Not Good Enough? A Response to Wolfgang Jonas: A Special Moral Code for Design?

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In a recent paper (A Special Moral Code for Design? Or, Aristotle Will Do *Design Philosophy Papers* no 2, 2006), Wolfgang Jonas proposes an endeavour in moral philosophy aiming at reaffirming the actuality of Aristotle's ethic for the design field. In fact, since the early 1990s,[1] it seems that design thinkers, not to mention practitioners, have had some difficulties integrating in their work the idea that the act of design is essentially an engagement based on values and beliefs. I would like to add some comments to Jonas' argument which, albeit pointing to questions of central importance for designers, fail to account for the roles of common good and dilemmas in the dynamics that govern the moral engagement of professional agents. Consequently, and despite his warnings, Jonas article tends to present ethics as a technique leading to unproblematic goodness of actions.

There are no ethical principles, not even Aristotle's, which can give unquestionable answers to the specific

problems of common life and professional action. As Jonas mentions himself, answers lie in the persons themselves and depend on their own propensity for virtue; ethics contributing only in setting the table and offering a framework for an enlightened deliberation. Nonetheless, leaving aside, as he does, the analysis of whatever supports the reaching of an agreement concerning what to do when people are confronted with dilemmas and discordances, Jonas cannot avoid suggesting that there may be something absolutely good in a decision founded on a sound ethical deliberation.

Another point I would like to emphasise is the role of education in the ethical engagement of practitioners.

Although Jonas did underline that virtue emerges from the repeated use of our ability to reason,[2] in my view he did not tackle satisfactorily the question of how to prepare people to act in a desirable manner. This is of prime importance in a field such as design where no rules, codes or oaths exist to guide its professional members from erring from common good. In my view, those two critical points are largely due to the incomplete and imprecise definition that Jonas gives to the role of ethics.

What Is the Use for Ethics?

First of all, to present ethics as a mean to discriminate the good from the evil is misleading. The need for ethics identified by Jonas is a need for a deliberation necessary to settle dilemmas where the objects of confrontation are not good and bad but different legitimate alternatives. The difficulty of a decision comes from the existence and confrontation of many acceptable arguments people have to choose from to guide their act. It is in this way that the necessity of a moral deliberation and the usefulness of ethics arise.

Let me give an example. Yesterday, I did not respect the last stop sign on my way home. Would you blame me for this transgression? You could legitimately argue that my behaviour was legally wrong and very risky. But I would explain that it was late in the evening, and, as usual, no one was in sight in my very quiet neighbourhood and I wanted to hug my three year old son before he went to sleep. So, now knowing my motivation for running the stop sign, you might consider my reasons as legitimate as well and be compelled to compare the appropriateness or, more precisely, the adequacy of my conduct in the light of my depiction of the situation. However you would qualify my behaviour after having evaluated both sets of arguments, we see on what conditions hinges the necessity to compare competing arguments all deemed legitimate and from where emerges the difficulty of the deliberation.

The Sociology of Dilemmas and Judgement

It would be wrong however, to think of deliberation as a simple matter of rhetoric; that the adequacy and desirability of someone's

acts only spring from someone's ability to convincingly present his case. I will state two supporting reasons for this.

First, arguments can fall short of offering an eligible justification of conduct. Such illegitimate arguments cannot be counted as a cause of dilemmas and a motive for ethical deliberation. If someone participating in a dispute presents illegitimate arguments, chances are he won't even be understood. This would have been the case, if, to justify my driving last night, I told you that my being a full time lecturer at the university demands respect and that people should stop whenever they cross my path.[3] Here the judgement of my conduct does not present any difficulty.

Second, to get people to agree on something, such as the value of someone's behaviour or the one best way to answer a problem, you have to involve intersubjective dynamics that allow everyone to grasp the situation through the same frame of reference and evaluate issues in compatible ways. Consequently, legitimacy and conviction depend largely on the social nature of the situation from which dilemmas arise and solutions are developed. Conducts cannot be judged on the sole value of an argument detached from a situation it can refer to, giving it its strength.[4] Indeed, moral philosophy and sociology tell us to depart from the idea that a decision or an action can be absolutely or objectively good. This endorses a plea, that Jonas' text implies, for recourse to casuistry in all design matters.[5] Jonas is right when he stresses that morality is a requirement that actors have to meet; it is the requirement that arises from the very collective nature of the situation in which dilemmas occur. It is only in close relation to a depicted situation that arguments can be evaluated and decision can be judged. The rightness of a conduct is modulated by the stakes and the beings engaged in the situation.

Here I would like to introduce some precisions. Despite the social nature of the dynamics determining problematic situations, it would be incorrect to think struggles for conviction only appear in affairs that have gone public. One always faces the compulsion to "do the right thing", even in private day to day activities. We are continually confronted with requirements such as: to turn off our cell phone ringer when attending a conference; to sort the recyclable matter from our trash; to hold a door open for someone behind, and so on. The conviction to act accordingly arises from the fact that there exists a slight chance that a situation appears where we may have to justify our behaviour and if incapable of doing so, our inadequacies become apparent to others and, first and foremost, to ourselves.

Virtue and Common Goods

Once the table is set for an enlightened deliberation, the problematic situation being well defined and the arguments being prepared for confrontation, we still have to examine what

determines the nature of the effective engagement of actors. People confronted with a seemingly unsolvable dilemma have, at one point, to engage themselves. This is of central importance for any project that seeks to integrate moral deliberation in the design process. We have to understand how practitioners can select a path bearing in mind that deliberation itself does not guarantee the value of the chosen path. It is through this engagement that professional designers show their character. It is at that point that virtue should manifest itself and that virtue can be acknowledged by the fact that a decision or a conduct contributes to a common good. Wouldn't it be simpler to just be aware of the nature of common good and then act upon it? This would be simpler, yet useless, since common good comes in a variety of evolving disguises; so ethical deliberation would still leave us in front of an unanswered question.

According to Aquinas' works, which remained deeply influenced by Aristotle[6], virtue has to be considered as a potentiality lying inside people. As such, he stresses the need for education to fully actualise this capacity. This fundamental, anthropological common capacity for goodness – common humanity as French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot might put it – has been historically shaped into distinct and somehow competing conceptions of the good. Boltanski's and Thévenot's empirical studies[7] have shown that the settlement of discordances and disputes takes the shape of six moral stances that emerged through history. These six types of goods[8] now give the key to agents engaging in worldly activities. French sociology, notably through the pragmatic movement that follows the path opened by Boltanski's and Thévenot's work, has been since continually investigating the modalities through which these goods gained historical robustness.[9] What those studies have showed is that more than verbal rhetoric, common good seems to rely on a sort of grammar and a socially shared competency to use this grammar. To summarise, this grammar presents itself as a common mean to refer to situations. As I mentioned earlier, to prove one's good will or the rightness of an argument, one does have to succeed in presenting his case in a way that others can acknowledge. To succeed in doing so, people have to deal with the situation they are engaged in, in compatible ways, stressing the same issues – in my earlier example, the issue might be the importance of filial tenderness or the respect of normal uses – and giving importance to comparable beings – father and son, or driver and pedestrian, or lecturer and lay-person; familiar neighbourhoods or standardised infrastructure, etc. It is only at this expense that disputes can be tamed as people can adopt a common stance revealing a collectively accepted effective conception of the common good.

As such, designers can "do the right thing" in their professional practice in a lot of ways. Considering that, ethical deliberation does

not serve to "classify actions and attitudes into good or bad", as Jonas puts it[10] but help us select among the many goods we can aim at in our worldly actions.

The Rise of Moral Requirements

After offering his definition of morality, Jonas goes on trying to recall the origin of today's wide usage of applied ethic in many professional fields. His main hypothesis points toward the state of our environment which forces designers to re-examine their role in their community. He explains how ecological problems weigh heavily on the quality of the world we live in but denies good ecological thinking the capacity to help us build a more satisfactory world. I do not want to criticise this last argument which is coherent with the definition I just proposed of ethical deliberation and the conditions of its deployment. In fact, it is not surprising that ecology cannot be considered as a useful ethical principle. Studies have shown that ecology is itself becoming a common good[11] and, as such, an increasingly robust support for the effectiveness of one's particular way to justify one's decisions and actions. In that sense, it is impossible to depart competing arguments stemming from different conceptions of the good on the sole basis of ecology.

What I cannot concede though, is the link Jonas draws between the growing interest of scholars and professionals in ethical matters and the so called growth of a social awareness for ecological problems.[12] Even if data seems to offer some basis for such an assertion[13] to say that it gives rise to a public deception and criticism pointing explicitly toward the responsibility of the designers is a very questionable affirmation. The criticism revealed to designers by ecological problems is more of an auto-critique which, along with the anti-consumerism trend, casts a very crude light on their methodological frame work and deontological perspective. Such auto-critique engages them in untangling the paradox on which their practice seems to lie, answering this simple question: "how can I continue defining my profession as a part of the industrial system whose goal is to supply consumers with objects of all sorts when I know too well that this is one of the main factors of the catastrophic ecological problems we are facing today?" One does not have to be publicly charged to act upon this situation. A reasonable practitioner, a reflexive one as Donald Schön might put it[14], is bound to tackle this problem altogether and to reflect on what it reveals of his deontology and his methods. As such, ecological problems act only as whistle blowers of a more essential problem founded in the epistemology and the methodology of design. Linking this reflexive imperative too exclusively to an empirical state of affairs, as Jonas does, would put the legitimacy of such effort at the mercy of any pretended or effective shift in this state of affairs or in the way we account for it.

In that sense, the rise of the question of ethics is more profoundly due to the fact that, through ecology and anti-consumerism, design scholars realise the moral rigidity of their engagement as they traditionally treated the users who might benefit from their act as individuals with preferences and needs, that can only be fulfilled through consuming. The problem here is not the fact that people buy too many things, but that designers seem to limit their field of expertise to objects that can be owned by individuals. To put it in more abstract terms, criticism addressed at the state of our equipped world reveals two problems to designers. First, the fact that they will stay poorly prepared to conduct an ethical deliberation as long as they refuse to challenge the utilitarian axioms that took the helm of design methods, notably after the closure of Ulm's *Hochschule für Gestaltung*. And secondly, the fact that they consequently lean blindly on rational thinking to support their decisions which prove insufficient to attain the reasonableness one could expect from an ethically governed behaviour.[15]

To Become Virtuous

The last point I would like to address briefly, concerns the way by which apprentice designers can gain virtue. What Jonas proposes is a set of guiding principles that designers could assimilate and interiorise to attain a virtuous character. I would doubt very much that a discursive learning of moral principles could guarantee virtue. Since virtue depends on one's ability to conduct a reasonable deliberation upon difficult dilemma, and since in design we know too well that there is no one situation alike and that abstract concepts and theories never seem to exhaust this variety, it seems plausible that virtue can only be developed through action. One needs to be confronted with dilemmas and to exercise judgement in front of a real doubt, or a pragmatic doubt as Hans Joas might put it[16], to test its propensity for virtue. In that sense, learning institutions are well suited to define pedagogical situations where apprentice designers would have to apply their judgement given that in this situation, students are well protected from any prejudice of an unjust decision on their part. At last, the methods of scenario could be effectively contribute here, if they explored the moral dimension. Competing scenarios could put forward the variety of goods that can be engaged in the act of design, leaning on their particular grammar. This means that the detection of a specific problematic situation should lead to different definitions of it. Each definition being consubstantial with a given moral stance, a way to express what is at stake, and moreover to evaluate the success, or the desirability of one's acts and decisions.

Conclusion

Jonas article does point to fundamental questions, revealing the fragility of the moral engagement of designers, which are backed

neither by an ethical code, or professional rules of any kind. In a sense, designers are left on their own in front of many difficult decisions. That is why it is of the utmost importance that tools for deliberation, aesthetic and ethic judgement be introduced into education programs. But to succeed in doing so, we must first be clear on every possible obstacle.

What might very well be at the core of the difficulty of ethics in design is the unexpressed utilitarian axiom that supports this discipline and Jonas does not succeed in debunking this self-evident truism. Designers are always eager to improve their next of kin's life. This leads them in a quest for the best identification possible of what their next of kin strives for in order to attain happiness. But to think that righteousness depends on the precision of this account seems pointless as this account can only be judged good and pertinent according to a given context. What Aristotle's and Aquinas' ethics imply though, is that the 'enlightened planning' that Jonas pleads for[17] is actually not a quest for the 'good life' of others, but the 'good life' of designers themselves.[18] Common good concerns responsibility and the aptitude to act righteously. So whenever designers reflect on how they will be able to ascertain that they did the right thing, they should not turn to the sole evaluation of the product of their act, but to the value of their acts in themselves.

Notes

1. When, in 1990 to 1992, the École de design industriel of the Université de Montréal organised a collective inquiry into ethic, techno-ethic and professional responsibility in design. This collective effort, animated by Alain Findeli, have taken the shape of four numbers of the now defunct revue Informel on the theme of 'Prométhée éclairé. Éthique, technique et responsabilité professionnelle en design', 3 (2), 4 (1–2) and 5 (1), published from 1990 through 1992. It culminated with the organisation of a symposium, also published in Findeli Alain (dir.), (1993) Prométhée éclair. Éthique, technique et responsabilité professionnelle en design, proceedings (Montréal, Canada, Université de Montréal, May 8th-11th, 1991), Montréal: Informel.
2. See part 5.1, § 1 of his article.
3. This was actually the case in XVIth to XVIIIth century Paris when right of way was due to every members of the court who were granted a privilege.
4. Stephen Toulmin has developed a similar argument in Toulmin Stephen (2001), Return to Reason, Cambridge/Londres: Harvard University Press.
5. See part 1, § 2.
6. My understanding of Aquina's and Aristotle's ethic relies heavily on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre who offers a very comprehensible explanation of both propositions. See

MacIntyre Alasdair, (1988) Who's Justice? Which Rationality?, Notre-Dame/London: University of Notre-Dame Press/ Duckworth.

7. Boltanski Luc and Laurent Thévenot, (2006) On Justification. Economies of Worth, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

8. The good of opinion, the good of inspiration, the domestic good, the market good, the civic good and the industrial good. In their later works, they have also stressed on the probable rise of two more types: the green good (see Lafaye Claudette and Laurent Thévenot, (1993) 'Une Justification écologique? Conflits dans l'aménagement de la nature', Revue française de sociologie, 34 (4), pp. 495–524, Thévenot Laurent, (2000) 'Which Road to Follow ? The Moral Complexity of an 'Equipped' Humanity', in Complexities in Science Technology and Medicine, John Law and Anne-Marie Mol (ed.), Duke: Duke University Press, 2000) and a projectual good (see Boltanski Luc and Eve Chiapello (1999) Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme, Paris: Gallimard, coll. NRF).

9. See for instance Heinich Nathalie, (2005) L'Élite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique, Paris: Gallimard, coll. NRF, or Dodier Nicolas, (1995) Les Hommes et les machines. La Conscience dans les sociétés technicisées, Paris: Métailié.

10. See part 1, §1.

11. See Lafaye Claudette and Laurent Thévenot, (1993), op. cit.

12. See part 2, § 9.

13. Data that is still scarce in North-America. When a country like Canada, through the voices of the majority of its representatives and so many of its citizen applaud at the recent and sudden enrichment of one of its regional constituencies whose economy is mainly based on the production of oil which market demand never seems to slow down, one may well wonder if the penetration of the ecological consciousness has been as profound as Jonas expects.

14. Schön Donald A., (1983) The Refective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action, New-York: Basic Books.

15. On the concept of reasonableness, see Toulmin Stephen, (2001) Return to Reason, Cambridge/Londres: Harvard University Press, p. 2, along with Jonsen Albert R. & Stephen Toulmin, (1988) The Abuse of Casuistry. A History of Moral Reasoning, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, prologue and chapter 1.

16. Joas Hans, (1993) Pragmatism and Social Theory, Chicago/ London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 60–61.

17. See part 6, § 3.

18. An alternative from this utilitarian standpoint is the communitarian one of which Charles Taylor make an excellent description in Taylor Charles, 1995) 'Irreducibly Social Goods', in Philosophical Arguments, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 127–145.