



Chapter 23



Ted Honderich's Determinism

TED HONDERICH is the principal spokesman for strict physical causality and “**hard determinism**.”

He has written more widely (with excursions into quantum mechanics, neuroscience, and consciousness), more deeply, and certainly more extensively than most of his colleagues on the problem of **free will**.

Unlike most of his determinist colleagues specializing in free will, Honderich has not succumbed to the easy path of **compatibilism** by simply declaring that the free will we have (and should want, says DANIEL DENNETT) is completely consistent with **determinism**, namely a Humean “voluntarism” or “**freedom of action**” in which our will is completely caused by prior events.

Nor does Honderich go down the path of **incompatibilism**, looking for non-physical substances, dualist forms of agency, or gifts of God. He does not simply identify freedom with Epicurean **chance**, as have many scientists with ideas of brain mechanisms amplifying quantum mechanical indeterminism to help with the uncaused “origination” of actions and decisions.¹

Honderich does not claim to have found a solution to the problem of free will or determinism, but he does claim to have confronted the *consequences of determinism*.² He is “dismayed” because the truth of determinism requires that we give up “origination” with its promise of an open future, restricting - though not eliminating - our “life hopes.”

Unlike many of his hard determinist colleagues, who appear to welcome determinism and enjoy describing belief in free will as an **illusion**, Honderich is unique in his passionate sense of real loss. We might have been the author of our own actions, he says, we could have **done otherwise**, and thus be held accountable and **morally responsible** in a way more acceptable to common sense.

1 informationphilosopher.com/freedom/free_will_mechanisms.html

2 Honderich (1990)



Honderich describes the main life hope that is lost as a future we can make for ourselves.

“We have a kind of life-hope which is incompatible with a belief in determinism. An open future, a future we can make for ourselves, is one of which determinism isn’t true.

“Suppose you become convinced of the truth of our theory of determinism. Becoming really convinced will not be easy, for several reasons. But try now to imagine a day when you do come to believe determinism fully. What would the upshot be? It would almost certainly be dismay. Your response to determinism in connection with the hope would be dismay. If you really were persuaded of determinism, the hope would collapse.

“This is so because such a hope has a necessary part or condition on which the rest of it depends. This is the image of origination. There can be no such hope if all the future is just effects of effects. It is for this reason, I think, that many people have found determinism to be a black thing. JOHN STUART MILL felt it as an incubus, and, to speak for myself, it has certainly got me down in the past.”³

Though he is its foremost champion, I find it most extraordinary that Honderich characterizes determinism as a “black thing” and as what JOHN STUART MILL called an “incubus.” Determinism gives him “dismay,” he says.

In my readings of hundreds of philosophers and scientists on the problem of free will, I have found none with such deep heart-felt feelings and frank openness about the implications of their work for the state of humanity.

The Failure of Compatibilism and Incompatibilism

In Honderich’s article for Kane’s *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, he says “Determinism is True, Compatibilism and Incompatibilism are False.”

³ Honderich (2002) p. 94.



Honderich faults both the Compatibilists and Incompatibilists on three counts.

First, he says that **moral responsibility** is not all that is at stake, there are personal feelings, reactive attitudes, problems of knowledge, and rationalizing punishment with ideas of limited responsibility.

Second, these problems can not be resolved by logical “proofs” nor by linguistic analyses of propositions designed to show “free” and “determined” are logically compatible.

And third, he faults their simplistic idea that one or the other of them must be right.

Furthermore, unlike some of his colleagues, Honderich does not completely dismiss **indeterminism** and considers the suggestion of “near-determinism.” He says,

“Maybe it should have been called determinism-where-it-matters. It allows that there is or may be some indeterminism but only at what is called the micro-level of our existence, the level of the small particles of our bodies.”⁴

Despite this openness to indeterminism, in his book *On Determinism and Freedom*, Honderich has an extensive discussion of Quantum Theory in which he says

“Does Quantum Theory as interpreted have some clause, hitherto unheard of, that its random events occur only in such places as to make us morally responsible in a certain sense? This objection of inconsistency, perhaps, is less effective with some uncommitted philosophers because they do not really take the philosophers of origination seriously. If it really were accepted as true that a random event could get in between the question and the intention, with great effect, then it would have to be accepted that one could get in between the intention and the lie, with as much effect. Any attempt to exclude the possibility is bound to be fatally ad hoc.”⁵

4 Honderich (2003) p. 5.

5 Honderich (2005) p. 125.



Here Honderich puts his finger on the stumbling block that has prevented philosophers and scientists from accepting an amplified quantum event as the source of indeterminism in a decision.

It is highly unlikely that individual quantum events could be synchronized and located precisely, near or inside the right neurons for example. The “master switch amplifier” concept of ARTHUR HOLLY COMPTON seems only to have been offered as a source of randomness centered in the second stage of the decisions themselves.

ROBERT KANE recognized this problem in his early work, when he thought he needed a random event precisely at the moment of his Self-Forming Actions (SFAs). Today he sees ever-present noise in the brain as providing the required indeterminism.

Kane described the problem,

“We do not know if something similar goes on in the brain of cortically developed creatures like ourselves, but I suspect it must if libertarian theories are to succeed. The main problem is the one addressed by ECCLES of locating the master switch and the mechanisms of amplification. We have no substantial empirical evidence on these matters (especially regarding the master switch), merely speculation, and libertarian theories may fail dismally at this juncture. But there is much to be learned yet about the brain; and research exists...suggesting that master switch plus amplifier processes play more roles in the functioning of organisms than was previously supposed.”⁶

Honderich is right that quantum events do not “occur only in such places as to make us morally responsible,” as various free will mechanisms have proposed.⁷ But the “inconsistency” is not with the quantum mechanics, just its misapplication by philosophers.

In my Cogito model, I depend on the fact that quantum noise is ever present. It just normally averages out in macroscopic situations. Microscopic situations, like the storage and retrieval of information in the neurons of the mind/brain, are much more susceptible to noise. Information structures in computers, and in

⁶ Kane (1985) p. 168.

⁷ informationphilosopher.com/freedom/free_will_mechanisms.html



modern digital media devices like CDs and DVDs, are also susceptible to random noise. Media devices, and perhaps the brain, have elaborate error detection and suppression capabilities.

On Determinism

Honderich has long defended what he calls the “truth” of determinism. I agree that there must be “**adequate determinism**” in our choices and actions for us to take **moral responsibility**. I have tried to convince Honderich that all we lose with my “adequate determinism” is the truly grand, but unsupported, idea of **pre-determinism**, namely that every event and all prior events form a causal chain back to the origin of the universe. Indeed, in *On Determinism and Freedom* (p. 6), Honderich calls for “the truth of a conceptually adequate determinism.”⁸

In some of his earliest thoughts, Honderich wrote in 1973, in his essay “One Determinism,” that determinism may preclude responsibility (as DAVID HUME also had feared) ..

“States of the brain are, in the first place, effects, the effects of other physical states. Many states of the brain, secondly, are correlates. A particular state accompanied my experience the other moment of thinking about having walked a lot on Hampstead Heath, and a like state accompanies each like experience: each of my experiences of thinking of having walked a lot on Hampstead Heath. Given our present concern, it is traditional that the most important experiences are decidings and choosings. Some states of the brain, thirdly, are causes, both of other states of the brain and also of certain movements of one’s body. The latter are actions. Some are relatively simple while others, such as speech acts and bits of ritual, depend on settings of convention and have complex histories. Simple or complex, however, all actions are movements, or of course stillnesses, caused by states of the brain. It follows from these three premisses, about states of the brain as effects, as correlates and as causes, that on every occasion when we act, we can only act as in fact we do. It follows too that we are not responsible for our actions, and, what is most fundamental, that we do not possess selves of a certain character.”⁹

8 Honderich (2005) p. 6.

9 Honderich (1973) p. 187.



Most compatibilists and determinists since Hobbes and Hume never mention the fact that a causal chain of events going back before our birth would not provide the kind of liberty that common sense expects. But Hume, like Honderich, frankly admits (in a passage rarely quoted by compatibilist philosophers) that such a causal chain would be a serious objection to his theory.

“I pretend not to have obviated or removed all objections to this theory, with regard to necessity and liberty. I can foresee other objections, derived from topics which have not here been treated of. It may be said, for instance, that, if voluntary actions be subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter, there is a continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all to every single volition, of every human creature. No contingency anywhere in the universe; no indifference; no liberty. While we act, we are, at the same time, acted upon.”¹⁰

To escape this objection, we might imagine that Hume wanted some kind of agent-causal freedom in voluntarist acts?

The Consequences of Determinism

Honderich's great work is the 750-page *The Theory of Determinism*, Oxford, 1988, later broken into two volumes, of which one is *The Consequences of Determinism*. Honderich claims to have solved the “problem of the consequences of determinism.”

Note that this is not the problem of free will and determinism. Honderich believes determinism is true.

Rather than discuss the problem of free will directly, or even indirectly via the familiar though muddled terms determinism, compatibilism, incompatibilism, and libertarianism, Honderich introduces new concepts and still more new terminology.

In the style of PETER F. STRAWSON, Honderich's interest is in our feelings and attitudes toward the truth of determinism, as what he calls our “life-hopes” are altered by belief in determinism.

One hope is that we should be able to originate the actions affecting our future life. The truth of determinism, which denies

¹⁰ Hume (1975) p. 99.



the freedom to originate actions, might give rise to a “sad” attitude of “dismay.” In this respect, Honderich regards determinism as a “black thing.” He calls *dismay* the “sad” attitude toward determinism.

But we can have another “tough” attitude, that of *intransigence*, in that our hope involving belief in “voluntariness” is consistent with determinism. This kind of voluntarism goes back to THOMAS HOBBS and **freedom of action**.¹¹ With his term intransigence, Honderich wants us to resist compromise with ideas like origination. But he seems to imply that moral responsibility can be reconciled with determinism.

Finally, Honderich argues that we can choose the attitude of *affirmation* rather than *intransigence* or *dismay*.

It might appear that Honderich's terms *dismay* and *intransigence* roughly correlate with the ideas of

- incompatibilist libertarian free will (involving randomness), which is denied by determinism, leading to his attitude of *dismay*
- compatibilism which is reconciled to determinism, leading to the attitude of *intransigence*, (irreconcilable with the “fiction” of origination)

But Honderich says he avoids the mistakes of Incompatibilism and Compatibilism. His point of their mistakes is subtle. It depends on his introduction of the two kinds of “life hopes,” the one voluntariness alone, the other voluntariness plus origination. He says:

“Let us finish here by having clear the relation of affirmation to Compatibilism and Incompatibilism. Affirmation differs wholly from both in that it recognizes the existence of two attitudes where Compatibilism and Incompatibilism assert a single conception and a single connection with moral responsibility and the like. Affirmation does involve reliance on a single attitude, having to do only with voluntariness, which of course is related to the single conception of initiation which Compatibilists assign to us. Affirmation also has to do with the other attitude, pertaining also to origination, related to the single conception

11 informationphilosopher.com/freedom/freedom_of_action.html



which Incompatibilists assign to us. It is not much more like Compatibilism than Incompatibilism.”¹²

The mistake of Incompatibilism appears to be that it assumes that determinism destroys moral approval and disapproval. This, Honderich says, ignores the tough attitude of *intransigence*.

The mistake of Compatibilism, is to assert that nothing changes as a consequence of determinism, when clearly we have lost the life-hope of origination. This ignores the sad attitude of *dismay*.

Honderich recapitulates his lengthy argument.

“The argument about the consequences of determinism has been a long one, and can usefully be brought into a succinct form.

“1.2 All our life-hopes involve thoughts to the effect that we somehow initiate our future actions. Some involve not only beliefs as to voluntariness or willingness but also an idea, or what is more an image, of our originating our future actions. To think of life-hopes of this kind, and their manifest inconsistency with determinism, and to accept the likely truth of determinism, is to fall into dismay. We are deprived of the hopes.”¹³

In my **Cogito** model, our life-hopes are *thoughts*. They present themselves freely to us in the undetermined first stage of the two-stage model. This gives us Honderich’s “origination.”

But Honderich makes it clear, and I agree, that some determinism is needed in, is consistent with, our voluntary *actions*,

“1.3 We also have life-hopes involving only beliefs as to voluntariness — that we will act not from reluctant desires and intentions, but from embraced desires and intentions, that we will act in enabling circumstances rather than frustrating ones. These circumstances have to do with at least the way of my world, the absence of self-frustration, independence of others, and absence of bodily constraint. Thinking of hopes of this kind, and noting the clear consistency of a determinism with them, may issue in intransigence. These life-hopes are not at all significantly threatened by determinism.”

12 Honderich (1990b) p. 149.

13 Honderich (1990b) p. 169.



In my view, all the determinism that Honderich needs is R. E. HOBART's determination (See p. 23).

P. F. STRAWSON distinguished treating some persons as autonomous participants in our moral universe, from others who are treated "objectively," as ruled by deterministic forces. Honderich feels dismay about the latter, intransigence about the former.

"1.4 We have appreciative and also resentful feelings about others, owed to their actions deriving from good or bad feelings and judgements about us. Both sorts of personal feelings involve assumptions somehow to the effect that others could do otherwise than they do. It is natural in one way of thinking and feeling to take the assumptions to amount to this: others act with knowledge, without internal constraint, in character, and in line with personality, not out of abnormality, not because of constraint by others. This second one of a set of fundamentally like conceptions of voluntary action, wholly consistent with determinism, may lead us to make the response of intransigence with respect to personal feelings. However, we also have other personal feelings, having a certain person-directed character and including an assumption as to a power or control of their actions by others. The assumption is inconsistent with determinism and may lead to dismay."¹⁴

Honderich recognizes that in a deterministic universe our knowledge claims are suspect. Information philosophy puts the basis of knowledge on the sounder foundation of information, in the universe outside us, and isomorphic information in our brains. But that is the subject of another book.

Honderich thinks (correctly) that origination is needed to ground knowledge claims. (See the Free Will Axiom on page 231.)

"1.5 We accept that our claims to knowledge derive in part from beliefs and assumptions to our mental acts and our ordinary actions, by which we come to have evidence and the like. We may take it that originated acts and actions are necessary, and, taking them as ruled out by a determinism, suffer a want of confidence in our beliefs, a dismay having to do with the possibility of a further reality. Inevitably, however, we can have a

14 Honderich (1990b) p. 169.



different kind of confidence, owed only to an assumption as to voluntariness, the possibility of our satisfying our desires for information. Hence intransigence about knowledge. These are facts which the Epicurean tradition of objection to determinism has greatly misconstrued.”¹⁵

On Consciousness and Radical Externalism

Honderich’s study of *Mind and Brain*, originally the first two parts of *Theory of Determinism*, informs Honderich’s later works *On Consciousness and Radical Externalism*.

How do these works reveal Honderich’s perception of the problem of the originator, the kind of free will that libertarians are looking for?

A careful reading of *Mind and Brain* tells us that Honderich is concerned about micro-indeterministic chance being the direct cause of action. He calls this the “Postulate of Neural Indeterminacy,” and generally opposes the idea.

“How could an unnecessitated or chance event be something for which the person in question could be censured in the given way?”

(p. 184)

He finds

“strong and clear support for the proposition that neural sequences are somehow or in some way causal sequences.”

(p. 266)

Neurobiologists, and cell biologists before them, have long shown that the size of cellular structures is macroscopic enough for quantum micro-indeterminism to be irrelevant in the normal operations of a cell. We grant this, and it seems as if this is the basic evidence for Honderich’s claim of determinism and causality in the “Psychoneural Intimacy” of the mind/brain.

But there is another level of operations in the mind, the one computer scientists and cognitive scientists use to defend the “mind as computer” or “machine.” That is the famous analogy of the relationship of software to the hardware.

¹⁵ Honderich (1990b) p. 169-170.



The identity theory of mind says that mind and brain are one thing. Philosophers of mind take a more nuanced view and say that mind events “supervene” on brain events. There is a one-to-one correspondence that sounds like GOTTFRIED LEIBNIZ and IMMANUEL KANT’s ideas of a parallel noumenal or mental world in “pre-established harmony” with the physical noumenal world.

My **Cogito** model is a purely physical model. But like the cognitive scientists, I see an important distinction between the software, considered as “pure” information, and the hardware, considered as embodied information structures.

The macroscopic neurological brain is storing and retrieving pure information to serve the mind’s consciousness of its surroundings, to inform its actions and interactions with the world.

Now we know that there is no such thing as an information system that can communicate without noise in the system, both quantum noise and the more common thermal noise. Such noise is the informational equivalent of those chance microscopic events in Honderich’s “Postulate of Neural Indeterminacy,” but now the emphasis must be on the psyche side of Psychoneural intimacy. It is indeterminacy of *thought*, not of *action*.

Indeterminacy of thought, while not directly causing action, can influence our choices for action, not by causing them, and not by changing their **probabilities**, but simply by becoming **alternative possibilities** for action by the **adequately determined** will, which also includes determination of our muscular motions to implement the action.

We may occasionally exhibit spastic behaviors, but there is absolutely no evidence, and no need, for actions that are affected randomly by microscopic quantum uncertainty, despite the fears of many philosophers of the consequences of admitting some indeterminism.

Determinists have been right about the Will, but wrong about Freedom (or origination).

Libertarians have been right about Freedom, but wrong about the Will, which must be as **adequately determined** as the rest of our physical selves.



Consciousness as Existence

What does this information in the mind/brain have to do with Honderich's theory of "Consciousness as Existence" or more recently "Radical Externalism?" Consciousness is quintessentially ideas, including of course our feelings about those ideas, which as associationists from Hume's time thought, are recollections of sense experiences.

Now small errors or "noise" in our recollections are the stuff of "new ideas," such as we experience when dreaming or half-dreaming, musing about possibilities.

Radical Externalism says that:

"Consciousness is perceptual, reflective or affective — in brief it has to do with seeing, thinking and wanting. We are as good as never engaged in only one of the sorts of things. There are large problems here. One is the understanding of the mixing and melding of the three parts, kinds, sides or whatever of consciousness, of how one contributes to another, even in ordinary seeing and acting."¹⁶

Honderich wants his "perceptual consciousness" to encompass not merely the representation of the world in the mind but a commitment to the existence of the perceived world. In informational terms we say that there is at least a partial isomorphism, a "mapping" of the information stored in our neural systems onto the information in the external world that I am seeing.

"You are seeing this page. What does that fact come to? What is that state of affairs? The natural answer has a lot in it, about the page as a physical thing, whatever one of those is, and about your retinas and your visual cortex. It also has in it philosophy and science about the relation between a neural process and your consciousness.

"So there is more to your seeing the page than your consciousness of it."¹⁷

¹⁶ Freeman (2006) p. 6.

¹⁷ Freeman (2006) p. 3.



Honderich seems to agree with the partial isomorphism in his description of reflective and affective consciousness, which can have thoughts that correspond not to the real world, but to a modified world of the imagination, including states of affairs that the agent has the power to originate, to bring about in an open future.

“Now a few words about reflective consciousness, say thinking of home, and affective consciousness, say wanting to be there or intending to get there.

“Very briefly, what it seems to be to think of home now is for something to exist that has some of the properties of home. That is what a representation essentially is — something that shares some effects with what is represented.

“As for wanting to be at home or intending to get there, and affective consciousness generally, one essential point is that this too is to be understood in terms of the characters of anyone’s perceptual and also reflective consciousness.”¹⁸

Can Honderich see that our affective consciousness is so much more powerful if it can imagine, if it can freely create, ways of wanting the world (for example, wanting to be home) that are not already **pre-determined** in the one possible future of his *intransigence* attitude toward the meagre “life-hope” he accepts in voluntarism with no origination?

We can originate, we can create, in the abstract world of **information**, thoughts in our minds about how we want the world to be. These thoughts can then activate our reflective consciousness, and stimulate our affective consciousness, helping our deliberations and evaluations of those thoughts, before we act on one of them.

In his latest work for the second edition of the *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Honderich takes a stand opposing PETER F. STRAWSON, who said that he did not understand the problem of determinism and free will.¹⁹ Honderich says,

“Determinism is not one of those theories filling up the world whose truth you cannot be sure about because you cannot be sure what the theory is, or what it really comes to. You know

18 Freeman (2006) pp. 8-9.

19 Strawson (1962) p. 1.



what determinism is. It is even plainer in its essentials than the lovely theory of evolution... So much for the essential content of determinism. Come round as quickly to the question of the truth of the theory—the truth of the proposition that every event, each thing that happens, is a standard effect.”²⁰

But Honderich is unhappy with our current understanding of quantum mechanics, that some events are merely probable, not **necessitated**. I call it “soft” causality. It is not that the causative event does not exist, but that it itself was only probable. Honderich remarks...

“about probabilism. It is argued that interpretations of quantum mechanics establish, about events of which we are sure that they cause cancer, that these events are undetermined or unnecessitated. So, unless we take causation to be probabilistic, we will have to be agnostic about well-supported or even best supported causal claims. A reply is that there is a less confusing and maybe less confused response. If later unnecessitated events are said to be explained by prior events only in some unnecessitating way, then the prior events are not causes and the later events not effects, whatever else is to be said of them in terms of some kind of explanation.

“Probabilism, it seems, despite the great interest, history, and technical competence of work on probability, is the intrusion of a specialism into a subject not explained by it and not in need of it.”

Sadly, Honderich is no scientist, not even a philosopher of science. He says he must “navigate around” what he does “not understand and cannot judge.” But judge he does,

“It is my own judgment that modern physics at least does not give consistent support to a denial of general determinism.... No doubt a little intemperately, I have in the past spoken of the interpretations of quantum mechanics, and in particular those taken to show that the world is indeterministic, as a mess.”²¹

20 Kane (2011) p. 442.

21 Kane (2011) p. 447.



Honderich, as always, is keeping up with events in physics. He mentions Bell's theorem, and the recent experimental tests (which confirm quantum mechanics). He says he polled a number of his colleague philosophers, and found only hesitation on whether the experiments establish indeterminism.²²

But these philosophers (of science mostly) are still clinging to the hope (shared originally by JOHN BELL) that Einstein was right, that quantum reality might be shown to be "local" and that determinism would be restored.

I have presented the latest evidence on **nonlocality** and entanglement in several web pages.²³ I hope that Honderich and his colleagues will study them closely. I have edited a video presentation by JOHN BELL, shortly before his death in 1990, in which he confirms that the experimental tests of his theorem show Einstein to have been quite wrong about his idea of "local" reality.²⁴

Honderich himself maintains a website on Determinism and Freedom, with a selection of important pieces by various thinkers, and a companion guide to the terminology.²⁵ His website was an inspiration for my own.

22 Kane (2011) p. 456.

23 See informationphilosopher.com/solutions/experiments/Bells_Theorem/

24 See youtube.com/watch?v=V8CCfOD1iu8 or search YouTube for John Bell

25 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwTerminology.html>

