

After the Terror

(Expanded and Revised Edition) by Ted Honderich,
Edinburgh University Press, 2003, 188 pp.

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This book is by Ted Honderich, the former Grote Professor of Logic at University College, London. It comes with a history – and, in this edition, it comes revised and with an ‘unrueful postscript.’ This is a shame, because Honderich should be just a little rueful about this book. He should be rueful because the book ought to have done very serious damage to his reputation as one of Britain’s leading philosophers.

Essentially, there are two parts to the argument of the book. The first part concerns world poverty. Honderich outlines a deep criticism of world poverty, and places a great deal of emphasis on the reach and significance of this criticism. Drawing on some obviously shocking figures concerning life expectancy, income and income distribution in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Sierra Leone, Honderich reports and condemns the half-lives and quarter-lives that stand in shocking contrast to those in the affluent West. His explanation for this lies largely with the omissions of those in the West.

Honderich denies any moral relevance, when designating the rightness and wrongness of acts, to the distinction between acts and omissions – between what we actively do, and what we fail to do. He explains, ‘My not giving the \$1200 to Oxfam, which is definitely something I do, and something bound up with giving it to the airline, has the effect of some lives being lost, the same effect as the possible action of ordering your armed forces to stop the food convoys getting through for a while’ (p. 75.) Intentions are relevant to responsibility but not to the rightness and wrongness of an act. Despite this, after suggesting that what we fail to do directly results in the bad lives in Sierra Leone, and so on, Honderich reintroduces intentions to emphasise the very great guilt which is to be borne by those in the affluent West. ‘There is, among us a responsibility for the bad lives. It is not just that our actions are wrong, but that there is a responsibility on our part for them,’ (p. 85) he claims.

His primary aim in the first part of the book is to argue for what he calls the Principle of Humanity. This is the claim that ‘the right thing to do is the one that, according

to the best judgement and information, is the rational one with respect to the end or goal of saving people from bad lives.' (p. 53) This whole line of criticism is familiar, and powerful. It was first articulated by Peter Singer [1] and developed by Peter Unger. [2] The Singer/Unger critique, which Honderich largely appropriates, is an important one – and, unusually for work in philosophy, it has had some real world echoes. The moral appeal of both Live Aid and Live 8 was pretty clearly Singerian in its content. The particular Singerian content derives not from empathic concern with others but in the tone and discourse of Bob Geldof, Midge Ure and others – a discourse of collective responsibility and a charge of simple moral blindness. When, in 1984, Geldof demanded 'People are dying NOW. Give us the money NOW', he articulated a sense of responsibility and obligation that has its philosophical articulation in Singer and Unger.

This line of argument has long been a serious and radical challenge to the conventional moral standpoints adopted in the West. Since the work of Singer and Unger, this philosophical approach, most associated with utilitarianism, has been an important contribution both to professional applied ethics, and to our overall thinking about the world. It has generated a huge literature, [3] and has led to some important distinctions in moral philosophy – such as the notion of person-relative moralities – and important discussion of the limits of our obligations to others. Some obvious objections include criticism of the idea that our obligations to others should (indeed can) be usefully be conceived of in this flat and virtually boundless way. Also receiving critical comment have been the acts/omissions conflation, the diminution of intentions, and the reference to human rational capacity and, so, to some form of contractualism. And, of course, there is the criticism that simply giving (a lot of) money to charity is not the appropriate, best, most sensible, moral response to a realisation of the degree of suffering and bad lives in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. But even those who, in the end, reject this position ought at least to be a little unsettled by it. But Honderich does little to respond to any of these criticisms except to suggest that they are selfish 'guff' (p. 88.) There is, despite his claims, little or nothing new in Honderich's position on global suffering or moral obligation, and there is certainly nothing to be learned from his rejection of the criticism of his – or rather the Singer/Unger position.

But what of the second argument in *After the Terror*? Honderich, for some reason, thinks that the argument in the first section is a good candidate for justifying terrorism. He thinks that in one particular case – Palestinian terrorism against

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Israel – this sort of argument provides a successful justification. Palestinian suicide bombing is justified by appeal to the Principle of Humanity.

To begin with, he doesn't just think that affluent westerners are collectively guilty for their omissions in respect of bad lives. He asserts that this explains and justifies anti-Western hatred. The question 'why are we hated?' says Honderich, '...is a pretty ignorant or dim-witted question. Americans and we who are with them, maybe with them all the way, are hated by people for the reason that what we are doing, what it comes to, is destroying them and their lives' (pp. 98-9.)

The book is, as I will show, chock full of sloppy arguments and non-sequiturs but this is perhaps the worst, and is the hinge with which Honderich gets from bad lives to terrorism. Honderich asks, in his characteristically rhetorical style:

Is it possible to suppose that the September 11 attacks had nothing at all to do with ... Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Sierra Leone? ... In thinking about it, remember that the attacks on the towers were indeed attacks on the principal symbols of world capitalism (pp. 119-20.)

It is easy to give the answer 'Yes' to the first question. I'll do it. The September 11th attacks had nothing at all to do with Malawi. But Honderich's argument rests on giving a 'No.' He seems seriously to believe that Osama Bin Laden has some concern with, or just connection with, malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, Honderich concedes, Bin Laden was sadly mistaken about the best strategy to address that malnutrition. Consequently the September 11th bombings were a bad idea. But that was something like the aim. Honderich gets to this position by systematically reducing the importance of intentions, like any good consequentialist, and systematically blurring together quite distinct aims. He concedes that Bin Laden was concerned with (what Honderich dresses up as) 'an intrusion for profit into the homeland of the people of Saudi Arabia;' *inter alia*, but this is swept up into a concern with sub-Saharan Africa because 'intentions in our actions can have a particularity about them and also a goal shared with other particular intentions' (p. 119.) But he does nothing to show how this enormous cleavage in intentions can be overcome, what the common goal might be, or how this bundling up might occur. He simply asserts it.

Try that one yourself. Scroll up: read the Principle of Humanity above, then reflect on the fact that Honderich is going to ask you to think of the 9/11 killers as moved

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by the Principle of Humanity. In the end, he dismisses the question. Intentions just aren't that important. But he does want his readers seriously to entertain the idea, even though he gives no argument and no evidence for it.

It is by this avenue – the assertion that the killings of 9/11 had to do with the bad lives in sub-Saharan Africa – that we get to the collective guilt of the west. 'We were partly responsible and can be held partly responsible for the 3,000 deaths at the Twin Towers and at the Pentagon. We are rightly to be held responsible along with the killers. We share in the guilt. Those who condemn us have reason to do so. Did we bring the killing at the Twin Towers on ourselves? Did we have it coming? Those offensive questions and their offensive answers yes, do contain a truth' (p. 125.)

Leave aside the unhappy thought that a question can contain a truth. Suppose, for a moment that there might be something in what Honderich says. Don't you want to know exactly who the 'we' refers to? It seems to matter. Intentions matter, remember, when it comes to responsibility, so there must be some reference to intentions. But you will look in vain through the book for either an explanation of the scope of 'we,' or a fully articulated discussion of the mechanism of responsibility.

This sort of sloppiness becomes familiar. Here is the second example of quite breath-taking sloppiness. Honderich wants to argue against capitalism, so he gives a cursory account of some arguments used to defend it – that capitalism promotes freedom, that capitalism is efficient, that it is a rational system, or that it is particularly suitable to the human condition. The arguments are set up so that he can have a go at refuting them. There's a lot to be said about each of these – but Honderich doesn't bother to say much. What's more, he hasn't remembered his Marx, so doesn't realise that it's quite reasonable to endorse some of these arguments about the progressive nature of capitalism and still hold to emancipatory and 'post-capitalist' normative positions. He doesn't bother with any of this, because he has a killer argument. This is it. '[W]e seem to have ... a lot of arguments that issue in the conclusion that the world is OK, maybe as good as possible. That conclusion is absurd. So the arguments must be mistaken' (p. 137.)

But none of the arguments he is considering amounts to the claim that the world is (even maybe) as good as possible. Honderich mischaracterises them all, and fails to refute – even to touch – any of them. Each of these arguments for capitalism is serious; each has serious problems, each needs serious qualification, at best. But

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Honderich entirely lets the arguments off the hook, and makes philosophical criticism of capitalism – and himself – just look silly.

The core of the second argument of the book is Honderich's justification of Palestinian terrorism, and suicide bombing in particular. Here is what he says in the key paragraph:

I myself have no serious doubt, to take the outstanding case, that the Palestinians have exercised a moral right in their terrorism against the Israelis. They have had a moral right to terrorism as certain as was the moral right, say, of the African people of South Africa against their white captors and the apartheid state. Those Palestinians who have resorted to necessary killing have been right to try to free their people, and those who have killed themselves in the cause of their people have indeed sanctified themselves. This seems to me a terrible truth, a truth that overcomes what we must remember about all terrorism and also overcomes the thought of hideousness and monstrosity (p. 151.)

Notice, first, two more pieces of analytical sloppiness and intellectually dishonesty here. First, there is a standard, ordinary language distinction between having a right to do X and X being the right thing to do. For example, it makes ordinary sense to say that Joe has a right to vote for the (fascistic) British National Party, but that he is not right to do so. This ordinary language distinction can be philosophically cashed out as the right to do wrong [4]. But it poses difficulties for very flat moral theories, including Honderich's variety of consequentialism. Honderich knows that he has these difficulties but he simply ignores them, sliding from the weaker claim that people have a right to something to the stronger claim that they are right to do that thing. This slippage comes between the second and the third sentence in the passage quoted above.

Second, there is a standard distinction made between what we ought to do and what is supererogatory, i.e., above and beyond the call of duty, and this latter is what is commonly understood as saintly behaviour. It is the standard way of making saintliness an explicable moral category. Honderich (an atheist) knows this, too, yet he plays with the notion of saintliness in this paragraph as he glides over the distinctions between having a right to X, to X being right, to X being supererogatory, or saintly. His flat theory of obligation squashes out all these distinctions, and does violence to ordinary language. Others think them morally relevant. Honderich

knows that, but he ignores it, because he wants to cash in on the rhetorical power of that god awful 'sanctified.'

But suppose we can, for the sake of argument leave even all sloppiness aside. Accept the Singer/Unger account of obligations. Accept the peculiar twist that Honderich puts on it. Accept the moral equivalence of acts and omissions. Accept 'our' deep and lasting guilt in those bad lives. Accept the dismissal of all 'moralities of relationships' from Aristotle, through Kant, to contemporary critics of consequentialism as, all of it, just selfish guff. Drop the prohibition on killing the innocent, or drop the idea that there are any innocents. Accept the moral equivalencies that Honderich asserts. Accept, that is, the whole moral framework that Honderich outlines. Still, Honderich's argument fails, in a rather weird but obvious way.

Honderich asserts that the Principle of Humanity justifies Palestinian terrorism 'of course by way of various additional propositions of fact, some of them historical' (p. 166.) There needs to be something to back that 'necessary,' – and its horrible resonance with Auden's Stalinist invocation of the 'necessary murder.' The backing needs to be certain sorts of facts – about alternatives, about consequences, about probabilities and about counterfactuals.

Those additional propositions of fact must be to do with the effectiveness of terrorism as a means to securing the end of 'ending the violation of the Palestinian people and their homeland.' One obvious outstanding counter-example is the case of the Netanya bombing in 2002 which instantly derailed US sponsored negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. So we should expect to hear something about this. Honderich is, after all, some sort of consequentialist who justifies acts and omissions by reference to their consequences, and he is explicit that historical propositions of fact need to be entertained in the argument. It would seem then that some general principles about the success of suicide bombings might be adduced at this point, or even some specific considerations about specific suicide attacks: there are enough of them.

What has Honderich to say about this? He calls Blair a liar. He cites Finkelstein. Then he cites the increase in the Jewish population of Palestine after 1876 (though he endorses the formation of the state of Israel) He cites various other very partial features of Israeli history in a way that had his referee Habermas scratching his head: 'The one-sided sketch of the history of that conflict ... is a long way from satisfying the claim to historical accuracy.' [5] But these facts cannot possibly enter into a

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justification of terror and suicide bombing as a tactic. They can conceivably enter into a justification of the claim that an injustice has been done to the Palestinian people, though very much more would need to be said. They cannot conceivably enter into a justification of terrorism or suicide bombing, because that would require facts of an entirely different order – facts about political effectiveness, facts about the absence, or weakness of alternatives, facts about the persuasive nature of the alternative under description. But here Honderich's consequentialism is abandoned. Instead, Honderich who has already told us that he has '*no serious doubt* about the claim that Palestinians have a moral right to terrorism,' adds that '*it is also my conviction* that there is a possibility of rightness with respect to ...Palestinian terrorism' (p. 175 italics inserted.) He seems worried that we will be in a state of confusion about the strength of his epistemological commitment, because he later states that 'With respect to the moral rights of the Palestinians, *I myself have greater confidence* in it than before the war on Iraq' (p. 184.) On this very question, in the unhelpful postscript, Honderich's argument is 'Nothing has changed my mind about that' (p. 184) In *Counterpunch*, he tries to respond to the criticism that Palestinian suicide bombing is counterproductive. '*It is possible to think, as I do*, that this course of action, and only this course of action, will secure the freedom and power of a people in their homeland.'^[6]

But, as philosophy markers often say, that wasn't the question. It is possible to think all sorts of silly things, it is possible not to doubt them, even not to doubt them seriously. It is possible to have great confidence in them, to be convinced by them. More: it is possible to write them down, and sometimes, quite often, sadly, it is possible to get them published. That doesn't stop them being silly. Where are the historical and contingent facts? Where is the assessment of counterfactuals, of probabilities, where is the careful consequentialist judgement, based on contingencies? In their absence, what is going on here?

The whole effect is slightly strange. At first sight, it seems that Honderich thinks that it is the strength with which he holds his view that makes a difference. He tells us that he hasn't changed his mind, that he is unhelpful, that he is more convinced than ever. It seems that he thinks this ought, in some way, to be persuasive. Perhaps his uncertain reader just needs to be convinced – 'well, Ted, if you're *sure* ...' It looks like truth by conviction.

But, since not even the first year undergraduate sees anything in truth by conviction, perhaps there is something else going on. Perhaps it's not the strength of convictions

themselves that matters, but the fact that they are *Honderich's* convictions. Honderich is a Philosopher, after all, and an eminent one at that. He used to be the Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at UCL. He has thought about these things a lot, (as if time, on its own, mattered) and his conclusions are controversial. But he is an Authority, so perhaps the persuasive force is supposed to come from some strange mix of truth by conviction and truth by authority. It's an odd conclusion to come to, because the very basis of doing philosophy, especially critical political philosophy is a rejection of all of these notions. In order to do serious critical political philosophy, you shouldn't care about someone's credentials, or the strength of his or her convictions. What matters, all the time, and only, is the argument. Honderich may have convinced himself, but he has no argument that should convince anyone else.

Remember that *nothing* is said about the strategic or political calculations in asserting that suicide bombing is consequentially justified. Nothing is said to generate the conclusion out of the consequentialist matrix. It might be therefore be worth recording what some Palestinian voices say about terrorism. Here is what Hanan Ashrawi's group The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue & Democracy had to say about the Netanya bombing.

MIFTAH unequivocally condemns the targeting of innocent civilians and bystanders regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religious affiliation or any other consideration. Such violence only undermines the integrity of the Palestinian cause and distorts its basic values of human liberty, dignity, and self-determination. [7]

Or perhaps we should attend to the statement of 58 Palestinian men and women, Muslims and Christians, who signed a public statement published by the most read Arabic daily, Al-Quds asking for a halt to all suicide bombings? They made clear their view that such actions widen and deepen the hate and resentment between Palestinians and Israelis and destroyed the possibility of the two peoples living in two states:

We, the undersigned, out of our sense of national responsibility, and in light of the difficult situation of the Palestinian people, hope that those who stand behind the military actions against civilians in Israel, will reconsider their actions and will cease to encourage our boys to perform these operations, because we do not see results from these actions ... We believe that these

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operations do not advance the fulfilment of our endeavour, for freedom and independence... Military actions are defined positively or negatively not by their own criteria [i.e. the success of the attack itself] but rather according to the achievement of political goals. [8]

My point is not that these are the most devastating criticisms of suicide bombings. There are, to my mind and many others, non-consequentialist reasons to be brought into play. Here's one: Don't target civilians. It is, rather, that on his own terms, accepting all the contortions of his position, Honderich is under an obligation to deliver something to suggest that these Palestinian views – which chime directly with his consequentialism, but disagree vehemently with its upshot – are mistaken. These Palestinian judgements might be right or wrong: but against them Honderich only has his unexplained conviction and his authority, which are, strictly speaking, worthless. So the contrast seems a little unequal.

Michael Walzer's judgement of this sort of view can't be bettered: in *Just and Unjust Wars* he compares people like Honderich unfavourably to early IRA volunteers and to the Stern gang, who drew lines between combatants and non-combatants: 'Those who make these assertions (that there is no alternative to indiscriminate terror [JP]) ... have lost their grip on the historical past; they suffer from a malign forgetfulness erasing all moral distinctions along with the men and women who painfully worked them out.' [9] The 'no alternative' justification represents both a moral and political blindness.

This is a terrible book. It does enormous discredit to the project of trying to do socialist analytical political philosophy for a wide audience. But has Honderich also written an *anti-Semitic* book? When this book was first published, this charge was levelled by Micha Brumlik (Director of the Fritz Bauer Institute, Study and Documentation Centre for the History of the Holocaust and Its Effects at the Goethe University, Frankfurt.) There are some very nasty turns of phrase – Honderich says that 'Having been the principal victims of racism in history, some Jews now seem to have learned from their abusers.' (p. 29.) [10] He endorses the claim that Zionism is racism: 'Zionism as it has become, the new Zionism, has rightly been condemned as racist by the United Nations, whatever further analysis of the fact is attempted.' (p. 29) And then we get this: 'the bottom fact of it all is that the lives of several million people have been made ... bad by wrongful actions of people who suffered uniquely before them – and by actions of their supporters elsewhere.' (p. 29.) He means the Jews. There's no messing around here with circumlocutions about 'Zionists,' or 'the

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Israeli state.' It was Jews who suffered uniquely in the Holocaust, and that suffering is used by Honderich both as an explanation (they 'learned') and as an extra stick to condemn the treatment of Palestinians. The frightening and enlightening revision – the introduction of the word 'some' in the first sentence cited in this paragraph – suggests that Honderich is dimly aware, or perhaps has been reminded, that he is straddling lines. It is no surprise that Honderich is published and lauded in *Counterpunch*, the journal that published the philosopher Michael Neumann, an apologist for anti-Semitism, and defences of the anti-Semitic musician Gilad Atzmon. But perhaps the main reason that Honderich's position could be thought of as anti-Semitic is, as Walzer has argued, that 'contemporary terrorist campaigns are most often focussed on people whose national existence has been radically devalued: the Protestants of Northern Ireland, the Jews of Israel and so on. The campaign announces the devaluation.' [11]

The campaign announces the devaluation – and Honderich endorses that devaluation, because he endorses the campaign. However, I've read quite a few comments recently that demonise, or devalue the Jews of Israel. It's often difficult to decide whether they emanate from conscious anti-Semitism or chronically lazy thinking – they certainly have nothing in common with reasoned criticism of the occupation of the West Bank. In this case, though, there is a straightforward way out of the dilemma. I'm happy, for now, not to inquire too closely into Honderich's mind and to acquit Honderich's book of the charge of anti-Semitism, because it is so clearly, so obviously, the product of chronically lazy thinking. A fortunate consequence of this is that it lets me off the hook, and Honderich (probably) won't call for me to be sacked, as he called for the sacking of Micha Brumlik.

Finally, there is the question of seriousness. One might have thought, given the gravity of the subject, that the tone of this book would be careful, weighted, finely judged. After all, the author aims to persuade us of his conclusions. Instead, the tone is conversational, convoluted, rhetorical, self-referential and lazy. Don't take my word for it. Here is an example.

Does talk of mass action or mass civil disobedience strike you as another of my lacks of realism? (sic) Could be, but there are some persons and things worth remembering... There was Mahatma Ghandi who had a lot to do with getting independence for the continent of India by getting people into the street... There were those Germans too, including the clergyman whose name escapes me. Do you think they were a little silly sitting in that church

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in Leipzig with the candles and then processing around? ... I've run out of steam, but not quite. There are two things about all of us on this earth. One is that we all have desires and needs. The second thing is that we're not all ninnies. Hardly any of us are, in fact. We can see through things.... (p. 153.)

(Honderich has in mind Parson Christian Fuhrer, though he couldn't be bothered to do a Google search.) It's not clear why this sort of prose – and there's a lot more – can pass as an argument, or why such self-indulgent laziness is reproduced in print form. It was a mistake for Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali and Mary Warnock to endorse this writing, and they are diminished by their endorsement. Jurgen Habermas was right to have second thoughts, to groan when he read some of the passages above. But the endorsements are by the by. In the end, Honderich is right: we can, indeed, see through things.

Here is my own, somewhat rueful postscript. I've argued here that Honderich's book is terrible, not simply because it is an apology for suicide bombing, but because it presents a sloppy, lazy, dishonest argument that fails in its own terms. There is, to my mind, a lot wrong with those terms, and we should remember what is at stake, in these calls to understand 'their' hatred, and 'our' guilt, 'their' necessary terror and 'our' complicity.

On the 7th July this year, after hearing about the London bombings, my first thoughts, like those of many others, were for friends, family and acquaintances living and working in London. First, my brother, on his way to give a lecture at Imperial College, then a friend who works for the Aristotelian Society, people at the London Review of Books, in Tavistock Square, and philosophers at UCL. I heard soon from my brother. Brian Leiter's blog and Crooked Timber quickly contained news that the UCL philosophers were safe, and people were able to make one or two black jokes about the chances of catching a philosopher on a tube train in the rush hour. It looked as if UCL, close to the scene of the bombings had escaped unscathed.

Over the next few days, though, it became clear that an employee of UCL was killed in the suicide bombings that day. Gladys Wundowa, a Ghanaian cleaner at Honderich's college, a charity worker and a student of housing management at Hackney College was blown up on the Bus in Tavistock Square. The logic of Honderich's position is, I think (though it's hard to be absolutely certain) that the

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7th July bombings are to be condemned. But I wonder how much truth the Emeritus Professor thinks there is in the answer that Gladys Wundowa had it coming?

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- Walzer, Michael 1977, *Just and Unjust Wars*, New York: Basic Books.

Notes

- [1] Singer 1972.
- [2] Unger 1996.
- [3] Though Honderich refers to hardly any of it, and there is no bibliography.
- [4] Waldron 1993.
- [5] <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/BrumlikHabermas.html> This is posted by Honderich as support for his position. Habermas, I think unreasonably, blames this on the methods of analytical philosophy.
- [6] <http://www.counterpunch.org/honderich10252003.html>
- [7] <http://www.miftah.org/Index.cfm>
- [8] Al Quds, June 16, 2002.
- [9] Walzer 1977, p. 202.
- [10] Note that the insertion of the word 'some' here seems to have come in the revised edition. Jurgen Habermas quotes the line without the 'some' in his review of the book on Honderich's own website, and says that it made him groan.
- [11] Walzer 1977, p. 203.