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To cite this article: Cameron Tonkinwise (2007) Philosophy Gets Real about Design: Review of Albert Borgmann's 'Real American Ethics', Design Philosophy Papers, 5:1, 21-28

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871307X13966292017117>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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REVIEW ESSAY

Philosophy Gets Real about Design

Review of Albert Borgmann's 'Real American Ethics'

Cameron Tonkinwise

This essay presents a review of Albert Borgmann's book *Real American Ethics* published by University of Chicago Press (2006, 245 pages).

Philosophers who use the word design, with reference to the human practice of making things (happen) as opposed to divine schemes (such talk is perhaps no longer philosophical) are few. The most notable contemporary exception is Albert Borgmann. It is frustrating that, despite having published summaries of his philosophies of technology in ways and places that should have attracted the attention of designers,¹ engagement with his work by design practitioners and researchers, is almost non-existent,² though discussions around 'slow design' are beginning to take up his ideas indirectly.³

What is most significant to my mind about Borgmann's use of the word 'design' is that it refers primarily not to the production-side but to the use-side of artefacts and built environments. The core of Borgmann's critique

of technology has been distinguishing, to some extent as a supplement to Heidegger, devices from things. Devices disburden and disperse their users whereas things enable and focus their users. Although it is at times ambiguous in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*,⁴ it seems that this distinction is not strictly one that can be applied to products themselves, as designed, but rather concerns products as used. Generally the more infrastructural or black-boxed a technology, the more likely it is to be something that we use without heeding; as opposed to things that demand that we, and others around us if the thing is used in their presence, engage with how it works, or rather, is worked.

However, as hackers of all sorts evidence, things designed to function in the background or hidden behind interfaces invariably can and do get opened up and reworked in ways that indicate how devices can be re-focused on in thingly ways. This means that the distinction is more about the tendencies associated with how products get used, in other words, the worlds and ways of being-in-those-worlds that those products design. Things design engagement with what and how they are, including all that, and who, is supporting, and benefiting from, them; whereas devices design disengagement from the how and who of all we depend on. In terms of Borgmann's critique, the evaluation to be made concerns the extent to which the design of a product, as evidenced by its wider context of use, designs focusing or defocusing life-worlds.

Because what is at issue is the nature of this second 'designs', that is to say, the extent to which the nature of an artefact determines its take-up and the wider and longer term consequences of that take-up, Borgmann is for me, not just a philosopher who uses the word design, but a philosopher of design, of just what the concept of design does, but also can and should, mean.

It was therefore exciting to see that one of the major contributions to the discourse of ethics that Borgmann claims for his new book *Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for our Country*⁵ is the introduction of the notion of design:

We have a term for the political virtue of caring for equality – it is justice; and there is a something of a term for the virtue of caring for the environment – it is stewardship. But what is the term for political rather than private economy... we have to conscript a term that is helpful but not perfect, and *design* has the right connotations. (10)

The work that Borgmann wants 'design' to do is precisely the wider sense of the life-worlds designs design. Throughout the book, Borgmann calls this sense of design the "Churchill principle", referring to Winston Churchill's speech promising to rebuild the Houses of Parliament in London after their WWII bombing: "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us."

The most glaring blank on the moral canvas however, is the unconcern with Churchill's principle. If we are unaware of how the shaping of our household typically shapes our practices, we can tell our children to do their homework, to stay away from soda pop and snacks, to talk to us, and to practice their instruments till we are blue in the face – it will only create frustration and resentment unless our home is so arranged that doing the right thing comes naturally or at least does not require heroic self-discipline. (10)

Here Borgmann is not only pointing out the absence of design in the discourse of ethics, but pointing to a major failing of ethics, its principled mentalism that always stumbles on implementation due to the material constraints of the world. This is what Borgmann means by the 'real' in the title of his book. He is looking for an ethics that is real about how it might be realised:

But there is this assumption in theoretical and practical ethics that life unfolds on an empty stage, or at least the belief that, when it comes to doing the right thing, the props on the stage of life don't matter much.

That was a reasonable assumption when the material culture changed slowly and its moral significance came to no more than being fair in distributing things and moderate in enjoying thing... But the Industrial Revolution changed the stage of life from the ground up, and now the technological devices that surround us channel the typical ways we behave. (11)

Unless ethics takes account of the designed and designing nature of the world, it will keep finding itself subject to what Stewart and Kasunic have identified as modern *akrasia*.⁶ Following their argument, without an adequate understanding of designed material culture from the perspective of philosophical ethics, 'real ethics' will remain the remit of, not philosophers, but the implicit project of designers, facilitating this action, inhibiting that, without sufficient self-critical awareness of their role as (devolved) moral agents. This is Borgmann's worry (inherited from Dewey): that technology, in providing a prevalent instance of (or substitute for) 'the good life', "shapes our society and propels it on its way", but in a way "that is as definite as it is invisible" (17). Unrecognised as a morality, technology becomes 'the silent majority.' For Borgmann, taking the measure of his homeland in contemporary United States,⁷ this leads to a fragile decency:⁸

American decency is distracted and indifferent. It has no vision and no voice. It is largely uninformed and unconcerned. There is no real conception of the good life that decent people

are willing to assert and support in political campaigns and elections. (16)

Nor is there a conception of the good life that decent people can even martial when talking to their designers.

Robert Kirkman has an exceptionally clear conception of design as a moral virtue: 'A particular way of building is good to the extent that it makes it easier for people to live well, to be good people, and to participate in community life; it is bad to the extent that it makes these things more difficult by harming individual well-being, fostering injustice, fragmenting communities, or undermining the conditions of its own continuation.' But he has also found that people are either outright hostile to the very idea or they use 'comfortably vague terms' such as 'green space', 'progress', 'family' and above all 'quality of life' to avoid an incisive conversation about design. When decisions have to be made, the narrowing of moral discourse we have observed before takes place, and a 'proxy battle' ensues. 'A proxy battle,' Kirkman explains, 'is a conflict over a concrete problem or decision that stands in the place of much broader debate over basic values.' (134–5)

Without the ability to articulate, at an individual or collective level, designs as ethical values realised – morality made durable as Latour would say⁹ – the decency that it is currently being obtained by the design of middle America for example, is at risk of displacement by extremists who are succeeding in articulating visions.

Borgmann's book is therefore a welcome rereading of a range of traditional approaches to ethics – Kantian duty, utilitarianism, evolutionary psychology (Dennett), Rawls' theory of justice, and virtue ethics – in a contemporary designed context. These accounts are clear, often with elegantly simple terminology that should enable designers at least to be more articulate about the traditions with which they are practicing. However, I did not feel that the book was as successful in introducing philosophers, nor perhaps any non-designers, to the ethical significance of design. And this is mostly because, despite having made such significant contributions to the philosophy of design, Borgmann, or those inspired by his work, still have much to clarify about design.

Too often in this book Borgmann has recourse to the Churchill principle without any substantial elaboration of the nature of the 'shaping' it invokes. To architects still running scared from modernism, the phrase calls up all the determinism of positivistically behavioural 'environment design research.' To the tenured radicals of cultural studies, materialist shaping is in principle impotent, forever open to the *detournement* of local tacticians, the real issue being power/knowledge.¹⁰ Jelsma via Latour and Akrich has started to

use the language of more or less open or closed scripts to explain the force of things.¹¹ Elsewhere, Borgmann has made some forays into these disputes about what ‘shaping entails’. In response to Verbeek’s critical review of his philosophy of technology as overly deterministic, Borgmann comments:

The problem lies in the slide [in a quote from Verbeek] from “*is* more engaging” to “*can* involve themselves intensely.” Yes, people can so involve themselves; it’s important to point that out. But do they? What’s the aggregate effect of all the devices at people’s disposal? This is an empirical rather than transcendental question. And if the answer is depressing, as it surely is in the United States at least, why is it so? Is it not possible that to capture this gross effect of technology we need to resort to something like Heidegger’s comprehensive characterization of technology?¹²

I think that this way of thinking about the Churchill design principle, as something like ‘*can* tends to lead to *will*’, is really important. It needs to be progressed through a de-biologising and re-socialising of Gibson’s notion of affordance,¹³ where things are interactionally and collaboratively perceived as not only promoting themselves for certain uses, but therein promoting certain uses. It is interesting that when Latour butts up against this he often calls up Francois Julien’s sinology, particularly his account of *The Propensity of Things*.¹⁴ These are the sorts of approaches I was hoping Borgmann was going to pursue in *Real American Ethics* but does not. He is instead content to remain at the level of what he calls in the quote from the Verbeek review, the ‘empirical’, observing where and when things correlate with, rather than cause, device-like relations to the world. Borgmann has in fact always insisted on conducting his philosophy on this level, the level of ‘character’ or ‘paradigm’ rather than ‘category’ or ‘essence’.¹⁵

However, after working through this book’s various observations, I started to worry about a possible contradiction in Borgmann’s design ethics. *Real American Ethics* often in the last chapters returns to the ideas of *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* around the commodification of technology. For Borgmann, technologies are commodities less in the Marxist sense of being divorced from the human conditions of their production, than in the etymological sense of becoming “commodious, that is, convenient and comfortable” (156), in other words, being divorced from the human conditions of their consumption, the physical and intellectual and social labour of using things in ways that brings out the best in us.

There is a danger that the response that seems most appropriate to this ‘moral commodification’ is the ‘hard life’ of America’s puritanical heritage, that one should respond to the dangers of disburdenment not with focusing but with reburdenment.

Borgmann is not just being realistic in not calling for this, but is in fact, as all the mentions of the Churchill principle throughout the book indicate, committed in principle to a ‘real ethics’, that is, an ethics that realises itself through design, that makes being good less hard to do: “The task is to turn [the Churchill] principle in favour of the good life and the good society. Unless we get to be schooled and practiced in realizing Churchill’s principle on behalf of moral excellence, this won’t happen” (162).

The task must therefore be something like: not making (things that make) ‘being good’ automatic or easy, which would be moral commodification; nor in demanding that being good entails standing unassisted against the device paradigm;¹⁶ but rather designing the things, and the use and engagement with things, that make it less difficult to take up what is less easy. There may be no contradiction between making things that guide people to use them in particular ways, and guiding people, through philosophy, and education more generally, to use things in ways other than how they have been made; and there may be no contradiction between making less difficult and not making too easy.¹⁷

If that is the case, then Borgmann’s *Real American Ethics* is an important facilitation of the difficult question of design ethics.

Notes

1. For example, ‘The Depth of Design’ in Margolin, V. & R. Buchanan eds *Discovering Design*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995; ‘The Moral Significance of the Material Culture’ in Feenberg, A. & A. Hannay eds *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, 1995; ‘Information and Reality at the Turn of the Century’ *Design Issues* Vol. 11 (1995); ‘Opaque and Articulate Design’ *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, Issue 11 (2001). A version of a chapter of *Real American Ethics* was originally published in *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection Two* Ravensbourne: D/E/S Publications, 2005. Recently, though 5 years after its publication, Linnda Caporael reviewed an edited collection dedicated to the work of Albert Borgmann (Eric Higgs, Andrew Light & David Strong eds *Technology and the Good Life?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) in *Design Issues* Vol. 21 No. 1 (Winter 2005).
2. I was interested to see that Dan Saffer, something of an Interaction Design celebrity at the moment, recently published on his blog a series of summaries of his reading of Peter-Paul Verbeek’s *What Things Do*, which has a chapter on Borgmann: www.odannyboy.com/blog/new_archives/2006/11/review_what_thi_5.html.
3. See the research and writings of Johan Redström, for example ‘From Use to Presence: On the Expression and Aesthetics of everyday Computational Things’ *ACM Transactions of Computer Human Interaction* Vol. 9 No. 2 (2002).

4. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
6. Susan Stewart & Jacqueline Kasunic 'Akrasia, Ethics and Design Education' *Design Philosophy Papers* Issue 4 (2006).
7. In many ways *Real American Ethics* reads like Borgmann's response to Putnam's very influential *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* New York: Simon and Shuster, 2000. Borgmann's book is in the recent tradition of left-wing philosophical defences of American patriotism, such as Stanley Cavell's *This New yet Unapproachable America* Albuquerque: Living Batch Books, 1994, and Richard Rorty's *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th Century America* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. For a version of this tradition that also invokes design, see Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores and Hubert Dreyfus *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action and the Cultivation of Solidarity* Cambridge: MIT, 1997. All should be compared with the more comparative survey by Jeremy Rifkin *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* Cambridge: Polity, 2004.
8. When Borgmann previously 'took the pulse' of America in the grip of conservative government (*Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), he found it to be one of sullen hyperactivity, in response to which he prescribed something like patient vigour.
9. See 'Technology is Society Made Durable' in John Law ed. *The Sociology of Monsters* London: Routledge, 1991.
10. Borgmann does not help in this regard by talking frequently of 'the *social version* of Churchill's principle: We shape our social institutions; afterwards our social institutions shape us' (79) and 'the *behavioural counterpart* to Churchill's principle. We shape our principles of decency, and afterwards our principles shape us.' (39)
11. This terminology is becoming more substantial, following the publication, with several contributions by Jelsma, of Peter-Paul Verbeek and Adriaan Slob eds *User Behaviour and Technology Development: Shaping Sustainable Relations between Consumers and Technologies* Dordrecht: Springer, 2006.
12. 'Review of Peter-Paul Verbeek *What Things Do*' *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* August 1st, 2005: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=3361>.
13. See for example, Alan Costall's 'Socializing Affordances' *Theory and Psychology* Vol. 5 No. 4 (1995), but more so Mike Michael & Alan Still 'A Resource for Resistance: Affordance and Power-Knowledge' *Theory and Society* Vol 21 (1992). See also Alan Costall and Ole Dreier eds *Doing Things with Things: The Design and Use of Everyday Objects* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

14. See the footnote attached to the following: 'Now it's the actor... that has to be flattened out and forced to take a star-like shape. What should we call this newly flattened element? Is it something that is 'made to act'? Is it something that is 'triggered into being triggered into action'?' *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
15. See the chapter on 'Paradigmatic Explanation' in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, *op cit*, but also Carl Mitcham's typically lucid survey of Borgmann's philosophy, 'On Character and Technology' in Eric Higgs, Andrew Light & David Strong eds *Technology and the Good Life?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
16. Though Borgmann is clearly tempted by this approach, made famous by Heidegger with the strange out of context (mis) translation of Plato's *Republic* with which he ends his Address on accepting the position of the Rector of Freiberg University at the invitation of the Nazis, 'All that is great stands in the storm...' For example, 'we should not overburden Churchill's principle. Even in the most favourably shaped circumstances, it takes some resolve and dedication to establish a practice [of ethical excellence].' (136) And this resolve is directed against the comforts of design: 'What grace needs most, though friendship and wisdom require it too, is the virtue of courage... steadfast persistence against comfort and convenience – the virtue that might better be called fortitude... What comes between us and the good life are the unencumbered and seemingly sweet pleasure of technological affluence. They are advertised to us. They need no lengthy introduction or training. But at length they leave us empty.' (172) Though the point is equally frequently tempered with design again: 'yet with the passing of courage a magnificent manifestation of what it is to be human would disappear as well. There is a principle of symmetry between reality and humanity that surfaces here. great persons require great contexts. the principle of symmetry underscores another point. We have allowed to pass away not just a virtue but also a kind of reality.' (109); 'Resolve does not really come from nowhere. It responds to the force of focal things and practices. If they have touched us, it's our task to be their advocates, but not only advocates. We also need to be architects who are devoted to the design and economy of a setting that favours the good life.' (138)
17. This is perhaps what Christensen's recent review essays in *Design Philosophy Papers* have been trying to get at in response to Latour and Thackara; that we need things that prompt discussions about the extent to which we would like things to do without what we need to discuss.