

Why Go To Extremes?

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*When something is very, very far to the right, it actually becomes closer to the left
– especially to the very, very far left.*



In our geometrically-inclined imagination, we often picture extremes as lying at the two ends of a single line. But we can also, with a bit more effort, envision a 2D space, with extremes lying all around the edges. If we try to gain a general understanding of something by imaging it in one of these ways, we then tend to simply discard the extremes. They are, naturally, outliers, unusual and atypical. Gauss's statistical curve, bulging up in the middle, peters off on the sides. Beyond a certain cutoff, the extremes are sometimes thought not to matter at all.

The Polish word for "extreme," *skrajność*, has at its core the word *kraj*. This word now means "country," but it in turn is related to an old root meaning "to cut" (*kroić*), and hence to the meaning of being far away from the center, being off in the periphery. At one time long ago, the word *kraj* referred to a cut made into a piece of wood to mark off a certain portion; later the noun started to refer to a certain distance. Later, when *kraj* grew closer and began to denote the place where one lives, the notion of being out of the center, or *z kraju* (or sometimes the old form *z kraja*), came to denote the periphery. Being relegated to the periphery could entail a sense of not being involved in the goings-on of the center. The old phrase *Moja chata z kraja* (loosely: "My hut is far away from everything") is sometimes used to express a lack of interest or head-in-the-sand attitude: "What business is this of mine? Leave me the heck out of it!..." Stick to the core, let the devil care about the rest.

But sometimes the reverse is true, as extremes may involve a deep sense of involvement. For instance, when we think about various *skrajności* "extremities" of human behavior or character traits, we perceive them as less typical, even strange, and associate them with an exceptional lack of what we acceptingly call objectivity, or neutrality.

In both English and Polish, describing something as *skrajny* "extreme" usually involves a certain negative stance. We can speak of "extreme stupidity" but not "extreme wisdom," of "extreme cowardice" but not "extreme courage." We may sometimes accuse someone else of "extreme irresponsibility," but I have never heard of anyone ever being praised for "extreme responsibility."

Moreover, people generally do not see themselves or their own views as "extreme." Indeed, it seems that it is in political discussions that we most often talk of the "extreme" views of others, of the "extremism" of those darned

"extremists." In public, political, ideological speech, such terms are meant to provoke dislike to the people and ideas so described. But note how those who use such words to describe their political opponents can, more often than not, just as aptly be described by them themselves.

And here, again, we can reconsider the underlying conceptual geometry. Note how the adjective *skrajny* "extreme" gets used in connection with "nationalism" (albeit certainly not "patriotism"), with "cosmopolitanism," with "xenophobia," and other none-too-pleasant views. Extremisms do seem to be either far to the left, or far to the right. But things are not always evenly balanced: left-wing extremists (however their leftism might be understood) end up getting pejoratively called *lewaki* "lefties," whereas there seems to be no corresponding pejorative term for their right-wing counterparts, in either English or Polish (*prawaki*: "righties")?

And what if we try to move from one linear dimension, and instead switch to two? It seems to me that the notion of extremism can also be applied to fundamentalists, who in this configuration would be down at the bottom, at the base. But it would be hard to imagine what kind of "extreme" would be up at the top – perhaps some kind of "extreme idealists"? No, it seems that upwards we can only imagine good things. So getting back to the bottom, let us consider once again those "extreme fundamentalists" – is that not really just pleonastic hyperbole? Perhaps not: even among fundamentalists some kind of less-engaged core can be distinguished, and if there is a core, then there must also be some more fervent peripheries.

They even say that opposite extremes attract one another, that they can even meet. Here we have to switch to a different conceptual geometry: this time a circle. When something is very, very far to the right, it actually becomes closer to the left – especially to the very, very far left. Our minds, so susceptible to dialectics of various sorts, perceive no contradiction here. Two opposing extremes are similar in that way: they are both far from the core. And here we are dealing not so much with logic, as with an intentionally guided picture of the world, people, and their views. Especially those we cannot identify with.

When it's all said and done, we do not really advocate extremisms or extremities, of whatever sort. Because after all, why go to extremes? ■