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Conspiracy Theories as Superstition: Today's Mirror Image in Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus

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Abstract: The contention in this paper is that the theological-political disputes Spinoza was concerned with 350 years ago are similar to the conspiratorial disputes we experience today. The world in Spinoza's Tractatus theologico-politicus, a political intervention in his time, serves as a "mirror image", that is to say, it deals with the same problem we face today albeit in a different mode. Understanding our contemporary condition under the auspices of a Spinozist perspective, problems in countermeasures to the conspiratorial disputes come to light. Scholarly work and practice focus on the epistemological dimension of conspiracy theories, tying in the extent to which they are problematic to the degree in which they deal in untruth. However, the lesson from Spinoza's analysis of the theological-political disputes is that such theories do not deal in truth, but, in affect, they do not spring from a lack of education but a lack of certainty. The work of Spinoza opens up a different approach, and if our aim is like that of the TTP, to defend political life against the threat of civil war, such a different approach is in order.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; political affect; superstition; Spinoza; tractatus theologico-politicus



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For I have shown that Scripture does not teach things through their proximate causes, but only relates them in that order and with those phrases with which it can most effectively move people (especially, ordinary people) to devotion. For this reason it speaks quite improperly concerning God and things, because its concern is not to convince people's reason, but to affect and fill their fantasy and imagination. (Benedictus de Spinoza, TTP, ch.6, G iii, p. 91)

1. Introduction

The year 2020 was the anniversary of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (TTP), a major work by Benedictus de Spinoza. However, for most of the last 350 years, it faded from memory [1]. Due to the efforts of scholars, such as Jonathan Israel, Etienne Balibar, Antonio Negri, and others, this neglect is now changing [2–4]. Yet, it remains a strange book, or an "anomaly", to borrow Negri's term. The peculiar title of the treatise gives us the first hint of its two-fold structure, which would strike a modern reader of our secular age. The first part deals with religion and superstition, which are, unlike in the main currents of the Enlightenment, not differentiated in terms of prejudice or blinded intellect. Both religion and superstition, as Spinoza points out throughout the TTP, stem from the imagination; there is no distinction there. In the second part, Spinoza translates this insight into the political domain. He considers here not just what we might call a classical liberal version of this conclusion, that reasoning be free from political consequences (his much-debated notion of the "freedom to philosophize"), but he also paradoxically proposes what many consider a harsh insight: in matters of religion, the state is the supreme power, which will and should limit the social freedom of the individual.

My contention is that the theological-political disputes that Spinoza was concerned with in his time are similar to the conspiratorial disputes we experience today. There is a "mirror image", that is to say, they are dealing with the same problem in a different

mode [5]. Here, I take a cue from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. When he spent some time in Bamberg as a newspaper editor, he noted that, in modernity, the reading of a newspaper replaced the ritualistic prayer of reading the Bible in the morning¹ [6]. Hegel observed a shift in how humans oriented themselves in the world. Although the world in the Bible and the world in the newspaper are very different—the Bible displays a stable one and the newspaper shows a constantly changing one—they are equivalent in the citizen's life, to orient one's attitude toward the world, in the words of Hegel. They structure the imagination beyond intellectual control, priming our affective responses to ourselves, each other, and our surroundings.

We can extrapolate this idea beyond Hegel's time. It is no novelty to consider the newspapers, which once thrust the Bible off of this pedestal, to be themselves now succeeded by yet another more rapidly changing and interactive source of news: social media. Especially new social media outlets, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and so on. A decidedly different type of medium has thereby emerged as the centerpiece of social orientation. One's place in the world is no longer determined by a single or a handful of outlets, such as in the times of hegemonic newspapers, but by a disorganized plenitude of often contradicting sources. More importantly, we now actively contribute to this place in the world by liking, reacting, upvoting, and so on. Unmistakably, for many people in the world, social media is the primary fashion to understand the world and their place in it, rather than Scripture. With the emergence of these platforms came the popularization of a new type of conspiracy theories, what political scientists Rosenblum and Muirhead call, in the American context: "the new conspiracism" [7]. Particularly in the year 2020, these theories broke out from the American context and are now widespread and firmly established in Western Europe and the rest of the world. The emblematic conspiracy theory of this new conspiracism is Qanon. The popularization of these kinds of theories—which are marked by contradiction and incoherence [8], and we will come back to their status as theory as well—prompted responses aiming to counter them, not just in the United States but in the European Union as well. Two important means in this battle are fact-checking and gatekeeping. While such means are supported by certain existing scholarly work on conspiracy theories, I argue that from a Spinozist perspective, by understanding conspiracy theories as superstition, these suggestions appear to be problematic. Both fact-checking and gatekeeping are ultimately aimed at solving a knowledge deficiency, to let the right kind of knowledge reach as many people as possible. Yet, they fail to connect to the affectual operations of these conspiracy theories, nor do they address the grounds from which they spring: uncertainty.

In this article commemorating Spinoza's TTP, I aim to show its relevance today in helping us understand the appeal of these conspiracy theories and to approach conspiracy theories philosophically, and more specifically within the framework of Spinozist anthropology. First, through an exposition of Spinoza's TTP, as an intervention primarily concerned with the relation between politics and theology. Second, by examining the emergence of a specific kind of conspiracy theory, which a significant portion of the contemporary population of the (Western) world is inclined to obey, even if many others consider them outlandish superstitions. Finally, to understand and assess the current difficulty in combatting them while at the same time opening up a different approach not directly concerned with epistemologically policing conspiracy claims. If our aim is like that of the TTP, to defend political life against the threat of civil war, such a different approach is in order.

2. Theology and Politics in the TTP

It is useful to establish the TTP's backdrop, before I treat Spinoza's understanding of superstition. Political and religious life in the United Provinces was intermingled from its

¹ The full quote, translated in English, is as follows: "Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer. One orients one's attitude toward the world either by God or by what the world is. The former gives as much security as the latter, in that one knows how one stands

inception, and social conflict was endemic [9,10]. In the General Union of 1576, all Dutch provinces became united in their resistance against their legitimate Lord, the Roman-Catholic Spanish king, Philip II. In 1581, in the famous *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Act of Abjuration), they formally renounced Philip II as their sovereign. Yet, with the establishment of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces, the religiously fueled political disputes were far from over. The war for independence against the Spanish Empire went on well into Spinoza's life. It was only with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that the Republic was definitively recognized, and the Dutch revolt finally came to an end. This "external war" was part of the wider European struggle between Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism in its different forms. Additionally, while it was internalized in the United Provinces, there were struggles even within the Reformed denomination.

The most noteworthy was between the theologians Arminius, who came to be supported by the leaders of the province of Holland, and Gomarus, who was supported by the other provinces. Spinoza briefly mentions this at the end of the TTP as "the religious controversy between the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants (. . .) stirred up by the Politicians and the Estates of the provinces" [11] (ch.20, G iii, p. 246; p. 352). The conflict was settled through the Synod of Dort, which took place from 1618 to 1619, convened by the Estates general. It established the official doctrine of the Public Church. Dissenters were arrested and either locked up, such as Hugo Grotius, or sentenced to death, such as politician Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Land's Advocate of Holland, by far the most powerful province of the Union. For Spinoza, this controversy serves as a warning, noting that:

In the end, it degenerated into a schism, and many examples made it manifest that laws passed to settle Religious controversies aggravate people more than they correct them, some people take unlimited license from them, and moreover, schisms don't come from a great zeal for truth (a source of gentleness and consideration for others) but an overwhelming desire for control [11] (Ch.20 G iii, p. 246; p. 352)

As an intervention in the political and religious life in the United Provinces, Spinoza tried to formulate a response to such disputes through the TTP. The point of his exercise is not to do away with religious life tout court but to interpret its role in teaching social morality, which consists of "obedience and charity" and to give all citizens a "freedom to philosophize"—that is freedom of (religious) imagination—which is essential to social stability. Spinoza notes that this freedom "cannot be taken away without great danger to the peace and great harm to the whole Republic" [11] (Preface G iii, p. 10; p. 74).

Within that process, there is a complex role for imagination. Spinoza argues that no prophet "has received God's revelations without the aid of the imagination, i.e., without the aid of words or images"—only Jesus Christ could directly access God's revelations [11] (ch.1 G iii, p. 21; p. 85). He does not offer a full-fledged theory of imagination in the TTP, but in the Ethics, Spinoza teaches [12] (II, p17s) the pervasiveness of imagination in human life. In the words of Spinoza scholar Eugene Garver, according to Spinoza: "Imagination is our original endowment" [13]. All knowledge of the outside world is ultimately based upon our body creating "images" of the outside world [12] (IV, p1s), [14]. Sometimes we are able to transform these images into rational "philosophical knowledge", but prophecies, as found in Scripture, are not aimed at nor can they be transformed into that kind of knowledge. Images cause an emotional response, and the entirety of our affective life operates through the imagination [12] (II, p40s2), [4] (p. 231), In the Ethics, Spinoza explains that, by affect, he means a force or influence, and the idea thereof, which either increases or diminishes our power of acting. He makes a basic distinction between positive affects and negative affects. Positive affects (such as joy) are the affects through which our power of acting is increased, which he later restates as moving our minds to greater perfection, i.e., closer to God, that which acts most powerfully. Negative affects (such as sadness) are those that diminish our power of acting, by which we are moved to a lesser perfection [12] (II, p11), [15]. This does not just hold for the individual's power and being but holds for the social and political spheres the individual is a part of.

This is why prophets rely on imagination; they use it to connect to an audience, strike a chord with them, regardless of the intellectual capacities they might have. Spinoza often emphasizes that this is the point of Scripture itself, to speak to common people's imagination. However, at the same time, imagination is "inadequate", meaning that we can be mistaken about what it is that prompts our imagination, while, at the same time, knowledge of such a mistake does not annul the effectual "impression" [12] (II, p40s2). Therefore, the imagination is open to disputes, and it cannot properly determine by itself to what end it is affected, whether the result is an increase or decline in the power of acting. And, unlike reason, it can give rise to social conflict, with which Spinoza was confronted in the European and national theological disputes. In the next sections, I will examine how Spinoza's notion of imagination and his distinction between positive and negative affects translate to his distinction between religion and superstition, which arise from the imagination, and their political role vis-à-vis the sovereign.

3. Between Religion and Superstition

In the TTP, religion acquires a specifically practical meaning. Spinoza distinguishes true religion from superstition [4] (p. 302). Unlike his contemporaries argued, such as Thomas Hobbes and Adriaen Koerbagh, religion should not simply be debunked as just another kind of superstition only with an institutional force and critical mass by which it seeks to differentiate itself from those other superstitions. Instead, through his observation of the inexpugnable role of imagination in human life, he notes religion's social function and immanently critiques its role in 17th-century Dutch society. In a play on the famous Lucretian line that religion could persuade men to do great evils, Spinoza substitutes fear for religion [11] (Preface, G iii, p. 6; p. 67). Yet, even though Spinoza considers fear the source of superstition, he more often emphasizes the vacillation between hope and fear as the affective driving force. It is impossible to become completely impervious to these affects, but the notion of vacillation points to an unbearable kind of uncertainty, which specifically serves as the breeding ground of superstition. Unlike religion, superstition is "necessarily very fluctuating and inconstant" [11] (Preface G iii, p. 6; p. 68).

For Spinoza, superstition is a stranger to no one, and he opens the TTP, akin to the famous first sentence of Rousseau's Social Contract, with an observation on the pervasiveness of superstition:

If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition. But often they are in such a tight spot that they cannot decide on any plan. Then they usually vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear, desiring immoderately the uncertain goods of fortune, and ready to believe anything whatever [11] (Preface G iii, p. 5; pp. 65–66).

What is immediately striking about this passage is that superstition is understood here as a way out of uncertainty. However, superstition offers the "easy" way out. It prompts belief in something without sufficient causes for such a belief. Despite the believer's best hopes, superstition ultimately leaves those who seek refuge through it right back at the starting point. Again, if not more, in fear and uncertainty looking for new superstitions, trapped in a vicious cycle. Uncertainty has a "natural" component, pertaining to those factors that are outside of our powers to manipulate. He makes this especially clear when he states that even powerful statesmen, such as Alexander the Great, are not exempted from superstition's hold [11] (Preface G iii, p. 6; p. 67). Additionally, since superstition arises from the imagination, or rather "because it arises, not from reason, but only from the most powerful affects", this hold is not countered by education [11] (Preface G iii, p. 6; p. 68).

Spinoza understands superstition as a kind of pathology, as a deformation of religion [16]. He emphasizes that such a deformation might result from reading Scripture too literally. Superstitious readers confuse what are ultimately moral messages aimed at the imagination, told through wonders or acts of God, to be instead rational explanations for events that occurred. For Spinoza, the problem consists of an inadmissible intermingling of reason and faith. An intermingling that fails to understand the role of the imagination and

accommodate the moral messages of Scripture to how people are constituted, i.e., their affective composition. Reading Scripture from a Spinozist perspective, through his idea of accommodation, we can distill what he calls (true) religion. True religion aims only at social behavior, as “it requires nothing from men but obedience”, and its core message is that “obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbor” [11] (ch.13, G iii, p. 168; p. 258). For the application of this simple message, a free imagination is required. Spinoza walks a fine line between the freedom one has to interpret Scripture according to one’s own insights and setting very specific limits on this freedom through the core message: careful that religion does not degenerate into superstition again. Not the inevitable differences in interpretation are problematic, but the aim with which the interpreting is done. He notes that true religion “condemns as heretics and schismatics only those who teach opinions which encourage obstinacy, hatred, quarrels and anger” and promotes “those who encourage Justice and Loving-kindness” [11] (ch.14 G iii, p. 180; p. 271). This is captured not in words or thoughts, but in actions, for “the person who displays the best arguments is not necessarily the one who displays the best faith; instead it’s the one who displays the best works of Justice and Loving-kindness” [11] (ch.14 G iii, p. 179; p. 270).

4. Religion, Superstition and Politics

Were superstition only a personal matter of coping with the natural causes of uncertainty and fear, perhaps Spinoza would be less worried by it. However, not only does superstition have a social dimension in the sense that we are affected by other people, the role of imitation in social life [10] (p. 30), but more importantly, it has a political-institutional dimension. Spinoza understands the state in a Hobbesian sense, arguing that: “each person transfers all the power he has to the social order”, which implies that this “social order alone will have sovereignty” and that “each person will be bound to obey it” [11] (ch.16, G iii, p. 193; p. 258). What Spinoza understands in Hobbes, who is considered the first theorist of representative government, is that only on the sovereign level can some form of political unity be constructed. This unity entails combining powers, opens the possibility to live in greater freedom [11] (ch.16 G iii, p. 195; p. 289), and increases the ability to cope with or face uncertainty. Therefore, the sovereign plays a role in the constitution of its subjects. Certainty is, at least partly, mediated through the social and political practices of “customs, laws, and institutions”, giving each nation its particular constitution, as well as reflecting that back onto its subjects [10] (p. 35). For Spinoza, the object of the state is the structuring of the “social environment in ways that promote virtue and harmony” [10] (p. 36). These powers of the sovereign are threatened by social discord, and the greatest threat to any such construction is civil war. In a state of civil war, some subjects attempt to retain some of their rights and thereby divide and destroy the sovereignty [11] (ch.16 G iii, p. 195; p. 289). Here, the political problem of superstition comes to light since to achieve unity, the state deals in affects. Spinoza argues that what binds subjects to the state, to make the contract by which the transfer of rights to the sovereign takes place valid and lasting, is the hope for a greater good or fear of otherwise greater harm [11] (ch.16 G iii, pp. 191–192; p. 285). This means that superstition, with its own dealings of hope and fear, is a competitor in binding the people to political aims. Superstition is inherently a governing logic. However, whereas the logic of the sovereign is intimately tied up with a calculation of public utility [17], or with the public good (the positive affects which would increase the power of acting of the community), superstition is only concerned with private aims (negative affects leading to a decrease in the power of acting). The problem Spinoza faces is that, on the one hand, “a contract can have no force except by reason of its utility” [11] (ch.16, G iii, p. 192; p. 286), while superstition operates through the personal authority another actor uses “only to compel others to think as he does, under the pretext of religion”, to further personal aims [11] (ch.7 G iii, p. 97; p. 170). In a way, this obscures the calculation of utility and binds people to a “false” religion instead. Yet, unlike binding to the state, this is a problem because “an action done on a command—obedience—does, in some measure, take away freedom, (. . .) that isn’t what makes the slave. It’s the reason

for the action" [11] (ch.16 G iii, p. 194; p. 288). The ultimate aim of superstition, according to Spinoza, is to "turn the heart of the multitude (. . .) away from the supreme powers, so that everything may collapse again into slavery" [11] (Preface G iii, p. 7; p. 70).

Spinoza proceeds to try and understand in what way the state can best defend itself against superstition. He argues that the power of the sovereign is tied to the space left for criticism of the governing function with an appeal to the mutual calculus of utility. Spinoza understands democratic government to be more or less fully realized to the extent it can hold open the space for criticism, and subsequently if from that space subjects can still recognize these "supreme powers" as sovereign:

So if good faith, not flattering lip service, is to be valued, if the supreme powers are to retain their sovereignty as fully as possible, and not be compelled to yield to the rebellious, freedom of judgment must be granted. Men must be so governed that they can openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony [11] (ch.20 G iii, p. 245; p. 351).

Hence, Spinoza argues for a "freedom of philosophizing", which is simultaneously an irreducible freedom and a political one [11] (ch.20 G iii, p. 239; p. 344). From the fact of imaginative plurality, Spinoza tries to conceive the political situation best suited to it, which both gives space to this plurality and aims to overcome it in the political sense of unity, of uniting forces. This, finally, leads Spinoza to come to the insight that (even) in matters of religion, the state is the supreme power to provide and limit social freedom.

Now that I have treated Spinoza's understanding of superstition, I want to turn to his relevance for our contemporary political condition of conspiracy theories. Before I can do so, however, it is important to examine this condition, and I will do so through one of the more promising attempts to understand it: Nancy Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead's *A lot of people are saying*.

5. The New 'Conspiracism'

In the age of social media, public and scholarly interventions tackling conspiracy theory are usually centered around two specific things: first, the (im)possibility of making a distinction between malign and benign forms and second, finding the right means to combat the malign ones in the name of the public good. Many scholars attempt to do so by reference to an epistemological dimension or some criterion of truth. They either state that conspiracy theories are by definition untrue and therefore problematic tout court, what has come to be known as the generalist position [18,19]. Or that conspiracy theories are problematic to the extent that they are untrue, arguing for a case by case or evidence-based approach, what has come to be known as the particularist position [20,21]. Combatting conspiracy theories then either entails bolstering or targeting the epistemological apparatus of those who adhere to the conspiracies, to wise them up, so to speak [19,22]. Otherwise, suspending judgement on such theories until they are properly investigated, looking at the "evidence" [23]). Such a truth-criterion, however, proves difficult to establish. It is not easily ascertainable what is true or what is evidence, even when dealing with non-conspiratorial sources (a quick glance at theory on propaganda is enough to understand that). More importantly, however, the supposed truth of such theories does very little to remediate their problematic aspects. Differently put, even truth can be weaponized against society. Take, for example, the overrepresentation of minorities in poverty and crime (which holds for most Western countries). This fact is often ideologically weaponized against these minorities, its 'truth' is no counterforce [24]. The same holds for the charge of "conspiracy theorist" itself, which can be levelled against people to discredit them [25] but, at the same time, is not immune to such weaponization if proven true or untrue. A focus on the epistemological dimension entrenches the discussions on conspiracy theory in a back-and-forth on the possibility of dismissing such theories out of hand or on a case-by-case basis through evidence. Such a focus can either fall into the trap that a reference to a criterion of truth is insufficient to distinguish between problematic and unproblematic theories or runs the risk of becoming an ahistorical framework from which these theories

are understood. More importantly, they take us away from questions concerning the (inner) workings, its appeal, and the (social-political) aims of the theories.

A more promising attempt to understand and distinguish between mere theories of conspiracies, as benign forms, and “conspiracy theory”, as malign forms, is put forward by Rosenblum and Muirhead in their work *A Lot of People are saying*. Rosenblum and Muirhead, political scientists by trade, approach the matter mostly in relation to the political aims of conspiracy theories, more specifically oriented towards, or rather against, democracy. They understand there to be a new form of conspiracy thinking; they term “conspiracism” and define it shortly as conspiracy without the theory [7] (p. 2). Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that we cannot dismiss conspiracy theories out of hand, that “classical” theorists, meaning most conspiracy theorists before our current social media age, were engaged in “detective work” and aimed for a comprehensible narrative to understand collected evidence. However, the new “conspiracism” of the social media age is not aimed at evidence nor investigation but mostly has (destructive) political aims and a different mode of legitimation: repetition. This mode is specifically coupled with the emergence of social media in the political realm, in which the amplification of baseless claims is pervasive through likes, reposts, retweets, upvotes, etc. Hence the title of their work, a reference to the oft-used phrase by the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump, the most prominent politician connected to conspiracy theories and responsible for bringing them to the forefront of American politics. The new conspiracism aims at delegitimization. The intended targets are not to be corrected but denied “their standing in the political world to argue, explain, persuade, and decide” [7] (p. 2). Hence, Rosenblum and Muirhead identify two specific targets of this “conspiracism”: first, political parties, partisans, and the norm of legitimate opposition, and, second, institutions such as the free press, the university, and expert communities within the government.

6. Combatting Conspiracism

Emblematic for this new kind of conspiracy theory, or conspiracism, is “Qanon”. A conspiracy theory that started on the online message board 4 Chan in 2017. An anonymous writer(s), under the name “Q”, regularly posted cryptic messages called “Q drops”, which hint at various conspiracies connected to the virus, the 5G network, a so-called deep state, and Bill Gates. While the theory may have originated in the United States, this specific conspiracy theory has surprisingly become a global phenomenon. Moreover, whereas 4 Chan was still considered a fringe platform, where many of these theories flourish, Qanon has now spread throughout the internet, reaching millions of people through the more popular platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. What sets this “conspiracism” apart is its purely negative project of rejecting the “meaning, value, and authority of democratic practices, institutions, and officials” without any affirmation of another order or replacements [7] (p. 7). It thereby aims at a second, subsequent, goal: disorientation. Rather, more precisely, it attacks any and every possibility of a shared understanding or the possibility of a political community. This has become specifically clear in the “stop the steal” campaign loosely connected to Qanon. This campaign took grievance with the US presidential elections of November 2020, arguing that massive voter fraud was employed to cover up the “landslide” victory of their preferred candidate Donald Trump [26]. It was one of the fastest-growing groups in the final months of 2020, present on several social media platforms, including Facebook, which then quickly tried to shut it down. Elections are a telltale target, for, in their capacity of institutionalizing democracy, they are supposed to act as an orientation point beyond partisan perspectives.

In defense of the intended target of conspiracism, Rosenblum and Muirhead mostly aim to bolster democracy itself through what they call “speaking truth to power” and “enacting democracy”, which to varying degrees are already put into practice. Concerning “speaking truth to power”, two means are specifically prevalent in contemporary attempts to combat conspiracism. First, the role of fact-checking, the practice by which false claims are debunked through an appeal to the rational abilities of people. A response that is

highly informed by the focus on the epistemological dimension of conspiracy theories. Second, and closely connected to it, gatekeeping, a strategy focused on the amplification or restriction of speech, or in the age of social media known as “deplatforming” [27]. The emergence of social media proves to be a particular challenge for the practice of gatekeeping. Whereas traditional media still had control and responsibility over what they published, new social media circumvent this control (they are only platforms!). Rosenblum and Muirhead signal a second element that makes gatekeeping more difficult: an asymmetry of claims. Simple false messages are amplified more easily, and the fact that there are so many online platforms means that actual gatekeeping is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, calls for gatekeeping are being heard, and large platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, now actively fact-check and deplatform suspicious claims. Even if these platforms are themselves private entities with private aims [28], and, in response, alternative platforms emerge, sometimes even set up with the express aim of promoting such conspiracy theories [29].

However, it is not just put into practice by private companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, but became a focal point for the European Union. Accelerated by the Corona-virus pandemic, the aforementioned Qanon theory was, for much of 2020, the most followed conspiracy theory in Germany and the Netherlands [30]. A development that worried the European Commission to such an extent that it prompted them to devote time and energy to addressing these theories, especially concerning the Coronavirus itself [31]. Together with the United Nations, the Commission attempts to counter the trend by, essentially, fact-checking. Through an official website, they attempt to debunk the claims of conspiracy theories with a slew of reliable and verified information as well as guides on how to distinguish between facts and falsehoods, understanding your own possible biases, and even how to approach others who support the problematic theories.

Rosenblum and Muirhead note that “to diagnose the threat that conspiracism poses, to unravel its logic, to falsify its specific claims, to call out the conspiracists, and to point to its destructive consequences are all necessary, though they are not guaranteed to disarm it” [7] (p. 158). They understand that gatekeeping and fact-checking alone will not be enough. Hence, they add a third element: “enacting democracy” as a call to action. Action that confirms democratic norms by realizing them. Political leaders, officials, and democratic institutions must hold their ground and directly confront conspiratorial claims with defiance, thereby actualizing democratic norms [7] (p. 161).

7. Conspiracism as Superstition; A Spinozist Critique

Understanding the emergence of contemporary conspiracy theories on social media as conspiracism is a valuable approach. It highlights the political character of such theories and directs our attention to the supposed enemies and subsequent aims of these theories. Yet when considered from a Spinozist approach, crucial elements seem to be lacking that problematize the means of combatting such malign conspiracy theories. So what can be gained by taking up such an approach and taking conspiracism for what is considered a term of old religious moralizing, namely: superstition?

First, while contemporary analyses and subsequent means of combatting conspiracy theories *prima facie* appear as logical, their lack of understanding the appeal of such theories warrants skepticism. Instead of remediating the situation, trying to close the rift between adherents of the conspiracism and others, they may very well be exacerbating it. They omit the affective dimension, which is central to Spinoza’s approach to superstition. Bringing in this affective dimension brings up different and important aspects of conspiracism. It redirects our attention from possible epistemological disadvantages on the part of the conspiracy theorist to the production of negative affects as a consequence of societal constellations. Moreover, it opens up a different response to the question: what do people try to get from these theories? The answer to which is not the truth but rather a sense of certainty and orientation in society.

A second and connected point here is the understanding that the uncertainty that is the breeding ground for conspiracy theories is not caused by conspiracism itself but rather homed in on, exacerbated, and exploited. Disorientation is not merely caused by conspiracism; it harnesses the uncertainty and disorientation present in society already. Subsequently, it presents itself as a way out, as a means to (re)capture some political, social, and economic standing in the world. It brings to light those structural causes, those political and societal uncertainties, which serve as a pre-condition for the new conspiracism. Uncertainties that do not merely pertain to the economic situation, as the global economy increasingly involves high levels of precariousness, but also to the cultural dimension [32–34]. Additionally, what is now abundantly clear with the coronavirus pandemic and an increasingly changing climate: a biological/environmental one.

Third, in its capacity of exacerbating the disorientation and uncertainty in society and its mobilization of certain groups therein, conspiracism reveals itself to be a governing logic. This brings out the question: what specific aims are furthered here? For Spinoza, these aims were tied to the theological-political structure controlling society, whereas we must wonder now what the aims of the mobilizing, not mobilized, group are as the second element in the constellation of conspiracism. Here, politicians, political commentators, and media figures alike actively promote uncertainty through these conspiracies, only to then sell a false sense of certainty to those who are receptive to it. Trump has tried to keep himself afloat through it [35]. However, he is far from the only one nor even the worst. Especially jarring is the case of political commentator Alex Jones, who in a ruthlessly opportunistic manner sold even a false cure for a disease which he has claimed did not exist [36].

Therefore, given the points just mentioned, what does this mean for the attempts to counter conspiracism through a cognitive/epistemological dimension, namely by doubling down on facts or even enacting and bolstering democracy? To further understand how these measures do not break the constellation of conspiracism, I take a cue from Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller. Pfaller reads Spinoza's distinction between true religion and superstition in a unique way, in part through French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, which I use to help translate Spinoza's position to our contemporary situation. In the time of Spinoza, at least in The Netherlands, the Christian confessions notwithstanding their antagonism served as a common point of orientation with the Bible as their primary source. Therefore, to immanently criticize failings meant to construct through that common point of orientation "access points", hence, the equal yet distinct standing of religion and reason in moral social orientation. Yet, in our contemporary globalized society and with social media providing a myriad of points of orientation, such a universalization does not hold anymore. Mannoni, through a psychoanalytical appropriation of Spinoza, understands there to be three positions a subject can take up vis-a-vis religion. Not just those of true religion (faith/foi) and superstition, but a third "middle" term, namely belief (croyance). He thereby introduced a third term that entails a kind of "educated" position, meaning informed on the supposed truth or untruth of whatever belief is held that the subject disavows a superstition through but simultaneously upholds it. Both Pfaller and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has frequently explained this position through an anecdote about Niels Bohr. Bohr supposedly had a horseshoe above the door of his country house as prescribed by European superstition at the time. Yet, he did so, because while he himself did not believe in it, he was told that it would work despite the fact that he didn't believe in it [37]. Pfaller, in turn, deduces from the three positions of Mannoni that there are, therefore, two types of illusions, a term that incorporates yet extends beyond religion: those with owners (corresponding to true religion/faith/foi) and those without owners (belief/croyance or superstitions).

This appropriation of Spinoza makes for an interesting flip, which has two important consequences. First, as faith equals illusions with owners and superstition illusions without owners, the straightforward believers of superstitions for Spinoza are for Pfaller, in fact, adherents of faith. Second, those without faith are not without illusions but unaware of which illusions they disavow yet nonetheless uphold. Therefore, how does this conception

aid us in understanding the effects of the contemporary countermeasures for conspiracism from a Spinozist perspective?

It makes it possible for us to understand why, despite those attempts at solving knowledge deficiencies, people still believe in superstitions. For, the process of faith implies a double play of superstition or illusion. A problem Spinoza is also confronted with when he tries to understand how authoritarianism “keep(s) men deceived” by disguising superstition in “the specious name of Religion” in order for them to “fight for slavery as they would for their survival” [11] (Preface, G iii, p. 7; p. 69). Whereas the superstitious for Spinoza, or the faithful for Pfaller, import their belief from an external source, they take it up as if it is not. The reason that this “transformation” takes place, according to Pfaller, is because “faith”, by imbuing its subjects with the imagination that they are the authors of their own actions, produces the affection of self-esteem (or for Spinoza: pride) [38] (p. 71). As such, it is a means to (re)gain some standing in the world. Furthermore, the more a subject acts according to these external sources, “the more bitterly he or she holds on to the illusion of self-determination and pursues his or her own heteronomy simply for the sake of ‘proving’ it to be autonomy” [38] (p. 215). The more these subjects are confronted with the better knowledge that they are not acting out of their own accord or that what they believe is not true, the more they are pushed for the sake of their self-esteem to own up to the illusion, thereby further undermining their own power to act. The difficulty in directly acting upon this mechanism is apparent in Spinoza’s assessment of moralizing legislation, as:

The people who believe that the opinions the laws condemn are sound will not be able to obey them. But the people who think the condemned opinions false will accept the laws as privileges, and triumph in them so much that afterward the magistrate won’t be able to repeal them even if he wants to [11] (ch.20, G iii, p. 244; pp. 349–350).

There is a second important consequence. For, there are not only illusions with owners (Spinoza’s superstitious) but also illusions without owners or disavowed illusions. For Pfaller, illusions without owners mostly concern “enlightened” disavowed beliefs; For instance, feeling intensely defeated when your favorite sports team lost even though you know very well it is merely a sports game. I argue we can apply them to a second position in the conspiracism constellation: political leaders, such as Trump. For, in a variation on the theme of Mannoni’s, “je sais bien, mais quand même” (“I know very well, but nonetheless . . .”) [38] (p. 69), which is so aptly captured by the title of Rosenblum and Muirhead’s work *a lot of people are saying*, these political leaders argue: it is not I who is saying this, I know better, but they (my faithful constituency) believe this, and thus, I must act according to it nonetheless! Here, better knowledge is even a requisite, and it allows such political leaders to play the game of politics, suspend their own disbelief, and run with whatever suits their political goals nevertheless. This means that an appeal to such leaders, either in terms of “speaking truth to power” or in terms of “enacting democracy”, does, again, not break the hold of the conspiracist constellation. It rather enables them to play with those demands and strengthen the hold by covering up their private aims under the pretext of their supposedly democratic and representative function.

In sum, contemporary measures combatting conspiracism suffer from their omission of the affective dimension. It does not mean that they will not work since there is some evidence that they have limited effects on specific people, yet, at the same time, by not addressing the source of superstition, uncertainty, it runs the risk of leaving its impression on people intact, or worse, driving them further into the hands of the modern ‘theologians’ that deal in those superstitions. Even an appeal to political leaders does not work in that respect, for they are just as intimately tied up in the constellation of conspiracism, whereas the faithful adherents own up to their illusion, these leaders disavow it in order to play the game of politics.

8. Conclusions

I have tried to show how Spinoza's 350-year-old intervention in the political situation of his time still holds important insights for the political problems we face today. Overlaying his notion of superstition onto conspiracy theories has hopefully shed light on the one-sided and problematic approach of contemporary responses: attempts to influence the cognitive dimension, via an appeal to truth and information, mistake the affective causes, and subsequently its pervasiveness. Yet, we might wonder, what is there left to do then under the auspices of a Spinozist perspective?

Unfortunately, I can only hint at a possible direction and point towards the self-healing power of imagination in a variation on that saying at the core of Wagner's Parsifal, "die Wunde schließt der Speer nur der sie schlug" ("Only the spear that made the wound can close it"). However, how can that be? Pfaller, at the end of *On the pleasure principle*, takes up what he calls Pascal's advice. The only way to cure the ailment of taking too much pride in your own illusions is to disinvest yourself (specifically the psychoanalytic ego) and take up the illusions of others. This comes down to a ritualistic doing without believing. One must utilize the illusions of others to disavow one's illusions, as a means to cope with reality, "an exercise in superficiality" [38] (p. 225).

Yet, at the same time, I claim, this is exactly the kind of position used by political leaders who have exploited the 'faith' or superstition of others. It is a personal technique to not succumb to displeasure or unhappiness in the form of affects such a fear (or the other sad passions) without changing anything about the sources of fear. Here I wish to make one final return to Spinoza. I am not convinced by only "bringing back in", so to say, the faithful or the superstitious to society. No, the spear that makes the wound for Spinoza is intimately tied up to the uncertainty present in society. Uncertainty cannot be completely eradicated—there is space for Pfaller's advice—but at the same time, there are (self-caused) uncertainties that might possibly be overcome on a societal basis. In their displacement, such uncertainties come up as the objects of contemporary conspiracism: the global pandemic, the changing climate, social media, political elitism, and so on.

For Spinoza, engaging with these uncertainties means adhering to a form of neighborly love, the affect tied to his notion of true religion, which itself can only be ascertained from deeds or the good works. Politically, this amounts to an aim for a political construction through which all subjects can orient themselves. For our contemporary situation, it means that "speaking truth to power" or "enacting democracy" must be accompanied by an understanding of, attention for, and investigation into the breeding ground of conspiracism: political and societal uncertainty. Such uncertainties do not merely affect those who ultimately succumb to superstitious seductions, but all those who are required to enact democracy, political leader or not. Unfortunately, there are no quick solutions here.

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