

CENSORSHIP AND DISCOURSE: ATOMS, BITS, & BODIES

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Epistemic coercion is a *problem* – something we need to do as well as something we need to avoid or resist. Epistemic coercion is a *superficial* problem – in two senses: First: we, or “they”, cannot actually control discourse except by controlling speakers and writers, which means that nobody can actually be stopped from saying what they will up until the moment they are sanctioned or cancelled. Second, through epistemic coercion we control the surfaces and motions of bodies we discipline and mobilize. We can inscribe bodies but cannot conjure them into flesh from words alone – at least until our nanotechnologists can assemble atoms into life.

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ЦЕНЗУРА И ДИСКУРС: АТОМЫ, БИТЫ И ТЕЛА

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Проблема эпистемического принуждения относится к тому, что мы должны нечто делать, а также к тому, что нам следует чему-то сопротивляться. Это поверхностная проблема в двух смыслах. Во-первых, мы или «они» можем контролировать дискурс только посредством контроля за теми, кто говорит и пишет. Это означает, что никому нельзя помешать говорить то, что он хочет, пока это разрешено. Во-вторых, посредством эпистемического принуждения мы контролируем поверхности и движения тел, которые мы подчиняем и мобилизуем. Мы можем оставлять знаки на телах, но не можем собрать тела из одних только слов – по крайней мере, до тех пор, пока наши нанотехнологи не научатся собирать атомы в живые организмы.

Ключевые слова: цензура, власть, экспертная оценка, сопротивление, мобилизация

What is epistemic coercion, and how is it possible? The West is administered through the US-centered “Censorship-Industrial complex,” as Michael Shellenberger [Shellenberger, 2023] has called the globe-spanning assemblage of intelligence agencies and their academic and Big Tech collaborators. The censorship-industrial complex can keep us from knowing things by censorship, or by polluting our information stream with misinformation.

A possibility we consider less frequently is that one can make somebody know something he or she did not choose to know, or even something that he or she would have chosen not to know. The clear cases of this kind of epistemic coercion are cases of knowing how: a conscript learns how to be a soldier whether he or she wants to or not.



As the example of conscription shows, the question of how to resist epistemic coercion is supplementary, and, as a political scientist I would argue really secondary, to the question of how and when to perform epistemic coercion. Feyerabend, the self-proclaimed “epistemological anarchist” [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 9] often gives the impression that we have an option to avoid all complicity in policing speech and thought, but the Wehrmacht, in which Feyerabend himself served, was defeated not by pacifists nor by nonviolent resistance but by hundreds of divisions of conscripts drafted at gunpoint to defend “The Four Freedoms” and, notwithstanding the deceit and horrors of Stalin’s tyranny, the constitutional rights of Soviet citizens. Both FDR’s America and Stalin’s USSR claimed, with great differences in law and far greater in practice, to champion freedom of speech and of religion, and did so by coercing men to know how to fight. As Professor Turner writes, epistemic coercion is a “problem” – a ancient Greek word which etymologically means something thrown before us that we must, generally speaking, solve – that is, figure out how to do – rather than avoid.

An old idea, going back to Plato’s Socrates in the *Theaetetus* (201), is that knowledge, or rather propositional knowledge or “knowledge that,” is “true belief plus an account,” a cognitive state of belief with the addition of a discourse correctly justifying that belief. Coercion of discourse is of course, eminently feasible and even frequent. “They,” Shellenberger’s censorship-industrial complex, can and do control what we read or hear and punish us for what we say or write. “They” can certainly coerce statements of belief even more easily than they can coerce belief, and do it all the time in the user agreements we click “yes” to without choice and without reflection. Because or insofar as Jefferson was correct that the beliefs of men depend on the evidence presented to their minds, “they” can control beliefs by controlling what evidence is explicitly presented and what is suppressed.

Yet note that the control of evidence is control of discursively presented evidence: the mechanism of censorship is the control of publication and occasionally, depublication. Sometimes depublication occurs as the result of evidence of plagiarism or fraud – but with regard to claims “they” disfavor, depublication is often the result of alleged “ethical violations” even though no counterevidence or substantive debunk is produced [Boseley, 2010].

Peer review is review of peers by means of review of the writings of would-be peers: to coin a phrase from Linus Pauling about the eventual Chemistry Nobelist Dan Shechtman, “*there is no such thing as quasi-crystals, only quasi-scientists.*” Professor Turner writes above of “the efforts of scientists to censor their own colleagues for taking positions that the government opposes, out of fear for their own grants.” Note the object in that sentence: it is the colleagues that are censored, not the positions. The key method of control is not censorship of discourse *per se*, but exclusion



of speakers or writers. People, it turns out, are more easily “cancelled” than expressions are censored. The Internet still “interprets censorship as damage and routes around it,” but those who take or enable those unauthorized or illegal routes can be punished. To stay in the First Circle of grant recipients and the professionally licensed, you have to avoid saying or writing certain things. Moreover, unless one is remarkably fortunate in one’s naiveté, those of us with careers to forfeit have to know what not to say.

Turner writes that “teen-age girls lack the experiences that lead to the tacit endowments that enable resistance.” As the son of a teenage mother I am well aware that resistance can be excessive and that the fantastic naiveté of teenage girls appears to be vital for the continuation of the species. But it is not only resistance but also complicity that requires an endowment of knowledge, explicit as well as tacit.

That the mechanisms of coercion operate effectively on persons but poorly on statements has two important implications: First, because you have to know what you are not allowed to say, the whole system of policing is made possible only by the bad faith of those who implement it and those who comply. “‘I wonder,’ said Cato, ‘that a soothsayer doesn’t laugh when he sees another soothsayer’” (Cicero, *On Divination*, 2.24). Statements that must be believed but cannot be articulated cannot be put to the test: US opponents of voter ID requirements (which are pretty much universal in democratic countries), often claim that voter ID is “racist”: the unspoken and unspeakable premise is that US racial minorities, in particular African Americans, do not know how to get ID’s, which would be tough on US Black people who want to clear their sinuses with pseudoephedrine.

Second, if you are willing to brave the penalties – or are immune or merely oblivious to them – you cannot be kept from tasting the forbidden fruit, or even retailing it. As Kevin Bird and Jedididah Carlson [2024] regretfully note, when “articles are published outside of mainstream venues” or “by a group of researchers who lack institutional affiliations (or whose affiliation is outside of the United States), the ability to retract or sanction these researchers through usual mechanisms seems minimal.” Or to take a less academic example, the “blackface” episodes of the US medical sitcom *Scrubs* have been removed from streaming services [Caras, 2020] but are still available for (illegal) download via file sharing protocols. Yet there really is harmful stuff out there when one ventures beyond the walled, curated garden of permitted content, and bad things can happen to those who wander beyond the pale, ranging from bricking one’s cellphone or accidentally infesting one’s IT system with ransomware to starving oneself on a fruit diet to dying unmourned in custody.

What resists epistemic coercion whether we will it or not is that impersonal, seemingly unknowing thing: our bodies as we live them. Tacit knowledge is paradigmatically bodily knowledge: I suspect that when we say that something “doesn’t sound right” or “violates common sense” or



“doesn’t pass the smell test,” these references to our bodily sensorium are not just dead metaphors. One cannot simply tell the ignorant or the innocent what sex is like, or how to ride a bicycle: this is tacit knowledge as inarticulable knowledge. Turner, however, uses the term “tacit knowledge” to include knowledge that is articulable but for which the supposed knower does not have a ready articulation. Turner writes of “examples of explicitly coerced personal experiences that generate largely inarticulable knowledge: a paradigm case would be Eisenhower’s decision at the end of the Second World War to force Germans to watch films of the concentration camps by making it a condition of getting stamps to obtain food.” Whatever the Germans could learn from those films could also be taught as explicit knowledge, one might think, from a book or a sufficiently articulate and vivid series of lectures about the Holocaust.

Discourse can be made without loss into images, as the former Wachowski brothers demonstrated a generation ago with *The Matrix* (1999). Discourse can be made into lived reality only by recruiting bodies and deploying them all but superficially as they are. “They,” our censorship-industrial complex overlords, can control “the discourse,” – or at least they can control their own discourse and that of anyone who aspires to the positions of power and privilege that they control. That discourse can as yet be inscribed on our bodily reality, the realm of tacit knowledge beyond all discourse, only superficially – a tattoo, or a vaginoplasty.

The United States Marines could, at least until recently, take boys and make them into tattooed men, but they cannot grow riflemen in computer-numerically-controlled vats. The technophiles talk about bits versus atoms, as if we knew how to assemble atoms into life. To fully transform discourse into biopower one would need to make one’s code come alive, perhaps with the aid of Plato’s nuptial number (*Republic* 546). “They” can force the large language models whose programmers they manage and those who wish to avoid “cancellation” to say that men can have babies, but “they” can’t actually make men have babies... yet.

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