

## Introduction

# Public Health Policies, Science, and Democracy. Philosophy Moves Beyond the Pandemic

*Federico Boem*<sup>†</sup>

federico.boem@gmail.com

*Matteo Galletti*<sup>\*</sup>

matteo.galletti@unifi.it

Significant work has been done in social epistemology in the last decades. COVID19 pandemic has clarified that public health policies are central for the future of human societies from several perspectives. As a matter of fact, they are based on certain premises that are practical-political (e.g., ensuring the health of citizens), moral (e.g., health is a value), or epistemological (e.g., certain ideas concerning expertise and shared knowledge).

Indeed, effective policies require first and foremost not only to be based on reliable data and models (i.e., so-called evidence-based policy) but also to ensure that these policies are democratically accepted, shared (e.g., considering both cognitive and social dimensions), and hopefully formed after a deliberative process involving experts from various fields alongside citizens.

It is also increasingly clear that the translation of scientific evidence into rules for policy implementation is not a linear path, but often a tortuous one, with many different levels to consider, which are often hard to reconcile because of the *different* assumptions adopted or the *different* goals desired. Thus, public health policy constitutes a perfect (and perhaps obligatory) laboratory for investigating the relationship between scientific knowledge, its epistemic justification, and its ethical dimension, in relation to the democratic order.

The papers included in this issue use public health policies, vaccination policies, and pandemic management as a field of inquiry not only to analyze

<sup>†</sup> Philosophy and Technology section (PHIL), University of Twente (Netherlands).

<sup>\*</sup> Università degli Studi di Firenze (Italy).

epistemological, ethical, and social aspects but also to explore new theoretical proposals that can hold all these aspects together.

In the opening paper, Fiorella Battaglia aims at justifying the legitimacy of public health policies beyond their democratic quality. To reach such a conclusion, political proceduralism is insufficient, so Battaglia uses a view of knowledge as practical and shared that takes seriously the value content of political decisions and illustrates it through the case study of the concept of "M-Health" (the medical and public health practice using mobile and multimedia telecommunication technologies).

Stephen Holland focuses on a limiting-liberty view of public health ethics. He claims that such a view can be vindicated through a "wide reflective equilibrium" methodology and then proceeds to apply it to the case study of the ethics of COVID-19 immunity passports.

Marzia Marastoni's paper considers the pandemic emergency from a legal-philosophical point of view. The emergency determined by COVID19 requires the suspension of certain human rights (respect for private life, freedom to express one's opinions, freedom of association, freedom of movement). Whether it is legally justified to do so is a legal and philosophical question. The author addresses this issue by showing how utilitarianism and liberalism provide a different answer to this question.

Federico Boem and Emanuele Ratti, examine the history of the first year of the pandemic in Italy, analyzing the interconnections between political responses and the ethical-epistemic dimension. Focusing on the Italian response as a particular case study, they show how making political decisions based on scientific evidence is never a linear path and that often non-epistemic elements become part of the epistemological framework that permeates not only political choices but also technical-scientific recommendations. Their aim is to show how the Italian reaction to the pandemic can offer some lessons for the future management of analogous issues.

Stefano Calboli and Vincenzo Fano explore the ethics of nudging vaccination, especially with respect to the "alien control" objection. The question is whether the use of behavioral and cognitive tools to boost vaccination adherence is an instance of manipulation and which kind of manipulation is. The authors conclude that it's *political* manipulation and provide some hints to overcome this problem.

Finally, Mattia Andreoletti addresses the epistemological aspects of SARS-CoV-2 transmission theories, confronting the droplet and aerosol theories. The

former has been accepted for philosophical commitments of the dominant actors to a specific theory of evidence and for non-epistemic reasons, although the latter provides a more plausible explanation of disease transmission.