



Coercion — the Meaning of the Word

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Once again TCS usage of the word “coercion” has been discussed, and once again, may I stress that I am not

interested in arguing definitions. If you don't like the way we use the word, choose another word – make up one if you like – but leave the meaning intact. The idea is not: “We want to be non-coercive. Now let's consider what that *means*.” We believe that the thing that we call “coercion” is harmful. If you want to give that thing a new name, I don't mind, just so long as we are all talking about the same thing.

Having said that, it is indeed interesting to ask how close the thing we call “coercion” is to “coercion” in everyday usage. I think that it is very close, perhaps much closer than it looks to some people. You see, how close these two concepts seem to you depends on your background assumptions about human minds. In particular, the less you believe non-coercive educational theory, the further from ordinary usage the TCS usage of “coercion” may seem to you. Perhaps it might help if I give an example of a similar phenomenon here:

Anarcho-capitalists define the word “anarchy” as the absence of government, and they have in their mind's eye a society in which there is spontaneous order and in which there is less violence and threat of violence than in our society. But when *most* people hear the word “anarchy,” they think of a society which is much more disordered than ours, and in which there is *more* force and threat of force than in our society. A second way of defining an anarchist society is as a society organised by spontaneous order. How alike are these two definitions? To an anarchist, they are very close, almost identical, because an anarchist believes that it is largely government that causes deviations from spontaneous order. But if you *don't* believe that – for instance if you believe that “unchecked” market forces cause *disorder*, then the two definitions will look radically different to you. So whether the two definitions define closely related things or not depends on one's substantive theories about how government and spontaneous order are related.

I think that something of the same thing is occurring when people find that our definition of coercion differs from their intuitions of what coercion is.

If, for instance, you think that unresolvable conflict of the type that we associate with “coercion” is inherent in the human mind or in everyday external circumstances – then you might think that whilst it is true that coercion (in the everyday sense) produces that sort of thing, so do all sorts of other things too. But if you think of such conflicts as unnatural, and absolutely not inherent in human minds, but as being caused by the coercion (in the everyday sense) of children, then you will soon think it natural to change to our definition, because it is more precise than the everyday usage but differs from it only marginally, if at all.

You can't really divorce the question of whether human minds have any inborn irrationality from the question of what coercion is. To take one extreme: if you are a behaviourist, and you think that it is meaningless metaphysics to talk about the internal states of the mind at all – that the mind is simply a black box – then our definition of coercion is strictly meaningless, because it refers entirely to something that does not exist, and the difference between a coerced and a non-coerced action is defined away.

Incidentally, as I argued in the earliest days of the list, I don't think it is at all true that the word “coercion” as used in everyday language implies violence or the threat of violence. That is a Libertarian legalism. For instance, when employees go on strike, they often describe themselves as having to resort to coercion because the employer wouldn't listen to reason, or they describe their employer as trying to coerce them by (lawfully) changing the terms and conditions of their employment or whatever. When somebody at Ford steals some machine parts, and is suspended without pay, or threatened with demotion, that is seen as (justified) coercion of the guilty party, even though there is no violence or threat of violence involved. And of course in education, many parents have renounced the use of violence or the threat of violence against their children, but most are appalled at the idea of renouncing coercion.

A few years ago headmaster of Radley College (a prestigious school) *defined his job* as “coercion ... coercion into experience, because no boy in his right mind would do what we require them to do of his own free will.” He knows, as nearly everyone knows, that when you bellow “*shut up and do as you're told*” in a small child's face it is for all practical purposes immaterial whether or not the child fears that it may be backed up by violence. In matters of education it is pointless to distinguish between assaults on the mind that are mediated by legally-defined battery, and assaults on the mind that are mediated by any of the countless other means that adults have of making children suffer. And everyday usage *does* call all of them coercion.



In the hearings for the impeachment of US President Bill Clinton, there was an argument on about whether or not

Monica Lewinsky was coercively *held* in the hotel by the FBI or whether she was there of her own free will. In suggesting that she was held coercively, the Clinton side referred to Monica Lewinsky's *state of mind*. It may well be that Monica Lewinsky was not held coercively in the *legal* sense, but that she *was* acting under coercion, as Bill Clinton's lawyer appeared to be suggesting – that is to say, that she was acting against her own will rather than conflict-free about being in the hotel. It may be that she was under the impression that she was being held (legally) too, or was David Kendall slightly equivocating?

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