

J. Andrew Ross

Hitting On Consciousness

Honderich Versus McGinn

Ted Honderich, 74, formerly Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at the University of London, recently published a short book on consciousness (Honderich, 2004). Colin McGinn, 57, his former colleague at University College London and now a professor of philosophy at the University of Miami, Florida, reviewed it (McGinn, 2007a). The review is quite long and detailed, but the first sentences set the tone. McGinn on Honderich:

This book runs the full gamut from the mediocre to the ludicrous to the merely bad. It is painful to read, poorly thought out, and uninformed. It is also radically inconsistent.

The review elicited a long and pained reply from Honderich, who posted his review of the review on his website (Honderich, 2007). Honderich on McGinn on Honderich:

If I were to join McGinn in his habits, the word ‘shoddy’ would come to mind about this performance. ... McGinn does not make me dream of changing a comma.

Other philosophers joined in a chattering chorus of responses, some on either side and much of it recorded in a thread on Brian Leiter’s celebrated philosophy blog (Leiter, 2007). All this prompted McGinn to rally to his own defence (McGinn, 2007b). McGinn on Honderich on McGinn on Honderich:

To repeat, I found Honderich’s book to be quite the worst thing I’ve ever read — an insult to the reader, no less — so I was duty-bound to pan it. And I did give my reasons.

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Girlfriends and Nausea

The story goes deeper. In the December 21 issue of *The Guardian*, Stuart Jeffries reports that he called Honderich and McGinn to get their latest thoughts on the controversy (Jeffries, 2007). To quote his report of what they said, Honderich described the review as ‘a cold, calculated attempt to murder a philosopher’s reputation’. But McGinn was unrepentant:

It’s not like you’re hitting someone over the head with a hammer. Ted is not very good at philosophy. That’s the problem. ... I know Ted and know I don’t think much of him as a philosopher. But if you ask did that affect the way I wrote the review, absolutely not. ... Ted deserved it. It had to be done.

Prompted by Jeffries, Honderich ventured an opinion as to how all this may have started:

Nobody on Earth believes that his review is not motivated by animus. To suggest the tone wasn’t dictated by any history of hostility between us is crazy. ... At UCL we had a jokey locker-room relationship. But then I made a misstep. I suggested to him that his new girlfriend was not as plain as the old one, and I could see the blood drain out of his face. That was possibly the start of our frostiness.

Can we make anything of this? Well, I was acquainted with Colin’s first wife Marie back in the Seventies. She and I went to the same graduate seminars on truth and meaning, where John McDowell and Gareth Evans were the stars. Marie was slim and well groomed, and I imagine she distracted the stars regularly as she sat in the front row in her miniskirt. She once told me plainly that she would rather die than give up philosophy. Perhaps Colin went downhill after that.

Be that as it may, McGinn later wrote a review of a posthumous collection of papers by A.J. Ayer, edited and introduced by Honderich (Ayer, 1990). Ayer was Honderich’s predecessor as Grote Professor at UCL. In his review, McGinn called the introduction, which was a reprint of Honderich’s funeral eulogy for Ayer, ‘ill-written, plodding and faintly nauseating in places’. And Honderich remembered those words in his autobiography:

My old colleague McGinn ... put me in mind of someone’s earlier observation that he distinguished himself not only as the Wilde Reader in Oxford but also as the Wilde Writer. Conceivably out of justified spite about a line of mine, he had earlier said in a review of Freddie’s posthumous collection of essays that my memorial-meeting speech for him, reprinted as the introduction, was ill-written, plodding and faintly

nauseating in places. Was it for this reason that I was disinclined to his stuff about giving up in the philosophy of mind? (2001, p. 365).

For readers unacquainted with Alfred J. Ayer, a former student of his said he ‘was like an eighteenth-century rationalist voluptuary’. Ayer lived in a world of wealth and privilege and mixed in fashionable circles. In his biography of Ayer (Rogers, 1999), Ben Rogers describes him as precocious and narcissistic as well as ‘remote from some of the more ordinary human emotions’. To back this up, Rogers names dozens of Ayer’s mistresses. Ayer’s first book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, was published when he was 25, and achieved cult status on the strength of his militant and iconoclastic empiricism. In all his books he was merciless at finding nonsense where others saw truth, and he gained a reputation for mercurial brilliance.

At any rate, Honderich, himself no slouch in the womanising arts, admired Ayer greatly:

As executor with Dee of the literary estate of Freddie Ayer, it is good that the biography of him by Ben Rogers is so fine. Still the mighty little McGinn in reviewing it could write that Freddie not only never had an original idea in his life, but also never had a good idea, his own or anyone else’s. I thought he had one or two (2001, p. 387).

(To clarify Ted’s words, he and Ayer’s last wife Dee Wells were the executors.) In fact, Honderich is unusually impressed by Ayer as a philosopher, to the point that he not only dismisses Bertrand Russell’s mathematical talent and ignores Ayer’s own admiration for Russell’s work but even inverts the usual ranking of British philosophers by setting Ayer above Russell in his personal pantheon. And recalling McGinn’s nauseous reaction to the eulogy years later still drives Honderich to fury: ‘It’s as though it was a piece of shit by some adolescent muckraker. But anyway, with that he was the first to insult me in print.’

Hatchet Jobs and Terrorism

Before we descend any further, you may wonder why the *JCS* is reporting all this. As it happens, both Ted Honderich and Colin McGinn published their philosophical autobiographies just a few years ago (Honderich, 2001; McGinn, 2002), and since I knew them both personally I wrote an extended *JCS* review of their words on themselves and on consciousness (Ross, 2002). There is a lively history here that sheds light on the more serious issue of how far either of the protagonists succeeds in advancing our understanding of consciousness.

More light dawns when we recall a rhetorical shot at the younger McGinn with which Honderich spiced up his autobiography. Honderich on McGinn:

To confine myself to standard eccentrics, ... The envy of my small colleague Colin McGinn, also vegetarian, extended even to wanting to be Martin Amis (2001, p. 222).

This is a thrown gauntlet. It is also much more. Your humble reporter was once well enough acquainted with Martin Amis to know what lies behind this throwaway line. In fact, the reference to Martin is the key to understanding Colin's recent outburst of curmudgeonliness. For Martin is the English-speaking world's most terrifyingly dangerous book reviewer. With a few witty words, Martin can drive the shaft so deep that an author's reputation will never recover. You don't need to read many of his reviews to see how this works. From his assault on Norman Mailer:

On every page Mailer will come up with a formulation both grandiose and crass. This is expected of him. It is also expected of the reviewer to introduce a lingering 'yet' or 'however' at some point, and say that 'somehow' Mailer's 'fearless honesty' redeems his notorious excesses. He isn't frightened of sounding outrageous; he isn't frightened of making a fool of himself, and, above all, he isn't frightened of being boring. Well, fear has its uses. ... Mailer thinks on his feet and writes off the top of his head. ... 'One kissed the devil indeed', says Mailer. What is he writing about? Prize-fighting? Crossing the road? 'Brutal-coarse, intimate, snide, grasping, groping, slavering ...' It turns out that Mailer is writing about book-reviewing. But then he does tend to take things personally (Amis, 2001, pp. 267-268).

Maybe Colin took this to heart. For Colin, book reviewing is evidently a serious business. Unfortunately, his go at Ted doesn't look a bit like artful work with the blade. It looks like a hatchet job. Blood and guts everywhere, the would-be assassin as messed up as the target.

The first step in the task of clearing up the mess here is to identify the respective philosophical perspectives of the protagonists. Once we know where they are coming from, we can begin to evaluate their arguments in more detail.

Intellectually, Honderich and McGinn hold very different positions on consciousness. Honderich calls himself a radical externalist on consciousness. In short, as he told Jeffries, radical externalism is the view that 'my perceptual consciousness now consists in the existence of a world' (much more in this vein follows below).

McGinn thinks this is no good. As he explained to Jeffries, 'Ted's saying that one's perceptual content just is that thing, a table for

example. But if you close your eyes, does the table stop existing? On Ted's account it seems to, which is just wild.'

By contrast, McGinn is well known as a leading proponent of the 'new mysterianism' whereby the problem of consciousness is insoluble. To quote the Wikipedia entry for 'New Mysterianism', it is 'a philosophy proposing that certain problems will never be explained or at the least cannot be explained by the human mind at its current evolutionary stage. The problem most often referred to is the hard problem of consciousness.'

I shall not repeat what I said about McGinn's mysterianism in my earlier review of his words on consciousness (Ross, 2002), which he presents in his excellent and readable introductory monograph *The Mysterious Flame* (McGinn, 1999). Let me just say that one can only pity a man whose defining intellectual insight, which on his own account he experienced as if it were a spiritual epiphany (McGinn, 2002), was that we shall never understand the human mind.

Honderich derides mysterianism. To Jeffries, he described it as a 'form of intellectual wimpishness'. However, in defence of radical externalism he added, 'how dare McGinn rubbish my position'. Atta-boy, Ted!

Mercifully perhaps, as well as continuing to advocate his 'position', Honderich devotes some of his energies to cultivating the themes of political radicalism and violence that occupied him in earlier years. His post-9/11 book *After the Terror* (2002) managed to earn him the simultaneous hostility of Palestinians and Jews. Astonishingly, British leftist Tariq Ali said of the book, 'reading the words of Ted Honderich is a rare delight'. And notoriously, in the book Honderich asserted the moral right of Palestinians to resist 'ethnic cleansing' by the Israelis with terrorism, for which a Jewish leader in Germany attacked him bitterly in the media.

'To call me an antisemite was just a lie,' said Honderich to Jeffries. 'My first wife was Jewish, I have Jewish children and grandchildren, and I have always gone on record as a supporter of the right of the state of Israel to exist. That's why the Palestinians are opposed to me. What I don't support is Israel's expansionism after the 1967 war.' He later successfully sued a student magazine that accused him of anti-semitism.

The real argument is about Honderich's radical externalism (RE). Rather than either repeat his words on RE here or struggle to write my own, both of which would be redundant in view of the fact that the entire July-August 2006 issue of *JCS* was devoted to RE, I have selected and edited seven helpful texts (A1–A7 below) that not only bring the outlines of RE freshly to mind but also present a sufficiently

decisive criticism of the position to dispel most doubts. As a bonus, they convey the drama of the struggle with McGinn so well that further commentary on my part would be superfluous.

As outcome of the drama, all the evidence available to me suggests that Honderich the person will easily shrug off McGinn's assault. The more pertinent question is how well the philosophy community can accommodate such discord.

My Contribution to RE

Before we rush to judgement on all this, I have a confession to make. I may have encouraged Honderich to develop the detested doctrine of radical externalism. Whether my contribution to his work made any real difference is not for me to judge, and I would certainly not wish to claim any credit for the form in which Honderich, without help from me, finally cast his ideas, but the fact that I added some input should be on record.

It happened in Sweden, at a conference in Skövde in August 2001. I gave a talk illustrated with a colourful slide set (Ross, 2001) that went down well with Ted. We talked afterwards and I mailed him the slides. Later he mailed me the hastily written manuscript for his terrorist manifesto (Honderich, 2002), and I conveyed my forthright detestation of its propositions. In May 2002, he mailed me a draft for what became the second half of his book on consciousness and I made a few token criticisms. In July 2002, the *JCS* published my review of his autobiography.

My own view of consciousness developed over the years from 1997 to 2004, and I published the papers marking my progress in an online book (Ross, 2004). In short, my view was that consciousness is the phenomenal inner transparency of a world. A world is a re-entrant logical structure that can be modelled in set theory. As inspiration for my whole approach, I found a wonderful quotation from William James:

The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places — they are strung upon it like so many beads ... The world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist (1902).

I was also inspired by Wittgenstein, who said:

5.63 I am my world. (The microcosm.) 5.631 There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. ... 5.632 The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world. ... (1961).

In my understanding, a world of objects appears to itself through a re-entrant logical loop, which defines a subject as a perspectival limit to that world.

Honderich avoids trying to explain mental events in terms of two components, subject and content, and says that what it is for you to be aware of a room is for there to be a certain phenomenal world out there. This seems to depart from my view that we live in an evolving virtual reality that makes intentional contact with the physical world out there. Here I believe that I am following the views of Metzinger (2003). But I suspect that Honderich did not study my approach in detail, and McGinn certainly didn't.

Seven Helpful Texts

To spare you the work of hunting for background material either online or in your local philosophy library, I present below seven texts. I have radically abbreviated the pieces and smoothed the prose as best I can. Of course, if you wish to find out what the authors really said you should consult their original full versions.

The first text is my cut of a review of Ted's book by Barbara Hannan published in *Mind* in 2005, which shows that a professional philosopher can be civil about Honderich's book. The second is my cut of a critical essay on Honderich's radical externalism by Paul Snowden, which similarly demonstrates that one can take Honderich's position apart without resort to rhetoric. The third text is taken from McGinn's now famous review, in case you have not read it and wish to sample its contents. The fourth is a short summary based on the latest Honderichian material of the position, radical externalism, that so incensed McGinn. The fifth is the gist of Honderich's attempt to rebut McGinn's criticism blow by blow, more to give a sense of both sides than to address the issues themselves. The sixth is a part of McGinn's response to the controversy so far. The seventh and final text is a series of edited quotations from the Leiter blog in which various philosophers react to the controversy. I trust that with these seven texts you will be well equipped to draw your own conclusions about the whole saga.

Al Hannan on Honderich

Barbara Hannan published a review of Honderich's book in *Mind* (Hannan, 2005). My drastically shortened and slightly tidied up version presents some background and introduces consciousness as existence, which Honderich now calls radical externalism.

In *On Consciousness*, Honderich returns to various papers he wrote over the past twenty years or so and revises them to present the progression of his thought on the mind-body problem. He conceives of the mind-body problem as that of explaining the relation of mental events to simultaneous neural events. From dissatisfaction with property dualism, Honderich moved to his own union theory and then to a newer theory, which he calls consciousness as existence of a world.

Honderich concludes that Davidsonian anomalous monism accords too little causal relevance to mental properties. Neural properties do all the causal work, and mental content just hangs around doing nothing. So anomalous monism is unsatisfactory. Honderich denies that mental properties are anomalous and insist that mental properties are in a lawlike relationship with underlying neural properties. He calls this view mind-brain correlation with non-mental causation. But this seems not to solve the epiphenomenalism problem.

Honderich intended his union theory to be an improved variety of physicalism. The union theory says that both mental and neural events are physical in the sense that they are both spatiotemporal and in causal relations with perceived events. The theory unites simultaneous mental and neural events but does not explain the nature of mental events or of consciousness.

Honderich's new theory, consciousness as existence, avoids trying to explain mental events in terms of two components, subject and content. Thus he seeks to overcome cranialism, the attempt to locate mental content inside the head. Consciousness as existence is primarily a theory of perceptual consciousness. Something going on in your cranium is necessary to your being conscious, but the cranial events are not your awareness of the room you are in. What it is for you to be aware of the room is for there to be a certain state of affairs outside your head. This state of affairs, outside your head, is your phenomenal world, your mental world.

Honderich's book does not solve the mind-body problem, but it has the merit of raising central philosophical problems in a bold and provocative way.

A2 Snowdon on Honderich

In my biased opinion, Paul Snowdon's article 'Honderich's radical externalisms' (Snowdon, 2006) is the best critique of RE that I have found. Paul Snowdon is the Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at the University of London and the direct successor to Ted Honderich in that chair. The article was his response to Honderich's target article in the summer 2006 issue of *JCS*, where Honderich replied: 'Paul Snowdon's paper is as formidable as any in this collection.'

The following shortened and smoothed essay presents what I trust is the heart of Snowdon's critique of RE. I should disclose that

Snowdon was my undergraduate tutor some 35 years ago for the philosophy of Kant and the philosophy of mind. It is thanks in part to his efforts that these are both fields that continue to flourish in my mental life. I have taken pains with my editing to preserve the quality of the piece in order to reassure you that all hope is not lost of achieving clarity on the important issues at stake here. For the rest of this section, 'I' refers to Snowdon.

I want to concentrate on two questions. First, what exactly is the thesis about consciousness that Professor Honderich is proposing? Second, what are his main reasons for his proposal and are they persuasive?

Honderich says 'perceptual consciousness consists in an external state of affairs'. Let us read him as proposing that S's seeing the page is identical with the page's being there, where the claim that something is there is simply that it exists at the place we mean by 'there'. Let us assume that in the theory talk of something's being there is to be interpreted in this completely normal way. I call this thesis Radical Externalism I (RE1).

RE1 cannot be true. The page's being there, understood as indicated, does not contain enough to amount to the fact that S is seeing the page. The page can be there without S existing at all, or if we assume that S exists, without S's being conscious. Presumably, it should also be said that S's hearing X is X's being there, and that S's feeling X is X's being there. In these equivalences there is nothing which says what seeing X as opposed to feeling X or hearing X is.

Another problem is this. S sees the page and the page is there. But also between S and the page is a collection of oxygen molecules and so on, and where the page is there is also a large number of atoms, and subatomic particles, and so on. These are all there, but are not seen. The identity theory fails to explain why amongst those things it is the page and not the rest that is seen.

RE1 also fails to explain the way the seen object is seen. Suppose S sees some water and a straight stick next to it. The stick looks straight. Next, suppose that S sees a straight stick in water. The stick looks bent. There is a difference in the perceptual situation, but in both scenes what is there is a straight stick. Thinking solely in terms of what is there does not explain the difference.

These examples locate aspects of the phenomenon of perception. We distinguish within the class of what is there between the visible and the invisible, within the class of the visible between what we do and do not actually see, and between the ways seen things look. The phenomenon is complex, and cannot be reduced simply to the being there of what is there.

So Honderich's radical externalism had better not be RE1. Honderich says, 'the page's being there, and more generally your world of perceptual consciousness is things being in space and time, with such further properties as colour, and being dependent on a scientific or noumenal

world underneath and also dependent on you neurally.' A consistent reading would be that the state of affairs of your being perceptually conscious of some object involves both the object's being there and how you are neurally.

Let us call this thesis RE2. It leaves out the claim that neurons or neuronal events are not components in consciousness. It says of nothing else whether it is involved. It therefore fails to say something that Honderich wants to say, but perhaps it says only things that he does want to say.

RE2 seems to fit two other claims that Honderich wants to make. He insists that radical externalism does not reduce to the claim that what is there is what we perceive. And he opposes the idea that the occurrence of perceptual consciousness has a sufficient condition in the subject's brain. RE2 claims that the conscious occurrence involves external objects.

RE2 needs to be distinguished from the indisputable claim that if a subject S is genuinely perceptually aware of a G then there is a G. For example, if I actually see an ape in front of me then there is an ape in front of me. But RE2 is not a thesis about what has to be there for seeing an object to count as occurring. It is, rather, a thesis about what the conscious occurrence, the experience considered in itself, involves or consists in. RE2 claims that the experience considered in itself cannot be separated from the perceived object. Disjunctivists seem to claim this about perceptual experience. I am sympathetic to this idea.

Honderich relies on a principle that 'with consciousness, what there seems to be is what there is'. I call this the Positive Seems Principle (PSP). He then claims that when you see a page it seems that your consciousness consists in the page being there. Given PSP, it follows that what it does consist in is the page's being there.

It seems to me that both premises in this argument are questionable. Whether the second premise is true is a rather delicate issue. Consider how a subject might react to two questions. Suppose we ask S: what seems to you to be there in front of you? S says: it seems to me there is a page. But suppose we ask instead: what does it seem to you that your consciousness consists of? I suggest that S would in all likelihood be puzzled. I think the difficulty is that in undergoing the perceptual experience of seeing the page there is no such item as the subject's consciousness which seems some way to the subject.

The case against PSP is much stronger. Consider the example of a perfect hallucination of a gigantic pink rat. Clearly this is an episode of consciousness in which it seems to the subject that there is a pink rat ahead, but where there actually is no such pink rat. We cannot rely on PSP to support a theory of perceptual consciousness.

Honderich: 'With consciousness, what there seems to be is what there is. What there seems to be is all there is.' The further principle seems to be that an episode of consciousness only has a property P if it seems in undergoing it to be P. So if it is not the case that the episode seems to be P then the episode is not P. I call this the Negative Seems Principle (NSP).

A proponent of NSP must claim that each episode of consciousness seems to fulfil NSP. I suggest that this is obviously false. When I have a pain it does not seem to me that the episode has no other properties beyond those it seems to have. My pain can be improved by taking paracetamol. It does not seem so. Also, Honderich seems to think that perceptual consciousness depends on how the subject is neurally. But does it seem so?

We should not rely on PSP or NSP in developing a theory of consciousness.

I want now to engage with the idea that consciousness should be conceived of as not having any 'neurons in it' and as not having 'your visual cortex in it'. I want to argue both that no good reasons are presented for refusing to speak as the materialists do, and that anyway the conclusion is relatively unimportant to the metaphysics of consciousness.

If we say that your visual cortex is a part of seeing the page then it follows that there is more to seeing the page than your consciousness of it. Honderich seems to think that the problem with this consequence is that our ordinary assumption is that your visual cortex is no part of your being conscious. The materialist claims that the neural event is part of the sighting. This is like saying that part of my apple is a certain pip, which implies that there is more to know about my apple than simply that it is an apple.

Honderich adds that since dualists deny that consciousness involves brain events and we can understand their claim then 'talk of your consciousness has to be understood as not itself talk of your brain'. However, the materialist claim is that the referent of 'my sighting' is a conglomeration of neural events, not that the meaning of 'my sighting' is to be given in neural terms.

RE2 is not alien to materialism. There is no conflict. But is Honderich's radical externalism actually RE2? I suspect it is not. Honderich describes his theory as conceptual revolution. But RE2 can be seen as a form of naive realism! What then is the conceptual revolution? I have to end with an expression of bafflement.

A3 McGinn on Honderich

This is not the full offending review but my shortened and smoothed version, in case you want to get some idea of what all the fuss is about but have no desire to reach beyond this journal.

This book runs the full gamut from the mediocre to the ludicrous to the merely bad. It is painful to read, poorly thought out, and uninformed. It is also radically inconsistent.

The structure of the book consists of a series of previously published papers, somewhat modified, with short introductory sections, going back to 1981. The first half criticizes Davidson's anomalous monism, Putnam and Burge on anti-individualism about meaning, the identity theory, and functionalism. The second half tries to develop a new theory

of consciousness, according to which the positive theses of the first half of the book are all wrong. Throughout, the book is woefully uninformed about the work of others and at best amateurish. Honderich's understanding of positions he criticizes is often weak to nonexistent, though not lacking in chutzpah. And the view he ends up defending is preposterous in the extreme and easily refuted.

Honderich begins by saying it is difficult to see how the mental can have causal efficacy since the mental properties appear to dangle. He quickly establishes a 'union theory' by asserting that anything causal must be spatial, so that mental events are also in the head next to their neural correlates. Why this is not just intracranial token dualism is not explained.

Honderich's final view is that consciousness is the world we are aware of — it is what we would normally say that our perceptual consciousness reveals. Your consciousness is actually identical to a state of affairs outside your head in the perceived environment! He assures us that he is not defending the innocuous view that perceptual awareness is intentional directedness to the environment. His view is that consciousness is the state of affairs around you. Consciousness is not the awareness of the room, it simply is the room.

He appears to be a direct realist about perception, supposing that we see objects that exist independently of us. These objects cannot be regarded as mental products of some kind. They are not supervenient on what is in the head. Yet they are what consciousness is. But if consciousness is a state of affairs existing in the perceived environment, doesn't it follow that hallucination is impossible? His answer is that there simply cannot be perceptual hallucinations.

With perceptual consciousness thus taken care of, Honderich tries to extend the theory to thinking. Here, to sum up, his theory is that thinking is the perceiving of external representations like pictures and words, plus some inner representations. But wait: you can think about something and perceive no external representation of it. And those inner representations undermine the entire picture, since he is now invoking a relation between subject and object, not just the object considered in itself.

The short reply to Honderich's existence theory is that he is confusing vehicle and content, act and object. My experience of a room is the vehicle of a certain content, rather as a word is a vehicle of meaning. Seeing is a relation to an object, rather as referring is. If Honderich has simply decided to call a state of affairs in the environment 'consciousness' then the obvious reply is that this is not what we call consciousness, and we'd like a theory of that.

A4 Honderich on Radical Externalism

The following text is my unauthorized summary of Honderich's latest short account of radical externalism. He presented this account in response to McGinn's criticism, so we may take it as superseding the

criticised account. Honderich already published a longer account of RE as the target article in the July-August 2006 issue of *JCS* (Honderich, 2006), where it appeared together with a series of critical responses. So the account in the pilloried book is now doubly obsolete. I have taken the opportunity to tidy up Honderich's prose.

Perceptual, reflective and affective consciousness are different. They are also of the same general kind, to give the general question of what it is for something to be conscious. Questions about the three kinds of consciousness are about your having something, or its being given to you, or presented to you.

Contemporary philosophy of mind is centrally about the general question of the nature of consciousness. There have been two kinds of answers to the question. Physicalists say that your being conscious consists in physical facts. Physicalists include naturalists, identity theorists, reductionists, monists, eliminative materialists, functionalists, and so on. Dualism makes a fundamental distinction between conscious things and things not conscious. It also comes in several forms.

There are many criteria for judging physicalism and dualism. One problem with dualism seems to be that it cannot deal with the fact of causal interaction between consciousness and physical events. One problem with physicalism seems to be that it cannot account for the primary and subjective nature of consciousness.

More particularly, what is had, given or presented when we are conscious is not in general neural activity. If we keep our minds on the analysis of what it is for something to be had, given or presented, it is inconceivable that the general answer is neural activity.

Spiritualism is quite as impossible. It is not possible to contemplate that what is had, given or presented, in general, is spirituality, mentality, or subjectivity in an elusive sense having to do with a subject or self.

My book defends a theory different from both physicalism and spiritualism, although it is near physicalism. Its first proposition is that what it is for you to be conscious of the place you are in, say the room, is for a room to exist in a defined sense, outside your head.

You and I each have something when we are both aware of the room we are in. As we ordinarily say, there is the room as you see it and there is the room as I see it. However these two things are to be understood, they are different. Your or my world of perceptual consciousness has a dependency on you or me neurally and also on external physical facts.

Take the physical world as having two parts or levels, the things in space with perceived properties not dependent on any particular person, and the things in space in lawlike connection with the first things. So the physical world is chairs and the like and atoms and the like.

Evidently your world of perceptual consciousness, like mine, is akin to the physical world in its perceived part or level. Your world of perceptual consciousness is real despite not being objective in several senses.

What is had, given or presented is a world of perceptual consciousness. Our saying this puts no self, no relation of intentionality or

directedness, no sense data, no vehicle of content, and so on, into our consciousness. The theory says that what it is for a world to be had, given or presented is for it to exist. Out of the metaphors comes a reductive theory.

This theory goes further than other externalisms in the recent philosophy of mind. To the account of perceptual consciousness are added related accounts of reflective and affective consciousness. These demand different treatments. Seeing is not believing or desiring.

Radical externalism gives a conceivable answer to the general question of what it is for a person or whatever to be conscious, what it is for something to be had, given or presented. It puts no real difficulty in the way of psychophysical relations. Worlds of perceptual consciousness are as spatial as the physical world.

A5 Honderich on McGinn on Honderich

Honderich's online reply to McGinn's offensive review is quite long, quite hard work to read, and full of close references to McGinn's words. I present a drastically shortened and smoothed version here. For the rest of this section, the first person is Honderich.

McGinn says the book is radically inconsistent. 'The second half tries to develop a new theory of consciousness, according to which the positive theses of the first half of the book are all wrong.'

My aim was to republish some papers and to show some progress in thinking about consciousness. My aim was to argue for RE by showing inadequacies of alternatives, including my own earlier ones. Six papers present the alternatives:

Paper 1 rejects Donald Davidson's anomalous monism.

Paper 2 rejects a theory I call mind-brain correlation with non-mental causation.

Paper 3 rejects functionalism and advocates the union theory.

Paper 4 criticises the work of Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge and further promotes the union theory.

Paper 5 argues against John Searle and admits that the union theory is pretty outrageous.

Paper 6 struggles to make sense of perceptual consciousness and ends with an admission of failure.

The papers make up a line of argument. The book proceeds from these unsatisfactory theories to RE, which is advocated at length in place of all of them. To believe that such a book is inconsistent would be juvenile.

McGinn says the book is woefully uninformed about the work of others and at best amateurish. 'Honderich's understanding of positions he criticizes is often weak to nonexistent, though not lacking in chutzpah.'

The book divides previous views on consciousness into physicalism and dualism. The fact that there is a lot of material in contemporary physicalism and naturalism does not touch the fact that there are the two

traditions. Effective generalization is part of inquiry. If anyone's concern is with a general characteristic of a collection of things, it is both unnecessary and irrelevant to spend time on particulars that distinguish them. And two people can differ reasonably about what is most relevant to a question, what is of most value in answering it, even about what it is more or less essential to consider.

McGinn says that something called the union theory 'attempts to paste the mental and physical together inside the brain, with mental events declared spatial and physical (though not neural)'. He reports that the union theory 'is quickly established by asserting that anything causal must be spatial, so that mental events — which are held to be distinct from neural events — are also in the head next to their neural correlates, as well as being physical (because spatial)' and complains that it is not explained 'why this is not just intracranial token dualism (with the usual epiphenomenalist consequences)'.

I object to his saying the theory of lawlike or nomic correlation between mental and neural properties is not a theory, as if a theory were something better than a lawlike explanation. He does not dispute lawlike connection between mental and neural events, or the shortcomings of alternative views.

In the union theory, mental events are spatial and of course physical, so this cannot be dualism. There is nothing in the union theory that leads to epiphenomenalism. Psychoneural pairs or unions are specified as causal with respect to later such things. There is no dualism to make it epiphenomenal.

McGinn says my view in RE is that 'consciousness is the state of affairs around you ... Consciousness is not the awareness of the room (Honderich can make no sense of such "ofness"); it simply is the room ... He also appears to be a direct realist about perception, supposing that we see objects that exist independently of us; again, how this is consistent with those peculiar neuron-dependent objects is not explained.'

This report of RE is ambiguous. What RE says your perceptual consciousness consists of is sometimes the physical world, nothing else, and sometimes more or less what RE calls a world of perceptual consciousness. At the start of his review, McGinn informs his readers that RE is preposterous. But this depends on the ambiguity. One of the two propositions in question is indeed the preposterous one that your being perceptually conscious consists in the existence of the physical world. The other is not preposterous at all. The other is more or less RE, the theory in question.

McGinn objects that the mistake in RE about perception is the direct realism, the idea that perceptual consciousness is not about things intermediate between external things and something else. But RE is fundamentally different from direct realism in excluding a subject from what is given. What it is for a world of perceptual consciousness to be given is only for it to exist in the defined way.

McGinn asks: 'if consciousness is a state of affairs existing in the perceived environment, doesn't it follow that hallucination is impossible?'

Honderich finally gets round to considering this critical question ... His answer is that his theory refutes any such possibility — there simply cannot be perceptual hallucinations.’

I concede that my treatment of the argument from hallucination was not good enough. A better approach is disjunctivism, developed by Paul Snowdon and others: in taking ourselves to see things, we are either doing so or thinking we are doing so. This can be understood in terms of perceptual or reflective consciousness. Hallucination is reflective consciousness. Indeed RE leaves it open whether what we take to be our perceptual consciousness is always reflective consciousness. So RE does not vanquish scepticism or pretend to.

My book distinguishes between perceptual, reflective and affective consciousness. An adequate account of consciousness will have to give different accounts of the three things.

The account of perceptual consciousness is that what it is for you to be perceptually conscious is for what makes up a world of perceptual consciousness to be had, given or presented. When you are aware of the room, what is had or the like is not a self or sense data or some relation of intentionality, but a room.

According to RE, reflective consciousness consists in the existence of representations, these being things both outside and inside of heads that share some of the effects of what they represent. This account of reflective consciousness can thus be said to give a place to intentionality.

McGinn says: ‘Honderich assures us that he is not defending the innocuous view that perceptual awareness is intentional directedness to the environment ... he totally rejects the whole notion of intentionality.’

McGinn continues: ‘Honderich tries to extend the theory to thinking. Here, to sum up, his theory is that thinking is the perceiving of external representations like pictures and words, plus some inner representations. Two problems: first, you can think about something and perceive no external representation of it ... second, those latter inner representations, introduced by Honderich in a sudden moment of sanity, undermine the entire picture he is promoting. He has thereby acknowledged the importance of intentionality ...’

This is a shambles. The first speech is ambiguous and thus wholly misleading. The second speech is inane in the vagueness of the declaration that with reflective consciousness I am letting in intentionality. The RE picture has parts because consciousness is not simple.

McGinn says perceptual consciousness ‘is surely the presentation of a world (or at least a bit of one) to a conscious subject; but no such obvious thought is what Honderich is advocating. He thinks such an account would be “circular” since it is tantamount to saying that perceptual consciousness is the awareness of a world, and we were trying to say what awareness is.’

McGinn again: ‘The short reply to Honderich’s existence theory is of course that he is confusing vehicle and content, act and object. My experience of a room is the vehicle of a certain content, rather as a word

is a vehicle of meaning. My seeing the room is not the room I see but the means by which I see it; the seeing is not its own object.'

These items are as close as McGinn gets to stating an alternative theory of consciousness. I say an analysis of consciousness containing unexplained occurrences of 'consciousness' or the like is no great achievement.

McGinn: 'Are we to assume ... that he has simply decided to call a state of affairs in the environment "consciousness"? In which case, the obvious reply is that this is not what we call consciousness, and we'd like a theory of that.'

My book proceeds in terms of criteria for an adequate theory of consciousness. We have to keep clearly in mind the primary nature of consciousness, the fact of causal relations between consciousness and physical events, considerations of subjectivity, and so on. The book seeks a conception of consciousness that satisfies the criteria.

A6 McGinn on Honderich on McGinn on Honderich

Again, I have shortened McGinn's text. For the rest of this section, the first person is Colin.

Honderich's reply to my review speculates about the source of my harsh judgment. He suggests that it comes from my annoyance at his remarks about me in his autobiography. I had skimmed that work, and did indeed find his comments about me (and others) myopic, tendentious and foolish. But my review was dictated by my actual critical response to the text of *On Consciousness* and not by any supposed past slights.

For those not inclined to take my word for this, supposing that really my negativity arose from personal considerations, Honderich notes, correctly, that I had much earlier (1990) in the *London Review of Books* described his preface to a collection of A.J. Ayer's writings as 'ill-written, plodding, and faintly nauseating in places'.

The constant factor here is obviously Honderich's writing itself, not any supposed resentment on my part to his unflattering comments about me in his later memoir. I just think he writes bad philosophy badly, that's all. Indeed, the wild speculation suggests itself that Ted's remarks about me in that book may have been influenced by my earlier nasty comment about his Ayer preface.

To repeat, I found Honderich's book to be quite the worst thing I've ever read — an insult to the reader, no less — so I was duty-bound to pan it. And I did give my reasons.

A7 The Leiter Blog

Brian Leiter hosts a well known philosophy blog where on October 31 he started a thread on the already notorious McGinn review (Leiter, 2007). He kicked off the debate with a few words:

Disputes about ‘tone’ almost always mask, of course, disputes about ‘substance,’ which is probably why McGinn was disinclined to ‘soften the tone’ since he presumably thought it properly matched to the substance. Assuming the substance of the criticisms are sound, what do readers think about the ‘tone’ of the review? Are the two separable? It seems to me that there are too few honest book reviews out there, and too many puff pieces. But even if one agrees with me about that one might still think McGinn’s approach to this is wrong. I find McGinn’s approach refreshing, but I wonder what others think?

Comments were quick to accumulate. Here are just a few edited quotations to suggest the general drift:

I am left with the impression that the reviewer has a personal vendetta against the author of the work reviewed, which in turn leads me to become suspicious of the substantive criticisms offered in the review. (R. Vangala, October 31)

Reviews should, in my view, serve to introduce readers to books the reviewers think are worth taking seriously, for all their flaws. (Mark Sacks, October 31)

This sort of tone is appropriate, I think, when dealing with unserious mediocrities who are mysteriously accorded stature well beyond what they deserve in the profession. (David J. Watkins, October 31)

McGinn is perhaps righteously angry about incompetence or time wasted, but I’m inclined to suppose it’s what he regards as a frustrating fact of publication of a sub-standard work of scholarship. (Dean C. Rowan, October 31)

McGinn’s choice of words goes far beyond the informative. You can say a book has no value and should be avoided without a mocking or abusive tone. (Tony, November 1)

Public discussion of a work is probably more likely to achieve its goals if conducted on the basis, mutually understood, that errors, confusions, trivialities may be pointed out publicly but not condemned or ridiculed. (Sharif, November 1)

McGinn’s tone is right on the money for reasons having to do with how contemporary analytic philosophy is perceived in the wider culture. (Paul Raymont, November 1)

If the goal is to promote higher esteem for analytic philosophy, then best avoid saying things like this when interviewed by *The Times*: ‘[Philosophers] look terrible to start with. I don’t like people looking terrible. Their clothes are terrible. They will be intolerant of people whom they don’t think of as at their intellectual level. People who are very nice, interesting people, they’re just not interested in them.’ [said McGinn] (John Turri, November 2)

I can’t help feeling, having been tutored by both Honderich and McGinn at UCL and having read each of their autobiographies, that

there was never any chance Colin McGinn would write an impartial assessment of Honderich's book. I suspect he knew before he picked the book up that his review would be scathing. I don't find it hard to believe that the substantive criticisms are on the mark, but I do find it hard to take McGinn's review as evidence for that fact. In fact, I've never read a McGinn review in any context without getting the sense that it's all about self-promotion. (Andrew Black, November 3)

Book reviews in our profession tend to be unreliable, erring almost always on the side of being far too generous to work that is indeed culpably deficient. (Brian, November 5)

If we don't strongly discourage negative rhetoric, we're more likely to see reviews where the focus is on rhetoric and not content. (Kris, November 5)

Fortunately, with the ease of publishing reviews on the Internet, the trend to only positive reviews may be short-lived. (Christian Perring, November 6)

The problem to me seems to be when brutal reviews are written in such a way as to raise more questions than they answer, even if the forcefulness of the critique is warranted by the quality of the book. (Simon Cabulea May, November 6)

It's appropriate for a reviewer not only to say when a book is bad, but also not to understate just how bad it is. (Keith DeRose, November 7)

The Bigger Picture

There is much to be learned about the current state of academic philosophy of mind in this unseemly tale. For me, the main lesson is that professional philosophers have no monopoly of wisdom in consciousness studies, either in writing books about consciousness or in reviewing the efforts of their peers. The *JCS* illustrates with its judicious balance of peer-reviewed articles and other texts (such as the present meta-review) that consciousness studies can be enriched by reaching beyond conventional academic work.

Spare a final moment to consider the longer implications of the catfight you have just witnessed. Googling 'Honderich' or 'McGinn' will regularly find the two names paired with each other for the rest of digital eternity. Whether they like it or not, the two prickly protagonists are now sparring partners in cyberspace, bound in a fellowship of reciprocal contempt and vituperation. Perhaps future generations of philosophers will amuse themselves with animatronic replays of the Ted and Colin show, where photorealistic avatars trade vile words with heated fluency in comic clips.

In any case, the philosophical soil in which this debate is rooted will soon be ploughed over. I suspect that neither radical externalism nor

the new mysterianism will attract much attention once we witness the arrival of the first conscious robots (Ross, 2006).

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