

Preface to Coercion and Its Fallout

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[The second half of the last chapter (chapter 19) of Murray Sidman's book *Coercion and Its Fallout* (published in 2001 by Authors Cooperative of Boston, MA.) appeared in the last issue of *Behaviorology Today* (volume 6, number 2, pp. 30–35) as an article under the title "Reinforcement in diplomacy: More effective than coercion." To complement that article and, moreover, to encourage further investigation of the *Coercion and Its Fallout* book and the issues that it raises and the solutions that it proposes, the Preface to that book appears in this issue (reprinted with permission).—Ed.]

I wrote this book to say some things I have long thought needed saying not just to professional colleagues but also to all thoughtful people who are concerned about where we are going as a species. Even as a teenager, I had somehow become aware that the world was unwinding. It had real problems and was not facing up to them. My view was colored not just by personal experience; that was really quite limited. My family was really relatively secure and nonpunitive, and my most severe stresses came from the roving gangs that occasionally swept into our neighborhood looking for kids to beat up. But I was also a reader, and what I read about people's senseless cruelty and hypocrisy was almost unbelievable. How could human beings do the things they were always doing to each other? The prevailing themes in news reports or in novels were wars, murders and other kinds of personal violence, political and religious suppression, unscrupulous business and political dealings, betrayals of friends and lovers, mental illness, and petty egocentrism. And as if to confirm my dismay, World war II broke out just when I became old enough to take part.

Right after World war II, most of us did not yet understand the enormity of the destructive force that had been let loose. We had not resigned ourselves to the possibility that our generation might be the last. General skepticism about whether things could ever get any better had not yet set in. It was still easy to find peers and even older people who believed it did not have to be the way it was. And the end of World war II seemed somehow to mark a possible new beginning. The really large evil forces in the world appeared to have been wiped out; perhaps we could now continue, getting rid of the rest of

the senseless violence we characteristically subjected each other to. But it has not happened that way. Why not?

The big question was, "How to go about it?" How to bring about the changes that our society, exhausted by destruction and suffering, seemed ready for? Most of the proposed solutions involved changes in our institutions. For some, a new form of government was the answer. Others could see progress only in the context of an altered economic system. Still others believed that education was the key. But there was a catch to all proposals for political, economic, or educational reform. Those institutions, those systems, were not handed to us from the outside, ready made. We made them ourselves. Whatever virtues and weaknesses our institutions had were our own virtues and weaknesses.

It has become clear that the primary problems lie not in our institutions but in us. Somehow, we have to change ourselves if we are to build systems that will support cooperation, sharing, justice, and generally rational approaches to the problems that inevitably arise when large numbers of people have to share limited resources.

How are we to change ourselves? Many kinds of proposals have been made. Anthropologists long ago recognized that as a species, we have not yet completed our physical adaptations to our two-legged posture, to soft food, to the prolongation of life through sanitation and preventive medicine. We suffer much illness and distress because our upright posture provides proper support neither for our innards nor for the arches of our feet; our diets are making our teeth largely unnecessary; many immunological processes, no longer needed to protect us from environmental changes, show up instead as allergies; and with physical illness during our earlier years playing a lesser role in determining the duration of our lives, aging brings with it still new diseases. Some hold that leftovers from our physical heritage generate suffering and misery, keeping us at each other's throats. They suggest that the world would be a better place if we just got rid of all those whose physical suffering was making them impossible to live with. Their solutions include improvement of the species through radical euthanasia, getting rid of rather than prolonging the lives of those who are born with defects or who acquire defects because they live too long.

Extreme euthanasia, doing away with anyone who suffers presumed deficiencies, has been tried on a large scale more than once. The attempts by the Nazis made obvious the horrors inherent in arbitrarily defining what is meant by "deficiency," in specifying what is a "problem," and in determining what is "desirable." Furthermore, doing away with the aged and infirm—those who are no longer producing and bearing children—could have no effect on the evolution of the species. And if we were to attempt to achieve "genetic purity" at the other end—

doing away with physically and mentally deficient children—the evolutionary process would still take hundreds of generations. That time frame is not available to us.

Proposals to produce a healthier and perhaps more agreeable species through controlled breeding possess the same flaw—we do not have enough time. Modern advances in genetics do indicate that rapid changes will become possible in the not too distant future. How close that future is, we do not yet know with any certainty. We know even less about how genes and conduct are related. What kinds of inheritance will make us apply our full intelligence to our most critical problems? What genetic changes will make us respond to frustration with reason rather than aggression? Can we clone teachers who will use positive rather than coercive methods to teach the young? And so on. Even if it proves possible to use our developing understanding of genetics to speed up the normally slow evolutionary process, it is not at all clear that we are going to find out how to do this advantageously before we do each other in.

What few have considered is the possibility that we can bring about behavioral change without altering our biological processes or our genetic makeup. In the last 60 years, behavioral analysis has taught us much about how the environment influences behavior. Within the limits of our current biological inheritance, our conduct is strongly controlled by its environmental setting and its environmental consequences. Behavioral analysis has also shown us that self-control is really environmental control; it is possible to engineer changes in our own environment so as to bring about changes in our own behavior. To control ourselves is to change the environment in such a way as to change our own conduct, and to do so because it changes our own conduct. There is so much room for change, even without genetic manipulation, that altering some of the critical relations between environment and behavior is the only practical route to travel if we are really to change our conduct before it is too late.

A widespread but erroneous view holds that only superficial alterations can be brought about this way. Many still believe that an analysis of relations between our conduct and our environment does not get at our real nature. We like to see ourselves as independent agents, not as a locus of controlling variables. For many, the “real me” consists of those innermost feelings, thoughts, and yearnings that nobody else can ever know. And it is true, nobody else can ever know our “inner person” through direct experience. Granting that, we must also acknowledge that as far as the rest of the world is concerned, the “real you” is what they can see. That is all others can deal with. And what they can see, what they can deal with, are our actions. We may regard our inner person as our true self, but to the rest of the world, we are what we do. If we are going to change our interactions

with each other, we are going to have to change what we do. By changing our conduct, we change ourselves.

I have attempted in this book to indicate a critical kind of change that will have to take place in our social interactions if we are ever to do something constructive about the miseries we currently inflict on each other, if we are ever to at least postpone the current headlong rush toward extinction of the species. Coercion is not the root of all evil, but until we adopt other than coercive ways to control each other's conduct, no method of physically improving our species will keep our survival timer from running out. A developing science of behavior may again give people of good will cause for optimism about our chances for survival.✻

[You have now read both the beginning and the end of Sidman's book *Coercion and Its Fallout* (the Preface, in this issue, and much of the last chapter, in the last issue). All of the material between these points—which you can read by obtaining the book—builds on the experimental research that underlies Sidman's detailed analysis of the effects of coercion across the range of human interests—including at home, in school, at work, within governments, and among nations. This analysis then provides the basis for his reasoning that further applying scientific principles and concepts of behavior to reducing coercion throughout society would be beneficial. Again, these parts of the *Coercion and Its Fallout* book appeared in this journal to encourage further investigation of the book and the issues that it raises and the solutions that it proposes.—Ed.]

References

- Sidman, M. (2001). *Coercion and Its Fallout—Revised Edition*. Boston, MA: Authors Cooperative. (ISBN 1-888830-01-8).✻

