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TED HONDERICH

A Theory of Determinism: The mind, neuroscience, and life-hopes
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From a bird's-eye view, the central argument of *A Theory of Determinism* appears as follows: (A) The mind is the brain; every mental event (including every decision and every framing of intention) is intimately related to a neural event. (B) Probably all neural events are deterministically caused, so, thanks to the intimate relation, determinism is likely to be true of our decisions and actions. (C) Does this mean that there is no free will? Incompatibilists say yes, Compatibilists say no, and Ted Honderich says they are both wrong. Both schools fail to recognize that we have no single conception of free will, but rather several, and the prospect of determinism appropriately evinces different "families of attitudes", depending on which conception of freedom one is attending to or embracing. Three different responses to these conceptions are available: dismay, intransigence and affirmation. Affirmation is ultimately recommended.

Now swoop down lower and visualize an army of ants attacking this central argument at the details: What exactly is the intimate relation between a mental event and a neural event? Is it identity, or causal dependence, or co-occurrence, or something else? What exactly is causation, and what is determinism? (And what are events and what are attitudes and what does "freedom" mean and what does "mean" mean in this context, etc?) The army is composed about equally of real ants (published philosophers) and imaginary ants (holders of logically possible, but not yet occupied, positions), clever ants and obtuse ants. And now look closely – how heroic and how appalling! – Honderich is apparently taking them all on single-handedly, one at a time.

Just as a biologist can learn a good deal about the niche an organism inhabits by examining its defences, and particularly the way it budgets them, so a reader can learn about the intellectual world a writer inhabits by seeing whose work gets short shrift, whose objections are carefully rebutted, and which issues are "too obvious" to need defence. I am unsettled by the discovery that there can be a distinguished

writing in the same language as I, working on the same topics – the nature of mind, the problem of free will, the relation of our everyday conceptions to the world-view of science – arriving at very similar conclusions, and yet living in such a different niche.

My first reaction was dismay: here was Honderich lavishing hundreds of pages on painstaking refutations of positions I would never even mention, so unrewarding would their demolition be for the reader, while at the same time I found him seriously misreading,



Picasso's "Tête d'Homme" will be auctioned at Christie's sale of drawings, sculpture, prints and posters from the Douglas Cooper Collection on Wednesday, November 30 at 7.00 pm. It is expected to fetch between £15,000 and £20,000.

underestimating, all too brusquely dismissing some of the most fruitful and promising strands of current thought (in my opinion). A likely symmetry of our respective vantage-points was not long lost on me, however, as I began to imagine that one reason I had sometimes failed to persuade him by arguments in my own work could be his reflection that anyone who so cavalierly ignored the contributions of X, or Y, or Z should hardly be taken to have thought deeply enough about these issues.

My dismay was of course tempered by the recognition that Honderich was in the main coming to the conclusions I also defend: (1) Indeterminism provides no sanctuary whatsoever for those who hanker after free will (so determinism might as well be true, whether or not it is true – as Honderich thinks). (2) There are different conceptions (or varieties) of free will, and the stalemate of the philosophical

this. (3) "Arguably it is with respect to our conception of our own future lives that a determinism is most challenging to us, least tolerable", but the appropriate response to this upsetting prospect is to recognize and appreciate the varieties of free will that are unscathed by it, and adjust our institutions and attitudes to fit this clear-sighted vision of our circumstances; enough survives to sustain our life-hopes without the dubious crutch of the "obscure and panicky metaphysics" (P. F. Strawson) of indeterminism.

somewhat different terms in our two nations, and the British version encourages, or at least permits, Honderich's project.

More specifically, it encourages Honderich to explore the implications of a dramatically conservative view of what parts of common sense are immune to scientific overthrow. For while he has proper – that is, informed and not slavish – respect for science, and aspires to resolve the conflict we all can see between what Wilfrid Sellars calls "the manifest image" of common sense and the scientific image, he is not remotely convinced by some of the philosophic campaigns that have carried the day on my side of the Atlantic. The conflict is deeper than we have thought, Honderich believes, and so he has attempted his own resolution, giving fewer hostages to science from the outset.

Central among the truths he declares to be self-evident and non-negotiable is the axiom [sic] of mental indispensability: "earlier mental events are ineliminable parts of any full explanations of many mental events and also actions". What this implies is that no satisfactory account may swallow up the allusion to specifically mental events – for instance by identifying them with neural events, or with functionally characterized events. Thus, if the "full" explanation of Tom's pulling the trigger invokes *inter alia* the earlier mental event of Tom's suddenly thinking that the thing in the bushes is a tiger, then identifying this sudden thought as some purely physically described brain event would permit the trigger-pulling to be "fully" explained in those neural terms without recourse to mental terms – violating the axiom. Honderich is unpersuaded by the various doctrines of co-existing levels of explanation, supervenience and emergence that have helped American "functionalist" philosophers in the cognitive science movement to satisfy both their intuitions and their respect for physical science. On this point Honderich joins forces with his colleague Colin McGinn (and the Americans, John Searle and Thomas Nagel) in insisting that these doctrines, by forsaking the primacy of "the first person point of view", simply fail to "deal with half of the subject-matter".

This sets him the task of defining – not yet defending – an alternative, and the result, after 258 pages of definitional thrust-and-parry, is the Union Theory, and its attendant doctrine of the "causation of psychoneural pairs". The "theory" looks, not surprisingly, a lot like an identity theory (after all, and a lot like a dual

Agreement is a rare and cherished commodity among philosophers, but it is the disagreements that can lead to discovery. From what subterranean source do our differences spring? Part of the explanation is probably geographical. For instance, the ambient attitude towards science among philosophers in Britain is now apparently quite unlike that in the United States, where positions expounded in defiant ignorance of the relevant science are no longer taken seriously. It is striking to an American eye to see how hard Honderich thinks he must work to persuade the general run of his colleagues of the inescapable bearing of the neurosciences and physics on their jealously guarded topics, and hence on the untenability of certain perennially tempting positions. I suspect that this appearance owes more to eccentricities in Honderich's judgment than to the actual state of play in British philosophy,

an identity th... minus that dreaded swallow-
ing up and plus nothing of any further use or
interest to the theorist in either neuroscience or
philosophy. He sums up its virtues on page 338:

If the term "physical" is used otherwise than we have
used it, so as not to include the mental, the objection
is that determinism allows for the conditional pre-
dictability of mental events and actions on the basis of
physical facts alone. But the determinism to which
we have come *does* respect the axiom of the indispen-
sability of the mental and hence does *not* have the
given consequence.

Having distinguished the view-to-be-
defended from all its real and imaginary alter-
natives, Honderich has a relatively easier time
arguing for its truth, and for its deterministic
implications. As I have suggested, I find most
of this labour gratuitous, since its improve-
ments over the prevailing brands of materialism
(with their identical implications for free will)
are impressive only to those who cling to
Honderich's axiom of mental indispensability.
But suppose McGinn, Searle and Nagel prove
to be right: then Honderich will indeed have
shown that, even so, the implications of deter-
ministic physical science cannot be escaped by
any routes their vision opens up.

The chief novelty of this second part of the
book is Honderich's defence of determinism in
the face of the contrary received wisdom as
purveyed by the exponents of quantum mecha-
nics. Honderich is one of those who still firmly
believe, with Einstein, that the indeterminism
of quantum mechanics will eventually be made
to evaporate; and whether or not he is right
about that, he is certainly right to refuse to be
overwhelmed by the physicists' rather im-

pressionistic and loosely argued interpreta-
tions of the quantum-theoretical formulations,
whose success is quite beyond reasonable
doubt. As he notes, "The endeavour of inter-
pretation... [of quantum mechanics] is in large
part philosophical in nature. Still, it must be
that some significant weight is to be given to the
views of those who have a firm grip of the
formalism." Honderich is not such a one (as he
acknowledges) nor am I, so rather than criticize
his tenacious but modest attempts to under-
mine and restrict the physicists' near-
unanimous verdict in favour of indeterminism,
I will comment on his motivation for such a
brave stand. It stems from his faith in an un-
bendingly strict concept of causation, which he
believes to be part of self-evident common
sense, and which rules out, a priori, all merely
probabilistic visions of causal connection. In
Honderich's eyes, the burden of proof lies with
the physicists and their interpreters to show
indeterminism to be so much as coherent, let
alone empirically supported, and he finds the
standard accounts unpersuasive.

One of the virtues he sees in his defence of
determinism is that it clears the air for the
neuroscientists who are tackling the terribly
difficult problems of causation in the nervous
system, but it is ironic — and a sign of
Honderich's somewhat skewed understanding
of science — that he should thus try to save
determinism for the neuroscientists just as they
are discovering the virtues of noise in the ner-
vous system, and rushing to develop probabil-
istic models of neural-net activity. But still,
suppose the physicists are wrong, and that
determinism, with all its implications, is the

final truth of the matter.

What are those implications? Once again
Honderich upholds more of common sense,
and hence sees a deeper conflict, than others
have done, but in at least one regard I think he
is demonstrably in error. In support of his
contention that determinism definitely does
cast shadows on what he calls our life-hopes, he
offers, among others, the following reflection:

If things have gone well for a person, there is more to
hope for in what follows on the assumption that the
entire run of his or her life is fixed... If things have
not gone well, or not so well as was hoped, it is at least
not unreasonable to have greater hopes on the
assumption that the whole of one's life is not fixed,
but is connected with the activity of the self...
Given the sanguine premiss of our reasonableness,
there is reason to think that we do *not* tend to the idea
of a fixed personal future.

This passage displays a fundamental error
that probably underlies the thought of many
people about determinism. Determinism does
not imply or even render probable any of the
following: all trends are permanent, character
is by and large immutable, I am less likely to
change my ways, my fortunes, or my basic
nature in the future. After all, many phenom-
ena are classically understood to be *de-*
termined to be changeable, chaotic, unpredict-
able! The implications of having a "fixed per-
sonal future" are entirely distinct from the
implications of having a "fixed personal na-
ture". It is the latter that is cause for dismay,
perhaps, but not the former, for it may be one's
fixed personal future to have a protean per-
sonal nature, highly responsive to the "activity
of the self"; among the fixed personal futures

are all the triumphant futures that include vic-
tory over adversity, the overcoming of weak-
ness, the reformation of character and, for that
matter, a change of luck. It could be just as
determined a fact that you can teach an old dog
new tricks as that you can't. The general thesis
of determinism has no implications about such
matters — though the individual fields of bio-
logy and social science might on their own have
either dire or heartening messages on these
scores for us — whether or not they are them-
selves deterministic sciences. But perhaps once
again I have underestimated the challenge; if
so, Honderich will have shown that a certain
valuable conception of life-hopes is still
consistent with determinism.

In the course of defining and defending his
theory, Honderich presents detailed dis-
cussions of virtually every topic debated in the
vast recent literature on free will, and some of
these discussions make valuable new contribu-
tions. In the end, the message of this book is
that no matter how conservatively you cling to
the home truths of the manifest image, you will
never find a good use for indeterminism in
support of a doctrine of free will, and hence
must make your peace with determinism. But a
good peace can be made, Honderich argues,
and I agree. Since he reaches this gratifying
conclusion after treating the antipathy and
resistance to science much more patiently than
I (for one) have done, and since he resolutely
defends more of the common sense that reigns
in his intellectual niche, he probably stands a
better chance than I of being believed. But if
after such an effort he finds his audience still
unpersuaded, I invite him to switch niches.