



# ETHICS OF CONVERSATION AND DISAGREEMENT

Organizers:

Prof. Dr. Martine Prange (Tilburg University, The Netherlands)

Prof. Dr. Manuel Knoll (Turkish-German University, Turkey)

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**18-19 JUNE 2021, ZOOM MEETING**

For registration, please send an e-mail to  
[M.S.Prange@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:M.S.Prange@tilburguniversity.edu) or  
[manuel.knoll@tau.edu.tr](mailto:manuel.knoll@tau.edu.tr)

**FRIDAY 18 June (11:45–20:00 CEST)**

**11:45: 12:00**

Opening of the workshop (Prange & Knoll)

**12:00–12:40**

Robin Celikates (FU Berlin): 'Political Disagreement and the Ideology of Civility'

**12:40–13:20**

Andrei Bespalov (University of Warwick): 'Equal Respect and the Fallibilism of Public Reason'

**13:30–14:10**

Giacomo Figà Talamanca (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen) and Selene Arfini (University of Pavia): 'Rethinking Filter Bubbles: Epistemic Discomfort in the Face of Contrary Views'

**14:10–14:50**

Christopher Roser (Humboldt University Berlin): 'Argumentative Injustice and Epistemic Blame'

**14:50–16:00: Lunch Break**

**16:00–16:40**

Michael P. Lynch (University of Connecticut): 'Political Disagreement, Arrogance and The Pursuit of Truth'

**16:40–17:20**

Manuel Knoll (Turkish-German University Istanbul): 'Deep Disagreements on Values, Justice and Morals: The Need for an Ethics of Disagreement'

**17:40–18:20**

Diego Machuca (CONICET), 'Deep Religious Disagreement and Toleration'

**18:20–19:00**

Claire Elizabeth Kirwin (Clemson University), 'Moral Disagreement and Getting Something Right'

**19:00–20:00**

Drinks + Roundtable

**SATURDAY 19 June (11:45–20:00 CEST)**

**11:45–12:00**

Opening of the workshop (Prange & Knoll)

**12:00–12:40**

Odile Heynders (Tilburg University), 'Four Seasons in a New World: Ali Smith's Creative Intervention'

**12:40–13:20**

Simon Truwant (KU Leuven), 'Truth Pluralism and the Use of Silence in Public Debates'

**13:30–14:10**

Daniele Lorenzini (University of Warwick), 'Words and Lives: Remarks on Perlocutionary Responsibility and the Ethics of Conversation'

**14:10–14:50**

Raphael Rusitzka (Witten/Herdecke University), 'Outlining an Ethics of Listening Acts'

**14:50–16:00: Lunch Break**

**16:00–16:40**

Martine Prange (Tilburg University), 'Music and the Public Sphere: Towards and Ethics and Aesthetics of Listening'

**16:40–17:20**

Emile Bojesen (University of Winchester) and Naomi Waltham-Smith (University of Warwick), 'The Limits of Conversation–Listening Overboard'

**17:40–18:20**

Folke Tersman (Uppsala University), 'Agreement and Disagreement: Two Sides of the Same Coin?'

**18:20–19:00**

Marc Andree Weber (Mannheim University), 'Other Peoples' Beliefs and When They Should be Taken Seriously'

**19:00–20:00**

Drinks + Roundtable



Initial Online Workshop

## **ETHICS OF CONVERSATION AND DISAGREEMENT**

18-19 JUNE 2021, on ZOOM

Organizers:

Prof. Dr. Martine Prange (Tilburg University, The Netherlands)

[M.S.Prange@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:M.S.Prange@tilburguniversity.edu)

Prof. Dr. Manuel Knoll (Turkish-German University, Turkey)

[manuel.knoll@tau.edu.tr](mailto:manuel.knoll@tau.edu.tr)

**FRIDAY 18 June (11:45-20:00 CEST)**

**Zoomlink:**

<https://tilburguniversity.zoom.us/j/94017020539?pwd=bDhPcmJ2QWxESzg0ZnZOM1M1T20vQT09>

Meeting ID: 940 1702 0539

Passcode: 6411745469

**11:45: Opening of the workshop (Prange & Knoll)**

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**Drinks + Roundtable**

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**Zoomlink:**

<https://tilburguniversity.zoom.us/j/92281949395?pwd=MmthaEN2WUtybjkzajEzM3RQWFV1UT09>

Meeting ID: 922 8194 9395

Passcode: 1215227432

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## **ABSTRACTS**

*Andrei Bespalov (University of Warwick)*

### *EQUAL RESPECT AND THE FALLIBILISM OF PUBLIC REASON*

Rawlsian political liberals hold that, in order to show respect for one another as free and equal co-legislators, citizens should make political decisions only on the grounds of reasons that all may reasonably be expected to accept. The standard interpretation of this Rawlsian public justification principle (PJP) requires that under the conditions of deep ideological disagreement citizens restrain themselves from publicly defending and opposing legal provisions on the grounds of reasons derived directly from comprehensive doctrines of the good.

Opponents of justificatory restraint argue that it is burdensome to individuals' moral integrity and unnecessary for maintaining equal respect. On this view, all kinds of justificatory reasons are permissible, if citizens take upon themselves the duty to be responsive to one another's arguments, treating even their own fundamental commitments as open to scrutiny.

I concede that the standard Rawlsian PJP struggles to vindicate justificatory restraint. Yet, I contend that once the distinction between public and non-public reasons is drawn with more clarity, justificatory restraint as a means of maintaining equal respect becomes preferable to the duty of responsiveness.

I show that, although all justificatory reasons can in principle be subject to criticism, not all of them can be subject to criticism that deserves to be called reasonable – i.e., the kind of criticism that recognizes the burdens of judgment and helps to maintain fair terms of cooperation. In particular, justificatory reasons based on the acceptance or rejection of final values, or ends-in-themselves, cannot be subject to reasonable criticism. Due to the incommensurability of final values, reasons that appeal to such things as "God's grace," "the bright future of communism," "the values of our nation (culture, civilization)" etc. function as "conversation stoppers." Justification of legal provisions on the grounds of such reasons amounts to making contestable, yet structurally non-negotiable claims on fellow citizens, which is at odds with showing respect for them as free and equal co-legislators.

Accordingly, *I reformulate PJP in fallibilistic terms*: Citizens should make political decisions only on the grounds of reasons that can be subject to reasonable criticism. The fallibilistic PJP requires that citizens restrain themselves from publicly supporting and opposing legal provisions on the grounds of reasons that draw on final values.

I conclude by discussing two major advantages of the fallibilistic PJP over the duty of responsiveness. Firstly, given that the duty of responsiveness admits all kinds of arguments in democratic deliberation, it can only serve as a compensatory measure for allowing disrespectful non-negotiable claims. The fallibilistic PJP does not allow such claims in the first place. Secondly, the fallibilistic PJP is burdensome only to those citizens who wish to enforce their non-negotiable final values by the coercive power of the state. In contrast, given that the duty of responsiveness forbids citizens from refusing to subject their final values to public scrutiny, it is burdensome to all citizens, including those of them who would prefer to avoid political debates that are unreasonable and divisive.

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*Emile Bojesen (Winchester) and Naomi Waltham-Smith (University of Warwick)*

### *THE LIMITS OF CONVERSATION–LISTENING OVERBOARD*

As rich democracies continue to reel from a collapse in the traditional mechanisms and institutions of political mediation, conversation and listening are promoted as instruments for securing democratic legitimacy, promoting public trust, and reducing political polarization. Amid anxieties about "cancel culture," disinformation campaigns, and conspiracy theories, conversation and

listening are seen as ways to manage, resolve, render productive, even to rationalize debate and disagreement with an emphasis if not on empathy, then on the capacity for recognition, understanding, and toleration of difference in deliberative democracy. We consider and challenge such assumptions from the perspective of deconstructionist notions of conversation, responsibility, and listening, in particular Blanchot's notion of conversation in *L'Entretien infini* as plural speech, which liberates conversations from the ends of consensus, synthesis, progress, or conciliation, and from both dialectical and dialogic forms of resolution.

In theories of deliberative democracy and restorative justice, as well as in the situations such as complex peace processes or other challenging political negotiations, there is typically a presumption in favour of *more* conversation. When the conversation *stops*—that's the sign of an irretrievable impasse or breakdown. From a Derridean perspective, the inherent tendency of conversation to exhaust and grind itself to a halt, not because of an external obstacle but because the more conversation flows, the more it necessarily *over-flows* (*déborderer*) the limits (*bords*) of (the) conversation and turns into something else. We thus make the counterintuitive argument that going overboard (*débordé*) with conversation risks triggering the very things that are thought to block conversation, such as resolute dissent, disobedience, and even violence (in French the skirmishes that spin off from an organized demonstration are called *débordements*). In this way a limitless faith in conversation (especially when conceived of as dialogue) can undermine the very democratic legitimacy it often seeks to secure. This makes sense if we consider that politicians' listening exercises are often last-ditch attempts to restore public confidence and frequently look like weakness rather than a show of strength.

Blanchot's plural speech takes the risk of going beyond any legitimation, such that it is necessarily haunted by a certain spectrality, opening towards "the absolutely other that can never be reduced to the same or to take a place in the whole." With a more explicitly political sense Derrida at the end of *Spectres de Marx*, having earlier discussed the unlimited disagreement of a secret, heretical council (*concialibule*), maintains that one cannot have a conversation with a ghost, only the more delimited *entretien*, that would give speech back to the spectral other, even the other that haunts the speech coming out of our own mouths, without appropriating and incorporating it into our own position. This paper puts Blanchot and Derrida in (irreconcilable) conversation. If plural speech maintains difference rather than bringing about its reconciliation, militating against coercion or violently opposed monologues, Derrida's notion of the infinite highlights how justice might also demand the decision to end the conversation. Together they imply ethical dispositions quite contrary to those present in the dominant logic of conversation.

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*Robin Celikates (Free University Berlin)*

#### *POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT AND THE IDEOLOGY OF CIVILITY*

'Civility' has always been an ideological weapon, a stick with which the moral majority beats unruly subjects into conformity, attempts to control protest by dividing it into good and bad, and justifies the silencing of dissent especially by minorities. Current discussions about the ongoing 'incivility crisis' tend to neglect this asymmetry in how the line between the civil and the uncivil is drawn. In my talk I will address the ideological potential of civility discourse and show that how and where the line is drawn is never a purely theoretical or conceptual matter but part of essentially political struggles. How these struggles unfold concretely has eminently practical implications for how dissent and protest are normatively assessed, policed, embraced, co-opted or repressed. At the same time, this critical perspective leaves us with the challenge of looking for a more emancipatory, and capacious, understanding of the 'civil' that can identify and support forms of counter-civility 'from below' that have arisen in response to forms of incivility 'from above'.

Odile Heynders (Tilburg University)

#### FOUR SEASONS IN A NEW WORLD: ALI SMITH'S CREATIVE INTERVENTION

In the context of debates on how democracies function in a digital, mediatized and global context and how dis/agreement is organized, this contribution asks if (and how) the literary novel can be effective in today's public spheres. What role is there for fiction authors and artists in the neoliberal world in which we live, absorbed by commercial social media and attention attracting technological devices, and in which we are confronted with an "an endemic desire for realism" (Lyotard 1979). Drawing on Rancière's *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010) and the idea of art's capacity of resistance, the four seasons novels (2016-2020) by British author Ali Smith will be analyzed and discussed. Rancière introduces dissensus as new aesthetic regime, a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it. The connection between art and politics has to be cast in terms of dissensus. Smith's novels present politics and art in connection, by interweaving reality and fiction, historical figures and invented characters, art objects and political deception. On the one hand the novels evoke factual political events: *Autumn* (2016) relates to the Brexit referendum, *Winter* (2017) to protests against a nuclear plant, *Spring* (2019) to the UK detainee scandal, and *Summer* (2020) to the corona crisis. On the other hand, the novels present art works - connected to women artists such as Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean and Lorenza Mazzetti - as invitations to dialogue. The main argument is that Smith creates an opening in fiction to artistic perception and political agreement while imagining timely controversies in British society.

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Claire Kerwin (Clemson University)

#### MORAL DISAGREEMENT AND GETTING SOMETHING RIGHT

Why is it that moral or evaluative disagreement seems so especially intractable—why is it so difficult to argue others round to our own evaluative point of view? And how can we make progress in the face of such disagreement?

It is a central dictum of philosophical discussions of evaluative disagreement that if we suppose that there is such a thing as evaluative *reality*—something about which these people are really in disagreement—then at least one of the parties to the disagreement must be wrong. I do not think that this claim, as it stands, is false. However, what I shall try to show in this paper is that it misleads by under-describing what is typically going on in evaluative disagreement. There is, I shall argue, much more to be said here, such that the fact that at least one party must be wrong may well turn out to be one of the less interesting features of the interaction. Developing a richer picture of evaluative disagreement will both help us to understand the philosophical source of the distinctive intractability of such disagreement, as well as opening up new practical avenues for moving forwards and finding resolution.

I begin from a broad pluralism about value: there are lots of different *kinds* of value in the world. I then suggest we understand people's relationships to these different kinds of value on the model of *skills* or *expertise*: different people have different kinds and degrees of abilities when it comes to understanding these different values. And these abilities affect what they are able to see when they look out at the world of value.

Given such a model, we can understand the evaluative positions people take in debate to result from the particular areas of value-expertise that they happen to possess. Suppose a painter, 'Gauguin,' is debating with a friend whether he ought to leave his family to pursue his artistic calling.<sup>1</sup> Gauguin's conviction that this is what he ought to do plausibly reflects the special intimacy that he has with the particular value involved in the creation of great art; his friend's disagreement, on the other hand, may stem from *their* special expertise in the values involved in nurturing one's familial relationships. If we suppose that there is a 'right answer' here, at least one of them must have gotten

that answer wrong. But now we need not say *merely* that they are wrong. For their wrongness stems from some genuine (even if imperfect or distorted) grasp that they have of something that is, itself, genuinely valuable. There is something, that is, that each is on to; something that each have gotten right.

How does this help us, philosophically and practically? First, it allows us to make sense of evaluative disagreement's peculiar intractability, and its resistance to resolution through argument. It is no surprise that argument may not be enough to resolve disagreement, for the development of expertise in relation to some area of value is much harder-won than this: it requires extended practice and engagement with the relevant part of evaluative reality. This suggests alternative modes of moving forward in cases of disagreement: the task will be for each of us to help initiate the other into the particular realm of value-expertise that we possess, and to allow ourselves to be similarly guided by them in turn.

Finally, the realization that our opponent is likely on to some genuine source of value can encourage us to turn our attention away from the particular locus of disagreement and towards the broader context within which it is situated: instead of continuing to argue about whether it is right to pursue one's artistic calling at the expense of one's family ties, we are given impetus to turn a critical eye to the social structures that tend to render these two forms of value incompatible.

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*Manuel Knoll (German-Turkish University, Istanbul)*

*DEEP DISAGREEMENTS ON VALUES, JUSTICE, AND MORALS: THE NEED FOR AN ETHICS OF DISAGREEMENT*

This presentation starts out with several arguments for the *thesis of deep disagreements*, according to which widespread and deep disagreements on values, justice, and moral issues exist that are resistant to rational solution. Deep disagreements are disagreements in good faith that cannot be resolved through the use of reasons and arguments (cf. Fogelin 2005, p. 8, 11). In a second step the talk asks about the attitudes, behaviors, and actions we should take towards the people we disagree with. This presentation claims that in order to come to terms with deep disagreements we need to develop an *ethics of disagreement*. The reality that theoretical disagreements often turn into practical conflicts is a major justification for why such an ethics is necessary. This paper outlines an ethics of deep disagreement that is primarily conceived of as a form of virtue ethics. Such an ethics asks opposing parties in moral and intellectual conflicts to acknowledge that (a) deep disagreements exist, (b) opposing positions should be recognized as worthy of respect, and that (c) one should seek dialogue and mutual understanding. This ethical approach conceives of toleration as a moral and political virtue and presents an argument for toleration based on deep disagreements.

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*Daniele Lorenzini (University of Warwick)*

*WORDS AND LIVES: REMARKS ON PERLOCUTIONARY RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ETHICS OF CONVERSATION*

In this paper, I defend the relevance of the notion of the perlocutionary for a richer account of an ethics of conversation. I first offer an original characterization of J.L. Austin's distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary derived from the degree of predictability and stability of their respective effects. I then argue that, in order to grasp the specificity of the perlocutionary, one must focus, not on isolate speech acts, but on the total speech situation, which I define as *conversation*. Next, building on Stanley Cavell, I show that a conceptual distinction between recognition and acknowledgment is paramount to investigate the domain of the perlocutionary, specifically in its moral dimensions. Lastly, I elaborate the notion of *perlocutionary responsibility*, which I define as a

specific form of moral responsibility for the consequences of utterances that are not (entirely) predictable -- one that is crucial to consider when it comes to offering an account of an ethics of conversation.

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*Michael Lynch (University of Connecticut)*

*POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT, ARROGANCE AND TRUTH*

Truth is typically thought to have particular value for democracies. In this talk, I'll briefly explore the nature of that value, and then discuss two threats to it: The problem of epistemic disagreement and the problem of arrogant ideologies. The former consists in disagreement over which methods and sources are reliable for pursuing the truth; the latter is the threat posed by ideologies that convince their followers that they have nothing to learn from others because they already know the truth, and hence have no reason to engage in serious inquiry or the pursuit of evidence.

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*Diego Machuca (CONICET)*

*DEEP RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT AND TOLERATION*

Roughly put, deep or fundamental disagreements are disagreements that cannot be rationally resolved by appealing to arguments that can be recognized as sound or persuasive by all the disagreeing parties. The reason is that the disagreeing parties do not fully share the same conceptual frameworks, worldviews, or forms of life. What doxastic and moral attitudes should one adopt when involved in that kind of disagreement? By focusing on deep disagreements over religious matters, I consider whether the disagreeing parties are rationally and/or morally required to suspend judgment and to be tolerant of the views of their dissenters.

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*Martine Prange (Tilburg University)*

*THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE BY WAY OF THE AESTHETIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC: NIETZSCHE ON THE ART AND VALUE OF LISTENING*

In my presentation, I argue with Nietzsche that the art of listening is essential for a much-needed transformation of the public sphere. I do so in the context of the research Odile Heynders and I newly started and which seeks to develop an *ethics of listening* to help amend current distortions of the public debate in the context of 'post-truth' and 'cancel culture'. Our key research question is, '*What is listening and how can listening be made effective for the public debate in times of post-truth and 'cancel culture'?*' In order to develop this ethics of listening, we explore philosophical theories on the art, value, and meaning of listening, attention, and conversation and further study artistic and spiritual practices of listening to the inner self, God, silence, music, nature, other people, and even animals.

The current investigation into Nietzsche's ideas on listening is my first contribution to this wider research. I explore the transformative powers of (Wagner's) music, as analyzed by Nietzsche in his book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). I discuss, first, the fact that Nietzsche presents his book as 'a dialogue with Wagner' and 'the grave problem for Germany' Nietzsche and Wagner in joint action seek to address. Second, I examine Nietzsche's interpretation of *Tristan and Isolde* and, third, I analyze Nietzsche's concept of 'aesthetic public'.

From this I conclude that the art of listening is essential if we are to adopt an aesthetic, affirmative view of life, according to Nietzsche, and that we need this view of life to rejuvenate, 'wake up' or 'bring back' the public 'to life'. Such a 'wake-up call' is necessary, on Nietzsche's view, because

the public has been falsely indoctrinated with the idea that political power *is* cultural power. To counter this 'misinformation' and redirect the gaze of the public in the right direction of art and truth as pillars of culture, is the task of music. *Listening to Tristan and Isolde* will transform the public into an 'aesthetic' public, which is the way forward to what Nietzsche calls a 'healthy' culture and public sphere.

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*Christopher Rosen (Humboldt University)*

#### *ARGUMENTATIVE INJUSTICE AND EPISTEMIC BLAME*

We blame others not just for their morally objectionable action, but also for their epistemically flawed beliefs and epistemic conduct. This phenomenon is especially apparent in conversations. Suppose one person claims in a conversation with a second person that Covid 19 is not worse than the flue. As the second person points out her rational flaws and presents counterarguments and objections, the first person is entirely unresponsive. Here, the second person might at some point start reproaching the first person. She might say in an emotional tone: "Stop believing this! You have no evidence for it." or "That is no answer to my objection at all! You are begging the question." This is a case of epistemic blame. In my paper, I provide an account of this phenomenon. I argue that epistemic blame is a response to a felt wrong - the wrong of an argumentative injustice. This wrong occurs when a person epistemic conduct reflects an undue lack of respect and regard of others as epistemically rational subjects, subjects that are equally able to assess and follow reasons.

Recent accounts of epistemic blame have mainly concentrated on solving the traditional problem that beliefs are not blameworthy because they are not under our voluntary control. I argue that there is a further crucial problem for epistemic blame: Epistemic flawed belief seems to primarily harm the believer herself and not others. Epistemic blame, thus, seems to stand in tension with the liberal principle that we can only amend and blame people for conduct that harm or risk harming other (cf. Mill). Following this idea, it seems that the adequate response to a person's epistemically flawed belief is pity or compassion, not blame. Epistemic blame would seem to be an illiberal encroachment and reflect a lack of compassion.

I argue that we can solve this problem if we accept that flawed belief can wrong others. This is not only the case for racists beliefs, as has recently been argued by, e.g., Basu (2019), but also mora generally for grossly epistemically flawed beliefs. To account for this claim, I rely on Scanlon's contractualist approach to wronging. According to this approach, one person (A) wrongs another person (B) iff. A's action reflects a lack of respect of B as a rational being, capable of following practical reasons. In this case, B is wronged, even if she does not necessarily suffer a harm. I argue that a similar kind of wrong occurs also in our epistemic relationships, especially in conversations. This is the case if a person's belief-formation or epistemic conduct reflect a lack of respect of the other person as epistemic subject, which is capable of understanding and following epistemic reasons. Instances of this wronging can be found in cases of testimonial and hermeneutic injustice (Fricker (2007)). But it also appears if one person grossly disregards another person's objections or demands for justification. Others can then aptly respond to such disregard with blame and reproach.

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*Raphael Rusitzka (Witten/Herdecke University)*

#### *OUTLINING AN ETHICS OF LISTENING ACTS*

In the first part of my presentation, I will point out why listening has remained undertheorized in philosophical and other theories of communication, and why it is important to reconsider and enrich listening theory. Listening is an activity, not a passive intake of presented information.

Depending on a listener's concrete presence within acts of communication, the contents and the performative modalities of such acts can vary significantly. The listener's position within

communicative practices adds something essential yet difficult to describe. Appropriate listening is the minimally necessary success condition of uptake in speech acts. The power to stop listening is the power to cancel any flow of communication completely, as already noted by Plato (Republic, 327c-328) where he concedes that no conversational tactic, no feat of rhetoric whatever, can overcome a refusal to listen.

To listen can mean different things depending on which kinds of listening acts one performs. To name a few, listening is therapeutic (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952); listening is a performative act (McRae 2020); listening dignifies (Hicks, 2011); being listened to is a human necessity; (Koskinen & Lindström 2013), and a systemic refusal to listen is a form of oppression. Listening acts can differ eminently in the intensity of the presence of both the listening actor and the corresponding actors who intend to address particular listeners or audiences of listeners communicatively. Consequently, such self-presence combinations can differ on a spectrum on which, on one end, the listener's self is absolutely dominant and concerned only with her or his own internal affects, and on the other end, the listener is totally attuned to the message that the listener metabolizes with utmost attention. In my presentation, I will critically discuss Andrew Dobson's empirically and normatively interesting conceptual distinctions of "cathapatic", "apothatic", and "compassionate" forms of listening.

Finally, I will discuss various relations that hold between acts of listening, dis/agreement, and empathy. I will argue that listening during disagreement might be ethically appropriate until the listener is able to reconstruct the speaker's point of view fully, to the speaker's satisfaction. Moreover, I will argue that listening within communication driven by disagreement is likely to be misconstrued as tacitly consenting. With regard to empathy, I will argue that empathy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient basis for conversation and communication driven by disagreement, whereas appropriate listening acts are a necessary though not sufficient basis. This basis offers prospects for an ethically relevant characterization of listening acts.

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*Giacomo Figà Talamanca (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)*

*Selene Arfini (University of Pavia)*

#### *RETHINKING THE FILTER BUBBLE: EPISTEMIC DISCOMFORT IN THE FACE OF CONTRARY VIEWS*

It is no secret that social media radically transformed political debate - and, many believe, not for the better. One of the most notorious concerns is the establishment of "filter bubbles", by which the preference algorithms of digital platforms would provide increasingly personalized information for each user. This would cause users being excluded from other standpoints; the creation of "echo chambers"; and, ultimately, a polarized climate and a lack of the common ground among citizens, which is fundamental for democratic societies. However, a wide amount of empirical research shows that social media users do in fact engage with other viewpoints while online. Furthermore, there are fears that blaming social media and digital technologies to explain unexpected political developments - such as the rise of populist parties in many parts of the world - to be more of an explanatory scapegoat than a proper causal relation.

We propose that polarization due to online information consumption is caused not by algorithmic embublement, but by negative epistemic feelings experienced by social media users. We will ground our argument on a group of philosophical theories that examine some structural limitations of cognitive agents: namely, how agents are incapable of distinguishing, from the first-person perspective, what they know and what they believe they know, and tend to underestimate the extent of their ignorance. We individuate what we call epistemic discomfort as the feeling cognitive agents experience when confronted with evidence or viewpoints that would prove them ignorant, without necessarily causing doubt to arise. Rather, when experiencing epistemic discomfort an agent may be more inclined to dismiss or downplay the contrary evidence and reinforce her own previous belief.

We argue that the filter bubble should not be understood as a mere result of algorithmic activity, but rather as a result of digital platforms users experiencing epistemic discomfort while consuming information online. Following empirical evidence on the matter, we point out that Internet users encounter (often accidentally) upon opinions and viewpoints that contradict theirs. Such viewpoints are experienced as unmediated, decontextualized and unjustified, due to the fact that these platforms are entirely constituted of information and are characterized by a general ambiguity regarding epistemic and moral authority, as well as motivations. This way of experiencing contrary perspectives, we argue, can strengthen their own beliefs and prompt them to stick to them instead of being open-minded towards other standpoints. This (mis)management of epistemic discomfort experienced online can establish a causal link between information consumption on social media on the one hand, and polarization and cognitive rigidity on the other.

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*Folke Tersman (Uppsala University)*

#### *DISAGREEMENT AND AGREEMENT: SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?*

In many philosophical debates about how one should respond to or which conclusions one should draw from, disagreement the contrastive phenomenon of agreement is given much less attention. Perhaps the explanation is that it is believed that a plausible account of disagreement can easily be extended to answer the questions raised by agreement as well. My aim is to examine that belief and to present some reasons for doubting it.

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*Simon Truwant (Catholic University Leuven)*

#### *TRUTH PLURALISM AND THE USE OF SILENCE IN PUBLIC DEBATES*

The idea that we nowadays live in a 'post-truth society' means, among other things, that many ongoing public debates are not simply about what is true, but about what counts as truth and who gets to decide this (and who does not). The very existence of such debates further implies that, rather than having abandoned the truth, we actually maintain multiple conceptions of truth in our public, as well as our personal, lives. This 'truth pluralism' entails that, depending on context and motivation, we shift between truth as correct facts, as a coherent worldview, as performative acts, or as lived truth. For example, in a debate about criminality we invoke meaningful arguments that are based on crime statistics, a conservative or progressive worldview, feasible policies, *and* fear or hope about a changing society. I thus argue that an ethics of conversation, be it of truly public conversations or of private conversations about public matters, must disentangle these diverse notions of truth. This is however only half the story. The idea that we nowadays live in a 'post-truth society' still makes sense insofar as our public debates very often violate the standards and demarcations of all of these conceptions of truth, be it by sheer mistake, in bad faith, or deliberately for political or economic gains. This leads to multiple forms of untruthfulness that derail public debates: bullshit (fake news, trolling), blended, incoherent discourses (technocracy, political myth), spectacle (irony, dog-whistling), and the cult of authenticity (identity politics). I therefore further argue that an ethics of conversation and disagreement must also identify and critique these various types of untruthfulness or expressions of post-truth. Building on this 'taxonomy of post-truth', on the occasion of this workshop I wish to explore two questions. Which kinds or uses of silence (withholding information, silencing, leaving room for others to speak, ignoring framing) can be considered un/truthful and hence harmful or constructive to the public debate? How can this theoretical framework be translated into a praxis of ethical conversation, a praxis that includes those who don't care about the theoretical framework - that is, what kind of listening is needed to hear someone else's truthfulness in a post-truth society?

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Marc Andree Weber (Mannheim University)

*OTHER PEOPLE'S BELIEFS AND WHEN THEY SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY*

In my talk, I will argue that insights from the debate on peer disagreement suggest that whether or not a position is or could be regarded as scientifically proven is crucial for the way we should organize our public and private conversations concerning that position. More specifically, it is crucial for what views we are allowed to believe, what views we are obliged to consider, and what views publication organs might even be required to suppress.

Roughly, one's epistemic peers concerning a specific subject matter are those who are as competent and well-informed concerning that subject matter as oneself. Conciliatory views hold that one should, whenever one disagrees with an epistemic peer about some subject matter, revise one's original belief concerning that subject matter towards the belief of one's peer. An important special case is the Equal Weight View, which holds that one should give the opinions of one's epistemic peers the same weight that one gives one's own. It is usually taken for granted that with regard to some kinds of disagreement, the Equal Weight View is correct, whereas with regard to other kinds of disagreement, all conciliatory views are wrong. Examples of the former kind are disagreements in which there is an easy way of checking who has made a mistake. For instance, if two people who have been equally good in the past at doing calculations in their heads find out that on one occasion, they have formed different beliefs concerning the correct calculation result, then each of them should become agnostic about the correct result until they check who has been wrong. Proponents of conciliatory views argue that the fact that there is an easy way of checking is inessential here, and that we should treat disagreements in philosophy, science, politics, and similar domains in the same fashion. But even they admit that conciliatory views are wrong with regard to extreme cases of disagreement, in which some presumed peer discloses a belief in some utterly preposterous position, such as that  $2+2=5$ .

A problem that has not yet been adequately addressed in the debate is that of drawing a non-arbitrary borderline between extreme and non-extreme cases of disagreement. I argue that this borderline should be drawn along the line that separates the reasonable from the non-reasonable, and that there is, in our contemporary societies, exactly one established dividing line between what can and what cannot be reasonably held. This line is drawn with regard to what is, or could be regarded as, scientifically proven. This thesis has remarkable implications, namely that disagreements do never require us to revise positions that we justifiably take to be scientifically proven, and that there is no epistemic point in considering or distributing scientifically refuted views.

I will discuss several objections against the prominent role in believing and asserting that I assign to the scientifically proven: the objections that 'scientifically proven' is a highly vague term, that there often is disagreement about what is scientifically proven, and, most importantly, that many disagreements do not have a scientific dimension, so that it seems as if recourse to scientific proofs can only govern a small part within the wide field of disagreements. My replies to these objections will show how the concept scientifically proven should guide us in thinking and conversing.

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