



Design, Ethics and Identity

Tony Fry

To cite this article: Tony Fry (2006) Design, Ethics and Identity, Design Philosophy Papers, 4:3, 161-165

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871306X13966268131712>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 56



View related articles [↗](#)

Design, Ethics and Identity

Tony Fry

Tony Fry is Main Contributing Editor to *Design Philosophy Papers* and the author of a number of books including *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (1999) and the earlier *Remakings: Ecology, Design, Philosophy* which has recently been translated into Portuguese for publication by the University of Sao Paulo Press.

An ontological theory of ethical design, a theory I have advanced elsewhere, posits ethics as a performative quality of the ‘good’ object. But one may ask ‘where does this leave the designer?’

Superficially, one can say that the designer retains the responsibility of bringing ethical objects into being, not least via ontological design. Here we recognise that the designer and the designed exist within the same hermeneutic circle in which the designed designs the designer’s designing (this being a condition of limitation rather than absolute determination). What this means is that the designer, rather than only being a possible agent of ethics can, in a regime of ontological design, eventually become its object.

Clearly, there is a vast gulf between the circling of an abstracted theoretical proposition and the possibility of concrete practical realisation. What then are the steps that have to be thought through to allow praxiological action to be contemplated, constituted and efficaciously enacted?

First, is the necessity to think beyond the idea of the general, functionalist, disciplinary identity of designer-as-service-provider by recognising that to act

ethically, the designer has to identify with something other than design(ing). Yet this practice is not easily retained while being transcended. This because the functionalist practice of design is not merely instrumentally directive of the designer's actions, but equally implicated in the formation of their identity.

To gain the anchorage of an ethical grounding, the construction of a designer's identity has to move beyond it simply resting on the performative act of designing in a particular design domain. In this respect, ethics is an ethos, a mode of being, rather than compliance to a professional code of conduct or a theoretically elaborated set of evaluative propositions. So, just as 'we are what we eat', it is also the case that the designer's identity is designed by what they design and their dwelling in 'the world of design'. From what has already been said, it follows that designing ethically is not just a matter of the appropriation and application of ethics but rather, and essentially, the designer becoming ethically constituted. Thereafter, being ethical and being a designer become indistinguishable.

From such a conception, it is possible to start to conceptually recognise how the process of a designer's ethical formation and identity can be practically enabled. But to take this further, the whole question of identity has itself to be visited.

We need to ask and answer the question: 'what can or should prompt the formation of the designer as an accountable ethical being before that moment when ontological design becomes normative?'

Being and Identity

At the Earth Dialogues held in Brisbane in July 2006 and chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev, one of the keynote presentations was by the Australian Aboriginal educator, activist and intellectual, Noel Pearson. In his powerful and evocative address he argued a position that directly confronted essentialist Aboriginal and mainstream Australian nationalist ideas of identity, as well as the more general reductionism of 'identity politics'. His proposition was that identity is complex and plural and is constituted from two sources: firstly, from the complexity of bonds to one's immediate and extended family, the historical traces and contemporary attachments to a particular culture, and the genealogy of one's systems of belief; and secondly, from bridges built to those communities of interest to which one chooses to associate, be they political, sporting, musical etc. Notwithstanding Pearson's insights, passion and powerful presence, there were some gaps in his analysis.

The first gap is that the whole question of identity is normally never brought into focus without a critical condition that calls it into question. A secure identity has no need to ask 'who or what am I?' It just assumes, it just knows, it is in the background, taken for granted. The entire history of the negation of the cultures, body and spirit of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and the

diminishment of their identity to stereotypes has made the question of identity an omnipresent and unavoidable issue for them. In fact, this issue continues to fold into the entire history of colonialism and its afterlife in the economic mask of globalisation. Colonisation always attempts to devalue the identity of an Other and establish an hegemonic identity designated by the coloniser.

Gap two is a failure of naming rather than of knowing by Pearson. Whatever identity is formed or forged, whatever the singular or plural nature of its construction, it exists in a constant condition of contestation by dint of cultural, economic or political forces that aspire to erase or appropriate it. This struggle arrives in numerous sites and guises: education, enforced organisational compliance, peer pressure, ideology, manufactured market desires and so on. Thus, no matter how much the ego claims ownership of an identity, it is always the product of Being itself in struggle and of imposition.

Gap three in Pearson's presentation was that while a critical condition makes the question of identity a metaphysical issue, in other words an issue for which knowledge is sought, it equally requires acknowledgement of an ontological state of being indivisible from the formation of a sense of the self. Now of course, the issue of what we actually are, and what we think and state ourselves to be may or may not coincide. Most importantly, without acknowledging and engaging the question of ontology, one cannot get to the most fundamental issues of identity, which is: 'we' cannot *be* human and who we are, without identity. In this respect, identity is the means by which we are differentiated from 'the same'. Our being cannot be without a created difference from Being itself. Yet this identification of difference is equally an identification of individuation and belonging. But what is it that makes this production of difference possible?

Let's consider a few lines from Martin Heidegger's seminal essay 'Identity and Difference'. He tells us:

Man obviously is a being. As such he belongs to the totality of Being – just like the stone, the tree, or the eagle. To "belong" here still means to be in the order of Being. But man's distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it. Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this.¹

In belonging to the totality of Being, 'man' is thus designated to be part of all and everything.

Interestingly, Western metaphysics has negated a sense of this belonging by its dualistic mode of thought: man and nature; nurture and nature; culture and nature; mind and body – some of the more

obvious registrations. Conversely, belonging to the totality of Being, that is, being within the order of Being, was the central feature of Aboriginal cosmology.

'Man's distinctive feature', as the being that thinks, is that 'he' is open to Being. This is to say 'man' knows 'himself' to be a being (with an identity) in being (being identified and together with and as the same). Man cannot be without giving way to being dependent upon Being – of answering to it. Heidegger's notion of the 'care of the self' is a graphic illustration of this; he makes it clear that such action is primary, it is the very base of ethics – for without giving way to such care, nothing else is possible (transposed into the discourse of sustainment one can say that nothing can be sustained unless one first sustains one's self).² The self that gives way to its own care belongs to Being while at the same time having to differentiate its self through the creation of a self identity.

Answerability and accountability, have been indicated here as an ontological condition of primary self-interested action rather than a product of conscious reflection (thus existing before knowledge of the self). This is how relationality is realised as man's being, as 'man' appropriates Being and Being appropriates (the being) of 'man'. The reciprocal relation 'the event of appropriation' of being and Being is what Heidegger understands to be 'being together'.³

So while we humans think our difference from the same, from Being, as an identity we equally identify ourselves (if in most cases mostly weakly) to belong to that against which our difference is defined. At the same time, the manner in which we centre ourselves, our anthropocentrism, undercuts our actions towards the very sustainment of Being.

The fundamental ground of enacted ethics actually rests between an identity acting in a way that performatively acknowledges that its being belongs to Being and an identity that does not.

Being a Designer

Like artists and architects, the designing subject identifies him or herself to their self and to the world they inhabit as 'a designer' well before any real ability to design professionally arrives or is acknowledged. In this respect, the identity of the role 'designer' itself designs. Later, of course, identification with other subject positions are added to qualify their identity as a designer – be these qualifiers ethnic, sexual, economic, political etc.

Clearly, as soon as a notion of what it is to be a designer is sought to be transformed into an ethical agency, the pre-existing identity of what it is to be a designer, becomes an object of self-contestation for the designing identity.

This contestation is fundamental. It is not about being hip or cool; nor is it about being seen as creative or being a problem solver. It is not about the objects and images associated with one's

name nor about having articles written about oneself in glossy magazines. Rather it is about something profoundly unfashionable. It is about being serious.

To become an ethical designer means to become accountable to Being by what one brings into being. And such accountability brings the very essence of an identity based on 'creativity' into question. In fact it inverts the designer's relations to creation.

Currently, the act of bringing into being prefigures the design act – the client designates what is to be designed, and does so in such a way as to radically delimit the possibilities of what ends up being designed. Notwithstanding the source of the designed, the designer claims authorship for it. Designing ethically inverts this relation – it acknowledges that in accepting the condition of delimitation, responsibility is taken for something, to which form and function have been given, but the design act of itself did not initiate. What responsibility means in this context is 'being accountable for what the designed designs' in relation to its environment of use, users and the world at large. At its most basic, this means everything brought into being can be evaluated according to the degree of its sustaining/unsustaining ability. The complexity of how this is actually done will, of course, vary enormously.

Obviously, the kind of materialist ethics proposed here prizes ethics away from all forms of ethnocentrism, theological or morally grounded over-determinism. Effectively, it means that ethics rests with the actions of discernable harm or good to the material and social fabric of the world-in-being by identified designing things and by the identity of designing human beings.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger *Identity and Difference* (trans Joan Stambaugh) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 edition, p. 31.
2. For a comprehensive and illuminating exposition of Heidegger's notion of 'care of the self' see William McNeill *The Time of Life: Heidegger and Êthos*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2006.
3. Heidegger *Identity and Difference* p. 31–32.