surprising. For their premeditated actions undermine Dutch society, at least that is what they aim to do.

As you have heard and will hear today, such radical groups and terrorist acts are by no means unique for Muslim youngsters or current times. About thirty years ago, Germany lived under the spell of the Bader-Meinhoff group and The Weather Underground was active in the US. Both groups consisted of white youngsters from a middle-class background. Moreover, it was a mind-boggling experience for me to discover on the website of the Terrorism Research Centre based in the US that there are hundreds of terrorist groups that have been active in the recent past or are still operational. While the Islamic groups are currently dominant, it seems as if every country in Africa, South-East Asia, or South America has a group that wants to liberate the country by terrorist means. And in addition to Islamic factions, there are also groups that are inspired by other religions like the Christian Anti-Abortion Extremists, who also call themselves the Army of God, Sikh Extremists. One of the questions that arises is: Are ideals necessarily explosive?

Given the enormous number of radicalised groups and the diversity in situations in which they operate, I need to be clear in my focus: my talk will discuss radicalism and extremism within Western liberal democracies.

Ideals and utopias

Ideals can be defined as those values that people believe to be excellent or perfect, value highly and that have not been realised as yet. Put differently, ideals are imaginations or visions of situations or personal characteristics that the person who has the ideal believes to be excellent or perfect and to which she attaches high value. The combination of the high value attached and the supremacy of the value the ideal refers to, highly motivate the person to pursue the ideal.

This makes ideals both a powerful source for the good as well as a potent origin for the bad. My focus will be on societal ideals, for the groups we are discussing this afternoon are characterized by having a vision about an ideal society. Of course, such a society demands particular characteristics of its citizen in order to establish and maintain the ideal, but these are deduced from those of the ideal society.

Societal ideals or utopias seem to be inherently moral, because they concern the well-being of a large group of people. However, not only are there immoral utopias, moral utopias can be pursued immorally as well. In literature about utopia two objections dominate the discussion. The first is that utopias are totalitarian and therefore necessarily repressive and oppressive. The second is that utopias cannot be achieved morally; people need to be indoctrinated to become loyal adherents to the utopian cause or be forced to be loyal to them.

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin was a fervent objector to the pursuit of (societal) ideals, which does not come as a surprise given his Jewish decent as well as his philosophical conviction about value pluralism. His focus is on the worldview systems that believe in and pursue a single ideal, which is that "all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only" (1999, pp. 5,6). If people actually try to realise this ideal, horrific situations arise: "For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it..." (1999, p. 15).

Berlin's view on the consequence of idealism is one-sided. He is right in his premise that idealism gives the followers the idea that they are on a moral high ground. Being morally right might lead to the conviction that one has a moral justification to use all means to establish the moral situation. However, the ways in which people try to realise their ideal are highly divergent and not necessarily destructive and immoral. Of course, history shows that ideals have been fanatically espoused which lead to immoral actions on the part of their followers. Holy wars like the Crusades or the suppression and killing of millions in Communist Russia and China, are examples of what Baumeister calls 'idealistic evil' (1997, p. 169 f.) However, it is as easy to give examples of saints, martyrs or peaceful demonstrators who have pursued their ideals in a highly moral way without coercing others to do the same. But the fact that idealism is a source for radicalism, extremism and terrorism does justify the question what educators can do to prevent youngsters from turning into radical activists.

Before I will come to that, I will first clarify the central concepts.

Radicalism, fanaticism, extremism and terrorism

Radical comes from radix, which means root. The first, and non-pejorative meaning of being radical is "Arising from or going to a root or to the basis". Within the context of this symposium, an example of a radical person would be someone who would want to change the domination and pollution of the consumer market and advocates that all consumer products of multi-nationals be banned and that only local produce should be sold.

This is, however, not the dominant meaning, which is "departing markedly from the existing or being extreme". Although close to our example, this meaning has a negative connotation, which is related to the phrase 'being extreme'. In this definition the difference between radical and extremism seems to evaporate. This is clearly the case when the concept 'radicalisation' is used. For instance, on the website of the National Coordinator of Counter Terrorism radicalisation is being described as: "The active pursuit of and/or support for fundamental changes in society that may endanger the continued existence of the democratic order (aim), which may involve the use of undemocratic methods (means) that may harm the functioning of the democratic order (effect)."

I will use radicalised (thus not radical) and extremism interchangeably. Buijs et al distinguish five characteristics of extremism:

1. The feeling of acute threat and the tendency to magnify the enemy.
2. A denunciation of the current world order
3. In contrast with Evil is a utopia of the good and harmonious world
4. There is a chosen people that can realise this utopia under the leadership of a noble person
5. In order to eradicate Evil and purify the world, the Good have to use force and violence.

It is particularly the fifth characteristic that contributes to the negative evaluation of extremism. For, while the first four may be viewed as being weird, unintelligible, or stupid, they are not necessarily detrimental to the well-being of others.

On the website of the National Coordinator of Counter Terrorism we find that "Terrorism is the use or threatened use of violence against people or the causing of serious damage to property that disrupts daily life, with the aim of bringing about social change or influencing political decision-making." I will use the term 'terrorism' for the means that groups of extremists employ for attaining their political or religious ideals. In relating terrorism to extremism, I want to express that not every form of violence is a form of terrorism. While terrorist acts are per definition illegal, this is not necessarily the case for all violent acts. Governments may use force and violence legally, for instance in the protection of citizens. Of course, what is deemed to be within the legal boundaries is not beyond dispute.

Sources of extremism

Empirical research of psychologists and sociologists has provided three clusters of reasons or sources for the move of youngsters towards extremism, namely the personality of youngsters, the environment or circumstances and the ideology the youngsters adhere to. I will give a concise description of these three in order to investigate if educators are able to influence youngsters in such a way that they shy away from radical actions.

It should be noted that none of the reasons described is a necessary or a sufficient reason for explaining why idealistic youngsters radicalise and are prepared to commit terrorist acts. It is a combination of factors that contribute to the possibility of their change. For, in each case it is equally possible to provide examples of youngsters who did not radicalise or did not become terrorists.

Firstly, there are personality traits or personality characteristics that make people prone to influences of ideologies or ideological leaders. Adorno's or Fromm's well-known description of the authoritarian character has been offered as a powerful explanation of why decent citizens can turn into ruthless killer-machines. However, recent theories have shed a light on the fact that personality characteristics are biologically or genetically predisposed and that they are difficult to change. One example of such a theory is that of the Big 5. This theory stipulates that there are five personality traits that are relatively stable: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability and Openness of mind or intellect. Persons can score high or low on these dimensions and thus would be either extravert or introvert or emotionally stable versus neurotic. It could be suggested that people who are extravert (adventurous, unrestrained, courageous), neurotic (dependent, other-reliant) and not open, have a higher chance of becoming radicalised. Equally, empirical studies show that behavioural disorders like psychopathy or sociopathy have a biological or genetic basis that make them sheer impossible to change and difficult to influence. That psychopaths and sociopaths are prone to develop into ruthless terrorists is not difficult to comprehend, given their lack of empathy and sympathy and their tendency to be fearless.

Second, the (societal) environment in which children grow up can also be a fertile soil for the growth of hatred and disaffection.

Twenge, Baumeister and others have shown in diverse psychological experiments that social exclusion increases feelings of aggression. People who were involved in the experiments and who were told that they were rejected or would end up alone in life, in other words who were given the impression that they were or would be excluded, behaved more aggressively. Of course, in the situation of radicalised Muslim youngsters and other groups, the situation is more complex.

For, in their case there is both the idea of being excluded and a strong sense of belonging. They are being excluded by society for instance through discrimination, harassment and have found a safe haven in which they are appreciated and taken seriously. Almost paradoxically, their commitment to the radical group increases the feeling of being excluded from the mainstream society. [Problematic however, is that it seems that a wrong kind of self-respect is nurtured in radicalised groups: they come to believe that they are important because they serve a particular cause.]

I mentioned discrimination and harassment. There is no discussion about the fact that discrimination is a source of agitation and anger. And rightfully so, because all human beings have the universal right not to be discriminated against. For some, this anger is so profound that it fuels feelings of hatred and destruction.

Finally, sociological research has shown that growing up in a socio-economically deprived area adds to the feeling of hatred against society. Particularly in situations in which youngsters believe that they have no opportunity to escape the dire circumstances because of the discrimination mentioned, their feelings of loyalty to society evaporate and can turn into aggression against those in power.

Thirdly, ideologies can foster the growth of extremism. All ideologies are prone to the danger of becoming an absolute conviction that leads to dividing humans between the right and the wrong, the saved and the condemned, the good and the bad. Even the belief of the pacifist Quakers, the self-denying Buddhists or the all-embracing Baha'i, can be radicalised. Baumeister has extensively argued how idealism can turn into a source of evil. "In idealistic evil moral virtue and idealism remain in force – but they support the committing of violent or evil deeds" (170). The reason why good acts on the basis of idealism can be considered evil at the same time, is that different people with different viewpoints evaluate the deed. This can be illustrated by radicalised Muslim youngsters. They believe that terrorist acts are justified in their war against the oppressing and evil forces of the western world, particularly now that this world has waged a war on them.

The justification of immoral acts on the basis of its ideological foundation which sanctions the means in virtue of the end is a powerful one. One is in a way compelled to commit an immoral act that one would normally find reprehensible as well, given the legitimacy of the cause and the impossibility of converting others otherwise. The social psychologist Albert Bandura explores why people are able to perform the immoral acts they perceived themselves to be unable to do. Under the umbrella of disengagement he describes several mechanisms: redefining harmful conduct by moral justification, euphemistic labelling of acts, minimizing or misconstruing the consequences, dehumanization of the other or attribution of blame on the victim. These mechanisms are exploited by militant groups and religious leaders.

They redefine situations in such a way that they are open to the mechanisms of disengagement. For instance, the western world is oppressive against Islam and therefore needs to be battled; killing innocent people and oneself is a heroic religious act (although the Koran forbids such acts).

Preventing extremism

I take the three sources of radicalisation as the starting point of our discussion whether or not educators can prevent idealist youngsters becoming radicalised and able to commit illegal acts. As it turns out, the possibilities of educators increase when we move through the three clusters.

With regard to the first cluster, I can be relatively brief: it is virtually impossible to influence personality traits or psychopathological disorders. The only path that parents seem to be able to walk is that of trying to find psychological or psychiatric help for their children and trying to keep these children out of the hands of those who find such people of good use. For parents of adolescent children this is almost unattainable. How can they ensure that children do not go to meetings of extremist mosques, of gatherings of extreme right- or left wing organisations or of church services of fundamentalist Christians who plan an attack on an abortion clinic? Therefore, I suggest that in case of youngsters for whom the most important reason for radicalising and becoming a terrorist is related to their personality, educators have little means of preventing this from happening.

With regard to the second cluster, educators have more possibilities, although these are also limited. The environment in which children grow up is up till their adolescence dominated by living at home and being in school. I acknowledge that the influence of the media diminishes the veracity of this statement, but what I know of research about Internet and TV is that for primary school children, their parents and teachers as well as their immediate environment are their locus of habitat. Although the influence of teachers and parents decreases in the case of secondary school children, this does not mean that educators cannot influence (up to a certain level) the quality of the environment.

First, the possibilities of teachers and schools. The environmental factors of social exclusion, discrimination and harassment can be influenced by teachers as far as the school is concerned. Teachers have to do their best to ensure that while children are at school, they are not excluded or pestered. Schools should be moral institutions characterised by justice, care for each others well-being, respect for the rights of school members, and be democratic in the sense that the voice of all pupils can have a place. This does not mean that every voice should be accepted or respected. That is obviously impossible, because some have a discriminatory nature.

However, by learning to make the distinction between respecting other pupils as persons who have the same rights as you have and respecting or appreciating their views, pupils learn an important liberal democratic principle.

There are also children who want to exclude themselves. I have no arguments for or against condoning this practice, but since it could turn into a breeding place for radicalisation, I would suggest that such children are carefully monitored while they are in school.

It is obvious that my suggestions regarding the influence of teachers on the school environment are only feasible in relatively small schools. The larger the school, the more difficult it is to build a moral community.

I think that the most important contribution of parents is to provide their children with a caring and safe family environment. I have not come across research about the attachment relation between radicalised youngsters and their parents, but it would be interesting to see how many of them are securely attached.

It is, however, clear that the possibility of influencing the environment in which children grow up also has its limits. Neither teachers nor parents can alter unjust socio-economic conditions on their own. Therefore, it is also important to mention the influential role of the state (or the state and local governments). Although a liberal democracy is the best type of organisation for a pluralistic society, this is only true if the government lives up to the ideal characteristics of such a society.

With regard to the third source, I want to suggest that educators have the most influence. Militant organisations and radical religious leaders precisely use the latent negative emotions against others who oppress the saved and who therefore have to be battled. Teachers and parents can focus on the positive emotions and critical abilities of children and youngsters. Equally, while indoctrination into the ideology is a good means to breed faithful followers who do not shy away from extremist acts for the good cause, teaching children to think critically may be an antidote against extremism.

This leads me to the following suggestions of possible influence of teachers and parents. First, teachers should teach critical thinking skills and stimulate pupils to think critically about ideologically justified illegal acts as well as about the possible reasons for people to turn to the use of these means. Parallel to this, teachers should offer students moral and citizenship education in order to assist children to develop into liberal democratic citizens.

According to the philosopher of education Israel Scheffler "[T]o choose the democratic ideal for society is wholly to reject the conception of education as an instrument of rule; it is to surrender the idea of shaping or moulding the mind of the pupil" (p. 139). As Scheffler has it, to cultivate the trait of reasonableness is to liberate the mind from dogmatic adherence to prevalent ideological fashions, as well as from the dictates of authority.

Citizens contribute to the flourishing of a democracy by taking a critical stance against practices in society in order to evaluate whether or not they meet the demands of the democratic ideal as well as against themselves in order to judge whether or not they contribute to the ideal as they should.

I believe it is of the utmost importance that schools aim to educate pupils to become critical democratic citizens who reflect upon the ideals that people, themselves included, pursue and, maybe more importantly, on the means that people use in pursuing their ideals. Children need to learn that the only way in which one may try to reform a society along the lines of one's utopia is within the boundaries of the rules of law, most particularly the minimal moral rules that are necessary for every kind of society, which includes the duty not to kill.

Characteristic for a democracy is that it is ruled by the voice of the majority. This means that laws can be passed that do not cohere with one's conception of the good life and that one can therefore deem to be immoral. However, what a person or community believes to be immoral (for instance abortion or euthanasia) is not necessarily shared by everyone. Learning to become a member of a liberal democracy therefore implies that pupils learn to respect the rights of other people to have the freedom of conviction as they themselves have as well. And that forcing others to believe what one believes oneself is illegal and immoral.

With regard to parents, I would argue that they do not only have a possibility to diminish the likelihood of youngsters radicalising by offering them a safe and secure psychological environment, but also by fostering the adherence of youngsters to moral rules and principles, and doing likewise themselves. The philosopher Frankfurt has shown, in my view convincingly, that it is virtually unimaginable for people to betray the ultimate values they care about. This makes such ideals a powerful source, as I already suggested. The most important contribution of parents would then be, in my view, that children will come to care about moral principles like not killing innocent people, justice, care, which they are unable to renounce for another cause. However, it is clear that not all parents are able or willing to do so. This means that schools should also see it as their duty to teach these moral principles and to foster the disposition in pupils to adhere to them.

In conclusion

The fact that most idealistic youngsters do not radicalise and commit terrorist acts, shows that normally educators are able to assist children in their development into (young) adults who have sufficient moral capacities and dispositions to strive after their ideals in a way that does not harm others. This is important, because ideals can be profound sources for the good. Therefore, it would be wrong in my view to aim to diminish idealism per se.

However, educators need to do whatever is within their power to ensure that the idealism of some youngster does not run astray. Given the profound disturbance for society, I suggest that all educators should see it as their duty to be sensitive to the susceptibility of those under their care to the mentioned sources and to prevent them from coming under the spell of extremist leaders who make them do things they never dreamed of being able to do.