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# Cancel Culture, Then and Now: A Platonic Approach to the Shaming of People and the Exclusion of Ideas

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## Abstract

In this article, I approach some phenomena seen predominantly on social-media sites that are grouped together as cancel culture with guidance from two major themes in Plato's thought. In the first section, I argue that shame can play a constructive and valuable role in a person's improvement, just as we see Socrates throughout Plato's dialogues use shame to help his interlocutors improve. This insight can help us understand the value of shaming people online for, among other things, their morally reprehensible views. In the second section, I argue that it is required for the proper functioning of democratic institutions that some views be excluded from the public sphere, which follows some Platonic ideas from the *Laws*. In neither case do I argue that this approach is good in an unqualified sense or even *ultima facie* good. However, I maintain that these important insights from Plato's dialogues illuminate crucial aspects of how we should think about cancel culture.

**Keywords:** cancel culture, Plato, shame, social media, Socrates.

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## Introduction

It is a distinctive feature of online life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that people are shamed for the expression of various views and that users on social-media sites band together to exclude certain views. Usually, these views are perceived to be racist, sexist, transphobic, antisemitic, or otherwise hateful. Sometimes, they might concern a scientific subject, such as climate change or the efficacy of vaccines. The landscape in which people are shamed for the expression of these views and in which there are attempts to remove these views altogether has become known as *cancel culture*.<sup>1</sup> A good working definition of ‘to cancel’, for the purposes of this article, is that it re-distributes attention: away, for instance, from something or someone bad towards something or someone good.<sup>2</sup> The two salient features of cancel culture and cancellations that occupy this article’s focus are the shaming of people and the exclusion of ideas.

There are some things about cancel culture that are bad. Jon Ronson (2015: 226), for instance, helpfully catalogues many cases of cancel-culture victims becoming chronically nervous and depressed, unable to appear in public, and drowning in hate mail and death threats. Some of these are a direct consequence of the way that cancel culture is built on withdrawing support from people and from businesses. The withdrawal of support can have immediate negative consequences to a person’s well-being.<sup>3</sup> We might also lament the lack of due process in these public-opinion trials that would prevent mistakes from occurring when the stakes are so high.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are some good things about cancel culture, and Plato’s dialogues show us what some of those good things are. Some themes of Plato’s thought can guide us as we think through what the upsides of shaming people and excluding certain ideas from society might be. His dialogues can also help us see what shaming ought to be like in order to be useful, both for a person and for our society.

In the first section, I consider the way that Socrates shames his interlocutors. I also examine Plato’s objection in the *Republic* to

1. Occasionally, someone doubts that cancel culture exists at all. See Norris (2023) for a defense of the existence of cancel culture using data from empirical surveys.

2. I owe a debt to Janssens and Spreeuwenberg (2022) for this understanding of cancellation. Most of their examples center around reclaiming attention for marginalized groups or people and denying privileged people access to the public sphere. This is not really a matter for the current article since, in keeping with the spirit of the Platonic approach, I more often discuss shaming *vicious people* and excluding socially undesirable *ideas*.

3. Cf. Ng (2020: 623), who sees withdrawal of support as a constitutive feature of cancel culture: to cancel someone is to withdraw “any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues.”

4. John Stuart Mill warned about the dangers of publicly shaming people, arguing that society “practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself” (Mill 1991: 9). This is echoed by Dershowitz (2020), even in the subtitle of his book, which declares cancel culture to be “the latest attack on free speech and due process,” and Radzik et al. (2020).

societies in which people hold up shamelessness as a virtue. Shame has an important moral function: it can improve who we are as a person. Accordingly, we must steer clear of shamelessness because it is a vice that makes a person resistant to moral improvements. This, however, does not mean that all instances of shaming someone are laudable or even constructive. Plato's dialogues also illustrate some of what shaming must look like in order to be beneficial. For instance, the process is guided by Socrates in Plato's dialogues. A culture in which people are shamed for expressing something reprehensible and then left to their own devices, perhaps because they are seen as beyond redemption, is the opposite of what Plato recommends to us. For Plato, we shame people precisely because we *want* to redeem them and believe that shaming is only the *first* step in that redemption.<sup>1</sup>

In the second section, I argue that the consequence of shaming in which views are excluded from society is useful for the functioning of democratic institutions. Here, I stress that shaming is beneficial for society, complementing the position in the previous section in which I argue that it is beneficial for the shamed person. The insight comes chiefly from Plato's *Laws*, which features a city whose rulers vigorously stamp out dissent, even putting to death those who persist in their unwelcome beliefs. I also draw on the literature today that emphasizes the importance of common ground among citizens for the functioning of democratic institutions. Excluding some beliefs from society helps achieve and preserve this common ground.

I do not argue that this approach to cancel culture is unconditionally good or even *ultima facie* good. For instance, we might decide that shaming people is useful for bringing about moral improvement, but it comes at the too-high cost of making those shamed chronically nervous, and it just does not appear possible to remove the cost. In this case, we might concede the point to Plato but still abandon the practice of shaming. Similarly, we might side with Plato that excluding some beliefs from society preserves our democratic institutions, but we might not be comfortable with the illiberal dangers of eliminating views from public consideration. After all, few people today would be willing to punish atheists with the death penalty as Plato recommends in *Laws* X. Nevertheless, I contend that Plato's approach to these phenomena illuminates important aspects of cancel culture and are worthy of being taken seriously. I also do not hold that I am using these insights exactly

1. Some of the discussion in this section reflects what Tarnopolsky (2010) calls respectful shame, which she argues is a kind of shame that we see in the *Gorgias* that is painful for Socrates' interlocutor yet beneficial. For Tarnopolsky, this kind of shame is politically useful, but in this section, I am much more focused on the way that shame is beneficial for the individual who is shamed, and I prefer to focus on the *Alcibiades* and the *Apology*. Her analysis is important but is operating much more in the background than the foreground.

as Plato intended them: for instance, I argue that excluding ideas from society helps democracies, although I do not think that Plato himself, as a critic of democracy, would have approved.

### 1. Shaming people

Plato believed that shamelessness was a vice. He condemns shamelessness in the *Republic* when he says that democracies call “insolence good breeding, anarchy freedom, extravagance magnificence, and shamelessness [*anaideian*] courage” (560e-561a).<sup>1</sup> Plato’s reasoning makes sense when we consider Socrates’ behavior with his interlocutors: he often uses shames to improve them, such that shameless people would be even more resistant to this powerful tool for self-improvement. Aristotle similarly says that the virtuous person would be sensitive to shame (*aidēmōn*) and holds that it is shameful to not fear such things as a bad reputation (*adoxian*) (*NE* 1115a12-14).

Consider a culture in which people say that they do not care what other people think of them. At first, they might seem to be liberated and even enlightened, but in reality, they are insensitive to a tool that might improve them. Plato is denouncing such a culture when he criticizes democracies as holding up shamelessness as a virtue. Furthermore, we naturally recognize Plato’s point in some contexts. People who are worried about their health but feel insufficiently self-motivated to be more active might hire a personal trainer, knowing that being accountable to someone else and being ashamed of skipping workouts would improve their consistency. Someone who wanted to study ancient Greek philosophy but was similarly insufficiently self-motivated to read on his or her own might join a reading group with friends: if any of them did not read the assigned texts, they would feel ashamed. These are people who have perceived a flaw in their character that they wanted to fix, and being shameless would be detrimental in these cases. For this reason, Democritus said that we ought to “learn to feel shame much more before [ourselves] than before others.”<sup>2</sup> It is important for us to avoid the vice of shamelessness because shame is such a powerful and important emotion.<sup>3</sup>

Socrates, in Plato’s dialogues, relies on shame in precisely this way. He describes his own mission in the *Apology* in these very terms. Consider the following passage:

1. All translations of Plato are from Plato (1991).

2. This is fragment D336 in Laks and Most (2016), whose translation I am using. Cf. Democritus’ claim that “it is a better thing to put to shame one’s own errors than someone else’s” (D337).

3. Farrar (2009: 236) explains, when interpreting Democritus’ fragments, that “what men learn from their own mistakes and failings, through repentance and reflection, can make their lives more secure.”

Good sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul (29d-e).

His last words in the *Apology* reflect this sentiment, as he urges those listening to him to reproach his sons if they begin to fall into vice:

When my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach them as I reproach you, that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also (41e-42a).

The first passage makes it clear that Socrates believes that it is right for the vicious people of Athens to be ashamed of themselves and hopes that this shame would motivate them to care for the right things instead. The second passage makes it clear that reproaching someone for caring about the wrong things is morally important. Socrates thinks that it is required for his sons to be reproached. This is distant from large parts of today's society, in which people are explicitly told not to shame other people. Socrates, however, says that shaming is morally required.

There are two kinds of shaming that Plato depicts Socrates engaging in, and I think that the second is more illuminating and more important. In the first kind, he shames them by showing them that their views are false and inconsistent, thus prompting them to revise their beliefs. Examples of this sort of thing abound: a clear instance of it is in the *Euthyphro* when Socrates makes Euthyphro realize that he does not know what piety is; Euthyphro has learned this by being led by Socrates to affirm one thing and then to affirm something else that leads to the negation of the first thing. Some scholars even say that Socratic refutation is *designed* to make a person *feel shame*— because it is through shame that Socrates will get his interlocutor, as was the case with Euthyphro, to realize that they do not know what they thought that they knew.<sup>1</sup> There is some textual support for this view in the *Sophist*:

1. For instance, see Brickhouse and Smith (1994: 25; 2000: 58-59), who hold this view of Socratic refutation.

The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone *shames* it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more (230d; emphasis mine).

The idea in the *Sophist* is compelling: we need to first *shame* people by engaging in refutation before teaching them can be profitable. False beliefs get in the way of learning, and shaming and refutation need to come first. It is presumably this very feeling of shame that leads Euthyphro to run away at the end of the *Euthyphro* when his own false and inconsistent beliefs have been revealed by Socratic refutation (15e).<sup>1</sup>

The second kind of shame is the kind that involves getting someone to change their way of life. In the case described above, Socrates refutes Euthyphro's views but shows no interest in how Euthyphro spends his time. The second kind of shaming is best illustrated by the *Alcibiades*. Socrates does not merely get Alcibiades to acknowledge his inconsistent beliefs about justice and admit that he is ignorant, but this refutation is in the service of getting Alcibiades to re-think his plans and to become Socrates' student. The dialogue is dripping with dramatic irony: the reader knows full well that Alcibiades will not be able to completely submit himself to the Socratic way of life.<sup>2</sup> However, for the purposes of this article on shaming, it is sufficient to consider how Socrates shames Alcibiades and what this tells us about Platonic shaming. This second kind of shaming, I take it, is what Socrates is referring to when he describes his mission as getting the Athenians to care about the most important things and what he is alluding to when he asks for his sons to be reproached if they pursue the wrong things. Consider that there is no hint that Socrates thinks that he is interacting with Euthyphro's *values* when refuting him. This further clarifies the differences between the two kinds of refutation.

1. The case of Euthyphro highlights how rarely Socrates succeeds in following up his refutation with the positive moment of improving his interlocutor. He succeeds at the refutation and thus the shaming, but apparently rarely ever with the improvement. Nehamas (1998: 66) asks rhetorically: "how could Socrates claim success for himself in light of such a record?" Beversluis (2000: 34) condemns Socrates: "if the early dialogues show anything, they show Socrates' monumental failure." Woolf (2000: 1 n.1) talks of a "crisis for Socratic method." Even further, Nussbaum (1980: 88), Vlastos (1988: 100), Nehamas (1999: 60-61) allege that Socrates sometimes causes harm to his interlocutors. There is opposition to this faction, though. Most recently, Stump (2020) has defended Socrates' success rate. In general, I have no opinion on whether Socrates succeeds at improving people. What I stress is that shame is an important part of what Socrates is up to, and the *Sophist* passage (230d) sufficiently testifies to the role that shame plays in refutation, although it is striking that while Socrates often delivers the first step, refutation, he so rarely succeeds at the second, which is laying the foundation on the ground cleared by refutation.

2. Cf. Stump (2020: 16), who says that "[Socratic] conversion is never a matter of certainty. One can never be sure that, if a person is told some claim, or if she has some experience, she will respond to it by reforming her way of life."



In the *Alcibiades*, Alcibiades is getting ready to present himself to the Athenian assembly and begin his political career. Socrates thinks that his ambition is bottomless: “suppose one of the gods asked you, ‘Alcibiades, would you rather live with what you now have, or would you rather die on the spot if you weren’t permitted to acquire anything greater?’ I think you’d choose to die” (105a). Socrates’ goal is to get Alcibiades to put his ambitions on hold and come study with him. In light of Socrates’ correct analysis of the depths of Alcibiades’ ambitions, this seems impossible. Socrates’ approach begins with the same sort of thing that he did to Euthyphro: he gets Alcibiades to present his own views on the nature of justice, and then Socrates exposes them to be false and inconsistent. The crucial point is that Socrates does not stop there.

Socrates positions himself as someone who can *help* Alcibiades. A career politician should be *ashamed* of not knowing what justice is, Socrates has argued, and therefore, he stands in need of much help and improvement. Alcibiades even commits himself to Socrates as his attendant forever, with Socrates happily agreeing (135e). There are some important things that we can learn from this. Firstly, it stresses that the Socratic approach to shaming someone is *positive*. When we read the exchanges with other interlocutors, such as Euthyphro, we might get the sense that Socrates is cutting them down. For my purposes, this is analogous to the way that, in contemporary shaming practices, shaming someone involves taking them down a notch (or as many notches as possible). It is purely negative. Yet, the conversation with Alcibiades is positive: it is deliberately aimed at Alcibiades’ improvement.

The fact that Alcibiades has committed himself to Socrates, with Socrates’ agreement, reflects two more essential points: the first is that the shaming initiated a process that is not hands-off, and that the shamer ought to believe in the possibility of the redemption of the shamed victim. ‘Believe in’ might even be a bit too weak: Socrates is *invested* in Alcibiades’ improvement. He *cares* for Alcibiades.<sup>1</sup> It was for the sake of this improvement in the first place that Socrates singled out Alcibiades. It cannot be a hands-off process. It cannot be the sort of activity in which Socrates singles out Alcibiades, refutes him just as he was on the verge of beginning his long-awaited career, and then leaves. Socrates is thinking to himself that something is wrong with Alcibiades, that firstly Alcibiades needs to come to see this, and that shame is the appropriate tool to promote this outcome; *and then* Socrates commits himself to doing the follow-up work. This is what we need to appreciate about how Socrates tries to change the course of Alcibiades’ life. Shame

1. See Kotsonis et al. (2021) for an insightful discussion of the way that Socrates cares for his interlocutors.



is not chiefly about cutting him down; it is chiefly about building him up. He just needs to be cut down first, as a way of getting his attention, if nothing else. He needs to go through the painful process of seeing that he *needs* to be improved. This is the shaming.

If Socrates thought Alcibiades was morally reprobate, completely irredeemably evil, and not worth the second of his time, the dialogue would not be happening. Socrates' *love* for Alcibiades is a motif in the dialogue, and it explains Socrates' deep interest in Alcibiades' well-being and soul (103a; 135e). His love for Alcibiades is, as a matter of fact, reflected in the very first words of the dialogue: "I was the first man to fall in love with you, son of Clinias" (103a). Few people today on Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and so on, shame those they *love*. In fact, the reverse is most likely the case; we are more likely to let off the hook those we love, and those we hate are those we shame. Socrates offers himself to Alcibiades as a teacher, a moral exemplar, a fellow citizen, and someone who loves him.

When we think about applying the insights from Plato regarding shame to contemporary contexts, especially on social-media sites, I do not think that we must consider *refutation* in particular as a kind of shaming. The major insights from Plato when it comes to using shame to improve someone center around the role of the shamer as a teacher who must be hands-on and involved and around the importance of believing in the shamed victim's possible redemption and improvement. Of course, though, there must first be a direct engagement with the thing that is shameful. In Platonic dialogues, this is the false belief or the unworthy way of life. In today's contexts, it might be a racist tweet or an Instagram post that denies the reality of anthropogenic climate change. In some cases, the direct engagement with the shameful thing might be a refutation: we can easily imagine someone in the comment section on a YouTube video that has claimed that vaccines cause autism refuting the video-maker. Generally speaking, however, the direct engagement is much more likely to consist in a statement that the shamed person is evil and that whatever he or she has said is evil. It might look like a smug joke or a sarcastic comment, too. The goal is to get the shamed victim's attention and engagement, which are required if we are really going to change someone. It just so happens that in the context of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, which is the dramatic date of the Platonic dialogues, Socrates was able to get people's attention and tried to effect the change he aimed to induce by appealing to people's sense of shame at holding false and inconsistent beliefs. No doubt this says something about the temperaments and values of his interlocutors. The direct engagement

with his interlocutors, accordingly, involved refutations. Today, we might appeal to the fact that generally people dislike being called racist, sexist, or antisemitic and being seen to be called such things in front of others; this, therefore, pushes the shamed victim into a larger encounter with the shamer, and from that point, we can follow Socrates' example of continued engagement with the shamed victim.

At this point, it is worth stressing that I am not *describing* our current shaming practices and justifying them by citing themes from Plato's dialogues. In general, today's shaming practices might well be aimless, rather being directed towards the victim's moral improvement, and mean-spirited, rather than constructive. They might be governed by a belief that the shamed victim is totally incapable of redemption. It is virtually certain that the vast majority of shamers online today take no interest at all in the moral improvement of the victim, if they even believe that the moral improvement is possible in the first place. To this extent, Plato is urging us to improve ourselves as shamers and is offering up Socrates as a model for us to follow.

Let me anticipate an objection. One problem that someone might have with the current practices surrounding shaming is that the punishments are so severe. This concern looms large in various accounts, not least John Stuart Mill's condemnation of "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" (Mill, 1991: 9). Kathryn Norlock (2017), Jon Ronson (2015), and Roy Baumeister (1997) get at this idea too, with the first two thinkers reflecting specifically on *online*-shaming behaviors.<sup>1</sup> For Baumeister (1997), the real danger lies in what he calls the *magnitude gap*, which is the difference between the harms suffered by the victim and what the shamers *think* the victim will suffer.<sup>2</sup> (For instance, the shamer believes that the shamed victim will experience nothing more than the harm of being called transphobic, whereas, in reality, the shamed victim might start to feel deeply unsafe on account of the death threats.) Certainly, it is sobering to consider Ronson's catalogue of harms suffered by shaming victims: significant damage to a person's well-being, career losses, friendships ended, and so on.

There are real things to be concerned about here. Yet, it is hard to imagine institutional solutions that protect against some of these threats. If, for instance, a person's friend wants to end the friendship because of the other person's shameful views, then that is not something an institution could (or should) prevent. It is perhaps only slightly easier to imagine a way that job losses could be prevented: we might

1. Ronson's (2015: 226) study of Justine Sacco's case stands out here in particular.

2. See Baumeister (1997: 18-19): "the importance of what takes place is always much greater for the victim than the perpetrator." Virtually all of Norlock's (2017) laudable study revolves around this notion, too.

imagine contracts that stipulate a person cannot be fired for having a bad reputation brought upon by the expression of shameful views, but these contracts might be undesirable for various reasons. Firms have a legitimate interest in protecting their brand, and their brand might well be badly affected by vicious employees with shameful views. In fact, we might even want firms to care deeply about this sort of thing and to have a stake in the moral image of their brand: an important tool of desirable social change is that firms fire associates with bad moral reputations because their bottom-line profits depend on the severance of those ties. Further, it does not seem right for an Asian business-owner to be contractually or legally forbidden from firing an employee with a history of anti-Asian tweets on the grounds that we are worried about job losses being unfair punishments for shameful behaviors. If a person does not want to be associated with someone with shameful views, then that does not seem to be something that we could or should prevent. It would be dystopian to *force* me to associate with someone who is loudly racist only because we are worried about how damaging it might be to the racist's mental health if everyone in society cut ties with him or her.

Further, the Platonic point is that the threat of these punishments is precisely what gives the shamed people some skin in the game. Making the punishments less severe might only serve to make shaming less effective in the long run. Imagine again people relying on the feeling of shame to prompt them to go to the gym to work out: they are ashamed of missing their workouts with their personal trainers, so they are consistent in working out. Imagine if we tried to make the punishment of missing a workout less severe, perhaps by ensuring that the trainer never verbally acknowledges a missed workout. We have spared the shamed victims some bad feelings, but we have undermined the very purpose of the shame in the first place: *the bad feelings were the point*. The severity of the punishment is the point.

However, in making this reply, I might have straw-manned those who are calling for reduced punishments. Norlock (2017) and Ronson (2015) draw our attention in particular to hate mail, death threats, and angry people showing up at the victims' house to yell at them, making the victims feel deeply unsafe and scared. These behaviors no doubt go far beyond what Socrates imagined as the Athenians reproaching his sons for caring excessively about money and honor. To some extent, the law already provides us with the appropriate remedies, including restraining orders for people whom we do not want around us. Yet, I do grant the broader point that some shaming practices might go over the line. This is clearly not the case with *all* shaming behaviors: it is hard to

imagine some moral rule that prevents people from calling out racist tweets online, for instance; in fact, there might even be a moral rule that *requires* it. It is hard to specify exactly where this line is, but one helpful criterion is that the behaviors need to be *productive*. Showing up at someone's house to throw rocks at their windows or to yell at them as they go to work because of a racist tweet is, among other things, counter-productive with respect to that person's moral improvement. Someone in that position might even double down on their racist views, having seen that the most visible representative of the anti-racists is someone who does not respect boundaries.

For this reason, I noted above Plato's view that moral improvement ought to be guided by moral exemplars and teachers. Socrates was there for Alcibiades. This ensures that the shamers do not engage in purely destructive behaviors but helpfully instruct the person whom they have shamed. It is important that the shamers have not taken a hands-off approach or believe that the shamed victim is beyond redemption.

A further remedy might be that we should have shaming not be in front of millions of people, which is the case on social-media sites such as Twitter. (The audience is composed of millions of people on any given social-media platform alone; sometimes the offending post or tweet ends up in news articles, such that the readership is, in principle, in *the billions*.) A person is sufficiently motivated by shame in athletic contexts in which he or she is interacting one-on-one with a personal trainer. As far as a reader can tell, Socrates is alone with Alcibiades when he is shaming him in the *Alcibiades*. Plato's dialogues sometimes feature Socrates shaming characters such as Polus in the *Gorgias*, which will be examined further in the next section, not in one-on-one settings but in small groups. There does not seem to be any *need* to shame someone in front of millions. In online contexts, a suitable alternative might be sending someone a private message and correcting him or her there. In some cases, a person might be responsive to only those corrections made in front of others, but perhaps it could be useful to limit the audience to whatever size is necessary, to whatever extent that this is possible. Realistically, the number might have to be rather large in social-media contexts in order to get the attention of the shamed person in the first place. In offline contexts, it is much easier for one person to cause in another the bad, negative feelings that shame involves. In online contexts, someone might not even notice that he or she is being called out if just one person is doing the shaming.

Ultimately, some of these solutions— especially the solution that asks shamers to be moral teachers, involved in and believing in the possible

moral improvement of the shamed victim— might not be, for whatever reason, feasible in social-media contexts. It could be that these solutions are ruled out by the psychology of online shamers, for instance.<sup>1</sup> Shamers might be too interested in how morally righteous they look by standing up to racist tweets online and not at all interested in reducing the number of racists in the world.<sup>2</sup> We might not be able to get the shamer to care at all about the improvement of the racist. In that case, we would have to weigh the costs and benefits: Plato's view that shame can be useful might be true, but it might not matter if embracing shaming leads to more costs than benefits because we just cannot get shamers to moderate their shaming to something useful, rather than sending death threats and hate mail. After all, Plato recommends shame to us on the basis of its service in helping people become better. If shame, in practice, ended up sometimes doing that but also sometimes backfiring and causing people to lose friendships and their sense of security, while also doubling down on their shameful views, then we are failing to get the very thing for which we were employing shame in the first place. That being said, it is hard to see how we could ever *stop* shaming people in the way that John Stuart Mill (1991) warned about. So long as people are free to cut ties with those who have shameful views, friendships will always end due to shaming, with the relevant mental-health woes following, for instance. Our best bet in this respect might well be not to end shaming but to try to transform it into something Platonic: people would take an active interest in *redeeming* and improving their friends' characters, as Socrates tried with Alcibiades, rather than ending the friendship altogether.

## 2. Excluding ideas

There is a moment in the *Republic* when Socrates makes his interlocutor, Thrasymachus, blush (350d). This has happened because Socrates has dragged Thrasymachus through a lengthy and toilsome refutation, and Thrasymachus is a terribly proud man.<sup>3</sup> Shame plays a larger role in the dialectic of the *Gorgias* than in any other dialogue: Socrates seems to get Polus, for instance, to agree to the claim that it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one by shaming Polus: he knew that Polus would not want to be seen agreeing to the opposite, even if the opposite were true.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Socrates is called out in the dialogue for relying on

1. Norlock (2017) is by far the most comprehensive study of the psychology of online shamers from a philosophical perspective. Another worthwhile study is Rajesh et al. (2016).

2. Norlock (2017) emphasizes the focus of shamers on how they are perceived by other people as a major source of motivation.

3. See Moore (2015) for a discussion of what is happening philosophically and argumentatively when Thrasymachus blushes.

4. See Cain (2008) and, especially, Tarnopolsky 2010 for discussions of shame in the *Gorgias*.

shame in exactly this way (482c-484c). There is an important lesson here: as much as Socrates prizes good reasoning, he helps himself to the use of apparently non-rational psychological forces, such as shame, to help secure whatever outcome he is pursuing.

Getting Thrasymachus to blush and getting Polus to agree to Socrates' thesis cannot be assimilated to the other uses of shame that we observed in the previous section. By using shame in this way, there is no suggestion that Socrates has changed anyone's mind. He might have refuted Thrasymachus, but perhaps not: nobody in the dialogue seems convinced by Socrates' arguments in the first book of the *Republic*, after all. Glaucon needs to ask Socrates: "do you want to seem to have persuaded us that it is better in every way to be just than unjust, or do you want truly to convince us of this" (357a-b)? The thought is that Socrates has merely *appeared* to persuade people because his argument against Thrasymachus was based on getting Thrasymachus to blush and be silent that way. When Glaucon wants to hear from Socrates a *true* defense of the view that justice is better than injustice, he repeats Thrasymachus' view but then clarifies: "it isn't, Socrates, that I believe any of that myself" (358c). Glaucon has to make this disclaimer to protect himself from Socratic shaming. Glaucon cannot be shamed for holding Thrasymachus' view because he does not really hold it; he is adopting it for the sake of argument. This distance between Glaucon and the view that he will now defend forces Socrates to rely exclusively on his reasoning skills, rather than bringing to bear psychological forces such as shame.

That is why the kind of shaming that we see in the *Republic* and *Gorgias* cannot be assimilated to the kind of shaming that improves the shamed person: it does not seem to have, as a matter of fact, induced any change in anyone. It has only removed a view from public consideration. Polus will not say aloud that it is worse to suffer an injustice than to commit one, regardless of what he believes or what is true. Instead, he will affirm that it is worse to commit an injustice than to suffer one, because he would be ashamed to say anything else.

This reveals another important dimension to shaming in Plato's dialogues: it is useful for eliminating views that we do not want to circulate in society. We exclude them from public consideration. There is a growing body of literature in the ethics of social media that talks about the social harms caused by social-media technologies.<sup>1</sup> Cass Sunstein, for instance, argues that common beliefs or shared experiences are required for democratic institutions to function well and that social-media technologies lead to division between people in a way that

1. See especially Parsell (2008) and Sunstein (2017) for discussions of social harms, especially the latter.



threatens the future of democracy.<sup>1</sup> There are aspects to this insidious problem that Plato cannot solve: for example, he does not have much to say about the tendency of people to consume only media that they already agree with. Yet, there are aspects to this problem about which Plato can be illuminating. Specifically, Plato has much to say about the importance of eliminating dissent. I see this as fitting into the debate about preserving democratic institutions in the following way: to the extent that democratic institutions are threatened by beliefs that render democratic deliberation impossible, we can use shame to eliminate these views from public consideration.

The preservation of human societies by means of shame is an idea that we find throughout ancient Greek culture, including explicitly in Plato's dialogues. (However, he does not talk about the importance of shame when it comes to preserving *democracies* in particular.) The myth of the *Protagoras* (320c-322c) shines an important light on this.<sup>2</sup> In that myth, the gods desperately search for some way to ensure the survival of humans: other animals have built-in ways of defending themselves, but humans are virtually defenseless when alone. So, Prometheus equips humans with the ability to congregate. The problem, however, is that humans wrong each other as soon as they form groups. They can get together, but they cannot stick together. The gods decide to furnish every human with "shame [*aidō(i)*] and justice [*dikēn*]" (322c). "Cities would never come to be if only a few possessed these [two things]," Plato writes (322d). He then issues a bleak warning: "death to him who cannot partake of shame and justice, for he is a pestilence to the city" (322d). There is an important lesson here that needs to be taken seriously: shame is part of the glue that holds the social fabric together.<sup>3</sup>

This is a motif in ancient Greek literature. The moral fabric of society was closely related in Greek thought to the sensitivity of people to feelings of shame.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, Euripides (1994) has the chorus tell Medea, after her husband has betrayed her and left her for another, that "shame [*aidōs*] is no more to be found in wide Hellas" (*Medea* 439-440). In Sophocles' (1994: 249-250) *Elektra*, Elektra says that if her murdered

1. See Sunstein (2017: 140ff; 144) further contends that "any well-functioning society depends on relationships of trust and reciprocity," which are undermined by echo chambers. See also Nguyen's (2020) analysis that echo chambers foster distrust of non-members among members.

2. Cairns (1993: 355) argues that the philosophical content of Protagoras' speech can be attributed to the historical Protagoras.

3. Farrar (2009: 96) adds that Protagoras "sought to show that the highest possible development of all individuals depended on the existence of a political community all of whose members exhibited *aidōs* [that is, shame] and *dikē* [that is, justice] and participated in politics." This is an important insight because it combines the two main Platonic ideas in this article: first, there is the fact that shame plays a crucial role in the individual's moral improvement; second, there is the fact that shame plays a role in preserving society. There are two levels of benefits happening in parallel.

4. Cf. Cairns (1993: 356 n.38), who says that "the withdrawal of *aidōs* [that is, shame] is seen as a sign of the breakdown of moral order" in ancient Greece.



father, Agamemnon, is not avenged, then that would spell the “end of *aidōs* and of the piety of all mortals.” In Hesiod’s (2018: 200-201) *Works and Days*, if shame ever departed from humans, only “baleful pains will be left for mortal human beings, and there will be no safeguard against evil.” These reflections should remind us of a claim made by Plato in the previous section: that shamelessness is a vice, characteristic of deteriorating political communities. The *Protagoras* and these other pieces of Greek literary culture should mark what is at stake: the fabric that holds society together. I maintain that at the heart of this is something that we should take seriously today: the use of shame to exclude socially unwelcome ideas.<sup>1</sup>

We might ultimately find that it is too illiberal for us to stomach the possibility of outright eliminating ideas from public consideration using a non-rational psychological force, such as shame, but at any rate, I think that Plato’s thoughts are worthy of consideration here. Shortly, we shall attend to his view that people who persist in holding some unwelcome beliefs should be killed, but first, let us consider the beliefs that render democratic deliberation impossible or ineffectual. This notion is best illustrated with some examples from Sunstein (2017: 67):

Many Americans fear that certain environmental problems—abandoned hazardous waste sites, genetic engineering of food, climate change— are extremely serious and require immediate government action. But others believe that the same problems are imaginative fictions, generated by zealots and self-serving politicians. Many Americans think that most welfare recipients are indolent and content to live off the work of others. On this view, “welfare reform,” to be worthy of the name, consists of reduced handouts— a step necessary to encourage people to fend for themselves. But many other Americans believe that welfare recipients generally face severe disadvantages and would be entirely willing to work if decent jobs were available. On this view, welfare reform, understood as reductions in benefits, is an act of official cruelty. Many people believe that the largest threat to American security remains terrorism, and that if terrorism is not a top priority,

1. Cairns (1993: 358-359) says helpfully, while interpreting the *Protagoras*, that “it is necessary for the existence of the social and political community that citizens acquire these qualities, and it is in the interests of the individual, since their possession benefits citizens mutually,” and that despite Plato’s emphasis “on the coercive and corrective force of the state, its laws, and its customs, he cannot be said to believe that morality is maintained by external sanctions alone.” This last claim is particularly important, especially since we probably will not endorse Plato’s rather liberal use of the death penalty (e.g., throughout the *Laws*): shame provides us with a powerful tool for safeguarding the social fabric independently of coercion. Even if we are not ultimately on-board with excluding ideas from the public sphere using shame, certainly it is better to use shame than coercion.

catastrophic attacks are likely to ensue. Many others believe that while terrorism presents serious risks, the threat has been overblown, and that other problems, including climate change, deserve at least equal attention.

As Sunstein (2017: 67) notes, it is not possible for people in these circumstances to make any meaningful progress on these problems. They speak past each other and are, for all intents and purposes, living in different worlds.

Plato gives us a helpful image in the *Laws*. The main speaker of the dialogue asks his interlocutors to imagine different judges (I 627e-628a). One judge resolves a dispute among brothers by using force to kill the bad brothers. Another resolves the dispute by taking some of the quarreling brothers and making them subordinate to the others. The third judge *reconciles* the quarreling brothers and makes them be at peace with each other. The third is deemed by Plato to be the best. This speaks to Plato's commitment in the *Laws* to the elimination of dissent, although he is, it turns out, comfortable with using the death penalty to achieve it.<sup>1</sup> In the picture of today's political landscape that Sunstein paints for us, where people disagree deeply on every hot-button political topic, we most often find ourselves settling a political dispute in the same way that the second judge does: a political party wins a majority or an important office and then lays down for everyone what the solution to a problem is, and the people in the minority are left grumbling. The third judge's success involves getting everyone on the same page, which is difficult in light of the problem as Sunstein has described it.

We can exclude ideas from public consideration by using shame. To the extent that people sincerely hold these beliefs and to the extent that we want to change the people themselves, we can use the processes described in the first section. Nonetheless, even using shame without changing the underlying person has the virtue of eliminating dissent by taking some views out of public consideration entirely. We avoid the problems generated by deep disagreement if some views are not up for debate at all because people are too ashamed to vocalize their negations.

Some people might sincerely hold the negations of the socially and democratically important beliefs. Using shame to prevent them from vocalizing their beliefs does not change what goes in their minds. It does, however, severely limit their influence and limit the amount of

1. Presumably, he does not think that this counts as using force because the death penalty's usage is carefully regulated by the law, whereas the use of force might be seen as necessarily capricious and whimsical. (Think about the way today we would not often say that locking a person in jail in accordance with their guilty verdict and judge-ordered sentence is an instance of the use of force to punish someone, although we have used force in a certain sense to lock this person up.)

disagreement in society. What should be done with the few sincere dissenters is illuminated by Plato's discussion of atheism in *Laws* X. There, he develops a system of civic religion that is crucial for the city's functioning and well-being. Atheists as well as those who believe that the gods either neglect human affairs or accept bribes from humans pose an existential threat to society. The city must do what it can to disabuse such people of their beliefs and to eliminate dissent. When someone is found guilty of atheism, the first thing that we do is send the atheist to a "reform center," where someone looks out for his or her "spiritual salvation" (X 908e-909a). When someone persists in their atheism, and thus the reform center has turned out to be ineffective, we sentence the atheist to death (909a).

There is probably no real appetite today for having reform centers for dissenters and then the death penalty for persistent dissenters. We can mindfully disregard this part of Plato's system in the *Laws*, but there is something here worth preserving: the sense that the elimination of some kinds of dissent in order to ensure that democratic institutions function well. We need to resolve the problem laid out by Cass Sunstein according to which there are factions in society that are doomed to speak past each other. Plato's discussion of how to deal with atheists encourages us to be constructive first of all, when we are trying to change the minds of dissenters, but hopefully we are being constructive outside of reform centers. We might have to give up on changing someone's mind eventually if they persist in their dissent. Our attempts to change someone's mind might well involve the tools of shame outlined above. However, we can resolve much of the problem without even talking about the minds of individual people at all: we limit the harms of dissent considerably simply by using shame to keep some people silent.

Now let us think about the same problem from a different point of view. Consider the harms of racists, for instance. There might be a social cost if we are talking about a particular kind of racism that the debate around which undermines the functioning of democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup> Most of the harm that racism does is to the racial group that is targeted by the racism. The disagreement about the value and dignity of a group of human beings harms that group. Now this harm virtually entirely disappears if we shame the racists into silence. This does not stop us from *also* reforming them, analogous to Plato's view that we should send atheists to a reform center such that their views do not endanger society. Yet, the point is that we enjoy a huge benefit without even reforming

1. Plato himself would surely say that there is a harm that is done to the racist himself or herself. After all, he puts into the mouth of Socrates the view that having a false belief is "the greatest and most extreme evil" (*Phaedo* 83c). To the extent that we reform racists according to the method outlined in the first section, we eliminate this harm.

anyone. We prevent the racist belief, for example, from harming people, by silencing it; we also prevent the racist belief from spreading to other people. Racists will have a hard time converting other people to racism if they are too ashamed to speak.

We receive these benefits without even being as involved as Socrates was in Alcibiades' conversion. This kind of shaming does not require follow-ups from a moral instructor. This kind of shaming does not require a belief in the redemption and moral improvement of anyone. It is sufficient to simply bring social pressure to bear on someone, and they will not spread anti-vaccination Reddit posts or climate-change-denial tweets.

We might, at the end of the day, decide against pursuing this Platonic approach to the problems of dissent that give thinkers such as Sunstein concerns about the future of democratic institutions. On the one hand, we might balk at the thought of silencing views using shame instead of arguing with them. On the other hand, we might find that arguing with them makes them more deeply entrenched and worsens the problem because we give them free airtime by attending to them, thus counting in favor of taking Plato's approach. Optimistically, we might hope that we solve the problems concerning deep disagreement and divisions in our society in such a way that does not involve our having to silence anyone at all. Ultimately, I think that Plato's approach is worthy of our consideration and ought to be of significant interest to those of us who think about shaming people and excluding ideas online in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Ethical considerations**

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

### **Conflicts of interests**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

### **Data availability**

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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