

TED HONDERICH, AFTER THE TERROR

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A Review by Lansana Keita

The attack on the New York Trade Center that took place on the eleventh of September 2001 was an event that shocked a great number of people. On account of the lives lost in spectacular fashion and the massive damage to property much ethical debate has ensued. And indeed, given that ethics is one of the central planks in the enterprise one would expect that some philosophers would venture to offer elucidating analyses. Ted Honderich's *After the Terror* is such an example.

In a brisk style somewhat reminiscent of Hume's *Enquiry* Honderich appraises the interesting moral questions raised by September 11. Honderich's analysis is provocative and would no doubt raise many heated ethical questions. Honderich's thesis is this: there are good lives and bad lives. Good lives are lives that last longer and is one of the list of goods that characterize good lives. The others have to do

“with freedom and power of various kinds, to which can be added safety. There is also respect and self-respect, and private and public relationships with others, and the satisfactions of culture, including religion and diversion” (5).

Honderich also tells us that

“more of these five great goods is better than fewer of them, and more of each one is better than less” (5).

According to Honderich the major ethical problem facing the world and instantiated by the terror-inspiring events of September 11 is how to improve the quality of bad lives. According to Honderich bad lives are lives that are so short that they may be characterized as half lives, quarter lives and “under

fives” for those children that die under the age of five primarily on account of economic privation. For Honderich, individuals who live full lives inhabit for the most part the nations of Western Europe and North America, and those that live bad lives are found principally in nations such as Malawi and Mozambique. Honderich instantiates this fact by pointing out the vast disparity between average incomes of those who lead full lives and those who lead half lives and less. The comparison is between \$24, 000 and \$200.

Recall that Honderich’s task in his text is to mount an

“inquiry into terrorism and ourselves, although one brought on by the shock of September 11, 2001 when all television sets were present for the killing” (10).

His first query concerns the easy assumption on the part of those who might want to argue that the cause of terrorism as exemplified by September 11 is economic privation. Honderich points out that the terrorists did not originate from the countries with the lowest comparative incomes but from a set of nations whose average income approximates \$4, 000. Did it have to do with pride or religion? (15).

But regardless of relative economic privation or other cause, Honderich argues that the terrorist acts of September 11 cannot be supported by any moral argument whatsoever. For Honderich the acts themselves achieved no positive end and more importantly flouted what may be taken as an *a priori* principle of human existence, the principle of natural morality of humanity. As he put it:

“One true reason why the killers of September 11 rightly have our revulsion is that they violated the natural fact and practice of morality” (117).

This is the basis on which Honderich founds his theory of ethics, an ethics that rejects other ethical theories such as libertarianism and liberalism. Both theories cannot have a universalist reach for all of humanity because they are not anchored on the fundamental principle of ethics for humans—the principle of humanity.

What follows from this assumption is this: although the violent act of September cannot be justified a moral responsibility must be borne by those whose omissions are causally linked to the existence and persistence of bad lives in the world. It is the positive obligation of those who lead good lives, acting on the unavoidable principle of humanity,

“to change the world of bad lives, and not just to make more terrorism against us less likely. The first is our greatest obligation, but it is fortunate that the two go together” (147).

But according to Honderich the good lives are nourished by capitalism and as a result are

“ignorant, stupid, selfish, managed and deceived for gain, self-deceived and deadly” (147).

The solution is to appeal to our moral intelligences and thereby embrace the principle of humanity. This principle of humanity is what leads to the reciprocal recognition of the universal human desire for the six great goods (153). A less than a full embrace of such is to resort to half methods such as charity. Honderich writes:

“Charity is a refuge from obligation, something like Sartre’s bad faith” (152).

We are also told that the recipients of the acts of specious obligation can see

“what we have done to them, and what we are doing to them. So our question of what to do, and also their question of what to do—neither of these will ever go away” (153).

The central issue posed by Honderich’s text is how to reconcile two important theories of contemporary ethics, that of the principle of humanity according to which all human agents are intrinsically of equal moral worth hence equally worthy of being regarded as ends in themselves and not means to other ends, and that constructed on the principle of utility. This latter principle is the assumption on which utilitarianism with its attendant dilemmas of “the greatest satisfaction for the greatest number” and “the maximization of expected utility, “ in the form of theoretical neoclassical economics is founded. And neoclassical economics in practice is what we call capitalism. According to Honderich the practioners of capitalism

“as business persons are self-interested and seem to have no general *moral* principle at all. Nothing that is true to the basic stuff in the natural practice of morality” (140).

Appealing to the principle of utility – as capitalism – for a causal explanation of September 11 leads us to a world where economic considerations are of paramount importance in the political behavior of nation states. In the

imbroglio that produced September 11 human beings have been reduced to mere chips on the game board of *Realpolitik*. Yet the players themselves are human beings, much to the dismay of those whose ethics is founded on a principle of humanity rather than on “no general *moral* principle.”

And this is the argument implicit in Honderich’s thesis. His portrayal of those who endure bad lives is so stark that it leaves little scope for agency on the part of such persons. Is there a hint of an unintentional paternalism on the basis of an unrecognized exaggeration? Consider the facts that the vast number of abortions in the West are undertaken for economic reasons thereby leading to the claim that millions of potential lives of unknown quality are lost and that the vast disparity of per capita incomes in the areas of less than full lives is mitigated somewhat by communitarian considerations and free agricultural produce (in rural areas in Africa fruit and vegetables are easily obtained at very little cost).

Given his critique of capitalism and the recognition that the agents of September 11 targeted one of the symbols of world capitalism, one would have expected Honderich in his prescriptions to have raised probing questions about the role of capitalist institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank in their creation of bad lives. A major task at hand for those want to transform bad lives is to bring effective political pressure for the transformation of institutions such the IMF and the World Bank. Yet there are limitations on what may be achievable by those who would want to “save people from bad lives.” The principle of humanity endorsed by Honderich as the basis for a human ethic is founded on the assumption on the intrinsic equality of humans as dispositional agents. In this connection bad lives can be transformed only by those who experience such according to principles of rational response. Such principles would include concerted political action in those areas where bad lives proliferate. The required political action would then lead to qualitative economic transformations on the part maximally of the affected agents themselves. Sending more NGOs or “donor money” are not much more than bad faith charity as a refuge from obligation, as Honderich might say.

September 11 woke up certain elements in the West from their dogmatic presuppositions about the West and the “Others.” But this awakening only provoked the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq and an increase in the num-

ber of bad lives, as a kind of negative consequentialist morality. Honderich's *After the Terror*, on the contrary, is an insightful and alternative analysis and set of prescriptions about how to proceed.

