An analysis of their place in society

Coercion and Freedom

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What does it mean to coerce? No person can, in the literal sense, be forced to act. If the act is his, it is he who must put his body in motion. He writes his name; he speaks to affirm or to deny. If another guides his hand, it is the other who signs; if another plays ventriloquist, it is the other who speaks. There seems to be a paradox in the idea of coercion: there is the suggestion that the act of the agent is in some sense not his act. Yet, paradox or not, this is precisely how the matter lies. Coercion requires freedom, and the term makes no sense except on the assumption of freedom, yet in coercion freedom frustrates itself.

Acting under coercion a person wills, in one sense, to do what is not his will. What he wills to do he wills not for itself but for the sake of something else. In this respect a coerced act is like any act done for the sake of something else. Coercion, however, entails a further condition. I may do things I would not do for themselves but only because those acts prevent worse consequences. I pay insurance premiums, and for the sake of health I may abstain from certain pleasures. Such acts are not coerced; they are entirely voluntary. A coerced act has this distinctive feature: that it is an act done to avoid a threatened consequence which is not only more undesirable than the act itself but which has its existence as a threat solely in order to induce that very act.

In ordinary instrumental action I may choose to abandon the end for which I would have to make a sacrifice and thus avoid the need to make the sacrifice. When I am coerced, however, I do not have the same freedom to change my course; neither the negative nor the positive end to which my act contributes is of my own choosing. The threatened evil I would avoid is one I am confronted with by the act of another, not as a part of a situation that just happens to obstruct a course of action already under way or contemplated, but as a threat interposed solely to induce an action another desires me to take. The positive end to which my act contributes is not my end but one chosen by another as his.
Coercion is not the only kind of compulsion; I may be compelled by circumstances, by a state of affairs which will lead to unacceptable consequences if I do not do what is necessary to avoid them. No compulsion, whether coercive or circumstantial, is absolute; I can always choose to allow the consequences to have their way. If hope has given up to despair, or if the thing I must do to protect myself is an act which would destroy integrity or make any act morally senseless, I may refuse. I am compelled in so far as the act which I otherwise would not do is a necessary condition of the avoidance of something more undesirable or to obtain something deemed essential, and is yet not so repugnant or offensive that I cannot voluntarily submit to it. These conditions in turn presuppose that I am acting in accordance with some value structure.

The prime difference between coercion and other kinds of compulsion is that in coercion I am under a threat, for any instance of compulsion involves something that can be understood as a threat. The essential difference is that in coercion the threat has its very existence as something intended to limit my freedom. In other kinds of compulsion there are conditions I must meet in order to get what I want or to avoid what I do not want; if I am to act for my own ends under the conditions in which I exist I must seek those ends under those conditions. In coercion, however, the conditions and obstacles I meet exist only because another intends to compel me to act for his ends rather than for my own. Coercion is the method by which one person uses for his own ends the freedom of another person. To be coerced is not to be deprived of one’s freedom but to be compelled by another to use one’s freedom for the sake of another.

A distinction should be made between the threat of injury or deprivation as the basis of coercion and the acceptance of such an undesirable condition as a means to an end. A person may be willing to acquiesce in a demand in order to satisfy some strong desire of his own. Esau was willing to exchange his birthright for Jacob’s savory stew. Jacob’s strategy was not to coerce but to tempt. There was, of course, a threat to deprive Esau of what he so strongly desired at the moment, but the threat in that case was a threat to frustrate a strong desire already aroused. This is quite different from a threat to create an intolerable situation unless a demand is met. No doubt Esau’s hunger was intolerable; he had been hunting, he was tired, he yearned for a full belly of satisfying food and for sweet sleep, and he had a low frustration tolerance. Jacob did not create Esau’s hunger; he took advantage of it.

If Esau had been starving and dependent on Jacob for his life, we would not hesitate to consider this a case of coercion; but Esau could have satisfied his hunger with food less appetizing, or he could have gone hungry for a time without injury. Here we seem to have a sharp line between what is clearly coercion and other kinds of inducement or pressure. Coercion is based on threat of injury, and upon a degree of injury that is irremediable. One of the clearest examples of coercion is blackmail, and in all coercion there linger traces of its foul odor.

The Social Structure of Coercion

Coercion always expresses an intention or purpose, and it is always interpersonal. It is difficult to find any meaning in a statement that a person coerces himself. I may say I force myself to take a certain action, although even this seems hyperbolic; but I do not say that I coerce myself. The idea of coercion involves two dis-
distinct wills in conflict with each other. When I "force myself" to act, the action presumably expresses the resolution of a conflict between different inclinations or desires. The resolution may not be entirely satisfactory; it may be only the least undesirable under the circumstances. But that I do act means that a unity of purpose has been achieved; for the moment at least I am not at odds with myself. But when I am coerced into an action the action does not express a unity of purpose I have achieved. The act I do is one that thwarts my own will; it is no end of my own that is achieved by my act but only the end of another. My only gain is to avoid an eventuality which rests not on circumstance but on another's intention to injure me if I do not act in accordance with his will.

When I am coerced two wills remain in conflict: my own and that of him who coerces me. It is true that I choose to submit, but I do not make his end my own end. I still exclude his end from my own purpose. My act may resolve a question in my own mind, the question whether to submit or take the consequences; but it is with respect to this conflict alone that I reach a unity of purpose. In that decision I resolve a conflict by accepting one alternative and excluding the other. As in any resolution of conflict, regret for what is given up may remain; but if the decision is genuine I do not regret having decided as I did. Thus when I submit to coercion I resolve the conflict of whether or not to submit, and I may have no regret at having so decided; yet another conflict remains. The other's purpose and my purpose are not reconciled; I act as required, but the act remains one which is done in spite of my own chosen ends. The only end I serve in the act is the negative one of protection against injury, but it is protection against an injury willed by another.

Coercion requires at least two personal agents, one of whom has it within his power to harm or frustrate the other in a way that would be intolerable to the other and from which the other can protect himself only by acquiescing in the demand made upon him. In a solely dyadic relationship coercion would thus appear to rest finally on a threat of physical harm. The issue turns on the fact of superior physical strength. Harm to reputation or interference with the fulfillment of other commitments would seem to be ruled out, for all such possibilities rest on relationships with other people.

When the number of parties increases from two to three a radical change in the conditions of coercion comes about. For now it is quite unlikely that any one party is so superior in physical strength that he can threaten the other two in a way plausible enough to induce their submission to his demand. Provided no one party possesses weapons that render natural differences meaningless and provided a surprise attack has not preceded the demand, any two of the three almost surely have a combined strength greater than the third. At this point, therefore, coercion requires something more than superior physical strength and the willingness to use it against another. Coercion now requires an agreement between two of the three parties to act together against the third. Thus at this point the superior strength that makes coercion possible is itself made possible by agreement. But agreement almost certainly depends on effective persuasion, and so persuasion is a necessary condition of coercion effected by a combination of strength.

Whenever three or more are involved effective coercion that is more than a temporary expedient would seem to require agreement. One person may coerce another to act with him against a third, it is true, but such a combination is always unstable; the two who are acting against their wills have
something in common and that makes them potential allies against their coercer.
Persuasion may be a factor, of course, in a conflict of wills where only two are involved. One may persuade the other to change his purpose and to cooperate willingly. There is still the possibility, however, that where the weaker party is the one who has been persuaded the very fact of the superior strength of the other is the decisive influence, for the weaker person may agree simply because he knows he does not have the power to resist effectively. There is little doubt, however, that persuasion is the decisive factor when the weaker person induces the stronger to change his intent and to desist from his demands. The weaker does not here coerce the stronger, nor can we make out a case for considering it to be coercion by pointing to the winner's superior argumentative skill; for where such is the outcome it is reached not by threat but by some degree of reconciliation of opposed purposes.

Coercion, Agreement, and Acquiescence

Agreement is an alternative to coercion, and its superiority is obvious. To compel another against his will is to create an unstable situation. The other can be depended upon to submit only so long as the threat remains effective. A change of relative strength, and especially the reinforcement of the coerced party by the cooperation of others, may quickly alter the power relation. If coercion is used in pursuit of a long-range goal then that goal is under constant jeopardy. If cooperation is based upon a meeting of minds and the sharing of a single purpose the prospect of continuance is much more favorable.

Either persuasion or coercion may lead to a state of acquiescence. Persuasion may fall short of active agreement; its effect may be only the negative one of removing opposition. A coerced person may simply accept the situation and lose interest in resisting and in taking advantage of any show of weakness by the opposition. Acquiescence under coercion may come with loss of hope, or even as a result of becoming accustomed to submission. Or a person may, at the outset, offer weak resistance to one who opposes his will; perhaps the prospect of resistance and struggle is more forbidding than the loss he would sustain in submitting. There is a question at what point of weakness submission to coercion turns into acquiescence. The line may be drawn perhaps at the point where inner resistance ceases; coercion has not led to acquiescence so long as the will to resist remains, waiting for an opportunity to act against the enemy.

Acquiescence is also an unstable relationship, but its instability differs from that of coercion. In coercion the conflict of wills remains, and the will of the weaker is always a threat to the stronger. In acquiescence the will of the weaker is not a threat in itself, for in this matter he has no strength of will. His very weakness, however makes him quite undependable, for he may as readily acquiesce to the demands of any other who presses him. The fickleness of the public, for example, is notorious, and this obtains whether it be in coercion or acquiescence.

Acquiescence under coercion requires a constant intimation of the possibility of coercion. The only occasion for such acquiescence is the existence of a situation in which coercion is applicable. The person who acquiesces does so in order to avoid conflict or because he feels it is hopeless to attempt to resist. The possibility of coercion and the belief that it will be used if necessary constitute the dynamic of acquiescence. Remove these conditions and acquiescence evaporates or remains merely
as a state to which one has become habituated.

We thus may distinguish three varieties of relationships between two or more people who act in concert: manifest coercion, in which concerted action is obtained in spite of a remaining conflict of wills; acquiescence, in which there is passive submission with neither active resistance against the other's will nor positive interest in it; and agreement, in which there is a meeting of minds and a community of active purpose.

One characteristic of liberal thought in contemporary society is its tendency to overestimate the importance of agreement in the operation of a political system. Mistaking the acquiescence of an effectively conditioned public for agreement, liberals find themselves driven inevitably into the use of coercion for the implementation of their programs. Thus we have the paradox of a liberalism that does not hesitate to use coercion to subvert the freedom of others. The area of agreement in such an enterprise is usually restricted to the small group of kindered spirits who first dreamed it up. Perhaps those from an academic background are particularly susceptible to this temptation when they acquire political influence, accustomed as many of the less sensitive of them are to the use of coercion for the improvement of others.

The Problem of the Right to Coerce

Coercion seems to involve an ethical paradox. In coercion one person uses another person's freedom for an end the other would not freely will. The other must indeed be free to act, else a coerced act would not be possible; but he is forced to act contrary to his own choice, contrary to the way he would act if it were not for the threat of the consequence of not so acting. That the coercion of one person by another should occur, then, requires that the coerced person be threatened by another with an injury. If to injure another is itself evil, it would seem that to threaten to injure another would itself also be evil. If to injure another is evil, it would seem that to compel another to do an act that injures himself would be evil. Under what condition, then, is coercion justifiable? We accept coercion in the relationship of parents to their children and in the relationship of government to those who are governed. How can we accept what seems to be inherently evil?

One answer to this question may be that we are compelled to accept the use of coercion. We are compelled not by personal agents but by circumstances. Unless we accept coercion, it may be argued, unless we allow it to be practiced and unless we practice it ourselves, the positive ends of life and the values which give life its meaning will be put in jeopardy. We accept the lesser evil in order to have the greater good; we are compelled to do so by the logic of moral choice, that it is a moral contradiction to sacrifice a greater good for a lesser good.

The coerced party, however, may find it difficult to agree with this justification. On the ground of the same moral logic he might dispute the conclusion, for he would himself contend that the greater good is being sacrificed to the lesser. He does not acknowledge the superiority of the value in this instance coercion is intended to support. If he did acknowledge the superiority of that value it would be unnecessary to coerce him; he would willingly acquiesce. By what right does another compel him to act in such a way as to protect the other's value at the price of the sacrifice of his own?

If coercion can be justified in any instance it would seem that the values at stake in that case both are and are not
values of him who is coerced. If so, then of course the sense in which those values are his must be other than the sense in which they are not his. The obvious difference, and the difference so familiar to all of us, is the difference between what seems to be of value and is not, and what is truly valuable. On this ground we justify our coercion of our children, and on this ground it might seem justifiable to use coercion in political society.

There is, however, one important difference between the coercion of children by their parents and coercion of fully responsible persons by political authorities. We justify ourselves in forcing children to act in certain ways for their own good on the ground that they are as yet incompetent to judge what that good is. We suppose that what we compel them to do they themselves would freely choose to do had they the knowledge and wisdom to understand the alternatives and their import. But political coercion, particularly in a society that professes a doctrine of the essential equality of persons, is the coercion of those who are the peers of the coercers. How can political or legal coercion be justified except in a society of class distinctions which are also distinctions of inherent worth or of competence to live as persons?

To justify coercion it would seem necessary to make two assumptions: that there is an objective scheme of values which we are obligated to enforce in society, and that there are some people in a society whose judgment concerning values is the judgment which is correct and which ought to be enforced. Without these assumptions it would seem that a coercive society, no matter what the professions of its members and rulers may be, is only a system of organized power operating in accordance with the will of those who hold that power.

Even if we were to grant these assumptions, however, we still would not know what the objective scheme of values was, nor would we know which people were those whose judgment was correct. Although these assumptions may provide a basis for the contention that there are justifiable forms of coercion we are left in the dark as to what those forms are and as to the circumstances in which they may properly be used. Natural law theory and ethical theories of the state alike leave open this gap between principle and practice.

Many attempts have been made to close the gap between coercion in principle and in practice. Some are moral, some pragmatic; others, such as the contract theories, appeal to an implicit or tacit agreement and thus in effect deny that any genuine coercion occurs at all. The justification of coercion as a *de facto* right, the right of the stronger, is an old theory that seems never to die out entirely; and closely related to it is the theory of justification by numbers, or the theory of majority rule. Majorities do coerce minorities, where the procedures of decision provide for such coercion; but to suppose that a majority preference is somehow superior to a minority preference because more people share it involves a peculiar notion of superiority to say the least.

The supposed right of the majority, because it is a majority, to compel a minority is only a special case of the supposed right of the stronger. The celebrated defenses of this principle by Locke and Rousseau illustrate the difficulty of accepting it on its own ground. Locke resolved the right of the majority into a practical necessity. For Rousseau the coerced minority was expressing a tacit acquiescence which he, by his analysis, hoped to bring to clearer awareness.

The Justification of Coercion

The problem of the justification of coercion is in one sense a version of the central
problem of political philosophy, but in another sense it is an expression of a serious and widespread confusion in political theory. It is the central problem in the sense that competing political philosophies are based largely on different ways of justifying coercion. The confusion consists of a failure to recognize different levels of coercion and to recognize that at the basic level coercion is not something to be justified. Coercion is a prior fact, an integral and necessary part of the existence of any human society. The existence or non-existence of coercion at that level cannot be an issue, for it is only in a coercive society that such issues arise.

Political philosophies that rest their cases ultimately on one or another justification of coercion all have the same unexpressed and highly questionable assumption. They assume that the existence of a coercive society is something that has to be accounted for and justified. Now it may very well be an interesting and important problem of political philosophy or of the sciences concerned with the study of human culture to trace the development of later stages of society out of earlier stages. But it is senseless to ask how men who existed first as autonomous individuals in a state of original freedom happened to come together to form coercive societies, for we have no evidence that men ever so existed and we have every reason to suppose that such an idea is preposterous. Individual self-awareness always has deep sub-personal social roots.

So, too, the idea that coercion as such is something to be justified presupposes that men might have lived together in a society without coercion. It is true that there are great differences among societies in the forms and the uses of coercion, but no purely voluntary society is possible unless it is a part of and can exist under the protection of a more basic coercive society.

For a voluntary society is based either on acquiescence or agreement. Acquiescence involves tacit coercion, while agreement can be the basis of community only for those who already have had the benefits of social discipline in the processes of thought and evaluation. Human societies differ from insect societies; men are not born with the highly developed and semi-automatic adaptive response patterns which make co-operative life possible.

To ask, "By what right does society exercise coercion over individuals within that society?" is like asking, "By what right are men compelled to use food and water in order to stay alive?" Without coercion there is no human society; without coercion there is no human life. Men cannot be human in isolation; men cannot live together without coercion. Submission to coercion is the price we pay for being human.

There are many patterns of coercion, for there are many patterns of society. So, too, there are many dietary customs in various societies and there are many patterns of sexual relations. That there be some pattern of coercion in a society is as necessary as that there be some dietary practices and some patterns of sexual practice. A society that forbade the use of food or abolished sexual intercourse would not, by such provision, change the biological facts of human life. A society that abolished coercion would not by that act change the psychological facts of human association. In either case the effect would be to destroy the society.

When we discover the conditions under which a society uses coercion we have found the psychological boundary lines of that society. A society uses coercion at those points where its members feel its existence to be threatened. Differences of opinion concerning the propriety or rightfulness of this or that use of coercion reflect different
views concerning what are and what are not genuine threats to the life of that society.

Although coercion as such is not something to be justified, significant questions may be asked concerning this or that form of coercion, just as significant discriminations can be made between different dietary practices and different sexual customs. But even here the problem is not that of justifying this or that form of coercion, whether it be already in operation or contemplated as a replacement of practices hitherto used. A society does not change its structure by turning in an old one for a new one. The problem always concerns some modification of an already existing structure. In this respect a society is in the position of a family that is free to add to and remodel the house in which it lives but for some reason is not free to build a new one; it must live in the house that is being altered while the alterations are going on.

The justification of this or that mode of coercion is always relative to the society in which its use is proposed. Does the act which such provision is intended to prevent or control actually threaten the basic operation of that society? A society does not have a choice between one structure or another, for it can make its choice only by means of an already existing and operating structure. Its structure may change in time; certainly some social progress has occurred. But those changes, even revolutionary ones, take place within an already existing cultural framework. Destroy that framework and anarchy results. Attempt to impose by force an externally constructed framework and those who impose it will have to operate it. The result will be two heterogeneous societies, each operating in terms of requirements and procedures that make no sense to the other.

To live within a system of coercion is one of the existential limits of the human condition. We act within the limits of our biological natures, of the laws of the physical world, of the inevitability of death, and, among others, the limits imposed by the coercive restraints of our society. What is distinctive about us as human is that we constantly attempt to transcend the limits of our existence. The laws of physics become not mere limits but instruments we use for new ends; an understanding of the laws of living organisms contributes to the conquest of disease; the certainty of death is perhaps the chief inspiration of the search for an ultimate meaning in life. So also every important forward step in the growth of freedom in society has been the consequence of some new understanding of the existing coercive patterns of that society and their adaptation to the requirements of individual freedom.

Interdependence of Coercion and Freedom

Western history shows a constant tension between two aspects or polar tendencies of human existence. Man is social in his existence, but he repeatedly seeks to be an individual. As social he has to live in a coercive milieu; in his drive toward individuality he is constantly resisting the coercions of society. The significant problem of coercion is the problem of its relation to individual freedom. Since the drive for freedom is itself a product of coercive society, coercion and freedom may be polar opposites but they are not mutually exclusive. So far as the analogy of polar opposites is applicable those opposites must be seen as complementaries.

We have already seen that coercion requires freedom, for a person who is not free to do the act demanded of him cannot be forced to do it. This, however, is not the only way in which coercion and freedom are interdependent; there is also a
dependence of freedom on coercion. Freedom in a social context is possible only in so far as there are recognized limits upon freedom in that society. I can be free within a set of limits only if others practice their freedom within those same limits, and this presupposes a coercive society.

The dependence of freedom upon coercion may be seen more clearly in the light of a distinction between two levels or areas of coercion, the situational and the potential. The situational consists of the conditions of existence which hold within a society, the actual structure of interpersonal relations which constitute that society. The area of the potential concerns the goals that may be envisaged by individuals or groups within that society. Freedom is directed toward the fulfillment of potentialities; freedom is exercised under the conditions of the situation. No act of freedom can be directed toward its own situational conditions, for these are the conditions under which the act occurs. We may attempt to alter the conditions, it is true, but the state of affairs we attempt to bring into being is at this stage only potential, and whatever action we perform in order to realize it is performed under existing conditions.

The area appropriate to coercion in a society dedicated to freedom is in the maintenance of those conditions under which freedom of action with respect to the potential can be protected and supported. There must be a high degree of uniformity of limits of action if anyone is to be free within those limits. If the limits I recognize are different from the limits recognized by another, I find it difficult to act freely in my dealings with him. I do not know what decisions will stick. Even though this is difficult, I can manage provided I have some understanding of the limits he respects. But if he respects no limits at all, I am helpless. Those limits recognized by a society to be essential to the effective life of that society are the limits which that society protects by coercive means. This is not an answer to the question of whether or not there ought to be those limits, or whether or not certain specific limits constitute the "best" conditions; it is simply the fact that those are the limits. Any concern about the ought in that society must operate within those limits and not upon them. A society may modify its basic structure, but, as we have already seen, it can do so only by action within the limits of its already existing structure.

A society that places high value on freedom will attempt to restrict coercion to the minimum area and leave a maximum area of individual decision. Perhaps, however, it is not a matter of maximum and minimum so much as a matter of significance. Coercion belongs in the area of the necessary conditions that make life in society possible; individual freedom belongs to the determination of the ends of life for the individual. The wider the range of possibilities of individual choice of ends the more favorable a society is to individual development.

The pattern of coercion in a society constitutes the conditions of the possibility of freedom in that society. No society can deny all freedom, for no man can act absolutely contrary to his own will. A society without freedom would be a society without action. On the other hand, no person can act effectively in society unless he has some knowledge of what will be the consequences of his act and this is possible only in a coercive society.

In a society that espouses the values of freedom and of the dignity of the person it would appear impossible to justify the use of coercion for the attainment of positive ends. In the modern state man has devised an effective instrument of coercion, and well-intentioned but ethically insensitive
persons and groups have not hesitated to use that power for positive ends they deem valuable to all. But not even a majority has the right to coerce a minority when the purpose of that coercion is to compel people to do for themselves what others think it would be good for them to do. It is one thing to use public power to provide opportunity by removing hindrances; it is quite another thing to attempt to compel the acceptance of opportunity by coercion. Coercion is appropriate only to protect the members of the community against injury and to protect them in the use of their own freedom.

It is true that the line between the use of coercion for positive ends and its use for the protection of men in the exercise of their own freedom is often a very thin line. It is true also that coercion may be used for protective purposes under the guise of a protective use. Recognition of the principle, however, would be an effective bar against many obvious abuses and surely would provide some protection against those most dangerous enemies of human freedom, the sincere and well-intentioned and often unselfish persons who seek to obtain power in order to use it for the improvement of other people.

Although coercion maintains the foundations of a society, yet any society that has to make an extensive use of coercion thereby demonstrates its own weakness as a society. The most effective system of coercion is that which does not have to be implemented, which is effective primarily by being ready to operate. The condition of effective social existence is the ability and willingness of individuals in that society to make responsible choices within and consonant with the social order in which they live and in which they find the meaning of their lives. The instruments of coercion lie ready for use against those individuals who attempt to live in opposition to the order of their society. Such persons live a contradiction; they attack the very order of society in terms of which they exist as persons.

The fact that there are those who live such a contradiction may be evidence only of their unfitness for freedom in that social order or it may be evidence of a more basic conflict in the social order itself. In either case our customary moralistic attitude toward social deviants is inappropriate. Although we must subject them to coercion we should do so only for the protection of the freedom of others and only to the extent necessary to that end. A realistic rather than a moralistic approach to such problems might enable us to see in them clues to otherwise hidden weaknesses and contradictions. The only way in which men can discover and recognize injustice is to see it practiced; so, too, the only way in which a society can discover the conflicts in its basic principles is to see those contradictions acted out in the conduct of individuals.