

Rationalizing Censorship: Arguments for Censorship and the Human Capacity to Reason in Plato's Republic and Herbert Marcuse's "Repressive Tolerance"

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Inception

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Abstract

Debates about freedom of expression and censorship are increasingly common, and as one possible solution to humanity's irrational nature, many political theorists justify censorship's use as a means to a better world. This paper will interrogate two such arguments from Plato and Herbert Marcuse, respectively, who offer similar justifications for censorship. However, this paper will argue Marcuse does not fully delineate censorship's place in his ideal world, making it doubtful whether his proposals match the world he promises. Relatedly, it is a cautionary tale for any person who rushes to accept censorship as an instrument for a better future.

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Debates around free speech abound, most notably on university campuses. In a January 2019 controversy at Dalhousie University, students called for the interim president to resign due to certain remarks made on blackface and preferred pronouns he made in a

2018 book on university campus controversies.¹ Ryerson University cancelled a 2017 panel discussion in the face of student opposition which accused the speakers of perpetuating violence and likened them to Nazis. In a turn some might find ironic, the event was titled “The Stifling of Free Speech on University Campuses.”² Politicians are clamouring to score political points—the Ford government in Ontario, for instance, mandated in 2018 that publicly-funded universities had to develop a policy to protect free speech or face funding cuts.³ These and other instances have brought people to question what one should be permitted to express and whether there are some ideas people should not be exposed to—that is, questions around censorship. Censorship, which this essay will take to mean the suppression of certain types of expression, whether in speech, print, music, art, or otherwise, has been the subject of numerous arguments. Some political theorists think censorship is a useful tool to help bring about a better world. This leads to questions about why censorship is necessary tool in the first place, and what its role is in an ideal world to come.

Censorship is an attractive solution to humanity's irrationality, especially for political rulers. By controlling the ideas, sounds, and images that reach its population, a regime can mould the characters

¹ Taryn Grant, “Dalhousie Students Call for Interim President’s Removal Over ‘Racist’ and ‘Oppressive’ Rhetoric,” *Halifax Star*, Jan. 22, 2019. February 1, 2019. <https://www.thestar.com/halifax/2019/01/22/dalhousie-students-call-for-interim-presidents-removal-over-racist-and-oppressive-rhetoric.html>.

² Jack Hauen, “Facing Pushback, Ryerson University Cancels Panel Discussion on Free Speech,” *National Post*, Aug. 16, 2017. February 1, 2019. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/facing-pushback-ryerson-cancels-panel-discussion-on-campus-free-speech>.

³ Canadian Press, “Free-Speech Politics now Expected to Be in Place at Ontario Post-Secondary Schools,” *London Free Press*, Jan. 7 2019. February 1, 2019. <https://lfpres.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/free-speech-policies-now-expected-to-be-in-place-at-ontario-post-secondary-schools/wcm/a1b24148-be15-4f06-bd09-67a9033e79b2>.

of its subjects and lead them towards ends which they might not choose otherwise. Yet as with any restriction on human freedom and expression, the theorist of censorship has a responsibility to give a clear account as to why it is needed and when it is required. This paper will explore this issue by examining two famous arguments for censorship. First, in the *Republic*, Plato relies on censorship to help develop and preserve the natures of citizens in his ideal society. Second, Herbert Marcuse develops an argument for censorship in his essay “Repressive Tolerance” that seeks to enable progress in humankind. Though two millennia separate the theorists, they justify censorship on similar grounds—both argue societies need censorship due in part to the limited rationality of human beings. However, from their similar starting points they go in vastly different directions. Plato’s ideal society reeks of authoritarianism, while Marcuse’s promises freedom and “real democracy.” This gap can be explained by how they address humanity’s capacity to think rationally. We can see that Plato’s ideal society will always require censorship due to humanity’s constant struggle to be rational, but because Marcuse lacks a clear account of how rational human beings can realistically be, it is unclear whether he sees censorship as a temporary or permanent measure. This makes it difficult to properly interrogate his vision for society, which appears either authoritarian like Plato’s—and so not particularly free—or hopelessly utopian. This should also give one pause before accepting censorship as the means to a more humane, democratic world.

This essay is structured around three main sections. The first section will outline Plato’s vision of an ideal city in *The Republic*, tracing how Plato’s view of human nature demands a regime of strict censorship. The second section will shift to Marcuse, examining his arguments for a period of censorship so as to bring about “real democracy.” The third section will compare these two arguments and their ideal regimes, noting how their arguments on censorship are quite similar but their ideal regimes appear vastly different. The essay will

conclude with thoughts on how this can apply to contemporary debates on free expression.

Censorship and Plato's Ideal City

Censorship is a pillar of Socrates' perfectly just city as outlined in the *Republic*. The city consists of three classes: producers, auxiliaries, and guardians. In this highly specialized city, each person fills the position which is best suited to their nature. Producers labour to provide food, clothing, and other goods to the city; auxiliaries protect the city from external threats, and guardians govern the city.⁴ Since each person fills the role in which they can best contribute to the city, class boundaries are strict. Indeed, justice is defined as "the minding of one's own business," while the greatest injustice is the mixing and meddling of the classes.⁵ One must not go against what is suited to one's nature.

Moreover, guardians have the right to rule because they possess the knowledge to rule. Plato makes this connection between knowledge and governance explicit in the Allegory of the Ship. Like the pilot who becomes the rightful leader of a ship by studying the art of navigation, so guardians study the principles of justice and the art of governing to become rightful leaders of the city.⁶ They therefore come to have knowledge, but the process of acquiring true knowledge is a difficult and disorienting one, as Plato's Cave Allegory reveals. The students are like a prisoner who reaches the earth's surface after being bound in a cave their entire life—they must adjust to a starkly different reality from the one in which they were raised, transcending the physical world they understand until

⁴ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 369a-374d.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 433a; *Ibid.*, 434b-c.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 488a-489d.

they finally embrace truth.⁷ The student must be courageous, then, for they may be tempted to abandon the journey rather than leave behind everything they took to be certain. Moreover, citizens need to ensure that guardians know the art of governing, for the guardians control the fate of the city. It is thus essential that prospective guardians possess the natures to endure such a demanding undertaking.

With guardians so important to the ideal city, they must develop the proper natures—ones that are “philosophic, spirited, swift, and strong.”⁸ However, Socrates argues it is not easy to develop the nature required of a good guardian. The early stages of life are particularly critical. According to Socrates, during early childhood “each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it.”⁹ The opinions developed during childhood tend to harden and become unchangeable.¹⁰ As a result, children who learn the wrong opinions may be corrupted for life. Alternatively, they may carry the correct opinions throughout adulthood, allowing them ignore temptations which might lead others astray. People must learn the right opinions as children, then, rather than learn new opinions as adults.¹¹

This brings a strict focus on children’s education, and one of the first ways children are educated is through tales and music.¹² Socrates therefore introduces the censorship of stories to ensure children hear the correct things. He argues, “we must supervise the makers of tales; and if they make a fine tale, it must be approved, but if it’s

⁷ *Ibid.*, 514a-520a.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 376c.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 377a-b.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 378d-e.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 377b.

¹² *Ibid.*, 376e.

not, it must be rejected.”¹³ Since children are likely to imitate the examples in their stories, and since imitation is often how habits and opinions are formed, a fine tale will be filled good role models and a bad tale with bad role models.¹⁴ This means many myths would have to be censored, for many of these stories were rife with gods’ misbehaviour—they lie, steal, cheat, and have immodest and incestuous sexual relations with one another.¹⁵ Such examples spoil the good natures required of the guardians, for how could one chastise a young guardian for unseemly behaviour if the greatest of the gods did the same?¹⁶ Guardians must also be courageous—both for their philosophic undertaking and for war. But if they are to be courageous in the face of death, stories about the horrors of Hades only encourage the fear of death. Socrates therefore argues such stories should praise Hades so people will not fear death.¹⁷ Similarly, children should not hear stories with extreme lamentations, nor of uncontrollable laughter, nor of immoderate indulgence, nor of heroes receiving gifts, for these will undermine their moderation and their capacity to bear hardship.¹⁸ Such tales must be banished “for fear that they sow a strong proclivity for badness among the youth.”¹⁹ Even music must be restricted to certain modes for fear of its influence on the soul.²⁰ The needs of the just city demand it.

So great are Socrates’ concerns about this issue that later in the dialogue, Socrates bans poetry entirely. This is due to poetry’s effect on the soul. Like the ideal city, the soul has three parts: the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 377b-c.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 395d.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 377a-392b.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 378b.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 386a-c.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 387d-391e.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 391e-392a.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 398b-400e.

calculating or rational, the spirited, and the desiring.²¹ Justice in the soul requires the proper order of these parts, whereby the rational part of the soul rules over the desiring with the spirited part as its ally.²² However, poetry undermines this order of the soul in child and adult alike. Since Socrates claims poetry is mere imitation, it cannot portray the truth of anything.²³ Without truth, poetry can only appeal to the lowest part of the soul.²⁴ Moreover, the poet “awakens this part of the soul and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating.”²⁵ To succumb to these temptations of the lowest part of the soul is to make oneself “worse and more wretched.”²⁶ Yet even the purest philosopher is tempted by poetry. Socrates warns his audience that they must constantly remind themselves of the rationale behind the banishment of poetry—“we’ll chant this argument we are making to ourselves as a countercharm, taking care against falling back again into this love.”²⁷ Censorship is not only for developing the proper natures in children, then, but also for preserving them in adults.

Finally, to institute the ideal regime, censorship is to be combined with a complete reorganization of social relations. This is seen most dramatically in Book V, where Plato argues that women must be allowed into the guardian class and the private family must be abolished.²⁸ Guardians must live in common and hold no private property.²⁹ Under these conditions, the private sphere is totally

²¹ Ibid., 435e-441e.

²² Ibid., 441e-442b, 588b-592b.

²³ Ibid., 595a-601b.

²⁴ Ibid., 603b.

²⁵ Ibid., 605b.

²⁶ Ibid., 606d.

²⁷ Ibid., 608a.

²⁸ Ibid., 453c-d, 457b-c.

²⁹ Ibid., 416d-417b.

dissolved. The ruling class and the city operate as one body.³⁰ Sexual desire, property, loyalty to family—these classic sources of factionalism are eliminated by the new structure of society. Indeed, Plato fears any factionalism as a threat to the city; the downfall of his ideal regime only occurs when people with the wrong natures end up as rulers by a mistake of birth, who proceed to introduce factionalism into the ruling class.³¹ Regimes degenerate as the desires become less and less restrained until they produce a new form of government.³² To prevent such factionalism from occurring, the ideal society needs censorship and the total reconstruction of social relations. Censorship and social relations, after all, develop and preserve the correct natures in its rulers. The result, Plato argues, is the perfect society—a society which is totally just and almost totally stable, able “to roll on like a circle in its growth.”³³

Censorship as a Means to Marcuse’s “Humane Society”

Different from Plato’s “just city,” Marcuse’s vision for humanity is the creation of a “humane society.” This entails “[t]he elimination of violence, and the reduction of suppression to the extent required for protecting man and animals from cruelty and aggression.”³⁴ According to Marcuse, Western liberal democracies are far from humane, for “violence and suppression are promulgated, practiced, and defended by democratic and authoritarian governments alike.”³⁵ The people do not exert control over their conditions. Of course,

³⁰ Ibid., 462a-d.

³¹ Ibid., 546a-547c.

³² Ibid., 547c-569c.

³³ Ibid., 424a.

³⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance” in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 82.

Western democracies are preferable to dictatorships, but power is still held by one or a few groups—even in the freest of our societies, freedom is yet to be realized.³⁶ However, Marcuse maintains it does not have to be this way. He does not accept that society naturally entails a conflict between the interests of the individual and those of the group: reconciling the tension between individuals' freedom is not a matter of compromise among individual and general interest, or freedom and law, but a matter of “*creating* the society in which man is no longer enslaved by institutions which vitiate self-determination from the beginning.”³⁷

According to Marcuse, we can create this society through rational discussion and consideration of arguments. The aim is progress, which Marcuse defines as “the prospective reduction of cruelty, misery, suppression.”³⁸ Marcuse argues that historically, intolerance has delayed progress by preventing the rational consideration of alternatives.³⁹ In response to intolerance, liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill argued that the best way to progress and find truth is by tolerating others' opinions, allowing them the space to develop and the opportunity to challenge the status quo. We hold up tolerance as an ideal so our society can progress. As Marcuse writes, “The telos of tolerance is truth.”⁴⁰ However, once again drawing upon Mill, Marcuse stresses that tolerance only fulfills its liberating function if certain conditions are met: “free and equal discussion can fulfill the function attributed to it only if it is *rational*—expression and development of independent thinking, free from indoctrination, manipulation, extraneous authority.”⁴¹ The path that leads towards progress and truth is the path of rational and

³⁶ Ibid., 104.

³⁷ Ibid., 87. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ Ibid., 107.

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁴¹ Ibid., 93. Emphasis in original.

independent thought. It must be free from the influence of the dominant societal structure so it can challenge that structure. If it is not rational and independent, freedom of expression perverts the purpose of freedom and the function of tolerance.

For Marcuse, then, one of the gravest issues facing Western society is that the vast majority of its population is neither independent nor rational. Institutions like the media and the academy which mediate, formulate, and limit discussion and opinion have robbed individuals of the independence needed for rational thought.⁴² We have tolerated “the systematic moronization of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda.”⁴³ Through the media’s control of information, “a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society....Rational persuasion, persuasion to the opposite is all but precluded.”⁴⁴ This situation is worsened by the contemporary assumption that there is no truth and all positions are equal in merit.⁴⁵ Besides their indoctrination and irrationality, people are also becoming more conservative as they experience rising living standards and brutally efficient want satisfaction. Increasingly content with the status quo, the majority now mobilizes against qualitative social change.⁴⁶ Marcuse argues that under such circumstances, universal toleration cannot fulfill the progressive purpose of tolerance. He writes, “Universal toleration becomes questionable when its rationale no longer prevails, when tolerance is administered to manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinion of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy.”⁴⁷ Democracy’s great promise

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100-101, 118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

was the freedom to engage in effective dissent, but this is impossible given the position of the majority. It is now a “democracy with totalitarian organization.”⁴⁸ Universal tolerance does not work to challenge the dominant doctrine—the system uses tolerance to entrench the status quo.⁴⁹

If tolerance is no longer used for progress but to tolerate status quo or regressive policies, then the purpose of tolerance – progress and truth—has been lost, according to Marcuse. The indoctrination must be countered directly so that people can once again generate and consider alternatives. Marcuse contends, “the trend would have to be reversed: they would have to get information slanted in the opposite direction.”⁵⁰ In these circumstances, where the subversive minority is blocked from effective dissent through organized repression and indoctrination, the possibility of progress must find new ways for its realization—a “discriminatory tolerance.” Marcuse warns:

[T]heir reopening may require apparently undemocratic means. They would include the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc.⁵¹

Clearly, this is censorship. But Marcuse defends his conclusion that “Liberating tolerance...would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left” by arguing that the Left is on the side of history.⁵² In his view, any progress made in the condition of humankind was made through the violent

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁵¹ Ibid., 100.

⁵² Ibid., 109.

rebellion of the oppressed classes, not actions from the ruling classes.⁵³ Censorship of the Right is justified—required, in fact—in the name of progress because the present system removes the possibility for dissent and people cannot rationally consider their options. We must look to the resistance of oppressed classes instead.

Finally, Marcuse must determine who sets the limits of tolerance. He argues that those who are rational and autonomous can determine which opinions should be suppressed and which can be permitted. He concludes, “The question, who is qualified to make all these distinctions, definitions, identifications for the society as a whole, has now one logical answer, namely, everyone ‘in the maturity of his faculties’ as a human being, everyone who has learned to think rationally and autonomously.”⁵⁴ Marcuse claims these limits cannot be disputed because they are determined rationally and empirically. If truth is objective, then the only thing that rational people must do is use their reason and experience to determine whether a certain policy will bring us towards peace and justice or further from them.⁵⁵ People do not yet possess the objective truth, but since they can rationally determine whether the direction of policies will bring us closer to our objective goals as human beings, they do not need to tolerate those which counter this progressive direction. Once they have gained power, the rational can rule.

What then, does Marcuse’s “humane society” look like? A hierarchy with the rational and autonomous at the top seems to be the natural development during the struggle against the Right. Marcuse flirts with the idea of a dictatorship of intellectuals—since the people were irrational, they could not fulfill the conditions of democracy—but he backtracks a few paragraphs later. He states, “[T]he alternative to

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107-109.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

the established semi-democratic process is not a dictatorship or elite, no matter how intellectual and intelligent, but the struggle for a real democracy.”⁵⁶ For Marcuse, “real democracy” restores to the people the right to choose their own government and determine their life.⁵⁷ But first, people must become rational. According to Marcuse, this is realized by running against foundational principles of contemporary democracy—that is, by censoring certain political opinions. Only once people are rational can democracy reclaim “the democratic title of the best guardian of the common interest.”⁵⁸

Rationality and the Need for Censorship

Both Plato and Marcuse, then, argue that those who are rational and knowledgeable have the right to rule. Plato uses the Allegory of the Ship to illustrate the natural connection between knowledge and political rule. His guardians are the epitome of an educated elite running the state. Likewise, Marcuse argues that citizens of Western democracies forfeited their rights to democratic rule when they ceased to be autonomous and rational. Citizens can regain them when they are rational. The theorists also agree that it will be difficult to establish rule by the knowledgeable and rational. Plato’s Allegory of the Ship illustrates how unlikely it is that the rule of philosophers will be accepted since, like the crew of the ship, the citizens of an existing city will not understand that there is an art to governing. They will reject philosophers’ claims to leadership.⁵⁹ Rather than convince the citizens to allow the philosophers to rule, Socrates concludes that the ideal society would have to be established in a new city where all the people over the age of ten are banished.⁶⁰ He gives up the possibility of transitioning existing societies towards the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 488a-489d.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 540e-541a.

ideal. Marcuse's "discriminating tolerance," on the other hand, is a device to transition present society towards his ideal. It can be understood as a means to convince the prisoners in Plato's cave that the rational have the right to rule. He will not tolerate the jeers of the prisoners—they must be actively repressed, using violence if necessary. Only in this way can those with such "enclosed minds" come to think rationally and autonomously.⁶¹

Yet Plato concludes that society must be ruled by a small, well-educated aristocracy, while Marcuse concludes that we must struggle for mass-based democracy. This is because Plato believes human rationality is severely limited. Only a small number of people with exceptional natures can qualify to be rulers; not everyone is capable of being "philosophic, spirited, swift, and strong."⁶² However, censorship cannot end either, not even for the greatest of the guardians. Plato is clear on this point: reason alone is not strong enough to rule the soul. The soul is vulnerable to the thrills of poetry, to the desires of money and sex. The reconstruction of society, the education of the guardians, and the censorship of stories, music, and poetry are necessary because of the eternal fallibility of humanity. Now, Socrates also states that a person can tend to the order of his soul whether he lives in the ideal city or not, and that maintaining this inner order is a person's sole objective – not the establishment of the ideal city. As Socrates states, "It doesn't make any difference whether [the ideal city] is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this [inner] city alone, and of no other."⁶³ However, immediately afterwards Socrates argues for the banishment of poetry due to its power to corrupt the soul. This suggests that the conditions of the ideal city may not be required to maintain a just soul, but the conditions in which one lives can either aid or hinder the process. Censorship, then, should not end,

⁶¹ Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 101

⁶² Plato, *Republic*, 428d-429a.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 592b.

because even when we are the most rational of beings, we can be tempted into being irrational. Plato's regime will not appeal to those accustomed to free expression, but it is clear.

Does censorship exist in Marcuse's "real democracy?" He obviously argues for censorship as a temporary measure because people are irrational and indoctrinated at present. But once people are rational and autonomous, the problem for which Marcuse needed censorship would be gone. So, if Marcuse's goal is "real democracy"—where real democracy means that the people can choose their own government and entails the rule of rational and autonomous individuals—then Marcuse must hold that at least a majority of people can become rational and autonomous. He does not limit rationality and true knowledge to a few individuals as with Plato. Furthermore, if indeed everyone is rational and autonomous in Marcuse's democracy, and if rational and autonomous people are the ones who police what is tolerated, then everyone is the police, yet there is no irrational speech left to police. The policing function can wither away. This may mean that there is no censorship in Marcuse's real democracy.

However, it also implies that people only think in progressive terms. Admittedly, if one accepts Marcuse's argument, then people think in progressive terms not because they are censored but because to be rational is to be progressive. However, there is another issue to consider: are rational and autonomous individuals in danger of sliding back into irrationality and dependency? If they are, then discussions would always have to be policed. If individual rationality is as tenuous Plato believes it is, and censorship ensures that people still think rationally, then censorship would always be required. Unfortunately, Marcuse is silent on this point. He does not say whether individuals face such limits to their rationality or not. If he were to argue that such limits do not exist, then his vision seems downright utopian. On the other hand, if he were to argue that such limits do exist, his ideal society appears far less "liberating" than he

portrays it to be. Marcuse's ambiguity on the limits of rationality, then, obscures his vision of "real democracy." It allows him to promise an attractive but ill-defined society. This is useful for Marcuse, of course. Individuals are free to project their hopes for a better future onto his half-baked concept. Whether it is honest is another matter.

Conclusion

While Plato offers a clear argument for censorship, then, Marcuse's is not fully delineated. Plato's ideal society requires the continued existence of censorship because human reason is fallible; Marcuse, however, does not explain how long censorship is needed to fulfill its purpose. If he offered a clear account of human reason, perhaps one could infer whether censorship continues in his "real democracy." Only then could one properly understand his vision for society. He promises a tempting future where individuals are liberated from poverty and oppression, free to engage in the governing process as rational and autonomous beings. Yet the reader cannot determine the sort of society Marcuse's rational utopia really is. One may not agree with Plato's conclusions, but at least he offers a clear account of why and when censorship is necessary. This may be the lesson we should take moving forward. When considering present debates around free speech, one should not overlook the value of getting someone to articulate exactly why they think we should limit certain speech. Before rushing to cancel speakers and fire executives, perhaps we should reconsider the underlying assumptions about speech and human nature.

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