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# Quakers and Coercion in a World of Good and Evil

Phil Smith

When is it right to force someone to do something?

Real evil exists in the world. We recognize it in the selfish and cruel actions of other people, and if we are honest we admit at least the possibility of evil in our own actions. Sometimes we have the power, we think, to stop evildoers. But since we recognize the potential for doing evil ourselves, we worry that our efforts to stop the injustice of others will themselves be unjust. Whether wickedly or unwittingly, our fight against evil might just produce more evil.

This chapter consists of comments on violence, coercion, and Christian morality as interpreted by the Quaker movement. The context is explicitly one of good and evil – how should we think about violence and coercion in a world of real evil? All thoughtful people, certainly all thoughtful Christians, face difficult questions in this topic, but for Friends, the questions have a different context and bite.<sup>1</sup>

Since George Fox's days, Quakers have expressed a strong confidence in the power of God. In his *Journal*, Fox repeatedly concluded his description of diverse situations with some variant of 'the power of the Lord was over all'. This does not mean Friends have been ignorant of evil in the world, only that they believed that God's power, the light of Christ within them, would enable them to live effectively in the world, in spite of real evil. Because of this confidence, Quakers have plunged into the affairs of the world; they have been active in commerce, in science, in education, in manufacturing, and in government.

At the same time, Friends have testified against war. George Fox wrote that he had 'come into that life and power that takes away the occasion of war'. In the 350 years since Fox, Quakers have become well known as a pacifist sect (notwithstanding the fact that some of their members have chosen to serve in the military).

So Quakers live in a tension-filled space. They are committed to living actively in the world, yet they reject war, one of the major features of worldly affairs. Quaker historian Peter Brock calls the typical Quaker position *integrational pacifism*, because Friends often try to integrate participation in social reform movements (movements that tend to pull them into government or attempts to influence government) with nonparticipation in war (an all-too-frequent activity of governments) (Brock, 1972 and 1990, pp. 87–111). Other Christians have sometimes suggested that the Friends'

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1 I have addressed some aspects of these issues before in Smith, 1994 and Smith, 2002.

position is inconsistent; either they ought to accept the theory of the just war, or they ought to separate themselves from the evils of government. Friends themselves have not always thought very clearly about these matters. This essay is an attempt to rectify that weakness.

At the outset, I should define important terms, to avoid confusing the reader unnecessarily. There are many varieties of pacifism – non-resistant pacifism, non-violent pacifism, restricted violence pacifism – but they all espouse *the principled rejection of war*. I will not try to specify which principle motivates the pacifist. Therefore, I will use ‘pacifism’ to mean simply anti-war-ism, the thing that all pacifists share. Next, I will use ‘coercion’ to mean any action taken to cause someone to do something against her will.<sup>2</sup> Coercion is thus a broad concept, and there are many kinds and degrees of coercion. Some, but by no means all, forms of coercion are violent. Finally, I intend to use ‘violence’ to mean physical attacks or restraints on persons or their property. This is a narrow definition of violence, unpopular with many people, so I will defend it later on.

I will structure my comments by identifying three philosophical mistakes that Quakers sometimes make about efforts to coerce other people. I suspect that non-Quakers fall into similar errors when thinking about coercion and violence, so I hope this essay will be of interest to many readers.

### **First Mistake: Over-simplification: ‘All x is x’**

The first error Friends make about violence and coercion in a world of evil is to fail to see the important differences between various acts of violence and/or coercion. We say, ‘In for a penny, in for a pound’. Now, I suppose for some situations this proverb gives wise advice, warning us against half-hearted commitments. Worthwhile projects deserve enthusiastic support. But similar thinking, when applied to violence, coercion, or evil, oversimplifies the nature of moral actions. Some evils are worse than others; some violent acts are more violent than others; and some acts of coercion are stronger than others. And since these differences are real, we ought to heed them.

For example, Quakers disapprove of war but typically have approved of law enforcement, the ‘violence of the magistrate’. Many people (including some Friends) think this position internally incoherent. Since Augustine, a standard argument has been that if one approves of police force or violence, then one must approve of military force or violence. Now this argument depends on the assumption that police force or violence does not differ from military force or violence in any morally significant way. Jenny Teichman, in *Pacifism and the Just War*, effectively rebuts this assumption (Teichman, 1986, pp. 38–45).

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2 Philosophers might demand at this point that I give some account of the notion of human ‘will’ if I define coercion as interfering with or overruling a person’s will. There is hardly any question in philosophy more complicated than the question of free will, and I must resolutely resist the temptation to plunge into that business. I will only say that I intend here to appeal to a commonsense notion of agency in which we often act freely but sometimes are compelled by others.

Teichman points out that civilized nations distinguish between certain roles in the application of police force or violence. The police apprehend persons suspected of crimes. The courts determine the guilt or innocence of the accused. The prison service carries out whatever sentence the courts decree. Note: we hold it to be morally and practically critical to maintain this separation of roles; we condemn as unjust those countries in which a single institution (the party or the army) combines the roles of apprehension, judgment, and punishment. Because the separation of roles has been actually practiced, we have the reasonable expectation that police force or violence can be limited and effectively criticized.

For example, in many cities police officers must file reports every time they discharge their weapon while on duty. These reports can be made part of the public record, and violent episodes can be subject to investigation by outsiders. Some people argue that these limitations on police violence are too severe, that they hinder the police officer from protecting society. Others argue that institutional hedges on police violence should be stronger. My point is not that limitations on police violence are unimpeachable, only that they are real.

In warfare, by contrast, typically the same person(s) fills the roles of apprehender, judge, and executioner. Because the roles are mixed, we do not have a reasonable expectation that the violence of war will be limited. To the contrary: the history of war suggests that if any tactic is judged necessary for victory, that tactic will be used. Therefore, there is a significant, morally significant, distinction between the violence of the magistrate and the violence of war.

So Augustine's argument is simply unsound, since it relies on a false assumption. It is at least possible that one could approve the violence of the magistrate (or some instances of the violence of the magistrate) and disapprove of the violence of war. And Quaker practice has leaned toward toleration or even approval of some of the violence of the magistrate while resisting any acceptance of war. Some Quakers are very hesitant to admit this, since they think that pacifism requires that they reject all violence. But pacifism does not require that one reject all violence. Pacifism as such only requires that one reject war, presumably on the basis of a non-arbitrary principle. We need to explore more deeply and more carefully why we think violence and/or coercion are bad.

I suggest that violence and coercion trouble us because they depart from the moral ideal. I believe that much of the moral progress that we make in our lives depends on our 'vision of the good'.<sup>3</sup> For many Quakers, this ideal is expressed in the vision of the 'Peaceable Kingdom', a vision rooted in Isaiah's 'Mountain of the Lord' and other biblical passages (Isaiah 65:17–25). The Peaceable Kingdom is a place of *shalom*, to use another biblical notion. The idea here is that when God's rule is complete, there will be life and wholeness and no need for violence. The lion will lie down with the lamb.

We might compare the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom with the moral ideal of some enlightenment liberals. Here the ideal society is made up of perfectly

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<sup>3</sup> 'A Vision of the Good' is a chapter in my dissertation (Smith, 1991). There I define a 'vision of the good' as 'a global understanding, involving rational thought, emotions, and imagination, of something toward which a life can be directed'.

autonomous individuals, each one of whom recognizes the moral law (Kant) or joins in the general will (Rousseau). In this vision, the only need for coercion or violence is against those who fail to be wholly rational.

Of course, some Quakers actually *are* Enlightenment liberals. Why should we expect anything else? The philosophy of the Enlightenment, often called ‘modernism’, has powerfully influenced our society for three hundred years. For such Quakers, the vision of a Peaceable Kingdom fuses with the vision of a liberal society of autonomous individuals. Such Friends have two strong reasons to think coercion and violence are less than ideal. Others of us, and I include myself in this group, are deeply suspicious of modernism and some of the philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment. For us, the scriptural vision of the Peaceable Kingdom can be understood without individualistic autonomy.

Coercion and violence trouble us, because they fall short of the moral ideal.<sup>4</sup> Now I think we ought to recognize a wide range of possibilities within ‘less than ideal’. Various states of affairs fall short of the Peaceable Kingdom in different ways and to different degrees. The use of police force or violence falls short of the moral ideal. War falls short of the moral ideal. But there is a great difference, a morally significant difference, between them. The violence of war is ‘further’ from the moral ideal than the violence of the magistrate. And this ‘distance’ carries moral import: the further some action is from the moral ideal, the more reluctant we should be to take it and the stronger our justification for doing so needs to be. Some actions, such as making war, may be so far from the moral ideal that no justification will suffice. And I think that is actually the case – I’m a pacifist.

Oversimplified thinking – all  $x$  is  $x$  – keeps us from recognizing important facts about the moral world. Failing to see the contrast between the violence of the magistrate and the violence of war serves as only one example of this error, though an important one. If we pay attention, we will discover many other contrasts between this and that kind of force or violence. I give some examples below.

## **Second Mistake: Confusion about Violence and Nonviolence**

Some Quakers, and many people on the political left, have fallen into a peculiar distortion of language. Violence consists not just of physical acts of beating or shooting, they say, but also of unjust social structures that deprive people of their lives, property or other goods just as effectively as robbery or murder. So we should broaden our notion of violence to include ‘social violence’, ‘institutional violence’, ‘psychological violence’, and perhaps other things as well. Such Friends may go on to say that the opposite of violence is nonviolence, which expresses not merely the absence of harm doing but something very close to the moral ideal.

At least some contemporary Quakers (and others) seem to be committed to nonviolence as a fundamental principle, the key to the Peaceable Kingdom. I suspect the influence of Gandhi lies behind much of this thinking. There is something right

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4 The moral ideal need not be the Peaceable Kingdom or Enlightenment liberalism. Obviously, there are a great many possible ‘visions of the good’. Some persons may have moral goals such that violence and coercion do not fall short of the ideal.

and attractive about it. *Ahimsa* treasures every individual person, and aims to encourage full human flourishing for every person. Gandhi used Sanskrit words to express his moral vision: *Ahimsa* is the absence of even the desire to harm another. It refrains from all forms of *himsa*, hurting.

Nevertheless, I believe this is a confusion of language that leads to a confusion of moral thought. Our language includes many words to express moral judgment; we describe social evils as unjust, tyrannical, oppressive, and so on. We have an equally rich vocabulary for denouncing personal evils. Individuals betray each other, manipulate each other, ignore each other, and so on. Why should we want to label all evils as 'violent'? As Jenny Teichman has pointed out, both left and right distort the ordinary meaning of 'violence'. One side broadens the meaning to include all kinds of social evil and injustice. The other side narrows the meaning to include only illegal violence, as if the violence of the state is not real violence. Confusion and inflamed rhetoric result. Both sides are motivated by a simplistic formula: violent = bad. All violent actions are wrong, and all social wrongs are violent.

I think we ought to use 'violence' as we traditionally have, for those actions that are physically violent: beatings, shootings, hangings, imprisonments, and so on.<sup>5</sup> We have many other words to describe other evil actions: cheating, ridicule, deception, exclusion, infidelity, cruelty, unfairness, etc. But my objection is not merely or primarily semantic. Confused language about violence and nonviolence feeds into the oversimplification of the first error. Surely moral judgment ought to be more nuanced than 'nonviolent, good; violent, bad'. Human beings get themselves into an almost infinite variety of situations about which moral judgments must be made, and these moral judgments simply do not resolve themselves into just violent and nonviolent.

Confusion about violence and nonviolence contributes to the widespread belief that pacifism commits one to nonviolence. In fact, people often believe that pacifism must be an outgrowth of a prior commitment to nonviolence. Many pacifists, including many Friends, *are* motivated by a commitment to nonviolence. But other pacifists, again including Quakers, find their rejection of war grounded in some other commitment. We should not conclude, as some people have, that there must be something inconsistent in Friends history, merely because Quakers have often combined pacifism with involvement in reform movements that sometimes make use of the coercive power of government.

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5 There is no problem with the term 'institutional violence' as such. There are institutions, such as prisons and armies, that routinely use violence; this could be rightly called institutional violence. But suppose an institution, such as a bank or a wood-products store, engages in predatory lending or gouges its customers in the aftermath of a natural disaster. We might condemn such behaviors as institutional injustice, but they are not violence. Both sorts of practice may deserve our condemnation, but they are not the same, and labeling both as 'institutional violence' obscures the differences between them.

### **Third Mistake: Naiveté about Coercion**

Many people, certainly not just Quakers, fall into a third error, this one concerning coercion. They fail to see how pervasive coercion actually is in social life. In particular, we fail to see how much we ourselves coerce other people. The second mistake, the confusion about violence, reinforces our naiveté. If we think all violence (or with Gandhi, all coercion) is bad, we will hesitate to admit that we often participate in it. Therefore, to make my case, I will have to dwell for a while on some examples.

I suggest that coercion means making someone do something she does not want to do and would not choose to do in the absence of the coercion. If this definition is even close to right, I want to point out a simple fact: we coerce each other often, in many different ways. The examples I give here show the pervasiveness of coercion and violence in our lives, and they also illustrate my earlier point that there are degrees of coercion and violence. If we notice the many forms of coercion we will recognize morally significant differences between them; we will find that some instances of coercion are bad while others are morally permissible.

For example, consider the relationship of student to teacher. Humility is a virtue for students. Of course in some conceptions of humility, it is a vice. Someone influenced by David Hume might think of humility as a sub-human groveling, an offense against autonomy and dignity (Hume, [1739] 2000). But this misunderstands humility. Iris Murdoch illustrated the point with an example of a student learning Russian (Murdoch, 1970, p. 89). If you want to learn Russian, you must submit yourself to the peculiarities of the language. Whatever our discipline, without humility, we will never learn it. One cannot become a master without first being a novice. One cannot do anything he likes and call it 'gardening'. There is an actual human practice (or complex of practices) that we call 'gardening'; if you want to be a gardener, you have to submit yourself to the tradition of gardening.

Now if humility is a virtue on the part of the student, we should consider what this implies for the role of the teacher. The teacher invents assignments for the student, and the student must submit to the work. The teacher does a disservice to the student if she does not compel the student (in some sense) to submit to the tradition.

I serve as chair of my department at George Fox University, and in that role I read all the course evaluations for the department professors. I have read some student evaluations of professors that reflect deep misunderstanding of this feature of education. The professor should not teach x, the students complain; instead, he should teach y. Now I want to be careful and clear here. I very much want student feedback on my courses, and there are instances in which student input helps us decide which topics ought to receive greater attention. Student feedback is a good thing! Nevertheless, a student, as a beginner, is not ready to decide what she ought to learn. A student does not get to do whatever she wants and call it 'biblical studies'.

This means there is an element of force, of coercion, in the teacher's role. The teacher does not get to confirm all the pre-established beliefs of her students. Instead, she must explain to her students why the tradition is what it is. A professor who confirmed all the prejudices of her students would thereby deprive them of the truth the tradition has to offer.

What we want, of course, is for students and teachers to collaborate together in the practice of education. At its best, education becomes a mutual seeking for truth in which all the participants are humble before the truth and before each other. Even in this ideal learning community, there will still be times when one must speak authoritatively. In logic, when someone sees the proof that the whole class has been looking for, he says, 'Eureka' (or some equivalent). Then he goes to the board and corrects the mistakes we all have been making. Real knowledge carries authority. The voice of authority has a kind of force to it. Truth compels.

Richard Rorty is a philosopher who wants as little compulsion as possible in a free society, and he urges us to leave behind 'truth' talk. All truth claims, he says, mask power plays. Whenever people start using 'truth' talk, they do so in order to control other people. So we ought to stop making truth claims, he says (Rorty, 1989). He suggests that we become 'ironists'; we ought to believe that our deepest moral commitments are probably the result of historical accidents. (We could have been born in other times and places.)

I disagree with Rorty's conclusions, but I think there is something right in what he says. Truth claims do impinge on other people. Truth claims are public. If I say, 'the universe is like this', I make a public claim. Leslie Newbiggin explains this well, making reference to Michael Polanyi's work (Newbiggin, 1989, pp. 27–38; see also Polanyi, 1969).

Newbiggin points out that in a scientific age people often distinguish things that are known from things merely believed. Moderns think we can know scientific truths, but we can only believe or commit ourselves to moral or religious truths. But the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, showed that 'scientific objectivity' exists primarily as a fiction in the minds of non-scientists rather than in the practice of actual scientists. The scientist uses instruments and theories to put herself in touch with the world, but while she focuses on whatever bit of the world she is studying, she is only tacitly aware of the instruments or theories that reveal that bit of the world. The scientist must personally commit herself to the assumptions, problems, methods, and instruments of the field. In science, as in morals, there is no safe, objective 'pure knowledge'.

Rorty would agree with all this. Views similar to Polanyi's are widely shared in philosophy of science. Rorty's conclusion in moral philosophy is that we should give up making truth claims. I disagree with him on that point, but I agree that all truth claims are forceful.

Consider a second example. A landowner wants to build a garage next to his house, so he goes to the city planning department to apply for a permit. In the planning department some city employee tells the would-be builder that he must change his plans in some way, to make it conform to code, before his project will be approved. The required change will cost the landowner time and money, in some cases a lot of time and money. This little scenario plays out every working day in thousands of cities, and it involves real coercion. Just ask the would-be builders if they are being made to do something against their will; they'll tell you. The coercion in this case is almost never violent, but cities do have power to enforce their building regulations; if some landowner persists in disobeying the regulation, he will be fined, and if he

fails to pay the fines, he may be arrested. State coercion shades into state violence by tiny degrees.

Here is a third example. Members of a family, usually with the advice of medical and psychological professionals, go before a judge or some other state authority to ask that some individual in their family be committed to a mental health hospital. Depending on the details of the case, the judge or authority may grant the family's request, and the individual in question is involuntarily committed to the hospital. While in the hospital, the patient may be subject to locked doors, surveillance and other restraints. Some patients in this situation accept their loss of freedom meekly, but others object strenuously to their imprisonment. The amount of force (coercion) needed to restrain patients may vary greatly from case to case. I think that in at least some of these cases we have instances of coercion or even violence. Extreme cases differ only in detail from the coercion and violence of criminal punishment in prison.

Notice that the coercion in these examples varies. The power a teacher wields over students is fairly mild, and students have ways of escaping it. The homeowner, in contrast, has little recourse; if he wants to build his garage, he must submit to the city's regulations or face legal sanctions. The coercion involved in involuntary commitment is stronger yet, in some cases requiring violence.

I could easily list more examples (Smith, 2002, pp. 82–5). A will coerces one's inheritors as regards property and other matters. Persons freely agree to a valid contract, but later find that its provisions coerce them. In a civil suit, the plaintiff asks the court to compel her adversary to give justice. In a free election, one group of voters imposes its will on another group. And so on.

The conclusions I urge are these. First, coercion is not rare, but frequent in civilized life. As I said before, we often do not notice the presence of coercion because we are predisposed to think all coercion bad. But if we pay attention, we see it even in the classroom.

Second, coercion ranges in severity from mild to extreme. There is a difference – perhaps a morally significant difference – between a contract that parties agree to through open bargaining and one imposed through market compulsion. As a general principle, the more coercive an action is, the more morally problematic it is.

Third, some of the more severe coercive actions are also violent actions. As with city regulations, coercion can shade into violence bit by bit. Again, we should pay attention to the differences between various cases.

Fourth, because the differences are morally significant, we may well approve of some forms of coercion (even violence) while disapproving of others. We should think carefully about moral judgments; we should desire to make our judgments by non-arbitrary principles even if we do not always succeed in doing so. I am not here arguing for what those principles ought to be, though it is clear that I don't think 'avoid all violence' is the only candidate.

## Putting Things Together

If Quakers want to think well about our response to evil in the world, we need to learn to avoid the errors I have described. We need to get over our naiveté about coercion, clear up our confused thinking about violence and nonviolence, and reject the simplistic notion that all coercion or violence is morally equivalent to any other coercion or violence.

These conclusions do not apply only to Quakers, who are, after all, a tiny sect within the Christian religion. I think they apply to all morally serious people who recognize that the world is full of real good and real evil and who are self-critical enough to worry that their attempts to stop evil may instead create more of it.

Violence and coercion depart from the moral ideal, whether that ideal is expressed in the biblical vision of *shalom*, the liberal vision of autonomous moral individuals, or many other moral visions.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, we are tempted to fail to see how much violence or coercion there is in our own lives.

We should admit to ourselves that we do, in fact, compel other people to do things against their will; sometimes we compel them violently. Christians long for the rule of God, the Peaceable Kingdom. Christians pray for the Kingdom to come, and we offer ourselves to God, that we might be instruments of peace. At the same time, we live in a world of evil and try to reduce its injustice. Christians should consider each use of coercion or violence carefully to see if it moves us toward the Peaceable Kingdom or not. Similar advice applies to those who are motivated by some other vision of the good.

Elise Boulding, a Quaker, wrote a response to an earlier article I wrote on some of these questions. In it, she urged Friends to pour their energies into creating a peaceful world, through nongovernmental civil organizations.<sup>7</sup> Elise wants us to give our lives to creating new, vital, society – and she says that if we do, we will find that we have no time left over for compromising with violence. I share her worry, that by a series of small missteps we can transform ourselves into Niebuhrian ‘realists’ who justify the outrages of war, even modern mass warfare, as somehow faithful to Jesus.<sup>8</sup> We certainly need to guard against that result of the slippery slope.

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6 There are, of course, moral visions in which violence is readily accepted and is, in fact a good thing. Nazism was not amoral; rather, it inspired people with a compelling story of German identity.

7 See Boulding’s comments in *Quaker Religious Thought*, 27/1 (1994), pp. 19–21.

8 Reinhold Niebuhr, a twentieth-century Christian theologian, argued that Christians must guard against any watering down of Jesus’ moral vision. Jesus really did enunciate a vision of complete forgiveness, generosity, and self-sacrifice. But, said Niebuhr, this otherworldly ethic could not actually be practiced in the real world of finite and sinful people. The best Christians can do in the world, he said, is to limit the effects of sin as much as possible. In the context of the Cold War, this meant support for the American policies of global anti-communism and containment. Some Niebuhrians would even approve of limited nuclear war, as an expression of realism.

Nevertheless I think that some coercion, even some violence, is part of the 'good life' for Christian citizens.<sup>9</sup> We don't avoid the slippery slope to war by denying the complexity of morality. Instead, like George Fox, we should nurture in ourselves (or better: receive as a divine gift) a robust confidence in the power of Christ. There is no simple rule ('violent, bad; nonviolent, good') to guide our discipleship. Instead, we must live in the life and power of God. I am here advocating a frank supernaturalism. Let's face it: if God's Spirit does not actually help us find our way through the thickets of moral quandaries, Christianity doesn't have anything unique to offer the world.

Many non-Christians will find that their understanding of the moral ideal is similar to the biblical vision of the Peaceable Kingdom. For them, shorn of supernaturalism or any specifically Christian dogmas, my essay may serve as a warning against sloppy thinking and self-deception. And that may be enough; we will not make good progress toward the prize if we fail to recognize the twists and turns of the trail.

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9 I use the phrase 'good life' as philosophers sometimes do. It is the life of good persons who are achieving the proper goal(s) of life.