Conspiracy Theories and Reasonable Pluralism

Abstract

The popularity of conspiracy theories poses a clear challenge for contemporary liberal democracies. Conspiracy theories undermine rational debate, spread dangerous falsehoods and threaten social cohesion. However, any possible public-policy response, which would try to contain their spread, needs to respect the liberal commitment to protect pluralism and free speech. A successful justification of such a policy must therefore 1) clearly identify the problematic class of conspiracy theories; and 2) clarify the grounds on which the state is justified in acting against them.

This paper argues that the prevailing epistemic approaches to conspiracy theorising cannot fulfil these criteria. Defining conspiracy theories by their flaws in reasoning, questionable coherence or factual mistakes can neither sharply distinguish problematic conspiracy theories from other, non-problematic worldviews nor justify state action. Thus, we propose to understand conspiracy theories through their ethical unreasonableness. We hold that containment of conspiracy theories is justifiable insofar as they undermine the liberal-democratic ideals of mutual respect, freedom and equality. We then show that such 'ethical' criteria for conspiracy theories can be sufficiently robust and clear-cut so that they can serve as a useful guide for public policy.

Conspiracy theories have a bad name, and rightly so. Studies have suggested a host of unfortunate side-effects of certain types of conspiratorial thinking, such as the rejection of scientific findings (Lewandowsky et al. 2013; van der Linden 2015), lower participation in politics (Jolley and Douglas 2014a) or unwillingness to vaccinate (Jolley and Douglas 2014b; Kata 2010). Proponents of certain types of conspiracy theories seem more likely to hold contradictory views, which threatens rationality and logic (Wood et al. 2012), while morals are also at stake, since people likely to endorse conspiracy theories do so because they themselves would willingly participate in such conspiracies (Douglas and Sutton 2011).

However, proposing a conspiracy theory does not necessarily amount to a logical, epistemic or moral error as such a theory need not consist of unwarranted beliefs and hoaxes. Conspiracies are not only a fact of historical record, they are also a necessary result of social life

in which people pursue different, often conflicting goals, or compete for the same rewards. Whenever two or more people secretly act to advance their goals, they *conspire*, from the Latin for the 'breathing together' of the whispering conspirators. Thus, to offer an explanation of an event by positing that it results from a conspiracy of several individuals is *ipso facto* to advance a conspiracy theory (cf. Basham 2001, Coady 2006, 2012; Dentith 2014; Jane and Fleming 2014; Pigden 2007).

'Conspiring' is usually understood to entail nefarious, illegal or morally dubious purposes, which creates a need for secrecy.[1] But people '*breathing together*' does not always imply a sinister attempt to change history. We often find conspiracies in both bedrooms and boardrooms (adultery, hostile takeovers), as well as in everyday political life – though the parties involved would baulk at describing their dealings this way, mainly because of the negative connotations entailed by the word.[2]

Thus, conspiracies occur quite regularly, and no theory advancing a conspiratorial explanation of an event is automatically suspect. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact or the Watergate affair are just three historical examples of conspiracies that were unquestionably real. Any explanation of the events of 11 September 2001 has to work with a conspiracy of individuals – the paranoid 'inside job' version as well as the clearly correct al-Qaeda account.

Still, it is conventional wisdom that conspiracy theories are to be discounted as 'silly', 'paranoid' or 'dangerous'. It has even become part of regular political jargon – always a dangerous sign – to dismiss any allegation of wrongdoing as mere 'conspiracy theorising'. The

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[1] However, a 'conspiracy of angels' is not a contradiction. In fact, the idea that some beings conspire in order to help us is not unknown (cf. Walker 2013), though, unsurprisingly, this optimistic outlook and attendant mythologies have failed to gain much traction with the people who usually subscribe to conspiratorial thinking.

[2] Thus, in common parlance, Watergate was a conspiracy, whereas an undisclosed pre-electoral agreement between political parties on the future division of government posts is just shrewd politics.

speaker alleges that whatever idea was advanced is deeply suspect and too irrational to be seriously discussed. This, some critics note, is quickly becoming a routine strategy of exclusion, 'stripping the claimant of the status of reasonable interlocutor' (Husting and Orr 2007).[3]

Nonetheless, as Charles Pigden reminds us, there is nothing about conspiracy theories as such that warrants this dismissal:

> Some conspiracy theories are sensible and some are silly, but if they are silly this is not because they are conspiracy theories but because they suffer from some specific defect – for instance, that the conspiracies they postulate are impossible or far-fetched. But conspiracy theories as such are not epistemologically unclean, and it is often permissible – even obligatory – to believe them. For sometimes the case for conspiracy can be rationally overwhelming, 'proved beyond reasonable doubt', and even when it is not, belief in a conspiracy is often a rational option. (Pigden 2007: 219–220).

The current standard academic account of conspiracy theories thus usually avoids any pejorative connotation in their definition[4]. A conspiracy theory is simply understood in a neutral fashion as the proposed explanations of a major event or phenomenon, which is supposed to be the result of a concerted action carried out in secret by a group of two or several agents (Dentith 2014, Douglas et al. 2019, Parent and Uscinski 2014). These plotters are usually – though not exclusively – perceived as powerful and their goals as illicit, self-aggrandizing, or otherwise at the expense of the public good (Keeley 1999, Parent and Uscinski 2014). The definition is purposefully neutral towards the epistemic merits of such theories.

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[3] However, it seems this delegitimising strategy of labelling something a conspiracy theory may no longer reduce belief in it (Wood 2015).
[4] For a recent extensive overview of the scholarship on conspiracy theories, see Douglas et al. (2019).

At the same time, we are all familiar with a specific class of conspiracy theories, the irrational and frustrating properties of which make discursive engagement with their proponents difficult. Despite their internal failings, such theories nonetheless manage to command sizeable popularity and are an ever-present feature of the public sphere (Oliver and Wood 2014). A non-negligible part of the population thus consists of 'moon hoaxers', '9/11 truthers', 'vaccine denialists', 'Jew-baiters', 'chemtrails believers' and proponents of many similar conspiracy theories. The rise of the internet and the popularity of social media platforms has created an environment in which such conspiracy theories can thrive, multiply and, consequently, have a tangible influence on society.

The popularity of the conspiracy theories listed above has real consequences for the political system. Belief in them decreases people's trust in experts and scientific knowledge (Lewandowsky et al. 2013; van der Linden 2015), drives climate science denialism (Uscinski et al. 2017), lowers people's willingness to engage in politics (Jolley and Douglas 2014a, Uscinski and Parent 2014), is associated with political extremism (van Prooijen et al. 2015), and relates to the rise of populist politics (Castanho Silva et al. 2017). Moreover, the prevalence of these conspiracy theories lowers trust in official, legitimate hierarchies of public reason and political institutions, which, in the end, erodes the stability of democratic regimes (Bartlett and Miller 2010; Einstein and Glick 2014).[5]

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[5] However, it should be noted that the relationship between democracy and conspiracy theories can be more complicated (Moore 2016, Muirhead and Rosenblum 2016). Politicians from the parties in opposition sometimes need to express citizens' fears and suspicions over government actions in order to remain effective representatives of their constituents. Such an acknowledgement of "the suspicions harbored by citizens" can entail, within certain limits, also "accommodating popular perceptions of conspiracy" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2016: 68). Other studies suggest a partisan pattern of conspiracy theories, which often seem to track the respective electoral fortunes of the parties to which the conspiracy theorists feel affiliated (Parent and Uscinski 2014, Smallpage et al. 2017). Finally, it should be noted that, as Drochon (2018) observes, conspiracy theories are not necessarily the culprit, but could well be a symptom of a general democratic malaise. A complete political and economic exclusion of certain segments of the population can lead to a disenchantment with democracy and a greater willingness to accept conspiracy theory explanations.

Thus, it seems undeniable that a *certain* class of conspiracy theories provides a serious challenge for contemporary democratic societies and the mutual relations of their citizens. If a substantial portion of the population believes in this class of conspiracy theories, it undermines the conditions needed for a democratic regime to function – or even survive. Given these dangers, it seems natural to conclude that such ideas go beyond reasonable pluralism. The adherents of such conspiracy theories do not bring anything productive into the public domain, and their opinions should not be respected as products of Rawlsian 'burdens of judgement' (Rawls 1996, 56–57). They fall outside the scope of public reason, with governments having a right – or even a duty – to combat their spread and halt their influence.[6] Indeed, an effective policy to halt the spread of this kind of conspiracy theorising might be necessary in order for contemporary liberal-democratic regimes to survive.

The practical need to contain the spread of unwarranted conspiracy theories is clearly at odds with the key liberal commitment to pluralism and free speech. Containment of any worldviews by state power is always suspect and needs to be clearly justified. Thus, the main challenge of this paper is to provide the grounds for possible public-policy responses to the spread of problematic conspiracy theories while respecting the pluralist nature of liberal society. Any conception that meets such a challenge has to satisfy at least two conditions. First, it must be able to identify the problematic class of conspiracy theories (for simplicity, we will call them 'bad' conspiracy theories). As shown above, not all conspiracy theories are suspect and some are unquestionably true. The conspiratorial aspect in itself therefore cannot serve as a useful specification of the problematic nature of any theory, and some other problematic aspect needs to be found. Second, a successful conception needs to be very clear on the grounds that justify the

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[6] The specific actions that government can take are explored in Sunstein and Vermuele (2009), whose contribution we analyse below.

state in trying to contain conspiracy theories. In other words, it must maintain strong protections of pluralism while allowing the state to act against the specified type of worldviews. Once these two conditions are met, the resulting conception can help sharpen the focus and scope of possible strategies and policy proposals that would aim to limit the undesirable consequences of the conspiratorial thinking described above.

The rest of the paper follows the research questions specified in the previous paragraph. The next section analyses the epistemic aspect of bad conspiracy theories, which is by far the most popular route for analysing them. Philosophers aim to distinguish bad conspiracy theories by pointing out their questionable coherence, factual mistakes, or flaws in reasoning and logic. However, we argue that the epistemic approach towards these conspiracy theories is not useful if we want to point out the features that make them *politically* problematic. In other words, while epistemic criteria might show that certain conspiracy theories are unwarranted, they do not show that state intervention is justified. Therefore, epistemic deficiencies cannot justify state policy aimed at containing the influence of problematic conspiracy theories.

Following this insight, we argue that the most fruitful approach to capturing the unreasonableness of conspiracy theories is ethical. Conspiracy theories should be considered as problematic and unreasonable from the political point of view only insofar as they imply positions that are at odds with the liberal ideal of free and equal citizenship. Upon crossing this threshold, a liberal regime that respects reasonable pluralism is justified in trying to contain such conspiracy theories and in actively limiting their influence. We show that the 'ethical' criteria for conspiracy theories can be sufficiently robust and clear-cut so that they can be useful for practical purposes. The paper concludes with a sketch of possible public-policy responses that use the ethical approach we advocate. In line with our main argument, we stress that the most

fruitful policy response to counter bad conspiracy theories is not epistemic (focused on media literacy, critical thinking and reliable sources) but ethical (concerned with respect, equality and the promotion of liberal citizenship).

Conspiracy theories as an epistemic problem

Under the Pigdenian reading (2007), any literate person is either a conspiracy theorist herself, or has accepted some particular conspiracy theory as true or likely. Epistemologists such as David Coady (2007, 2012) welcome such a reading and argue for pushing the very notion of a conspiracy theorist out of our lexicon as too loaded a term, focusing instead on theories themselves, without resorting to name-calling. Though sympathetic to Coady's overall attempts to level the epistemic playing field and rebuild the reputation of conspiracy theories, such an approach does little to solve the practical challenge described above. We still need to classify and define the type of conspiratorial thinking that goes bad, given the social impact of such conspiracy theories and the need for policy responses.

By far the most common approach in the literature so far is to analyse bad conspiracy theories as an epistemic problem that can be traced to common psychological traits and cognitive errors (Brotherton 2015). The possible causes of problematic conspiratorial thinking include the fundamental attribution error (Clarke 2002), susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton and French 2014), anthropomorphism, intentionality seeking and other cognitive biases (Brotherton and French 2015; Douglas et al. 2015). However, knowing the origin of conspiracy theories will not help us to recognise them. What we need is a set of criteria to help us distinguish 'bad' conspiracy theories from the rest. Perhaps the most famous attempt at this task was made by Brian Keeley (1999), who tried to define a subclass of conspiracy theories, which

he termed 'unwarranted conspiracy theories' (henceforth UCT), by listing their epistemic deficiencies. This can serve as a useful starting point for our discussion. Keeley (1999, 116–117) believed UCTs to have the following characteristics:

1) A UCT is an explanation that runs counter to some received, official or 'obvious' account.

(2) The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.

(3) UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.

(4) The truths behind events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.

However, Keeley himself explicitly warns that there is nothing here that can help us identify a conspiracy theory as *necessarily* unwarranted. Indeed, the listed points are relevant in locating the theoretical space where most UCTs reside, but do not do any work when it comes to showing the epistemic deficiencies of UCTs. For example, an unwarranted conspiracy theory will often disagree or question the official account, or the 'received view', yet this does not make the theory automatically suspect or faulty. When Bernstein and Woodward published their story of the Watergate affair, they also questioned the official story, which turned out to be false. Similarly, the first accounts of Nazi extermination camps coming out of occupied Europe during the Second World War ran against the official German accounts, and tended to be dismissed as over-the-top conspiratorial propaganda. Likewise, a theory positing that the intentions of would-be conspirators are benevolent or even angelic is a logical possibility, but hardly one that would command much attention.[7] Pessimism is not an epistemically dangerous disposition. We can thus

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[7] See footnote 1.

see that a mechanical fulfilment of the criteria provided by Keeley will not make a theory necessarily unwarranted.

Steven Clarke (2002, 2007) has provided a different definition of bad conspiracy theories. He has helpfully suggested treating them as Lakatosian research programmes in order to better assess their epistemic (de)merits. To explain, Imre Lakatos proposed to distinguish between 'degenerating' and 'progressive' research programmes, based on how these react to new evidence. Each research programme has a 'hard core' of theories that stay the same, since changing them would mean abandoning the research programme as such, and a 'protective belt' of auxiliary hypotheses, which can be adjusted considering new facts and which can extend the explanatory power of the programme. However, if the auxiliary hypotheses change only to answer new evidence without extending the explanatory and predictive power of the core theory, then the programme has become degenerative (Clarke 2002: 136).

A programme that continues to shift and rewrite its protective belt in light of new evidence only to maintain its core theoretical commitments is degenerating to the point where it is irrational not to abandon it for a more successful research programme. Every student of conspiracy theorists recognises this feature of UCTs, as every piece of information launched against the theory is then reinterpreted as supporting it. We can recognise this as a continuous rewriting of the protective belt: all new evidence against a theory quickly becomes evidence *for* the theory, by redefining it as another part of the cover-up story. A theory thus descends into utter *unfalsifiability*.[8] Thus 'Watergate' and 'al-Qaeda' are successful, i.e. progressive research programmes that explain world events through a conspiracy of individuals, while 'controlled

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[8] However, Keeley cautions that unfalsifiability alone should not do all the work in identifying unwarranted conspiracy theories, since we are working in a domain in which the studied object actively tries to hide its own involvement: 'Imagine if neutrinos were not simply hard to detect, but actively sought to avoid detection!' (Keeley 1999: 120).

demolition' (AKA 'inside job') or 'Elvis faked his death' are clear cases of degenerative research programmes involving conspiracies (Clarke 2007).[9]

Relatedly, conspiracy theories often fail to be warranted through (deliberate) obfuscatory vagueness. By never quite offering a specific research programme with a testable hypothesis they remain merely 'proto-theories' (Clarke 2007: 175). This is probably because an actual commitment to an explicit theoretical elucidation would quickly reveal the conspiracy theory to be an example of a degenerating research programme. Thus, shifting and modifying initial conditions and auxiliary hypothesis is a way for them to explain away theoretical failures and inconvenient facts.

Ambiguity helps to maintain an aura of plausibility for the desired audience, as the willing recipients of the conspiracy do their own interpretive work and fill in the blanks. Should any critic make the mistake of stating any of the hinted hypotheses outright, she will be met with accusations of twisting the theorist's words, taking things out of their context, or willfully mischaracterising the issue. However, without settling the exact nature of the core theoretical claims, it is impossible to advance a proper theory. Therefore, the typical conspiracy theorists often resort only to sniping at the 'received view', muddying the epistemic waters. Their efforts thus mostly help to sow distrust and confusion and remain without 'veritistic value' (Goldman 1999).

Unwarranted conspiracy theories, reasonable pluralism and public policy

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[9] However, there is an important caveat to be made about the nature of much of the recent conspiracy theorising. More than an advancement of explicitly stated research programmes (Clarke 2002) about a conspiracy behind the headlines, too many of the conspiracy theories advanced on the internet bear the hallmarks of being part of hybrid warfare of state-sanctioned programs of bullshitting – in the sense that Frankfurt (2005) describes. Truth-regard is the least of the concerns of such theories; their goals are anti-epistemic, i.e., sowing distrust and confusion in the minds of the target population, making the possibility of reliably knowing and believing anything less likely (Pomerantsev 2014, see also Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2018; Yablokov 2015). However, calling these theories conspiracy bullshitting instead could open us to the not unjustified criticism of begging the question.

The previous section identified two influential accounts that try to isolate and define the unwarranted conspiracy theories: Keeley's list of epistemic deficiencies and Clarke's characterisation of degenerative research programmes connected with the obfuscatory vagueness that conspiracy theories tend to exhibit. Although these criteria give us a good sense of how we could define 'bad' conspiracy theories, they contain grey areas and cannot catch all conspiracy theories all the time. However, we will not focus on these particular deficiencies here. We want to ask a more general question: Can *any* epistemic account similar to those described above fulfil the practical task outlined at the beginning of this paper? Is it possible to use such accounts to classify conspiracy theories as being beyond reasonable pluralism? Can the epistemic deficiencies justify the state in being partial against conspiracies that exhibit them? The present section will argue for a negative answer to all these questions. Epistemic criteria are not a useful tool to justify a public-policy response to the rise of conspiracy theories.

The main reason why epistemic criteria are not a useful basis for a public-policy response to conspiracy theories lies in the fact that the errors described in the previous section are so widespread that it would be very difficult to even attempt to exclude them from the public sphere. Simply put, far-fetched theories are omnipresent at all levels of contemporary societies. The most prominent example here is astrology, whose popularity has remained stable over the centuries. In contemporary societies, astrology takes so many forms, from eclectic New Age literature to three-line horoscopes in lifestyle magazines, that it is very difficult to escape it. Yet horoscopes pose a causal explanation of world events that is *much* more far-fetched and epistemically problematic than most conspiracy theories. An explanation of world events that involves the United States government in an extremely convoluted plot to kill their own citizens by attacking the World Trade Center is clearly untenable. However, it is still more plausible than

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explaining to conference organisers that you missed your flight and had to cancel your presentation because ascendant Venus was in the first house, which meant that travel was not recommended for Leos and Tauruses – and, therefore, it was simply to be expected that something would prevent you from flying.

As a matter of fact, horoscopes commit most of the errors we can see in conspiracy theories. They propose an alternative explanation of events. They constitute a degenerative research programme with no predictive power, which is nonetheless able to fit in and interpret all new events, whatever they might be, as supporting instead of disproving them. And all horoscopes are of course vague and obfuscatory. Therefore, the problematic features we identified in conspiracy theories so far are straightforwardly applicable to astrology. If a public-policy response to conspiracy theorising is based on epistemic criteria, it would need to fight against astrology as well.

Moreover, the problems identified by the students of conspiracy theories are present not only in astrology; they are also ubiquitous in most religious doctrines. As Martha Nussbaum notes (2015: 24), most of the doctrines espoused by a majority of citizens fail one or more of the epistemic criteria described above. Indeed, theorists have long noted the 'quasi-religious' character of conspiracy theories (Franks et al. 2013) and the apparent similarities between secular conspiracy theories and religious beliefs. Both explain events 'in terms of intentional agents … that are not readily available for interrogation' (Keeley 2007: 139), who seem to be able to achieve what regular persons cannot, with unknown and unclear motives, and in secrecy. Moreover, one might argue that there is less evidence for the existence of God than for some conspiracy theories.

In general, irrationality, epistemic blindness, immunity to evidence and large-scale support for clearly far-fetched views are simply features of our society. We can call it, emulating Rawls, a 'fact of irrationality', which needs to be taken into consideration by political philosophers. For the issue at hand, the 'fact of irrationality' means that we cannot use epistemic criteria to single out bad conspiracy theories and fight against them. A state with negative views towards conspiracy theories, astrology and religion would simply be too exclusionary. After all, the public space in liberal-democratic societies needs to be sufficiently permissive to capture a wide range of views. If most citizens find themselves outside the bounds of reasonable pluralism, then something has certainly gone awry.

In summary, striving for strict and exclusionary epistemic criteria to guard the boundaries of reasonable pluralism goes against the spirit of mutual respect for citizens, who nevertheless continue to disagree with each other about matters of deep importance to them. To maintain the key element of openness and respect that pluralistic liberal regimes ought to exhibit, we need to abandon attempts that aim to classify different worldviews through their theoretical features. Along with Martha Nussbaum, we see no reason to 'denigrate them [the citizens] because they believe in astrology, or crystals, or the Trinity' (Nussbaum 2015: 25). By extension, the same goes for lizard people, flat Earth and chemtrails.

Can we suppress conspiracy theories because they are dangerous?

The previous section showed that if we feel compelled to act against bad conspiracy theories, the epistemic approach is not a good starting point. It catches a broad range of views and thus excludes a part of public sphere that every liberal regime should keep intact. However,

there might exist another, easier way to approach the problematic aspects of conspiracy theorising – through the dangers they pose to democratic societies.

As we showed in the introduction, the current popularity of problematic conspiracy theorising carries with it a host of social problems. Perhaps most importantly, it undermines the stability of the liberal-democratic order. A functioning democracy needs the support and trust of its citizenry to survive, and citizens have to see that the institutions are worthy of their continued support. Even a regime that is the best manifestation of the principles of justice needs also to be seen as such by the majority of its citizens. Without the trust of the citizens, no set of institutions can be stable. Thus, when widespread conspiracy theories undermine the trust of citizens in institutions – often for irrational and far-fetched reasons – they clearly endanger the liberal-democratic institutions and the entire political system that these support.

One could thus claim that limiting the spread of dangerous conspiracy theories can be justified on the grounds of self-preservation. Astrology might be more far-fetched and epistemically problematic than conspiracy theorising, but only the latter endangers liberal democracy. A public-policy response trying to limit the impact of bad conspiracy theories can thus be vindicated on the same grounds as laws against openly fascist political parties – they are all necessary to support public order and the political survival of the regime.

However, the argument above is ultimately unpersuasive. The danger posed by bad conspiracy theories is indirect and not clear enough to justify state intervention. Note that anti-system political parties are very different from conspiracy theories in this regard because their clear aim is ultimately to destroy the liberal-democratic order. Liberal democracies are acting in clear self-defence. This is not the case with unwarranted conspiracy theories. While it is certainly true that conspiracy theorising undermines trust in institutions and lowers political participation

(Jolley and Douglas 2014a), the existence of these effects does not justify the political regime's trying to suppress them. After all, to return to our favourite example, Watergate had exactly the same effects. Allegations of corruption or wrongdoing and their continued airing might indeed undermine public trust in the political elite or even the entire political system. Nevertheless, such actions are a necessary corrective to possible abuses of power (which happen in every political regime) and they are a vital part of a functioning public sphere. Therefore, an institution is not justified in actively suppressing any piece of information just because it negatively affects its image among the citizens. Freedom of speech should be protected, even though its particular instances can have negative utility values.

The unreasonable and the unethical

So far, we have argued that we cannot select bad conspiracy theories for possible corrective state action for epistemic reasons or because of the dangers they pose. They share the same epistemic problems with astrology and organised religions, while they have the same disruptive potential as legitimate journalistic exposés or warranted public complaints. In this section, we propose an approach that is capable both of filtering the 'bad' conspiracy theories and justifying the state in acting against them. We argue that conspiracy theories are politically problematic and can become a subject of state intervention insofar as they are unreasonable in an ethical sense.

We take the concept of 'the reasonable' from *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 1996), where it famously plays a pivotal role. It is the cornerstone of Rawls' insistence that discussions concerning 'the truth' are problematic in deeply divided contemporary societies. Because of the 'fact of pluralism' we cannot understand politics as a search for the truth – the best we can hope

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for is some agreement on what views are 'reasonable'. However, since it has been a subject of numerous interpretive disputes, we would like to understand the concept of 'the reasonable' in the specific ethical sense that was defended by Martha Nussbaum in her famous paper 'Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism' (2011). To summarise her position, Nussbaum chooses to disregard the passages in *Political Liberalism* where Rawls appears to embrace a theoretical (that is, epistemic) conception of the reasonable (e.g. Rawls 1996: 59). For Nussbaum, the reasonableness of comprehensive doctrines should not be judged using criteria such as coherence or intelligibility. Such criteria are too strict and would exclude many popular comprehensive doctrines, especially religious ones. The state would therefore privilege certain specific ways of thinking, which would necessarily destroy the equality of citizens and the openness to pluralism – two supposedly defining features of political liberalism. In her words: 'If I want to believe something silly, or to subordinate my judgment to that of some irrational authority, it is not the business of a pluralistic society to state that I am in any sense inferior for so doing' (Nussbaum 2011: 29).

Nussbaum therefore opts for *a strictly ethical* reading of 'the reasonable': '[A] reasonable citizen is one who respects other citizens as equals. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one endorsed by such a reasonable citizen, that is, including a serious commitment to the value of equal respect for persons as a political value' (Nussbaum 2011: 33). Reasonable citizens are therefore those who wish to live together in a society run as a fair system of social cooperation based on mutual respect. They will recognise each other as free and equal members of such a society and allow everyone to freely pursue their conception of the good, provided that this does not run counter to the agreed political principles. Consequently, reasonable doctrines, opinions and worldviews do not aim to impose their perspective on other citizens by using state power.

They recognise the right of the citizens to make up their own minds. Reasonable citizens thus refuse to denigrate each other even if some of them hold views that others consider wrong or even silly.

Writing in a similar vein, Jonathan Quong defines as *un*reasonable someone who 'rejects at least one, but usually several of the following: (1) that political society should be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefit, (2) that citizens are free and equal, and (3) the fact of reasonable pluralism' (Quong 2004: 315). Being unreasonable, then, has important consequences. While unreasonable citizens do not lose the rights and benefits of citizenship, they are excluded from the 'constituency of public justification that determines what those rights and benefits will be' (Quong 2004: 315), meaning that since they reject the premises of political liberalism, political liberalism takes no normative heed of their views in the process of political justification.

More importantly, these (ethically) unreasonable citizens, while not losing the rights and benefits of full citizenship, cannot exercise these rights in pursuit of unreasonable objectives. So, for example, a member of a white-supremacist Christian group cannot be denied any of the rights of citizenship just because he denies the freedom and equality of persons, but he can be prevented from exercising those rights when his aims are explicitly unreasonable; indeed, they cease to be rights when he attempts to exercise them in this way (Quong 2004: 332). Such a reading is compatible with wide toleration, as reasonable pluralism is fully respected in Quong. However, if a doctrine is found (ethically) unreasonable, and if the reasons to suppress it are 'especially compelling' (Quong 2004, 333), the state can act against it and the individuals concerned have no grounds for complaint.[10]

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[10] Quong's argument is in clear contrast with Rawls' insistence on protecting free speech in all cases that do not entail clear and present danger to outsiders (Rawls 1996, p. 340–356). Rawls' position here is typical of much North

At this point, we can ask whether conspiracy theories can be classified as unreasonable in this specifically ethical sense – and whether their unreasonableness can subsequently justify a public-policy response. At first, this strategy might seem unconvincing. After all, many conspiracy theorists seem to be fully accepting of the underlying sources of reasonable pluralism, namely, the burdens of judgement (Rawls 1996: 56–57). They are often happy to admit that the evidence for real-world beliefs is conflicting and complex, and thus hard to assess and evaluate, with necessary and persistent disagreements on relevant considerations and their relative weight. Indeed, considerations such as these may lead us to question the official accounts of some events in the first place.

Moreover, conspiracy theorists' espousal of core democratic values is often one of their key rhetorical arguments in defence of their intellectual pursuit. Many, if not most, proponents of bad conspiracy theories will be the first to declare that society indeed *should* be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefit. That is often a part of their radical political complaint: we are living in a sham democracy where people are systematically disrespected, with radical measures required to correct the current injustice.

So what would be the basis for pronouncing certain conspiracy theories as unreasonable in the specific ethical sense we just analysed? Recall Quong's characteristic beliefs typical of being (ethically) unreasonable: '(1) that political society should be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefit, (2) that citizens are free and equal, and (3) the fact of reasonable pluralism' (Quong 2004: 315). As started in the previous paragraphs, we believe that conspiracy theories often at least pay lip service to beliefs (1) and (3). Belief (2), however, is much more problematic. Indeed, we hold that a significant number of conspiracy theories (implicitly or

American scholarship, inspired by strong protections of free speech granted by US constitution's First Amendment. In this sense, we take a less strict ('European') approach. For an argument that duty of civility can serve to curtail free speech, see (Bonotti 2015).

explicitly) deny it. And, consequently, we would like to claim that these are the 'bad' ones. Thus, we hold that conspiracy theories deserve public policy containment *insofar as* they are ethically unreasonable, especially when at odds with Quong's second criterion.

To justify our position, consider the differences between two conspiracy theories. One claims that thirty Jewish bankers rule the world, the other that this power is held by a giant pipe-smoking rabbit. We hold that the former is clearly ethically unreasonable in Quong-Nussbaum sense of the word, although the latter is not. A belief in a giant pipe-smoking rabbit has no discernible real-world connotations and does not attach to any larger worldview. While we might think it is silly, it fulfils none of Quong's criteria of unreasonableness. The situation is radically different with the thirty Jewish bankers. It is a variation on the oldest globally popular conspiracy theory, going back at least to the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903. As such, it is designed to fuel anti-Semitic feelings, clearly endangering the mutual respect, freedom and equality of citizens that stands behind contemporary liberal societies. A belief in such a conspiracy theory entails that one is a mere puppet in hands of powerful Jews scheming to enrich themselves off a disempowered public. This clearly implies racial resentment, which is of course a highly undesirable element in every functioning society, not only a liberal one.

We hold that the above-mentioned difference between the two conspiracy theories should have a clear impact on public policy. State institutions are justified in trying to contain the spread of Jew-baiting conspiracies, or even in actively fighting them. On the other hand, conspiracies involving a pipe-smoking rabbit fall into the same category as astrology or alternative medicine. Their proponents are well within the bounds of reasonable pluralism and the state is not justified in taking any direct policy measures against them.

A similar metric can now be used for all other conspiracy theories. For example, by far the most politically influential recent conspiracy theory claims that the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis was orchestrated 'from above', with the explicit goal of changing the ethnic make-up of European countries (the so-called 'replacement theory'). The details, of course, vary with every account. Some claim that the perpetrator here is the United States, whose goal is to weaken Europe. Others claim that the European Union directs the migrants for its own political gains. More often than not, George Soros features in the explanation, which connects the theory to the tradition of anti-Semitic conspiracies. In any case, it is once again clear that this conspiracy theory fails the test of ethical reasonableness. It transforms refugees in desperate need of help into agents of a foreign power to whom we owe no compassion or benevolence – we should indeed actively fight them, as our very survival is at stake. The theory thus effectively de-humanizes them. As such, it directly challenges the belief in equality and respect owed to fellow human beings.

However, the 'ethical' understanding of the unreasonableness of conspiracy theories is not attractive merely because it offers a clear sense of what goes wrong and enables us to distinguish them from similarly far-fetched yet (ethically) reasonable views. We hold that the ethical understanding also captures much of what drives people to give credence to such conspiracy theories in the first place. Jewish bankers are a much more popular target than pipe-smoking rabbits thanks to existing biases against the Jews; people are eager to believe anything that confirms their suspicions about their inherently corrupt nature. The refugee-crisis conspiracy is popular exactly because people are searching for an outlet to justify their absent solidarity and very present animosity towards Muslims in general. The list can go on. The conspiracy theories

thus do not just happen to be ethically unreasonable; they express and amplify underlying beliefs that are at odds with the spirit of liberal democracy.

Nevertheless, many far-fetched conspiracy theories can be shown to be ethically reasonable and thus politically unproblematic. Belief in the existence of lizard people or that the earth is flat, as well as the various big-pharma theories (concerning the link between autism and vaccinations, for example), does pass the test. Such beliefs do not challenge reasonable pluralism and they do not entail beliefs incompatible with freedom, equality or the mutual respect of citizens. As a result, states are not justified in actively trying to contain them.

This conclusion, however, does not mean that conspiracy theories that pass the test are not dangerous. They can certainly cause direct harm, as the recent surge in vaccine-preventable diseases in developed countries testifies. In these cases, the state can indeed act to prevent such harms – for example, by making vaccination mandatory. Here, its powers to respond to direct danger are the same as with similar cases connected to astrology. Parents can be coerced into letting their child undergo surgery even if the family wholeheartedly believe a fortune teller who tells them it is a bad idea. However, this coercive state power has nothing to do with the reasonableness or unreasonableness of the theory that gives rise to the decision. The state wants to eliminate a clear and present danger to its junior citizens, which it is surely entitled to do. As such, these actions constitute a different case – and raise a different set of questions – from the ones we are considering in this paper.

What can be done about unreasonable conspiracy theories?

The previous section defined 'bad' conspiracy theories as the ones that can be shown to be ethically unreasonable in the ways described by Rawls, Nussbaum and Quong. This account

has a direct impact on possible strategies to contain them. While it does not imply any ready-made public-policy approach to conspiracy theories, it offers a clear perspective that can serve to evaluate them.

As we have shown, existing literature has so far mostly analysed problematic conspiracy theories in terms of their epistemic properties. It is therefore not surprising that the most popular solutions proposed to contain them mirror this approach. For example, in their famous article, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009) argue that since problematic conspiracy theories spread false and harmful beliefs, governments should actively subvert conspiracy groups by *cognitive infiltration* 'designed to introduce informational diversity into such groups and to expose indefensible conspiracy theories as such', 'whereby government agents or their allies […] will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylised facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity' (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 219).

Let us sidestep the obviously ironic point of government agents secretly conspiring to change peoples' minds about conspiracies[11] and focus on the other shortcomings of this view. First, cognitive infiltration will not work, as the main problem does not lie in 'crippled epistemology' but rather in crippled morality. While closed epistemic communities and 'conspiracy cascades' do play a role, Sunstein and Vermeule are wrong to assume that a problem can be solved – or even significantly mitigated – simply by introducing some informational diversity. People do not believe conspiracy theories because the truth is unavailable to them. A much more significant role is played by the unreasonable assumptions in the background, as shown in the previous section. People who are primed to believe in the evil nature of Jews or

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[11] Sunstein and Vermeule are aware of this; they note that the discovery of such tactics could have perverse results: 'If the tactic becomes known, the conspiracy theory may become further entrenched' (2009, p. 225).

who are severely prejudiced against Muslims will not be confused by cognitive diversity. Such a strategy leaves their motivations untouched, and consequently it would be supremely optimistic to expect any positive results.

Moreover, if the state were to adopt an ambition to constrain crippled epistemologies, then its efforts would be much more wide-ranging than Sunstein and Vermuele recognise. Their proposal sets such a low bar to government intervention that it would encompass the subversion of religious doctrines, astrology and other less-than-fully verified beliefs held by its citizens. It other words, such a state would actively try to undermine the beliefs of a great majority of its population, which we consider to be contrary to the spirit of liberal democracy and reasonable pluralism (cf. Hagen 2010, deHaven-Smith and Witt 2013). We believe that the best course of action for a democratic state with regards to non-unreasonable conspiracy theories is agnostic tolerance. After all, the exercise of tolerance, as Brian Leiter (2014: 8) notes, involves 'putting up with' beliefs or practices we nevertheless believe to be 'wrong, mistaken, or undesirable' – even if they contain crippled epistemology.

The inability of epistemic considerations to ground our response to bad conspiracy theorising has wide-ranging practical consequences. This is true especially in the current political climate, where regulating social media, where most bad conspiracy theories now live, is slowly becoming a political priority across the world (and especially in Brussels). From the literature surveyed in this paper, it is clear that many still believe in censoring bad conspiracy theories on social media based on crippled epistemology. This is a vain hope. The 'fact of irrationality' presented above makes sure that every free society will always contain too much falsehood and far-fetched theories for the state to even attempt to tackle. Epistemology is in this regard a bad guide to public policy. This is the first important practical conclusion we would like to make.

Secondly, we argued that ethical unreasonableness could be used instead of epistemology as a criterion to guide the political response to the spread of bad conspiracies. This has, practically speaking, one important downside. The epistemic strategy hoped to divide good conspiracy theories from the bad somehow objectively – finding clear-cut criteria connected to truth and falsehood and then mechanically applying them. This is not possible with the Quong/Nussbaum concept of 'ethically unreasonable'. As all political concepts, this one is also value-laden, open to interpretation and has grey boundaries. To give a simple example, we already discussed the 'thirty Jewish bankers' conspiracy as clearly stirring racial resentment, which makes it ethically unreasonable. However, consider a set of beliefs claiming that the few largest banks and Israel lobby have an undue influence in US Congress, making it extremely unlikely to achieve effective taxation for the top 1% and to reach a reasonable compromise in the Middle East. In between these (in our view unproblematic) opinions and 'thirty Jewish bankers' conspiracy, there are large grey areas, where it will be difficult if not impossible to ascertain whether one is making a (justified) political commentary or being anti-Semitic. In other words, applying the 'ethical reasonableness' criterion would be far from straightforward.[12]

Nonetheless, such task would certainly not be impossible. Targeting ethically unreasonable conspiracy theories is not that different from targeting other violations of the liberal-democratic beliefs in freedom and equality. We already have functioning laws against hate speech, racism, anti-Semitism, etc. In all these cases, the real-life examples will often be somewhere in the 'grey' areas. Nonetheless, clear violations can still be effectively policed. Media that are found guilty of spreading, say, hate speech, are often successfully regulated and fined by media regulators. We hold that given the gravity of situation and their frightening

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[12] We thank an anonymous referee for this example.

influence on public sphere the clear cases of ethically unreasonable conspiracy theories should be treated similarly.[13]

In fact, there is an important precedent for our recommendation: the criminalisation of Holocaust denial, which is codified in most European countries. Conspiracy theories relativizing the Holocaust are of course numerous, and they began to spread immediately after the Second World War, fuelled by anti-Semitic attitudes that survived despite the horrifying legacy of Nazism. European countries, knowing they were not immune to racist and supremacist views, sought ways to maintain a public consensus on basic liberal-democratic values. That is why they moved to criminalise Holocaust denial – and are more or less successful in doing so.

Such move by the state institutions is, as we argued, fully legitimate. The state can interfere because there is no *right* to share ethically unreasonable views. We agree with Quong that such unreasonable citizen 'can be prevented from exercising … [rights of citizenship] when his aims are explicitly unreasonable – indeed they cease to be rights when he attempts to exercise them in this way' (Quong 2004: 332). Ethically unreasonable views go directly against the very core of respectful social cooperation. A political association built on this core therefore does not protect them.

Of course, the fact that state interference against bad conspiracy theories can be justified does not mean that the state must strictly censor all of them. It means only that people's rights are not violated when the state decides to do so, because ethically unreasonable conspiracy theories are not a part of the reasonable pluralism the state is obliged to protect. Practically speaking, under normal circumstances, the state can limit itself to a very restricted role, for example not giving the proponents of bad conspiracy theories screen time in public broadcasting. However, when a certain conspiracy theory becomes so popular that it undermines the very basis

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[13] We thank a (different) anonymous referee for pressing us to clarify this point.

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of, say, equal respect between citizens, the state can use all the available resources to debunk it and contain its spread, including legal prosecution. Such approach, we stress again, is similar to existing policies against hate speech and racism. While it would be impossible (and also not advisable) to prosecute every racist remark uttered late at night in a pub, clear-enough cases (like a restaurant refusing to serve non-white guests), are an affront to the liberal-democratic belief in freedom and equality and should be punished accordingly. The same goes for weaponizing racial resentment by propagating ethically unreasonable conspiracy theories through social media.

We would like to end this paper with a few notes on education. The current popularity of bad conspiracy theories, together with the spread of 'fake news', often leads to our age being characterised as 'post-factual'[14]. Such a characterisation leads, again, to the issue being framed in epistemological terms. As such, the most typical remedies proposed in the public sphere revolve around media literacy and critical thinking in education (e.g., Swami et al. 2014, Douglas et al. 2016, van Prooijen 2017). The idea is that if people (and especially children) could be taught to work better with the available information, the spread of false theories would end.

While we do not want to undermine the usefulness of medial literacy and critical thinking – far from it – we do claim that their lack constitutes neither the root cause nor the most problematic aspect of the underlying phenomena. The main problem is not that the information people share is often false; the problem is the *kind* of false information that people share. Articles exaggerating the benefits of regular use of the Finnish sauna, falsely summarising the cultural traditions of Kazakhstan, or clearly overestimating the ability of cats and dogs to feel complex emotions are not the biggest social problems at the moment (even though a critical approach to these would clearly benefit the reader, in that she would not develop false beliefs). By way of

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[14] We use the terms 'fake news' and 'post-factual' with some reservations. See Habgood-Coote 2019.

contrast, consider the flurry of 'fake news' and conspiracy theories in the US regarding the 'migrant caravan'. The reason for the popularity of often clearly far-fetched views here is the pre-existing anti-immigrant attitude. In other words, people believe in the dangers posed by the caravan not because they are somehow less media-savvy than people who don't believe in these dangers; the primary reason is that they *want* to believe in the dangers, as it confirms their (ethically unreasonable) worldviews.

Contrary to the received views, we hold that a public-policy response to the rise of 'fake news' and conspiracy theories should focus more on the ethical issues of free and equal citizenship than on epistemic failings and media literacy. In the field of education, this entails civic classes geared towards recognising reciprocity and a sense of justice of the type advocated by Eamonn Callan (1997: 25-28). Such education cannot and should not argue against all specific bad conspiracy theories – this might also prove counterproductive – but should rather offer a generalized, reasonable and tolerant standpoint based on mutual respect. Citizens who understand themselves as free and equal should then be more immune to such conspiracy theories.

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