



Design Ethics

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EDITORIAL

Design Ethics

Anne-Marie Willis

Welcome to this latest issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* on the subject of design ethics.

We have made some changes to the Editorial Advisory Board, and are very pleased to welcome Don Ihde, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, State University of New York at Stony Brook. Don Ihde is one of the founding figures of the philosophy of technology and author of many important books on the subject. Cameron Tonkinwise (formerly a Corresponding Editor) has also joined the Editorial Advisory Board.

If you are a subscriber you will have received by now *DPP Collection One*, (print and CD). The print collection contains a selection of the best papers published in the online issues 1–6. It forms a worthwhile permanent record of DPP's concerns, addressing issues that will become increasingly important, such as design's relation to technology, sustainability, aesthetics and the political. If you are not a subscriber, you can still purchase *DPP Collection One* separately. Find out more about it here.

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1. The major benefit of becoming a subscriber is being issued with a password to access back issues online. This becomes increasingly worthwhile as the number of papers published accumulates, especially as many of them reference each other.

In the previous issue of DPP, which dealt with ‘user-centred design’, we asked “should researchers and designers really be trying to probe the psycho-social in order to unearth, and then serve, inauthentic desires? Or is the more urgent task that of designing towards the construction of subject positions that incline towards sustainment? This is the kind of question that is inseparable from design ethics.”

We need to step back and consider several things: *ethics* as it’s currently understood; *design ethics* as it’s currently understood; ethics as it has come to us through *philosophy*; and what an *expanded ethical field* might be in the context of the pervasiveness of design. The papers here by **Sean Donahue, Carla Cipolla, Jack Elliott, Cameron Tonkinwise** and **Tony Fry** (in his ‘Voice of Sustainment’) open up all these areas to explore. I provide a few introductory thoughts and make some connections between the papers.

What usually comes to mind when the term ethics is invoked, are questions of individual behaviour or professional conduct. While *ethics*, as a formal idea, may have come down to us via the early Greeks, clearly all cultures have an *ethos* that is inscribed in social institutions and expressed in how people relate to each other.

The ethical is not just about immediate relations between people, nor even, in the contemporary world, about social relations expanded beyond the face-to-face into the realm of the anonymous sociality of the institutions of business, government and other large organisations. As well, it is far more pervasively and invisibly inscribed into the design and designed operation of our entire techno-material-symbolic cultures. To take one example, almost everything we ingest or use on an everyday basis, we do so on the basis of an enormous amount of trust that we will not be harmed – a trust which is sometimes broken. The State as well as the agents of the restricted economy¹ – engineers, architects, product designers, manufacturers of all kinds, the food and pharmaceutical industries in particular (to name just a few groups) are only too aware of this and have developed a plethora of instruments from laws to product standards, safety procedures, health warnings, labelling, professional codes of conduct and the like – to minimise risk of harm and exposure to exploitation. Base-level ethics are therefore threaded and woven through the operation of our material and semiotic environments in ways so labyrinthine as to be, for most of the time, not even noticed. In the public domain ‘the ethical’ is also obscured because ethical conduct has become instrumentalised through the pseudo-science of risk management and the legalism of

professional indemnification, to say nothing of the fear of litigation and vast insurance payouts.

The interwoven layers of responsibility for providing a system of exchange based on known parameters (such as ‘fair trading’ or ‘truth in advertising’) as well as minimal levels of safety and wellbeing, in some ways shift ethical behaviour and ‘duty of care’ from the realm of individual behaviour into the operation of systems. Compliance becomes the norm, rendering individual ethical action superfluous. Yet erroneously, public discourse, often in the form of outbursts of moral outrage, tends to focus on the behaviour of individuals while being almost totally silent on the adequacy or not of invisible systemic ethical parameters.²

Ways in which ethics is considered in relation to design also tend to focus upon individual responsibility, with very little consideration about the conditions in which design operates. This is underscored by the characterisation of design as a service profession. In fact, the idea of service has been elevated virtually to a design ethos by Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman (in their book *The Design Way*, reviewed in the last issue of *DPP*).

There is an ethical abyss at the heart of many of the advocated approaches to design. For example, as previously noted, at its worst, ‘user-centred design’ (and the research that supports it) seeks to validate and reinforce user habits, inclinations, attachments or desires without concern for relational consequences. What is the reason for this? Is it that a literalist, forensic mindset screens out the connections between individual(ised) acts of product purchasing/use and broadscale biophysical, social or cultural destruction? Perhaps a misplaced sense of symmetry abhors such a collision between the minute and the massive? Or are there other, more fundamental reasons for this gap between knowing and doing, as **Cameron Tonkinwise** argues in his paper, ‘Ethics by Design’.

The papers in this issue of *DPP* explore different facets of the complexity of design’s relation to the ethical. Even where individual action is the focus, this is sought to be located in a wider frame, actually and potentially exposing ethical dimensions to what at first might appear as ordinary situations or routine design commissions.

Sean Donahue’s paper goes beyond the restricted domain of the client-designer relationship, introducing invisible others into the ethical equation. He gives an account of a project in which students of graphic design were prompted to consider the question of representing place beyond geography and stock imagery, via a structured encounter with a particular person from a particular place. Because a place is always socially constructed across large and small gradations of difference, there is always something at stake in attempting to sum it up in an image. The ethical dimension implied is a disposition of open-ness to the unexpected, to the

totally unknown (yet ultimately unknowable) lifeworld of an other person.

By co-occurrence **Carla Cipolla's** paper extends this idea of ethical responsibility in the context of the unknowable,³ opening the door to its philosophical basis in the work of existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber. For Buber, there are only two possible kinds of encounters, (i) that of 'I-Thou' which is a direct, face-to-face relation not based on certainties or pre-conceptions and which opens the possibility of dialogue; and (ii) 'I-it' in which that which is encountered has already been prefigured by pre-conceptions, categorisations, and frequently, an instrumental disposition.

These two poles, which while very different, are not fixed and can slip from one to another. Carla Cipolla takes them up to consider the differences between tourism (based primarily on the notion of an experience) and hospitality (which is fundamentally a relation). The ethical implications are significant, revealing tourism as a discourse that prompts situations in which people, as others, are encountered as 'it'. Whether it is possible for designers within or serving the tourism industry to design against this, remains an open question. Certainly the nature of tourism (including its supposedly enlightened forms like eco-tourism and cultural tourism) needs further theoretical exploration, which is to ask questions like: 'What is the essence of tourism?' Is objectification and distancing at its core? Are all of its managed involvements, quests for authenticity and meaningfulness not flawed because they are blind to the fundamental fact of the disengaged nature of the activity (i.e. the tourist's 'real life' is always elsewhere in a different time and place)?

There are further difficulties in considering 'design ethics'. One is the legacy of unresolved issues within philosophical ethics, many of these having been passed down through several centuries of philosophical thought. **Tony Fry's** paper indicates the difficulties of thinking ethics now, given the long historical accumulation and transformations, both minor and major, of the grounds upon which ideas of ethics have stood – ideas such as goodness, the good life, the common good, happiness – which often underpin the way in which that which is designed is projected towards us today.

Another difficulty arises from the expanded ethical domain. Once limited to relations between people, the idea of ethics has now been extended to other living entities – animals, trees, in fact the whole biophysical environment, as in the field of environmental ethics (which forms the backdrop for the arguments put forward by **Jack Elliott**). This expansion of the ethical domain, while it seeks to grant 'rights' to non-humans' often fails to see the basic anthropocentrism (and frequent anthropomorphism) of overlaying a human model of rights onto the non-human, wanting even to argue for intrinsic value or natural rights. While

able to be contested philosophically, this kind of environmental ethics (while not necessarily theorised as such) has been quite influential – think of the ‘personality endangered species’ that have been mobilised in conservation campaigns and sometimes been the reason a particular patch of forest, grassland or coast has been spared from economic exploitation. Seeking to save some cute and cuddly species is hardly an ethical motivation. Nor is taking action because this species/patch of forest/etc may one day provide the cure for cancer (that’s just instrumental, naked anthropocentrism). Taking actions informed by an understanding of, and taking responsibility for, the destructive implications of human beings’ lethal combination of selfish animality with environmentally transformative technological capability, is an ethical pathway.⁴ Tony Fry’s paper advocates ‘taking responsibility for our anthropocentrism’ rather than believing we can transcend it via the misdirected dream of mystical union with ‘nature’.

While anthropocentrism as a structural feature of being human is recognised by very few thinkers (let alone by designers, decision-makers or the wider public), there is a much more widespread understanding that human actions have, and continue to be, cumulatively environmentally destructive. But it is precisely here that two of the contributors identify a serious problem. **Jack Elliott** calls it ‘informed negligence’, that is, people knowing that their actions have environmentally detrimental consequences, but continuing to behave in the same way. **Cameron Tonkinwise** identifies this troubling characteristic of contemporary privileged society⁵ in terms of Aristotle’s notion of *akrasia*: knowing the right thing to do and yet not doing it. Jack Elliott provides several explanations for the condition of informed negligence, but also recognises that it is a product of design, inasmuch as the technologies and designed environments that dominate our everyday lives cut us off from encounter with ‘the natural environment’, except of course for those stage-managed encounters, like tourism, that Carla Cipolla discusses.

For both Cameron Tonkinwise and Jack Elliott, design provides a way out of this condition of *akrasia*. But it is here that their convergence ends. Jack Elliott puts his faith in an aesthetics of empathy and “a new ethical sensitivity, an expanded sympathy to things non-human”. Cameron Tonkinwise explores design as ethics materialised and active-in-the-world via a consideration of writings by Bruno Latour on ‘rude doors’, Elaine Scarry on disburdenment and Japp Jelsma on scripting sustainable behaviour via designed things.

This links to Tony Fry’s elaboration of the ethical in relation to ontological designing or ‘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’.

For an increasing number of those who are thinking about it, design is coming to be seen as a previously unrecognised site for the inscription and enactment of ethics.

Anne-Marie Willis

Notes

1. For an elaboration of the concept of the restricted economy, see Tony Fry, 'An Other Economy' *Design Philosophy Papers* 6/2003–04.
2. For example, the response to the recent exposure of widespread sexual abuse in the Christian churches, has been to set up 'ethics committees' and procedures for dealing with accusations on a case-by-case basis, rather than examining and seeking to dismantle the structurally unethical basis of a good deal of christian doctrine and its institutional forms.
3. One is perhaps reminded here of Wolfgang Jonas's characterisation of design as a '*practice of not-knowing*' and his advocacy that "it may be important to know more about not-knowing". See 'Design, Time and Not Knowing' *Design Philosophy Papers* 5/2003. It could be added that one of the ways of doing this (not pursued by Jonas) is to explore 'not knowing' philosophically. Martin Buber's work is a good place to start.
4. On 'selfish animality': this term is not used in a derogatory way, but rather to assert that a significant component of 'human nature' is in fact 'animal'. One way of trying to think against anthropocentrism, or less ambitiously, to counter anthropomorphism, is to invert that common reaction on observing animals and exclaiming "how like us they are!" and think instead "how like them we are".
5. This is my modification – it's only the privileged who have choices.