Social Coercion, or Humans as Means

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Traditionally, voluntaryism has only been concerned with physical coercion, or physical aggression. In "Voluntaryism Transcends Anarchism" I gave my thoughts on how voluntaryism should have a much broader application. Politics and the economy are important in voluntaryist thought, but so should be societal culture and parenting and childhood development. The arguments against the use of physical coercion abound in voluntaryism and libertarian thought, with a growing emphasis on the use of violence in the home. But what seems lacking is an analysis on non-physical forms of coercion. Let's fix that.

Coercion, Physical or Social

Coercion is simply "the practice of persuading someone to do something by using force or threats." That last "or" is important. Coercion is not only physical aggression. It can also be the threat of doing something that does not violate the non-aggression principle (NAP). For example, one person could threaten to make public an embarrassing or shameful habit of another person in order to get something from that person. The threat of broadcasting information of this nature is well within the bounds of the NAP, but it's still a form of coercion. Let's call it "social coercion," in contrast to "physical coercion."

The above example is not the only form of social coercion. There are many ways to threaten something undesirable that does not violate the NAP. These include the threats of not keeping one's promise to keep something secret or to perform some action, of discontinuing another's privileged access to one's property or service, and of withdrawing one's affections or presence from another. None of these involve an act of aggression, but they are still coercive because they use a threat in order to induce compliance.

Social Coercion and Voluntaryism

The foundation of voluntaryism has always been consistent adherence to the libertarian ethical principles of self-ownership, property by original appropriation, and non-aggression.

Each of these principles set guidelines on the nature of interpersonal relations. Those relations, according to these principles, must remain physically voluntary. The use or the threat of physical coercion is a violation of the libertarian ethic. Though founded on this ethic, voluntaryism has expanded over the last few decades, primarily by the work of Carl Watner, to embrace what he calls "the voluntary principle," that "human relations should happen voluntarily, or not at all." What separates voluntaryism from libertarianism, then, is the consistent application of the voluntary principle.

If all human relations should happen voluntarily, then social coercion is as much a violation of the voluntary principle as is physical coercion. It follows then that any action that disregards another's humanity, individuality, and free will, instead using them as mere means to be either physically or socially coerced and manipulated to one's ends, is an action that voluntaryists should reject as disdainful and contemptuous. While physical coercion may be responded to with force according to the NAP, social coercion cannot. How then can one respond to social coercion? While the voluntary principle requires initiatory actions to be voluntary, it only encourages voluntary-ness in retaliatory actions. The best strategy may not be responding in kind, but if one is using others as means by the use of social coercion, then he or she is estopped from also being used as means by the use of social coercion.

Final Thoughts

I think more can be said in regards to the use of social coercion in society, and certainly more in families. Parents who don't believe in physical coercion will often use the many forms of social coercion. I don't believe that children need to be coerced at all. They should be treated as individual human beings, and their free will respected, not as means in the designs of their elders. Parents who coerce their children as means teach them that it's quite alright to coerce others, to disregard their individuality, humanity, and free will. I think that's a poor way to create and maintain peace and a free society. I'll therefore be sure to abstain from the use of either physical or social coercion among my wife and children, and out in society. Join me!