



## The Voice of Sustainment: Design Ethics as Futuring

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# The Voice of Sustainment

## Design Ethics as Futuring

**Tony Fry**

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I am taking ethics to mean the body of values by which a culture understands and interprets itself with regard to what is good and bad.

*Charles E. Scott*

The more human beings have moved their view of an omnipotent agency away from God, faith and ‘the forces of nature’ towards ‘the forces of reason, science and technology’ the more the ground of ethics has shifted. It is now becoming clear that established ethical norms are frequently ignored or seen as irrelevant in assisting contemporary human beings deal with the problems of the worlds they perceive and engage. The more this situation is interrogated the more it will become apparent that what constitutes ethics needs remaking from both existing and new intellectual resources. Any practice, not least design, whose actions shape futures has to be brought to the realisation of the crucial importance of this imperative and the enormous challenge this poses.

## Design Practice and Ethics

Two linked concerns have dominated conventional modes of thinking about ethics and ethical behaviour in the full gamut of design practices. The first centres on employers' conducts toward employees, clients, the industry and the public – ethics in this context is frequently prescribed in a code of professional conduct. The second advocates social, legal and environmental constraints on design practice (like e.g., consumer rights, environmental regulations, health and safety), as well a degree of responsibility for what design/the designer brings into being. This responsibility is problematically understood and defined, mostly not going beyond the terms of 'professional due diligence'. This usually means that responsibility is delimited to the services contracted, compliance to the legal and operative dimensions of the functional performance of what has been designed, and its production complying with what has been specified. Moral obligation is often refused because key design decisions are made by the client and directed by the brief. This seemingly provides the designer with a convenient opt-out – "I am not to blame if something goes wrong as I simply acted on instructions". But if the designer is aware of negative environmental, health or design life performative consequences, or lack of compliance to legislation, and then fails to bring them to the notice of the client (irrespective of whether the client is aware of these issues or not) then some culpability must be accepted.

Such pragmatic relations to 'ethics' have a functionalist place in professional life but are totally inadequate when trying to deal with how designing subjects are created, how they are directed and for what ends, as well as how what they bring into being impacts upon the socio-cultural and material order. The pragmatic view does not have the ability to philosophically understand the why and what of ethics, consequently it can only have a restricted notion of responsibility. This limitation also restricts how design can be considered as an agent for the exercise of responsibility. Rather than just conforming to laws and to a code of professional conduct, the truly responsible designer will have worked to establish relations between design and (autodidactically) educated ethical judgement (which means s/he will have acquired a critical frame of reference in which to enact judgement and position the to-be-judged). Likewise, ethics will have been scrutinised as it spans both the metaphysics of design (design knowledge/knowledge of design) and an ontology of design (the being of design as it designs/the designing of design in being).

The task before us now is formidable. It is the remaking of ethics, and the education of design/designers in the process and pro-duct of the remade. We will get no further than the starting point here.

## The Normative Referent – A Discourse in the Keeping of Philosophy

A fundamental problem arrives as soon as design(ers) appeal to ethics. This problem, which is general to many professions, is that while ethics is appealed to as normative, it actually exists as a contested plurality within philosophy. It follows that to properly discuss the current and prospective relation between design and ethics requires conducting a brief review sufficient to show how ethics and its categories have been variously thought.

### A Brief Review

Ethics is one of the foundational branches of philosophy in both the east and west. It became firmly established in China, India and Greece between the 1000 and 200 BC. At almost the same time as the Greeks were starting to develop ethical inquiry so were Chinese Mohists and Confucians. Prior to this, Indian philosophy had created a way of thinking now regarded as part of the pre-history of ethics – evidenced by, for example, the *Upanisads* (800 BC) and the foundation of Buddhism (500 BC). In these Asian examples, ethical life was the result of an overcoming of will and desire – a doctrine that travelled through to, and influenced, modern western philosophy as can be seen, for instance in the 19th century in the writing of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Ethics emanating from the Greeks, although prefigured by the thoughts of Socrates and Pre-Socratics (especially the Atomists), was dominated by the influence of Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus.

Two interwoven strands of thought emerged that shaped how ethics was pursued. The first was egoistic, focusing on identifying and then elevating what were taken to be the elements of 'the good life'. This is associated especially with the hedonistic notion of *eudaimonia* as espoused by Epicurus and Aristotle. But rather than the modern view of hedonism as mere consumerist self indulgence, this first thinking was more akin to taking pleasure into ownership – of gaining satisfaction based on excelling (be it of one's skills or intellect). In this setting 'the good' came from a fusion between self-reflection and a feeling stemming from the creation (or discovery) of happiness as a quality (of the process and product) of being. The relation between happiness, pleasure and ethics has followed a historical path through philosophy from the Greeks to the Stoics, the Utilitarians and to Nietzsche and beyond. This is not to suggest that the idea of what constituted happiness or pleasure travelled through time unchanged. For instance, Thomas Aquinas understood the highest form of happiness as coming from a knowledge of God.

The second theory of ethics that emerged from Greek thought was based on the notion of 'intrinsic value'. This was especially associated with Plato and his notion of eternal forms (including the Good). The central idea was that in order for a person to be

good they had to know the Good by the application of intellect. Here the Good was theorised as things ‘that are good in themselves’ – beauty, virtue, knowledge and friendship being examples. Both Plato and Aristotle were equally, if differentially, concerned with ‘the common good’ – which was to become another enduring concern of ethics and the development of its proximity to politics. Here the Utilitarian position is an example of note. While echoing Epicurus on pleasure, Utilitarianism completely displaced an individuated or subject-based agent, asserting the common good as a product of common action. This view had enormous political influence (mostly in Britain).

In contrast to the founding propositions of ethics that posited agency with the singular or collective subjective and the abstract, for Immanuel Kant the law was the means of delivering an ethical and moral order. His formalist view was predicated on the power of ‘practical reason’ to command will and desire, which thereafter could bring ethics and morality together within civil society. This thinking directly links to modern jurisprudence and the inscription of right and wrong in a moral code that directs the rules of social conduct and order. Conversely, other ethicists have regarded will as a primary obstacle to the realisation of the ethical. In particular, Nietzsche not only rejected Kant’s subordination of will to reason but also the very position of willing – which for him means ‘willing an end’ by an authority standing ‘above mankind.’ For Nietzsche the strength of will comes from a dominant impulse, in this respect will is a ‘will to power’ – a power folding into fate as well as the becoming and drives of ‘nature’. As for ethics, Nietzsche adopts a perspectivalism. This view is most clearly evident in his major work on ethics, *On the Genealogy of Moral*, where he views ethics from both the perspective of the master/ the oppressor and the slave/ the oppressed.<sup>1</sup>

Again stretching back into its history, ethics has been viewed as an overcoming of ‘the bad’, sin and ‘evil’, but in more recent times it has been understood as a self-overcoming (see especially Nietzsche and Foucault as exponents of this view). Self-overcoming also links to an imperative bonded to obligation, the ‘ought’ and the other – a thinking that was sign-posted by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in the 18th century and later taken up most powerfully by Emmanuel Levinas and thereafter taken into the ethical problematic of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida.

As indicated, the language of ethics appears to evoke common terms, especially happiness, pleasure, pain, the good, evil, will, duty, desire, sin, etc. These terms equally link to meta-moral categories and specific figures of moral judgement that are constituted within particular theological and socio-cultural regimes. What is vital to understand is that while these terms suggest a commonality they do not actually constitute a common language; rather what they mean is plural and contested and frequently a source of

misunderstanding and theoretical problems. Certainly one cannot appeal to any ethical category as universal – as soon as content arrives so does relativism.

Every term rests on underpinning definitions that are culturally particular. Notwithstanding the hegemonic attempt of the forces of globalisation to create a single culture, inequity, spiritual difference and ethnic allegiances ensure that culture is plural. At the same time, it would be naïve to underestimate the transformation wrought by globalisation, and modernity before it. Over the last one hundred and fifty years, for example, entertainment has come to occupy a massive amount of the time and space of everyday life but, because of the aggressive competition between the agents and objects of cultural commodification, entertainment does more than ‘fill up time’ – it arrives as a screen through which our worlds are made to appear. Alienation, boredom and entertainment have in fact become the three triangulation points that position the socio-cultural and economic being-in-the-world of the majority of modernised subjects. It is quite clear that terms like happiness, pleasure or desire, are now refracted through the screen of entertainment. Thus in contemporary culture these terms take on a very different character, meaning and function in people’s lives than they did at the birth of ethics and during the course of its development from the ancient to the modern world.

Of course, once the foundational status of ethical values is brought into question, as it has over the last one hundred and fifty years, the very project of ethics is itself altered. Yet while this process now has considerable historical reach – embracing Nietzsche’s nihilism, being one of the defining characteristics of Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology, and being central to Derridian deconstruction – the full realisation of the consequences of such critical thinking has still not arrived. This limitation is certainly the case in the way ethics is evoked by most of the discourses (like design) that attempt to mobilise it.

Even from this partial and impressionistic account of ethics, it is possible to recognise a passage to, and continuum of, much early thought on ethics. In this respect, and in relation to philosophy in general, ‘the modern mind’ is a historically inflected form(ation). Yet it is also true, as remarked, that what has constituted and extended ‘the modern’ has itself radically altered modes of thought. So while contemporary thinkers continue to inherit unresolved problems associated with the very formation of ethics, they also acquire the substantial problems created in the making of the modern world. Clearly some of these are historically unresolved problems.

Design, or any other professional practice, cannot engage and establish a viable ethical platform to guide action without being caught up in thinking ethics as a corpus of knowledge and in the emergent circumstances. Current challenges totally overwhelm the efficacy of professional codes of conduct. With the escalation of

the powers to materially transform and erase worlds by military intent, bio-chemical intervention, the impact of industrial processes and by design, ethics has to claim its place on the line. It is positioned at the division between creation and destruction. Yet ethics is continually being displaced or ignored by instrumental and economic decisions. All this is to say that it is more important to remake and employ ethics than ever before. It has to be dragged out of the academy and rescued from its debased 'applied' forms. It has to be divorced from a subordinate relationship (professional practice *and* ethics) and (re)made as integral to the practice.

### **Coming at Design, Culture and Ethics**

Notwithstanding the unresolved and philosophical problems design has when it calls-up ethics, there is another and equally fundamental problem that design (in all of its various functional-aesthetic cultures) has when it appeals to the ethical. This is that the cultures of design lack the conceptual tools to think ethics – design philosophy has yet to even arrive at its infancy – which is why ethics ever remains a stranded debate and almost totally without the transformative agency it needs to have if design is to ethically progress. For design to make the choice to 'think ethics' it first has to learn how to make the decision and enact the thinking, while also being prepared to confront design's implication in the unethical – a recognition that a new thinking is likely to expose.

One has to face the actuality that many designers, including 'visionary designers' and much of what has been designed by designers in general, is deeply implicated in the negation of futures.

Design, as I have argued elsewhere, has been an unwitting agent of defuturing. It is obviously impossible for designers to be that one class of beings able to see into the future and view the consequences of their actions before they occur, and so be able to modify them for 'the good'. What designers can do though is to set-out to think, model and project *the designing consequences* of what they design. In so doing they need to ask and extrapolate: "what will that which I design be likely to bring into being, and with what likely results?" Trying to answer this kind of question is one of the crucial tasks in creating the possibility of a *thinking design ethics*. Striving to be ethical does not of course guarantee the realisation of an ethics, but this is all we can do.

Now an even larger problem looms.

As indicated, as worlds change, so to does the ground of ethics; correspondingly, the language of ethics cannot escape historical relativism. Certainly, one cannot simply pick-up and occupy 'the Good' as envisaged within Plato's cosmology, or the 'common good' as thought by Comte, Marx or Bentham (for example, the Utilitarian dictum, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' could now be taken as the slogan of the entertainment industry).

Likewise what 'pleasure' connotes has not travelled through time unaltered. Sin as viewed by Aquinas obviously does not sit well with the 'attainments of moderns' in spheres of inhumanity after Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda and the Balkans.

Unquestionably, past thinkers have provided us with much of value. But we fail them and ourselves if we do not open ourselves to what their thinking discloses. An 'ethics of now' crucially needs to confront our anthropocentric being as a *structurally unethical condition*. The implication is that ethics now does not imply overcoming what we essentially are, but taking responsibility for it. In this setting, 'unsustainability' does not name objective or biophysical phenomena (which is not to say that there are no manifest forms) but the consequences of a failure to take responsibility for what we are and how we act. This is not something new – 'we' have always been unsustainable. Our 'human nature' as creative creatures of destruction alienates us from the worlds within which we dwell. What is new is the amplification of our only partially controlled powers of creation and destruction combined with an increase in our critical mass. The growing size of the human population is actually far less a problem than its impact via the unguided multipliers of science and the technological.

For design to be what it needs to be – an expression and product of the acceptance of responsibility for what 'we' are, within this one plural field of endeavour – it has to contribute to creating the means by which 'we' can become otherwise (a condition that we have coined and presented as 'the Sustainment'). This remaking bonds design to the service of creating affirmative futures. This is not a leap into an entirely new and idealised 'world-of-action'. Rather, remade design 'on-the-ethical-line' simply takes what is already ethically 'good' in design (that which sustains<sup>2</sup>) and builds with and on it, while finding ways to destroy what is not. So while it is true that a great deal of designing defutures, it is also true that, in contradiction and very inadequately, it sometimes positively futures. Designers and design processes can, and sometimes do, bring 'things' into being that contribute to 'being in a time to come'. This happens when an appropriate trace of the 'common good' is brought into 'service', but is not however mobilised in the project of remaking for futures (unless the service relation is broken and a position of leadership is established). Neither can the 'common good' be mobilised in the disengaged activity of thinking ethics, rather it can only result if the project of ethics is ruptured from the philosophical tradition of ethical thought and made integral to design as 'designing ethically' by the designer becoming a remade ethicist. For this to happen the consequences of unsustainability have to be continually exposed, questioned and learnt. This knowledge can inform the foundation of design as a 'redirective practice' – a practice as much concerned with destruction as with creation.

In summary: the imperative of ethical design is to know what to create (as means to sustain futures wherein the responsibility for being anthropocentric is accepted as the basis of being another way) and knowing what to destroy.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to propose ethical design. Delivering it is another matter. There are four major obstructions that block design's ability to embrace itself as an ethical project:

- 1) Design's general subordination to uncritically serving the 'restrictive economy' of the unsustainable;
- 2) A deficiency of cultural capital within design education and practice that could provide the means to think and become otherwise;
- 3) The insularity of design professions;
- 4) Design's romantic attachment to 'the creative subject'.

Each of the obstacles begs comment.

1. *Design's general subordination to uncritically serving the 'restrictive economy'* (The restrictive economy is used here to name capitalism as that mode of exchange that does not accept responsibility for its negative consequences upon the relations within and between psychic, socio-political, cultural, bio-physical and techno-material domains). This dominant condition of design(ing) is one in which the operative character and economic functions of design have been formed by productivism.

2. *Design's inadequate cultural capital* means that the implications of the profession's bondage to the 'restrictive economy' are not recognised, in particular as evidenced in:

- a dialectical blindness in which the productivist drive to create fails to know what is destroyed and at what futuring cost;
- an instrumental appropriation without concern for what is taken, what is transformed by such action; and what obligations are created (then ignored); and,
- a theoretical and historical poverty (design professions lack, by varying degrees, a theoretical grasp of the worlds in which they operate, the agency of design in these world and their problems. The general theoretical preoccupation with 'design process' and 'how designers think' does not go to these crucial issues. Likewise, and again by varying degrees, designers lack of a historical sensibility (including a sense of the history of design beyond its canonised objects) equates to a lack of orientation to what design is and what it does.

These lacks are apparent in a number of contexts: the general failing of a great deal of design education; a lack of curiosity within the formed ontology of designers; the displacement of

critical inquiry by scientism; the negation of thought to technology/ technological rationalism; the elevation of the designer ego and its aesthetic expression. Creating and embracing a new thinking embedded in a new practice is only way to redress these problems.

3. *Design's professional insularity* mirrors the general propensity of professions to form cultures of closure (which commenced with guilds and was reinforced by the divisions of labour created by capitalism and later, by modern professionalism). To claim authority and maintain exchange value is, in the instance of design, reified as professional expertise, coded (by the profession's language) and made esoteric (often via the undeclared foundations of aesthetic judgement). Unless the conversation on design can be extended beyond the design professions, design (thinking, practice and product) will be increasingly restricted and be lacking a future that is able to future.
4. *A romantic attachment to 'the creative subject'* is merely one expression of design as egoistic. This subject withers before the 'higher calling' of a stronger desire.

### **The Sustainment, Futures with a Future, Demand for a New and Materialised Ethical Foundation**

The Sustainment names an imperative, and potential foundation, that from 'the margins' can articulate the remaking of design in another mould – to serve the pursuit of an ethical end (and thus a future with a significant degree of assured and enacted responsibility). The design profession is yet to realise that to maintain an uncritical and subordinate relation to the 'restrictive economy' is to support the psycho-material structures of unsustainability.

The idea of 'the sustainment' has been put forward as the naming of a possible new era of being to be made. As such it has been signalled as potentially as (or more) significant than the Enlightenment (a conscious project) and the Renaissance (a project of retrospective classification). The fundamental premise is that there is a pressing need to enact a responsibility of 'our' being anthropocentric by confronting and then dealing with the worlds that the efforts to 'be modern' has brought into being. Such a proposal cannot but be indiscrete, immodest and appear to verge on the impossible. Yet once embraced there is no choice but to clarify, elaborate and work for its realisation. It is not to be grasped simply as an ethics project, but rather an ethics in itself.

One of the fundamental consequences emanating from 'modernity' (as 'being modern') has been its created (con)fusion between 'the-being-of-the-world,' 'being-in-the-world', and 'world-making' – design philosophy is just starting to illuminate this enormous complexity. This undertaking is most simply expressed in a general statement of qualification of ontological design. It

can be basically understood as – ‘the things of the world that designers design, as they themselves contribute to the designing of modes of beings in that world, and of the changing character of worlds themselves’. These are relations in flux; they are dynamic, circular and excessive. That the designing agents of change are continually changed by the agency of the designed also begs emphasis. What is being described cannot be comprehended as a simple determinism; rather one needs to see it as a complex field of relational causality creating many connections that are not easily discerned by most received modes of inquiry. Once one commences to see, hear, touch, and so think ‘designing-worlds’, one is immediately struck by the level of unaccountability of anthropocentric being – ‘we’ have little sense of what ‘we’ create or destroy. So powerful is the blinding force of unthinking and so packaged (by design) are the phenomenal forms of everyday encounters that the familiar has become a primary locus of concealment.

These are obviously not a new insights. What is new though is the slow emergence of a relationally focussed deconstructive practice able to expose the unaccountability of the ontologically designed/designing world-making that hides in the familiar and is its substrate. This practice does not presume foundations, rather it follows connections.

It is now possible to rejoin the discussion of ethics in recognition of the reconfigured space of being-in-the-world as being-with-design as design has negated futures that could have served the ability to sustain.

The historicity of this situation has profoundly shifted the normative references of ethics. Ethics is so entrenched in the past and institutionalised academicism, so strongly attached to the textual corpus and to textuality itself (as its operative field), that it now stands limp before the contemporary forces of its negation. Ethics has to move. It has to bridge the schism between: a contemporary anthropocentric disposition towards instant gratification, social and material expediency, together with the privileging of the realisation of designed desires; *and*, the giving of due consideration to the defuturing consequences of succumbing to these dispositions (as they continually widen within and between people and populations).

In taking an ethical stand one is faced with the problem that there is so little ethical thought available now that is taken seriously outside of the back-lots of theology and philosophy.

Clearly, the dominant categories of the language of western ethics (the good, bad, evil, happiness, suffering, pleasure etc) and ways of thinking them are not simply going to evaporate – they hold the stage. Even in their antique state, or as defining elements in the rhetoric of philosophical avante gardism, their power over the form, content and context of thinking ethics obstructs

the arrival of another order of ethics (the remade old conjoined with the new). There are few viable ethical reference points, be they lodged in philosophy or theology, to which one can turn in the 'face' of the unsustainable so that it can be confronted with argument with force. The old order appears as the voice of hollows gestures, or as the source of instrumentalised moral conduct produced to keep the agents of the state, members of civil society and capitalists on the right side of the(ir) law. With this latter relation to ethics, professional behavioural conduct is in no way connected to the production of ontological change. It is not ethical, if we take ethics to be a means toward and a way of being that challenges 'the return of the same'. Conversely, philosophical avant-gardism turns ethics in on itself and buries it deep in the recesses of academic philosophy. Modifying Heidegger's dictum on philosophy – 'it is not what you do with ethics, rather it is what ethics does with you'.

The imperative of 'the Sustainment' has to be voiced irrespective of cost or the inadequacy of its articulation to date. 'The Sustainment' strives to name a futuring orientated toward 'being here' affirmatively. The proto-culture of the Sustainment has to be able to 'ethically' select from what is already filling the future; it has to eliminate or conserve. But it also has to construct content and relations according to this imperative. This proto project of the Sustainment cannot just evoke 'the good', rather the good has to be remade if a world of worlding 'good' material and immaterial things is to come to be. Likewise 'the bad' cannot be left to science or morality to define; neither can it be reduced to ethnocentric decision, nor to the existing geography of ethical placement (unless it marks a place wherein destruction is undertaken so that the potentiality of being(s) can continue to be).

Equally, 'evil' and 'the sacred' have to be wrested from the theological and psychological, while pleasure has to be rescued from entertainment, as entertainment increasingly colonises spaces of imagination and emotion. It is against this background that ethics can reconcile and combine two seemingly impossible propositions: dwelling in ways that 'future' *while* overcoming that which defutures. It follows that dwelling in proximity to 'the Sustainment' would be an existence based on working to concretely realise desires for 'a common good' with an understanding of the common in an extended regime of exchange.

The metaphysics of sustainment is thus proposed as a knowledge of imperatives, which themselves change as Being and beings change. It is thus contingent rather than foundational – there can be no fixed nature as a reference point, nor any certainty about what the imperatives of the future will be. It could not presume that certain peoples or individuals are chosen, but conversely may presume that 'the Sustainment' cannot be without justice (this again is another figure ripe for remaking).

Designers could not become a new breed of philosophers, but they could become key ethical agents in shifting the emphasis from the will-to-change (a position that only the few ever embraced) to an ontologically implicit willing of futures in the very fabric of designed and constructed existence. Ethics so posed ceases to be of mind and philosophy and becomes the animatory matter of worlds that carries our being into the being of futures.

Thinking, talking, planning, acting – it is all there to do.

### Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche *On the Genealogy of Moral* (trans, Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale) *Ecce Homo* (trans, Walter Kaufmann) New York: Vantage/Random House, 1969.
2. (ed – Further discussion of ‘that which sustains’ can be found in Tony Fry’s ‘Voice of Sustainment’ articles: ‘The Voice of Sustainment: An Introduction’ *DPP* 1/2003, ‘Elimination by Design’ *DPP* 4/2003, ‘An Other Economy’ *DPP* 6/2003, ‘Dialectic of Sustainment’ *DPP* 5/2003 and in ‘The Sustainment and its Dialectic’ *Design Philosophy Papers Collection One* Team D/E/S Publications, 2004).
3. See Tony Fry ‘Dialectic of Sustainment’ *DPP* 5/2003.