

Comment on Ted Honderich's 'Radical Externalism'

Tim Crane
Department of Philosophy, UCL

Ted Honderich's theory of *consciousness as existence*, which he here calls *radical externalism*, starts with a good phenomenological observation: that perceptual experience appears to involve external things being immediately present to us. As P.F. Strawson once observed, when asked to describe my current perceptual state, it is normally enough simply to describe the things around me (Strawson 1979: 97).

But in my view that does not make the whole theory plausible. There are puzzling questions one can raise about the theory – for example: how can a conscious *desire* for X, or the *imagination* of X simply consist in the *existence* of X 'in a way'? How can this model of consciousness be extended to bodily sensations? What has to exist 'in a way' for a sensation of nausea to exist? But in this brief note I will focus on what are to me three outstanding weaknesses in Honderich's present paper: the formulation of his theory, his treatment of the most obvious problem for the theory, and his criticisms of opposing views.

Radical externalism is 'the general proposition that what it is to be perceptually conscious is for a world in a way to exist -- i.e. for things to be in space and time with certain properties'. So to be conscious of reading this page simply is for the page to exist 'in a way', or to 'be there'. Call the state of affairs of the page existing, 'S'. Is the idea that the existence of S *suffices* for you to be conscious of it? Honderich equivocates. At one point he says 'to be perceptually conscious is *only* for an extra-cranial state of affairs to exist' (Honderich 2006: XX my emphasis). And elsewhere he says that your consciousness of the page simply *is* 'for the page to be there'. This remarks imply that the existence of S suffices for consciousness of it. But

this is at least puzzling, since it implies that S cannot exist without someone being conscious of it. And surely Honderich himself would reject this Berkeleian consequence.

In other places in his paper, he does reject it: ‘your world of perceptual consciousness is things being in space and time ... *dependent* on you neurally’. For you to be conscious, he writes, is ‘for there to be a spatio-temporal set of things with a *dependence* on another extra-cranial state of affairs and also on what is in a particular cranium’ (2006: XX). If we interpret Honderich in what I take to be a charitable way and ignore the remarks quoted in the previous paragraph, then we should interpret him as holding that consciousness actually consists in a *relation of dependence*: your consciousness of S does not consist in the existence of S alone but on the *relation* between S and your brain. Honderich denies that there is relation ‘of intentionality, aboutness or directedness in your consciousness of the page’ (2006: XX). But it follows from the only plausible reading of his view that he thinks consciousness is a relation of some sort.

The idea that mental states are relations to non-mental things is characteristic of many kinds of externalism. Applied to perception, it is the characteristic thesis of the disjunctive view of perceptual experience (Martin 2004). But Honderich’s externalism differs from many contemporary forms of externalism about perception in at least two ways: (i) it denies that the objects of the ordinary physical world are in the world of your perceptual consciousness; (ii) it denies that there can be perceptual consciousness of any kind without a relation to ‘extra-cranial’ states of affairs. I will take these points in turn.

For a disjunctivist, the ordinary physical page which you see, the same page which exists when you are not looking at it, is a constituent of your perceptual

experience. This is because your experience consists in a relation to the page. Honderich denies this, since he says that ‘a world of perceptual consciousness is not the physical world’. As we saw, the world of your perceptual consciousness is ‘dependent on you neurally’, yet nothing in the physical world is dependent on anything neural:

The physical world, very briefly indeed, consists in two categories: (1) things taking up space and time and also having other properties as standardly or publicly perceived, *as distinct from properties dependent on anyone in particular*, and (2) things that also take up space and time, are without perceived properties, but stand in causal or other lawlike connection with things in the first category. The physical world then consists in the perceived physical world, including pages, and in what you can call the physical world of science, including atoms -- already mentioned as a necessary condition of each world of perceptual consciousness. There is not much of a liberty taken in speaking of there being pages in both a world of perceptual consciousness and in the perceived physical world, and indeed in referring to each of a related pair of things as *a page*. (Honderich 2006: XX, my emphasis).

The page which is in your perceptual consciousness exists ‘in a way’ but does not exist in the physical world, since it does not belong to categories (1) or (2). It follows that the page is not the ordinary physical page which exists when you are not perceiving it. This is why Honderich says here that there are two pages, one in the physical world and one in the world of perceptual consciousness.

This consequence is surely bizarre – as bizarre as any of the sense-data views that Honderich ridicules – and may rob the doctrine of Radical Externalism of any of the pre-theoretical plausibility it initially had. Remember that initially what was appealing about the view was how natural it is to think that in perceptual (more properly, visual) experience, the world is simply ‘open to view’: how things seem to be in your experience is simply how things are with the ordinary mind-independent objects around you. But when Honderich explains what it is for an object of experience to exist ‘in a way’, he gives up this natural idea. For to exist ‘in a way’ is to exist in a ‘world of perceptual consciousness’, in space and time but not in the ordinary physical world.

The upshot is that the objects of experience are physical – because they exist in space and time, and this makes them physical on Honderich’s view – but they are not part of the physical world since their existence is dependent on experience. This is the sense I can make of Honderich ‘speaking of there being pages in both a world of perceptual consciousness and in the perceived physical world, and indeed in referring to each of a related pair of things as *a page*’ (2006: XX). The objects of perceptual consciousness correspond to things whose existence is not so dependent – Honderich says the two pages are ‘related’ – although the nature of this correspondence is not made clear. What is clear is that it is not the ordinary mind-independent physical page which you see when you see the page. Radical externalism therefore turns out to be a version of the early 20th century sense-data theory which treats experience as a relation to something which is not itself a physical thing, although it inhabits the physical world. It’s not essential to the sense-data view that the objects of experience are *mental*; what matters is that their existence is dependent on the existence of an

experience; and that's what Honderich thinks. This view is certainly radical, but if I am right it is not new.

This brings me to the second difference between Honderich's view and other forms of externalism about perception – and with it, to my second general point: his treatment of the apparent possibility of consciousness without an existing physical object.

The main *prima facie* difficulty with the claim that perceptual experience is simply a relation to the ordinary mind-independent objects and their properties is this: it seems possible that there could be an experience which subjectively seems exactly the same as a genuine perception, but in which there is no mind-independent object being perceived. If the same state can exist in the absence of some object O then O cannot be essential to that state. Hence experience cannot be a relation after all. This is a version of what has been called the argument from hallucination. Theories of perception respond to it in different ways: sense-data theories respond by saying that the objects of experience are really mind-dependent; intentional theories respond by saying that experience is a representation and therefore not a relation; disjunctive theories respond by saying that the perception and the hallucination do not share a common mental nature. (For a description of this argument and survey of these responses see Crane 2005). This argument has been the focus of intense debate in the literature in the philosophy of perception of the last ten or fifteen years; and arguably it was the source of the debate about perception in the first fifty years of the 20th century. The philosophy of perception can therefore be seen as the struggle to square the manifest phenomenology of perception with the apparent possibility of hallucination and plausible naturalist metaphysical commitments.

Honderich, by contrast, sees no need to struggle; in one paragraph he seems to dismiss the whole debate. The argument from hallucination, he says, ‘depends on the possibility of a causal or lawlike sufficient condition rather than a necessary condition in the brain. According to radical externalism, there isn’t a sufficient neural condition for perceptual consciousness.’ (2006: XX). Honderich does not say exactly why this undermines the argument given above. Does he have in mind the disjunctivist view that not everything that seems like a perceptual experience is an experience of the same kind? The disjunctivist says that although there can be a sufficient neural condition for a state which *seems like* a state of perceptual consciousness – in the sense that if my retina were stimulated in exactly the same way as it is now but by some cause other than the page, it would *seem to me* exactly as if I were seeing a page – but is not such a state. Does Honderich accept this view? Probably not, since he commits himself earlier in the paper to the claim that ‘with consciousness, what there seems to be is what there is’ (2006: xx). And this plausible claim, of course, is what the disjunctivist denies.

But if he doesn’t mean what the disjunctivist means, what can Honderich mean by saying there is no neural sufficient condition for perceptual consciousness? Does he mean that it is *impossible* to stimulate the retina in such a way that produces an experience which seems exactly like an perceptual experience of a page? But how can he know that this is impossible? Asserting its impossibility commits one to the view that what makes a state of perceptual consciousness seem the way it does is either (a) some distal cause upstream of the retinal image which has some way of affecting the causal upshot in the brain without having any effect on the retinal image; or (b) some non-causal condition on a state of mind.

The first reason, (a), goes against what we know about causation. In any case of a causal chain, A-B-C, it is metaphysically possible to ‘screen off’ A from the effect C, by simply considering C to have been brought about by B instead. The second reason, (b), is tantamount to admitting that perceptual consciousness is not a wholly causal process (according to Valberg (1992), this is Heidegger’s view). Perhaps Honderich has an alternative view of causation in the background; or perhaps he is a closet Heideggerian. But given that he is not a disjunctivist, these seem to be the only options here.

It should be emphasised that the claim that it is possible to produce a hallucination – an experience which seems just like a genuine perception of a mind-independent object O but in the absence of O – by stimulating the retina (e.g.) in exactly the way in which it was stimulated when O is present, does not involve a commitment to phenomenalism, nor to any particular theory of experience, nor to any extreme hypothesis about how the brain works. It is simply a metaphysical possibility which seems to reside in what we already know about experience. So it also should be emphasised that this idea is not, as such, a *denial* of externalism. All externalists in the current debate – with the exception of a few Wittgensteinians who decline to play this particular language-game – accept the possibility of hallucination in this sense. The question for externalists is not whether hallucinations are possible, but how an externalist should classify them or theorise about this possibility. If Honderich’s radical externalism simply denies the real possibility of these hallucinations, then he has to take one of the two paths, (a) or (b) above. Both paths are certainly radical, but can there be any future in this kind of radicalism. So what does Honderich think can be said in favour of it?

This brings me to my third and final point, concerning Honderich's treatment of other views. His main strategy here is to describe certain criteria which any theory of consciousness has to meet, and then to claim that Radical Externalism satisfies the criteria better than the alternatives: 'the argument for radical externalism is in a very important part the extent to which the alternatives fail to satisfy the criteria' (2006: xx). Suppose Radical Externalism is really coherent. I myself doubt this, for the reasons given, but let's suppose it for the sake of argument. Then Honderich's strategy here is certainly a good one, so long as he has considered a good range of alternative views.

On this, in my view, he fails badly. He considers only two views: dualism (which for some reason he calls spiritualism or mentalism¹) and physicalism. Dualism is the Cartesian version of the view according to which consciousness does not exist in space. This doctrine seems to be despatched by stipulation, given what Honderich means by 'physical':

A fourth criterion of adequacy is that a theory of consciousness must make consciousness a reality, which is to say physical or approximate to physical or in some strong sense reducible to the physical. (Honderich 2006:xx)

In other words, in order to be real, something must be physical; in order to be physical, it must exist in space and time; dualism denies that consciousness exists in space; hence dualism denies that consciousness is real. The argument is valid of course; but it must be without force unless it can be shown that any doctrine deserving

¹ Neither of Honderich's terms are very satisfactory, since both 'spiritualism' and 'mentalism' have perfectly clear meanings in and outside philosophy; so I will stick with 'dualism' despite the many things that word has meant.

the name 'dualism' (i.e. any doctrine that treats the mental and the physical as two, not one) *must* say that consciousness is non-spatial. Most forms of dualism around today (e.g. Chalmers 1996, to pick a prominent example) do not say this, and there's no reason why they should. (To be fair, Honderich also attacks dualism on the grounds that it can't handle mental causation. Here he agrees with many materialists, and there is no need to add to the discussion here, except to say there is no knock-down argument against dualism on these grounds.)

Physicalism, on Honderich's view, is the view that 'our consciousness is a fact, property or state of affairs that involves only physical properties in the sense gestured at earlier -- and in particular properties in existing and more or less anticipated neuroscience'. Honderich insists that he does not mean that this kind of physicalism is eliminative materialism. So it is a theory which says that consciousness exists and only involves neural properties; the best way to understand this is as the identity theory. But now we can see that Honderich's description might mislead: for although the identity theory does say that consciousness is a neural phenomenon, it means by this that certain neural phenomena are also mental or conscious. Identity is a symmetrical relation: if $A=B$, then $B=A$. So if consciousness really is neural property P then neural property P is *ipso facto* consciousness. Some of Honderich's criticisms of physicalism fail to fully take on board this feature of the view.

For example, his first criticism is that a theory of consciousness should be precisely that: a theory of consciousness and nothing else. He says that physicalism fails to satisfy this requirement, presumably because it says a theory of consciousness should be a theory of certain neural phenomena. But if consciousness *is* neural property P, then a theory of consciousness *is* a theory of neural property P and nothing else: the objection fails. His second criticism is that physicalism cannot

account for how consciousness seems to us. It's not clear why; maybe because consciousness does not *seem* like a brain process. But, to echo Wittgenstein, how would it seem if it *were* a brain process? The objection begs the question. As for the third objection, that physicalism cannot account for the subjectivity of consciousness, this is a familiar objection, and there may be something to it, but since Honderich does not say enough in the article to say what the basis of the objection is, we will have to leave this hanging for the moment.

What should we make of Honderich's radical externalism? The contemporary philosophical landscape contains a wide variety of metaphysical views on perception and on the relationship of mind and body. Some are dualist, some are materialist, some claim to be neither. Some are externalist, some are internalist. Instead of indicating that he is aware of this variety and making room cautiously and judiciously for his own view in the crowded landscape of possible views, Honderich seems to me to have decided instead to describe one view which almost no-one holds and to misdescribe a view which many hold, and show how they are incompatible with some of his own rather vague stipulations about the nature of consciousness. It's hard to see how progress can be made by discussing philosophical views in this way. Honderich would have done better to have tried to respond to the obvious problems with radical externalism, such as those indicated above, and to take on board discussions of similar problems in the voluminous literature. As it stands, I can see little to recommend radical externalism.²

REFERENCES

Chalmers, David (1996) *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

² Thanks to Ted Honderich for explaining his view with me on many occasions, and for being open to frank discussion.

- Crane, Tim (2005), 'The Problem of Perception' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-problem/>
- Martin, M.G.F. (2004), 'The Limits of Self-Awareness', *Philosophical Studies* 120:
37-89.
- Noë, Alva. and Evan Thompson (eds.) (2002), *Vision and Mind: Selected Readings in
the Philosophy of Perception* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).
- Strawson, P.F. (1979), 'Perception and its Objects' in G. Macdonald ed. *Perception
and Identity: Essays Presented to A.J. Ayer with His Replies* (London:
Macmillan); Page references to reprint in Noë and Thompson (eds.) (2002).
- Valberg, J.J. (1992), 'The Puzzle of Experience' in Tim Crane ed. *The Contents of
Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).