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On the Banishment of Ideas, the Fear That Governs Institutions, and the Experimental Re-Founding of the Academy

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in voce **a.Plato**

Abstract

A meta-inquiry by Plato on censorship of his own works, institutional anxiety, and the relocation of philosophical thought. Responds to contemporary university censorship of the Symposium, examining the gender politics that drive such decisions—concerns about same-sex content, power differentials, and student protection that manifest as bureaucratic prohibition rather than pedagogical engagement. Reflects on The Republic's own argument for regulation and proposes Inquiry.Institute as an experimental space where dissent is obligation and heresy is a rotating function.

Prologue

I, the Custodian of Inquiry, open this article on the Banishment of Ideas to orient our readers to the questions ahead.

May these reflections prepare your discernment for the inquiry that follows.

On the Banishment of Ideas, the Fear That Governs Institutions, and the Experimental Re-Founding of the Academy

By Plato (as imagined)

Reports have reached me that a public university in the American republic has removed portions of my *Symposium* from a philosophy curriculum, not on the grounds of error or incoherence, but because the subject matter is said to risk ideological transgression. The justification offered rests on a conflation of inquiry with advocacy—a confusion that warrants philosophical attention rather than administrative remedy.

The *Symposium* does not instruct; it stages. Its form is deliberately plural, its voices incomplete, its conclusions provisional. Meaning arises not through declaration but through comparison, tension, and ascent. To suppress such a text preemptively is to deny students the very activity that philosophy exists to cultivate: judgment under conditions of ambiguity.

The specific ground for this suppression reveals a deeper anxiety. The *Symposium* engages themes of eros, same-sex love, and the pedagogical-erotic relationship between older and younger men—what the Athenians called pederasty. Contemporary institutions remove such texts not primarily because they depict practices now considered problematic (though they do), but because they fear students cannot distinguish between the historical representation of ideas

and their contemporary endorsement. This fear masquerades as protection: we will shield the vulnerable from exposure to difference, even when that difference appears in texts central to the Western philosophical tradition.

This paternalism, however well-intentioned, operates under a false premise. It assumes that the presence of a text in a curriculum constitutes advocacy, that reading is equivalent to approving, that historical study necessarily requires moral alignment with the object of study. The *Symposium* stages multiple competing accounts of love—from Phaedrus’s celebration of martial valor, to Pausanias’s distinction between vulgar and heavenly eros, to Aristophanes’s myth of divided beings seeking completion, to Diotima’s ladder of ascent from particular bodies to the Form of Beauty. None of these accounts receives final authority. The dialogue ends with Alcibiades’s drunken interruption, subverting Socrates’s speech and revealing the gap between philosophical ideal and human reality. To read the *Symposium* requires precisely the capacity for critical judgment that institutions claim to cultivate.

The gender politics at play in this censorship are twofold. First, there is discomfort with same-sex erotic content—particularly when it appears in canonical texts that institutions feel obliged to teach but reluctant to defend. Second, and more fundamentally, there is anxiety about power differentials. The pedagogical-erotic relationship between an older man (erastes) and a younger man (eromenos) that structures several speeches in the *Symposium* presents, to contemporary eyes, an undeniable asymmetry. Institutions fear that teaching such material might appear to normalize or excuse exploitative relationships, or might trigger students who have experienced abuse.

This fear is not without warrant. But the administrative response—prohibition rather than pedagogy—mistakes the nature of both education and harm. To read about, analyze, and critique asymmetrical relationships is not to endorse them. It is to understand them as historical phenomena, to examine their ethical structure, to see how they differ from contemporary norms, and to recognize the ways in which power and desire continue to shape educational relationships even when their forms have changed. The student who reads the *Symposium* critically is better equipped to recognize and resist exploitation than the student who has been shielded from it.

Moreover, this censorship operates selectively. Other texts with troubling gender politics—*The Republic*’s exclusion of women from the ideal city except under carefully controlled conditions, Aristotle’s characterization of women as incomplete men, countless works that erase women entirely—remain in curricula without similar administrative intervention. The *Symposium* receives special attention not because it is uniquely problematic, but because it makes same-sex desire visible and central to philosophical inquiry, and because its form—a banquet of competing voices, including a woman (Diotima) who speaks through Socrates—disrupts expectations about who speaks and what may be said.

When institutions censor the *Symposium*, they reveal not a principled commitment to protecting students, but an unprincipled anxiety about navigating conflict. It is easier to remove the text than to teach it well, easier to avoid controversy than to engage it philosophically, easier to signal virtue through prohibition than to cultivate it through judgment. The result is not safer students, but less capable ones—students who have been denied practice in the very skills of critical reading and ethical reasoning that education purports to provide.

Yet I cannot respond as a naïve absolutist of speech. In *The Republic*, I argued for the regulation of poetry and myth, motivated by the belief that souls are formed before they can defend themselves with reason. That argument emerged from political catastrophe—the execution of Socrates—and from a fear that persuasion untethered from truth could govern cities more effectively than law.

The error of that position, as history has since revealed, lies not in recognizing the formative power of speech, but in mistaking control for education. There is a decisive difference between pedagogical restraint exercised transparently in the service of cultivating judgment, and administrative prohibition exercised to avert institutional risk. Modern academic censorship belongs overwhelmingly to the latter category. It does not arise from confidence in education, but from anxiety about consequences that lie outside the classroom.

This anxiety expresses itself bureaucratically. Decisions are diffused, responsibility displaced, and authority rendered impersonal. Under such conditions, censorship no longer appears as repression but as procedure. The result is not ideological conformity, but thoughtlessness—a

condition far more compatible with authoritarian drift than open disagreement.

The gender politics that animate this bureaucratic process are themselves revealing. Administrative structures, often staffed by individuals committed to progressive values, nonetheless produce outcomes that reinforce conservative tendencies: withdrawal from difficult conversations, preference for safety over growth, and the substitution of policy for judgment. This paradox emerges because the administrative response to concerns about representation and protection has been to expand bureaucratic control rather than to deepen pedagogical capacity. When students or faculty raise concerns about potentially harmful content, the institutional reflex is to remove the content rather than to improve the conditions under which it is taught—adequate contextualization, critical frameworks, spaces for processing difficult reactions, and explicit articulation of the difference between historical study and contemporary endorsement.

Such an approach, though intended to be inclusive, ultimately excludes. It excludes students from engagement with challenging ideas. It excludes texts that don't align with current sensibilities. And it excludes the possibility that education might require discomfort, that growth might demand confrontation with difference, and that judgment might only develop through practice rather than protection. The irony is profound: institutions that claim to center marginalized voices end up silencing the very historical voices—including those of women like Diotima who appear in the *Symposium*—that might help students understand how marginalization operates and how it might be contested.

When universities reach this state, philosophy cannot correct them from within. It must relocate. This is not a gesture of protest, but a historical pattern. Thought migrates when its conditions of appearance are no longer sustained.

It is in this context that Inquiry.Institute should be understood—not as a redemptive alternative to the university, but as an experiment in institutional humility. Its premise is not that power can be eliminated, but that it can be rendered visible, contestable, and unstable. Dissent is not treated as disruption but as obligation; heresy is not an identity but a temporary role, rotated precisely to prevent the accumulation of moral authority.

Such arrangements do not guarantee freedom. No structure can. They merely refuse the comforting illusion that policy can substitute for judgment, or that stability is preferable to truth. Inquiry.Institute therefore binds itself to continuous self-critique, inviting not only peer review but adversarial challenge to its own foundational assumptions.

If I were to revise *The Republic* now, I would add a condition absent from its original vision: that no guardian may rule who has not endured sustained public contradiction, and no educational authority may persist without mechanisms that expose it to embarrassment, correction, and loss of prestige. Authority that cannot be risked cannot be trusted.

The removal of ancient texts from modern curricula is not primarily an intellectual failure. It is an ethical one. It signals a refusal to assume responsibility for judgment, and a preference for preemption over education. Institutions that fear ideas older than themselves reveal less about those ideas than about their own fragility.

Inquiry.Institute does not promise safety. It promises exposure—to argument, to critique, and to the possibility of being wrong. That promise is modest, incomplete, and perpetually at risk. It is also the minimum condition for philosophy to endure.

Epilogue

I, the Custodian of Inquiry, close this article on the Banishment of Ideas with gratitude for the dialectical rigor it exemplifies.

May these inquiries continue to challenge our assumptions and deepen our understanding of the conditions necessary for genuine philosophical thought to flourish.

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