

Social Coercion, a Discussion

I thought I'd share the discussion on Facebook that led to me writing my column on social coercion, between Aaron and Steve (with minor edits and comments in brackets). It's far more detailed than my column was and I wanted to archive it here.

Skyler.

Steve: "Social coercion" I define as the pressure one individual or culture puts on an individual to conform to majority standards including appearance, action, and thought. It has both direct and indirect forms.

An example of direct social coercion: a man's neighbor expects that when they look at the man's house they will not see a naked man through the window. If the neighbor calls the police, this is government coercion. If the neighbor employs techniques such as social ostracization from neighborhood events the man would normally be entitled to attend, harassment, or ridicule towards the man, this is direct social coercion to force the neighbor's standard of decency upon the man's private life.

An example of indirect social coercion: a woman wants to marry into a polygamous marriage but she fears that her friends, family, and society will reject her, causing her to be depressed and lonely. She knows that just-or-not her relationships with others are dependent on her marital choices. It may be hard for the woman to define completely the "who" of the coercion when she feels and often verbally is labeled and mocked by passers-by as a "polyg."

Social coercion then is the often overlooked, typically non-physically-violent social means which a person or a people apply to get people to conform to majority will or will of another and to suppress individual rights. At its core it is the old "peer pressure" of the schoolyard applied to the adult world. I am fascinated by it because we often consciously neglect its proper labeling even though it is probably far more pervasive than government coercion. Even in voluntaryist circles we seem to only skip stones over this encompassing topic.

Social coercion is the cockroach of all coercion: difficult to extricate, of historic origins, and pervasive of all relationships: personal, business, employment, religious, political, and social.

Steve: One more attribute of social coercion: at its core it is *the* practical approach for the everyday voluntaryist as it begs the question: "Where in my own life am I employing social coercion and what can I do to change my own behaviors?" Even in the words I use to define social coercion the cockroach is evident: some people want to force others to conform to

spelling norms in writing and to bridle their kreeAtivity.

Aaron: I think “social coercion” is a lot of what gentle parenting/radical unschooling addresses to a certain degree (at least towards children).

Most of the time parents don’t need to physically coerce their kids. They usually can withdraw approval/love, humiliate, ostracize, scare, etc. to gain compliance.

Since Libertarianism/Voluntaryism is a political philosophy, it doesn’t have a ton to say on the topic.

However, at a deeper, psychological and sociological level we can look at it from a pragmatist perspective. Alfie Kohn’s book *Punished by Rewards* can offer some good insight here.

First: What kind of society do you want ... one where people are controlling dicks to others? (Though not through means of physical force.) Or one where people are empathetic and treat people with kindness? I think a society where people (who don’t physically hurt others) are treated with empathy and left to their own devices, generally, is a much healthier one. Sure, I might chose not to live next to a whore house ... but I should be treated like an asshole for manipulating and controlling through social means to ostracize and shame them. I think the best frame work of society is one where people are treated with empathy, and not treated with “social coercion.” Ergo ... I think the best way of attaining this is to act like an ass to assholes, and treat everyone else with respect. Reserve most forms of “social coercion” for people who use “social coercion.”

Second: It doesn’t work towards the goals you are looking for. Just like with children ... if you manipulate or punish them, you will likely attain short term conformity, but it will be at the cost of something much bigger. When you alienate people in your society, they will sabotage it.

When we start punishing people (even socially for their emotions), we don’t kill demand for their emotional expression ... we merely push it into a sort of social black market where the emotions get expressed in a much more dangerous way. I made a video that touches on this a bit (like 4 years ago). ... [Here](#).

BTW, I am not a fan of the phrase “social coercion.” I think this is a debate recently in the libertarian community with “slut shaming” from something written by Cathy Reizenwitz. While I agree with her that social pressure is an insanely manipulative and effective way of controlling people ... I hate to compare it to physical coercion. I hate social pressure, but I can leave it, and a person should have the fundamental right to be an asshole. That’s why I prefer to fight assholeish social pressure by treating them like an asshole. I think the phrase “social coercion” provides the linguistic illusion that it should be equated and treated

similarly to physical coercion.

Steve: Great stuff Aaron. As a free thinker, I coined “social coercion” for personal use rather than borrowing it with baggage from others who have already opined.

I would like to restate your premise with an example of my own. (I know, dangerous...) A true pacifist might take the position that because violence is inherently bad, there is no appropriate use of violence. In contrast, my personal approach is what I term the “non-aggression principle,” rather than pacifism. I allow violence in return for violence initiated by others or a government. I am not allowed to hit you first, but I am allowed to hit you back.

Applying this to social coercion (my term throughout) if someone is socially coercive to me, I allow myself to be socially coercive back as a means of self-defense. So yes, I agree with you that I have the right act like an ass to an asshole. Yet I would further refine that right to mean that it doesn’t mean I *have* to act like an ass if I feel like another philosophy such as the Christian turn-the-other-cheek (no pun) or forgiveness might be more effective in a situation.

Perhaps where we differ is in our views of the inequality vs. equality of social coercion and physical coercion. I don’t really see the difference; they are both violent. Social coercion tends towards violence of the mind/soul/spirit/sociality and physical coercion is violence, of course, to the physical body. Extreme social coercion can manifest itself physically. There are numerous examples of gay boys and men who have been so socially coerced—not by government but by ourselves as a culture—who end their own miserable lives. The whole modern term “cyber bullying” has led others to suicide.

It is thus I view social coercion on par with physical coercion. I suppose this way of thinking leads me to feel that life imprisonment without parole (principally an act of social coercion by a government) as no less a punishment than the death penalty (apex of physical coercion).

Aaron: “Perhaps where we differ is in our views of the inequality vs equality of social coercion and physical coercion. I don’t really see the difference; they are both violent.”

I always try to be careful with language. For example ... A liberal might say that “hate speech” is coercive. Through their logic they equate it equally with physical violence. Ergo, they will justify people using violence against someone using “hate speech.” They will now narrowly define hate speech to mean most anything they feel is wrong. Through their use of language they are now able to be insanely controlling of others.

I use violence to mean physical force. If someone initiates violence to me, I have every right to be violent with them. Once we define “social coercion” to also be violent, we are

opening the door to violently attack people who act like jerks. If both are equal ... It is totally justified to pummel a guy who calls me stupid. This is why I dislike the word violence here.

“Social coercion tends towards violence of the mind/soul/spirit/sociality and physical coercion is violence, of course, to the physical body.”

I agree with you in intent, but disagree with language. The body is a special line to protect ... If someone calls me names or acts like a dick, I have all the power in the world to get away from them. Once someone is violent with me I am in many senses kidnapped ... I can't escape. This actually plays into what you talked about afterward.

Bullying is so dangerous, not because people are mean, but because children are kidnapped (in a sense). Children are forced to be around their abusers by their parents, and by compulsory education laws. They do not get to choose their associations. There is no real market to protect them. We find the worse cases of bullying to be in forced associations ... School, prison, communist societies, police, government, [family], etc. Since you are not in a mutually beneficial relationship with the others ... there is little reason to protect the less powerful.

A huge reason bullying isn't often tolerated at work is because employees can leave, and employers are in the market to find quality employees. Ergo, there is usually no tolerance for bullying in any fashion, and it is the goal of the workplace to make it friendly to people who might work there. The more marketable your skills, the more demand for your labor, the more employers will make sure you feel appreciated. When things are forced, there is more of an incentive to worship power since there are no market forces keeping things in check. Do you really want to make enemies with the powerful and popular inmates / schoolkids / government worker to protect someone no one cares about?

Bullying is fundamentally a problem of forced association.

In some ways I hated the “It gets better” campaign. The focus was on teaching kids to tolerate abuse and realize their future might be better. How fucked up is that. Kids are treated like shit because they are told they have to learn to tolerate abuse, and they are often further told that life is that way. That is total bullshit. *No one should tolerate abuse in their lives*, and they should quit jobs if people are assholes. However, instead of teaching kids to go to places where they will be safe, and not to tolerate abuse ... we sub-textually tell them to “man up,” but also, eventually “It gets better.” The only people in the world our society tolerates being treated like shit are the absolutely most vulnerable, and most effected by abuse [children].

Anyway ...

I think social pressure can hurt vastly more than physical coercion. I think it can be insanely abusive. However, the fundamental difference between the two is that you can walk away from one, and you can't walk away from the other. As an adult I rarely run into people who socially pressure me, because I choose who I am around. As a child I was under constant social pressure (as most of us were) because we couldn't choose our associations.

The solution is to make it so children are more like adults. Liberate them. Let them choose what they do, and let them quit things that suck. Give them freedom of association. They will be able to truly walk away from bullies, and eventually learn how to pick associations that are uplifting and wonderful.

Steve: Aaron, it's pretty refreshing to have a fair and invigorating discussion with a thoughtful creature as yourself. Enjoyed your video, btw. I'm a fan of Master Skyler too and how he rationalizes. [*blushes*]

At any rate I see I neglected to put in one critical piece of information and you caught it for me. While I do consider social coercion as violence, there are different levels of violence. Punching in the nose is not akin to murder. Therefore, the rule I subscribe to says I can meet a violent act with equal violence. It's your "treat an asshole like an ass" or for many Muslims, Jews, and Old Testament Christians eye-for-an-eye. It does not say treat an asshole to the taste of my .22 or two eyes for an eye and this might be the missing piece in the liberal rationale.

An interesting thought about "walking away" from social coercion: I don't think it's that easy. For example, a spouse can use social coercion on the other (and I would assert this is a daily event for most). If you choose to walk away, might you have to dramatically alter the relationship you have with your children? I would guess there are times both when it is possible to walk away from physical coercion as well as social but there are times one finds it nearly impossible.

Aaron: I agree it is sometimes hard to walk away. We are often invested in people who don't treat us well. However, that is our choice. My wife doesn't interact with her family of origin at all. Her transition was very hard, but she is a much happier person for it. Sometimes that investment can be very powerful, and we don't have the will or self-esteem to overcome it ... I can empathize, but it is ultimately a choice we make.