

# TACIT COERCION: A REPLY

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In this reply to comments by Schliesser, Kochin, Kositna, Sasser, Miller, and Eyal and Sheremet, the underlying thesis of “Epistemic Coercion” is elaborated and explained. Epistemic Coercion is often thought to be impossible: no one can coerce belief. This is the thesis of epistemic voluntarism. But the techniques and responses the paper addressed were different: they were attempts to alter the epistemic environment. And this relates to the tacit. Voluntarism does not hold for the tacit, which is to say, that which is produced by experience and by prior cognitive predispositions. The experiences of the digital world are subject to manipulation, and the manipulators can themselves be coerced. In this way a person's tacit sense of what is normal or acceptable can be manipulated. But the same sense can be the basis of rejection of claims made in the name of expert authority. One difference between overt coercion and tacit manipulation is that the manipulation of epistemically relevant experience, through such means as algorithms governing social media content, is hidden from recipient, and more difficult to resist. But its effects are indirect, for example, in facilitating acceptance as normal. These effects are bound up with persuasion and acceptance generally, so this kind of manipulation represents an exercise of hidden power.

**Keywords:** tacit knowledge, epistemic coercion, expertise, censorship, power

# НЕЯВНОЕ ПРИНУЖДЕНИЕ: ОТВЕТ ОППОНЕНТАМ

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В ответе на комментарии Шлиссера, Кочина, Костиной, Сас-суэра, Миллера, Эяла и Шеремет разъясняется основной тезис статьи «Эпистемическое принуждение». Эпистемическое принуждение часто считается невозможным: никто не может принудить к убеждению. Таков тезис эпистемического волюнтаризма. Но в статье рассмотрена иная точка зрения: она принимает во внимание попытки изменить эпистемическую среду, что связано с неявным знанием. Волюнтаризм не действует в отношении неявного знания, которое формируется на основании опыта и когнитивных предрасположенностей. Опыт в цифровом мире подвержен манипуляциям, и сами манипуляторы могут быть подвергнуты принуждению. Таким образом, неявное восприятие человеком нормальности или приемлемости может быть изменено. Но такое восприятие может служить и основой для несогласия с утверждениями, сделанными от имени экспертов. Разница между открытым принуждением и неявным манипулированием заключается в том, что манипулирование эпистемически значимым опытом с помощью таких средств, как алгоритмы, управляющие содержанием социальных медиа, скрыто от получателя, и ему



труднее противостоять. Оно косвенно воздействует на получателя, манипулируя когнитивными предрасположенностями к убеждениям и действуя как скрытая власть.

**Ключевые слова:** неявное знание, эпистемическое принуждение, экспертиза, цензура, власть

Thanks to the contributors for their useful, and varied, responses. The sheer range of the discussion is a good indication of the richness of the topic, and its future. I hope I can clarify my point in this reply. My main concern was to identify some forms of epistemic coercion and resistance to it, and to undermine the idea of epistemic voluntarism. I was not concerned to argue against epistemic coercion, but rather to note its ubiquity, and that science was not exempt, but I was concerned with the epistemic environment and how it could be transformed by these methods, and how they could be resisted. I noted that this was a concern of long-standing, associated with novel information technologies. The current information regime had made it an especially salient topic. Social media and search engines have been subject to coercive control, handwringing by intellectuals, and a demand for more control by the supposed advocates of democracy and enlightenment.

The paper was critical of two viewpoints: the “liberal” one in which each person is the master of their epistemic universe, and the “common good” one, which justifies imposing epistemic order. My aim was to identify forms of both coercion and resistance. As I wrote “Neither of these conceptions is quite satisfactory, and none of them fit the pattern of coercion and resistance outlined here: coercion falls on the clever as well as the stupid, and epistemic autonomy is a myth.” But in addition, I was focused on identifying novel forms of epistemic control and the ultimate basis of resistance to them. But there is an issue here that is worth discussing: if coercion is an intrinsic and ineliminable part of the knowledge process, what can be said about the regime under which it is conducted? I will return to this at the end.

My larger point was that some important forms of coercion were not recognized as such, or were ignored. And that some forms of response were not understood as resistance to these forms of coercion. I did not treat the topic as a policy topic, which is to say one for which I had a policy conclusion, such as pluralism, as a remedy for coercion, or a means of eliminating coercion. My point was that coercion was intrinsic to a variety of common epistemic situations, including science, and indeed to epistemic experience in its full social complexity itself. In this respect I was agreeing with Feyerabend. I did not endorse or discuss his own not always consistent policy response to it, which would require a different kind of paper. Nor did I endorse nihilism, postmodernism, radical epistemic individualism, and so forth. Indeed, the argument eliminates hope for escaping coercion through some sort of cerebral hygiene. Nor is



there an institutional “solution.” My conclusion will be one I have argued for in other places: that any epistemic system or form of knowledge organization has its trade-offs, often involving conflicting cognitive values [Turner, 2023a], limits, and proneness to what are, even on its own terms, “errors” or as I called them following Charles Perrow, “normal accidents” [Turner, 2010]. But one can see why pointing out the features of ordinary science and fact-making include coercive elements would lead one to think that I was celebrating a kind of radical personal epistemic autonomy, despite my denials. But this missed the point. I identified strategies used in intellectual conflict, not epistemic guarantors. The analysis could just as well have been applied to the Inquisition, the Reformation, and the Counter-reformation.

The key background idea of the paper was the idea that there were two sides to epistemic experiences: the overt side of assertion and the tacit side of experiences, or tacit knowledge, that made overt claims believable or less than believable. I didn’t regard this as controversial, or at least worth elaborating in this paper. Nor do I regard the fact that tacit knowledge is individualized, or as Michael Polanyi titled his magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge* [Polanyi, 1958]. But it does conflict with a doctrine which is called “epistemic voluntarism,” which essentially claims that there can be no such thing as coercion with respect to belief. For the voluntarist, one is responsible for acceptance or adherence to one’s beliefs, and believing is assimilated to the commonsense model of action, where to believe is to make a choice to believe. This doctrine hinges on definitions of such things as knowledge and belief, and excludes tacit knowledge, because it is not “justified true belief,” which would need to be explicit to be “justified.” But it is a conventional doctrine in analytic epistemology.

## Science and the Tacit

In philosophy of science things are different: not only Polanyi but Popper, Dewey, and a host of others appeal to expectations, intuitions, feelings, unease, and so forth as part of the process of intellectual change, and discovery, and these things also play a role in acceptance. Popper made a specific point about the irrational element in discovery, and about the role of expectations: “we are born with expectations; with ‘knowledge’ which, although not *valid a priori* is psychologically and genetically prior to all observational experience” [Popper, 1953, p. 47] and that “we stick to our expectations even when they are inadequate and we ought to accept defeat.” But this dogmatism is necessary, because “if we accept defeat too easily we may prevent ourselves from finding that we were very nearly right” [Ibid., p. 49]. The “dogmatism” was based



on these tacit expectations: necessary, partial, but revisable. The scare quotes around the term “knowledge” reflect an important point about the tacit: when we use terms like this, including dogmatism but also belief, expectation, presupposition, assumption, values, intuitions, and so forth to describe the tacit we are using them analogically to describe the psychological and genetic.

This line of argument is connected to many other thinkers: the appeal to intuition in Bergson, which influenced many people in the nineteen-twenties, including Frank Knight, and beyond that to the opponents of neo-Kantianism, such as the *Lebensphilosophie* tradition, and one could add a long list of others. I alluded to this by citing Gerd Gigerenzer’s reference to gut feelings [Gigerenzer, 2007], Elsewhere he points to the psychology/logic distinction [Gigerenzer, 1998] which applies to decision theory and other model forms of rationality, and to the difficulties of modelling psychological rationality. But a more crucial aspect of this vast line of thought points to the issue of the relation between language and experience and the idea that language, like Kantian categories, comes before and determines experience. There is a qualification to be made here, however. A conventional way of thinking about the tacit derives from neo-Kantianism and treats what is needed for communication, understanding and so forth as “assumptions,” presuppositions, and so on. And a later version of this reduced these to discursive conditions. When Foucault said “we are all neo-Kantians now” he was reflecting this evolution of terms. But it also reflected the inappropriate concretization of terms used analogically, like presupposition, as though they were accessible facts: a core idea of neo-Kantianism. The paper rejected this and used the concept of a tacit endowment as shorthand for the tacit conditions of thought generally.

The reduction of the tacit to language or discourse in Foucault had the effect of de-individualizing the tacit, making it something shared, and treated the topic of thought as derivative of language or the discursive. The issue here is a bit confusing, because the tacit and the explicit are interwoven in practice: there are terms that are used, but what they mean to the users is partly tacit and individualized or variable at the tacit level. I have written extensively on the tacit [Turner, 2002; 2014a; 2014b; 2020; 2023b; 2024] and these topics from various angles. I did not recapitulate all these arguments, and merely mentioned Gigerenzer’s remarks on “gut feelings” as a marker for the tacit. But it is a good marker: scientists do in fact refer to the “in your guts test.”

The innovation of the paper was not to invent a new account of the tacit but to assert that the tacit side was important both to resistance and to acceptance, and that it was also the side that was most subject to unnoticed epistemic coercion. Lots of things, I would claim, are tacit, cases where “we know more than we can say,” as the Polanyian slogan has it. Some of these are the product of learning in the wild, so to speak.



The novelty of the new world of social media and digital communication is that experience can be “curated” [Turner, 2022]. As Michael Kochin notes, this is very much a live issue: “The censorship-industrial complex can keep us from knowing things by censorship, or by polluting our information stream with misinformation.” Much of my text reflected this new reality, but my concern was with the tacit effects. Ironically, given Gil Eyal and Elizaveta Sheremet’s comments on algorithms, tacit learning and its limitations are close kin to that of algorithms, and subject to the same kinds of manipulation.

Some of the tacit learning is the product of what I call coercion: they are intended alterations to the tacit endowments of others through the non-transparent manipulation of the cognitive environment. But as the language issue indicates, there is not a sharp line between explicit and tacit in terms of content. There is a tacit component to much of what is “explicit”: an element of interpretation based on what one knows tacitly. My concern was elsewhere. But I would add that personal experience, which also has a tacit component, has an outsize role in epistemic acceptance and rejection, especially in relation to expert knowledge claims. And this means that our tacit background is especially important in relation to them, whether we are ourselves experts employing our tacit knowledge or non-experts employing our own.

The idea of epistemic voluntarism is more plausible with overt claims: we agree to accept them. But we are not sovereigns of our epistemic world. *Why* we are inclined to agree or disagree, to accept or reject, is another matter: that depends on what I call our tacit endowment. Voluntarism doesn’t apply to experience. We do not, to put it in the crudest terms, control how our neurons wire and rewire in response to experiential inputs. But these are the bases of our tacit capacities. There is a sense, which Raphael Sassower makes much of, that this leads to a kind of individualism: the connectome, the set of connections that are the neural basis of thought, that results from inputs, is individualized. But it is not free from social inputs, meaning learning from others, and indeed one could not imagine a knowing subject that was not heavily dependent on social learning from birth or before. Moreover, this is a raw fact about human cognition, not a normative claim.

## Manipulating the Tacit

The responses to the paper cover a vast range of considerations: ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, political, and even legal, in that coercion is a term of legal art. A good place to begin is Boaz Miller’s invocation of Hobbes and the Leviathan, which gives us a start on thinking about the knowledge system as a regime. Carl Schmitt gives a nicely epistemic



description of the origins of the state: “the terror of the state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together; their fear rises to an extreme; a spark of reason (*ratio*) flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new God” [Schmitt, 2008, p. 31] and “a consensus emerges about the necessity to submit to the strongest power” [Ibid., p. 33]. Sasser’s picture of the absurdity and folly of the individual with his or her meagre epistemic base facing off against the scientific establishment with its deep roots in the scientific process captures this nicely: the fear rising to an extreme is the fear of life-threatening error, for example, over a vaccine. The solution is submission to the new God. This is in fact the situation which the manipulators of the cognitive environment wish to produce.

But the scientific Leviathan is a complex creature. On the one hand, people within it are nominally “free,” and free to believe what they want to believe. On the other, it is a system rife with coercive mechanisms, exclusions, rejections, and so forth. Many of these mechanisms are indirect. The coercive aspects can be concealed under notions of quality, peer judgement, and so forth, so they seem “legitimate.” But to participate in them involves a high level of acceptance of the system and conformity, which is largely internalized. We depend on our peers and the system for information, which we trust but verify, when we can, and expect others to verify. Gloria Origgi has a nice term for this, “Voluntary Epistemic Servitude” [Origgi, 2017, p. 216]. We strive to succeed and on terms we accept. We check our citation counts obsessively, but we do so voluntarily. We can leave. So where is the coercion? No one forces us to believe anything.

This sense of voluntary servitude extends to the digital sphere and social media. There are, as Gil Eyal and Elizaveta Sheremet note, no threats in the most overt sense to the mere user, though the point of curation and the reality of social media systems is that threats to be restricted, banned, shadow banned, or excluded are the norm: many people have received hundreds of these before being banned. And the government advises the companies involved what to exclude, which they do voluntarily. This is what a curated world looks like. We are not forced to participate. We can shut our screens and log off. The situation of the state of nature is that when we submit to the strongest power we are compelled to do so and do so without knowing what the consequences are. The key to curation is that it is invisible to the user and even largely to the curator, if the curation, or control of content, is done by an algorithm. As A. Kositna points out, not only is it not transparent, it is itself a source of ignorance that makes the true epistemic source unidentifiable. We can keep the illusion that we are voluntary knowers, deciding on our own. But we are living in a world of manipulated experience that is novel.

Does this amount to “coercion”? We are in the Hobbesian situation in one key respect: we don’t know what we have agreed to when we join



a curated system. Nor do we know the epistemic effects on us through experience as distinct from beliefs we are being persuaded to accept. One key to the legitimation of belief, found even in Schmitt's rendering of Hobbes, is the idea that there is a consensus that is protective at least in the sense that almost everyone else accepts it. In this case it is an epistemic one: it protects us from the errors that come from disagreeing with the group. But curation can create an illusion that facilitates normalization. Indeed, in Obama's original appeal for curation this was the point: to suppress information that would lead to dissensus [Turner, 2023]. This was indeed the tactic during Covid: to delegitimize some views by hiding them to create the illusion of consensus – incidentally the name of a well-known blog whose authors were subject to these methods.

Was there coercion here? As I write this the US Supreme Court is hearing arguments about one link in the chain: the role of the government in encouraging the control of online information in relation to Covid and many other matters, many of which were overtly political. The courts are trying to find the line between persuasion and coercion. A baseline for this can be taken from feminist ethics: the issue is imbalance of power. Those with power over the recipient of “persuasion” to do something are coercing, even if mildly. There need be no overt threat. Political scientists have long recognized the importance of latent power, which can be assumed to be operating in all these cases. What is important is intent. And the intent in the case of curation is to alter the experiences of individuals in social media in such a way that the experience conforms to and validates the overt claims, such as the claim of consensus.

Agreement may be “voluntary.” But the path of experience is not voluntary: the content of experience has been manipulated for the purpose of assuring that the overt claims, and the ideology, do not conflict with the experience, and therefore with the tacit predispositions to accept or reject that experiences produce. And this kind of conflict, as noted above, is the psychological basis of non-acceptance. Is this a novel form of coercion, based on a novel form of authority over what is treated by recipients as statistically normal? In law, what is accomplished by indirect means, such as through an intermediary or a mechanical device, is as unlawful as that which is prohibited to accomplish directly. This seems analogous. But in any case, from the point of view of political theory, the question is not the ethical-legal one of defining coercion, but a question of its effects and intended effects. If they are the same as outright coercion, and perhaps better because they incorporate the illusion of choice, they fall into the same political category.

Eric Schliesser argues that there is a “political” solution to these issues that I have ignored, and that it is more than sufficient to resolve any of the issues at hand. He has in mind reliable institutions with “countervailing powers that can provide trustworthy and reliable cues and proxies



for what and whom to belief.” These would include “A well-functioning state” which is “a trustworthy witness to the truth.” But he grants that if there are “new sophisticated forms of epistemic coercion then we will also need sophisticated countervailing powers.” So he suggests that “the full range of possible sources of a pluralist society” will serve this purpose and that I am “simply wrong about the fact that we are ‘most vulnerable where we have little tacit background that enables us to resist;’ rather we are most vulnerable when have no idea who and whom to turn to for assistance in our resistance.”

This is a touching statement of faith, to which I am sympathetic. But it has the effect of pushing the issues one step back to the question of where we get our ideas of whom to turn to and how to assess what we are told, which is to say who we can trust, and the step back is to the tacit: our sense of the trustworthiness of the sources. And the tolerance of the state for pluralism is hardly a given. The current push for censorship of misinformation is a response to pluralism, which is seen as dangerous if it is not controlled. Culture, which is to say the tacit, plays a large role here, often a paradoxical one. One recalls that Tocqueville regarded the Americans of his time as natural Cartesians, who wanted to decide everything for themselves. He pointed out that, ironically, this made them even more dependent on the opinions of people around them, which is to say who they have to turn to. What this suggests is that personal epistemologies are cultural or tacit, and also that turning to those around us for assistance is a resource of limited value if we are surrounded by the like-minded. But more fundamentally it points to a problem with “pluralism” in practice: it is something that itself depends on culture, on a tacit acceptance of the possibility of other people being right, on their sincerity and honesty, and a skepticism about claims, such as those of the state, to possess truth. I have written extensively on the ways in which state scientific institutions in the United States earned the trust of people, and how they did so [Turner, 1987; 2018a]. There was nothing automatic about it. This trust is provisional, learned, and easily lost.

The tacit is involved in more ways. To choose between plural options requires a capacity to choose that is based on one’s tacit endowment. The individual has no platform for neutral choice between the alternatives. His or her reaction in choosing is conditioned by their tacit endowment, which is individualized, and not neutral, but also not entirely subject to conscious control. Even to understand an alternative requires tacit capacities, often substantial ones: that is one argument for just accepting the standard authorities. There are no magic decision rules for sorting out the plural options that do not involve a large tacit component. Even knowing who to “turn to for assistance in our resistance” requires a sense of who is trustworthy as a source and as a knower, and why, a sense which is personal and rooted in experience.





I think this is fundamental to the possibility of “sophisticated countervailing powers.”

But pluralism also pushes the problem of coercion back a step in another way: to create a credible alternative, an alternative group – to which someone might turn – requires its own structure, which is going to be coercive in some sense, such as exclusion, within the group. The issue is genetic: if we ask how alternatives develop, we inevitably find that they involve, as Kositna usefully notes, a kind of tribalism that is deeply rooted in normal scientific practice. The pluralist world is a world of epistemic tribes. This may be “better,” in the sense that it gives the outsider more choices, and therefore more closely approximates pure epistemic voluntarism, which is itself most plausible as a thesis for explicit belief. But the tacit is not subject to epistemic voluntarism: though we can control the experiences and social contacts that produce social learning, we can’t control the contents or their effects on us. So, pluralism “solves” one problem but also conceals another.

The claims made on behalf of science conflict with “pluralism,” in ways that bear both on the intellectual history of the topic and its present role in public life. The intellectual history is vexed and disputed: Mill never freed himself from Comte’s science absolutism [Mill, 1865a; 1865b; 1867]. As Schliesser points out, Maurice Cowling [Cowling, 1990] has identified the authoritarian elements of Mill’s “liberalism.” Science was always exempted from Mill’s pleas for tolerance. Comte himself can be claimed to have allowed for free exchange but only until the science was settled, after which there was, as he put it, no place for conscience. We have many echoes of the conflict between science absolutism and freedom in the subsequent intellectual history: Karl Pearson’s call for the veneration of scientists and also of the state as a new religion come to mind – but Pearson similarly insisted that because science was a matter of consensus the society organized in this way could do without coercion [Turner, 2008; 2018b]. Even Pearson, however, acknowledged the need to suppress the recalcitrant. Pluralism in science was never on the agenda for any of these thinkers.

Michael Kochin and Boaz Miller come to terms with the political. Gil Eyal and Elizaveta Sheremet and Raphael Sassower dismiss it. For Eyal and Sheremet the sanctions involved in suppressing exchange on social media are mere instances of strategic interaction, and non-threatening – no more than the occasional ban from a social media site. The evidence is otherwise. The state – in this case the US government – is heavily invested in suppressing what it takes to be misinformation or the undefined malinformation, and the “strategic interactions” involve large imbalances of power, otherwise known as coercion. Suffice it to say that this is the subject of litigation in the US Supreme Court as we write, and the question that is being posed is this: should the state be limited in protecting people from the harms of speech that might lead them to endanger themselves.



The political question here is simple: who decides? Sassower thinks that the issue is simply one between legitimate authority, based on the “scientific method,” which he thinks is possessed only by the authorities, and individuals who lack proper respect for their epistemic betters. This is a parody of actual cases of the application of science to policy, which are normally ill-structured problems [Turner, 1989] or “wicked problems” [Turner, 2018c], and the “scientific method” never solves policy questions on its own.

As Miller notes, the elephant in the room is Covid. And the relation between policy and science has not been the simple one that Sassower portrays. The political and scientific record is still being written, and documents are still being released, or in many cases still being withheld. But what we can plausibly say now is this: the policies of lockdowns and vaccinations failed, by the standards of the promises made to justify them. There was little or none of the base in “testability, repeatability, and falsification” that Sassower takes to justify the legitimacy of “scientific authority.” The proponents of these policies simultaneously attempted to distort the facts about the origin of the virus, their role in it, and the lack of evidence for the policies and to suppress criticism and sound research that disagreed with them, and claimed that the science was “settled” only later to retract their claims and excuse their errors by saying “science evolves.” They suppressed and delegitimated research that has proven to be correct. They were practitioners of epistemic coercion. Nor is this the first such case in the history of science, or even in relation to epidemics: indeed, the pattern is depressingly familiar. This is indeed an elephant that any discussion of these issues needs to come to terms with. And it points to the larger need to understand the processes of coercion and resistance that the paper pointed to.

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