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Why Philosophy?

The Voice of Sustainment

Tony Fry

Tony Fry has been working on design philosophy since the 1970s and specifically on the relation between design, unsustainability and sustainment for the last decade, this is seen especially in his book *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (1999).

Unquestionably philosophically rigorous theory is out of fashion, out of favour. This was graphically illustrated on April 11 at a large gathering in Chicago convened by the prestigious journal *Critical Inquiry* to discuss the future of theory. A dozen star academics faced an audience of over five hundred. Reportedly they expected ideas and strategies to flow from the platform, however, they were sorely disappointed. The downbeat mood of the event was set by a reluctance of speakers to defend theory and actively engage the topic. Dominantly remarks by speakers indicated their deepening withdrawal from anything other than institutional time-serving. For instance, the distinguished literary theorist Stanley Fish said “I always counsel people against the decision to go into the academy because they hope to be effective beyond it.”

In contrast, there has been an enormous shift by the academy towards the subordination of education to servicing especially the economic world outside. Now we frequently find universities striving to make philosophy, the ‘queen of arts’ the servant of the forces of functionality.

Between the extremes of reducing philosophy/theory to just an institutional formalist practice or making it part of the trend towards the academy as a purely instrumental arm of the economy, is philosophy's transformation into entertainment by a constant stream of academically trained 'philosophers'.¹ Desperate for recognition and rewards at a time when academic spaces in which intellectual stars can shine are shrinking, these intellectual opportunists are now turning philosophy into pop, dumbed-down pap. We have recently seen, for example, philosophy for travellers, philosophy for the kitchen, speculation on how a Classical philosopher would run a multinational corporation and a philosophy of dogs.

Notwithstanding a seeming semantic closeness, there is a world of difference between philosophy able to entertain and philosophy as entertainment.

It's clear that what has been disappearing for a long time, certainly very quickly in the era of late modernity, is philosophy as an adopted ontology. This loss is evident in the terminal condition of a specific mode of being (a philosopher) with an embodied practice (philosophy). In its afterlife, philosophy merely becomes something that is studied and measured for exchange-value ('the career'). The key to grasping the endangered ontology is a giving-over to being philosophical. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger, the issue is not what one does with philosophy but what philosophy does with you. Moreover, as Heidegger points out at length, the skill of philosophising can be acquired as a trope but this does not necessarily mean that thinking is occurring.²

Of course, the loss of being a thinker while retaining the institutional position of espousing the thought of others is the stuff of careerism.

Clearly against this backdrop several questions come to mind. One is 'how has this situation come about?' Another turns the *Critical Inquiry* question of 'the future of theory' on its head to ask 'how do we theorise 'futures' to understand the imperatives, the possible, the impossible and options'. Finally, what will prompt the exercise of thought, imagination and risk-taking that is required to bring thinkers of the future into being?

What follows opens a way to such questioning.

One could perhaps legitimately blame the academic discipline for a failure of duty of care; equally one could assert that the rise of philosophy as entertainment is in direct relation to the declining institutional status and, in many cases, community and financial support for institutionally based philosophy. This is not just a decline in the status of individual thinkers and their careers, but a downgrading of a vast corpus of philosophical knowledge, which is being displaced by applied and economically cashable forms of knowing. These 'developments' have allowed much greater authority and recognition to be given to partly-informed sophist utterances by individuals by dint of their profile – ranging from

'pearls of wisdom' from prominent astrophysicists to philosophical banalities from pop stars (which is not to say there are not astrophysicists, pop stars and many other non-philosophers who are able to offer genuinely insightful philosophical observations).

However, more significant than all the institutional negatives and the failures of disciplinary practice, is the consequence of technology becoming hegemonic.

While Martin Heidegger gave analytical characterisation, and forewarning, of metaphysics (knowledge) becoming technology, we now live in an environment realised by this passage to disembodied mind. It is our general experiential condition. This is manifest in the victory of calculation over thought and in the proliferation of dependence upon many kinds of knowledge machines, especially those that constitute the electronic domain. Two particular characteristics within this situation beg identification. First, the illusion that humans are in control of technology persists. Second, such is the ubiquity of technology, and its accompanying dependencies, that it goes by un-noticed as we act in its environment. We drive without any sense of the multitudes of microchips directing the mechanical operation of our vehicle; likewise we operate washing machines, microwaves, telephones and a whole host of other devices unaware of the functioning of reified intelligence.

Philosophy has not merely been an innocent bystander in the unfolding events. For example "... there would never have been any sciences if philosophy had not preceded them".³ More recently, analytical philosophy has been deeply implicated in the rise and use of the logic systems and languages of computer programming. So said, while the memory of philosophy lasts, those who remember have an absolute responsibility to find another path (de facto another philosophy).⁴

The question of 'why philosophy' (a futural question) is predated by another one – 'what is philosophy' (a historical question). Both questions share answers that rest on the same foundational quality: they are fundamental acts of conservation. Thus, the question 'what is philosophy' is answered by pointing out that it 'conserves the thinking of thinking,' while the answer to 'why philosophy' is similar – philosophy exists to conserve thought (as a path to the future). Although both questions, and their answers, only exist responsively as philosophising (for philosophy) the conservation of thinking, the essence of philosophy, is indivisible from conservation itself.⁵ 'Why philosophy' is therefore significantly, if only in part, answered by the asking of 'what is needed to be conserved.' Here it's important to recognise that there is a fundamental difference between 'what is needed to be conserved' and the discourse of conservation (which is predominantly a biocentric discourse of the environmental movement).

It's already evident that Heidegger informs a good deal of what is presented here. He does not arrive simply at whim. Without

question Heidegger is not easy to grasp. However, no other philosopher has opened up such a rich line of questioning of Being, and the question of Being is at the very core of the thinking of Sustainment. What is actually identified here is something more fundamental than what has prompted Heidegger to be projected and adopted as an early deep ecologist.⁶ While these remarks raise an interesting topic, and invite considerable elaboration, this is not the project at hand.

To move 'why philosophy' forward the notion of 'the dialectic of sustainment' will be briefly characterised. To start with, the relation between destruction and creation need to be explored.

Taken literally, destruction speaks the elimination of what is unsustainable, so that what sustains is not negated (but this begs the clear identification of the unsustainable). But equally destruction speaks that mode of thinking able to identify what has to be eliminated, beyond unsustainability being reduced simply to biophysical and instrumental mechanisms. This means, for instance, bringing cultural practices, values, habits and thinking into the frame of scrutiny. Clearly the whole discourse that has been formed around 'sustainability' needs to be exposed to an extensive process of ontological inquiry that opens to view the values and assumptions that underpin the language. This is certainly, in crude terms, what Heidegger meant when he used the term 'destruction' to name a process of exposure.⁷ Likewise, it is close to what has informed the deconstructivist project, especially associated with Jacques Derrida. Again a complex area has been evoked that while inviting investigation in its own right, is actually presented here to make a particular point – although there is much that requires to be unambiguously destroyed physically, destruction is predominantly about the de-legitimisation of the authority of the language and institutions that sanction the unsustainable as the normative condition of 'consumer society'.

Creating the sustaining new is not possible without the clearing made by destruction. The failure to fully confront the unsustainable (because it is deemed to be de-motivating, bad news, politically unpopular, negative etc.), and to assume it as self-evidently straightforward, is one of the major flaws of the advocates of sustainability.

It should also be remembered that in the celebration and even veneration of creation and creativity, destruction is always present. The polished timber table does not arrive without the destruction of the tree, agricultural cultivation without the destructive clearing of land, food without the slaughter of animals or the harvesting of crops, and so on.

The dialectic of sustainment thus enfolds the dialectical relation of creation and destruction, while striving to make the processes present and subject to decision. Of course, to become aware of every juncture at which a decision would be needed, from the

minor to the major, would totally paralyse all other thought and action. What is really being advocated is the development of an ethico-critical sensibility of restraints. Thinking before acting is thus posed as counter to the negation of decision by its displacement or relegation by calculation (technology).

Besides the inseparability of creation and destruction there is a third figure of fundamental concern which demands to be thought in an initial encounter with the Sustainment – this is the figure of conservation. The identification of what needs to be conserved in order for sustainment to occur defies a single or easy answer. Certainly what is to be conserved cannot just be reduced to the domain of biophysical functionality. Moreover, the very first object of conservation is that kind of thinking with the ability to identify and decide what should be conserved, let be, or destroyed. Conservation, considered at this basic level, requires recognising that one cannot conserve: one's own being; the being of another; or, 'the world in being' without those modes of thinking capable of interrogating the particular material and immaterial perspectives that, in difference, designate the forms, structures and interactions of what exists. 'The world' never simply 'is' for us: it always arrives via the mediation of that culture by which we come to know it; it is constructed for us as a symbolic order of conventions, value designations, relations. Learning of 'the world' is thus indivisible from projecting value upon the animate and inanimate things in worldly being. So for 'us,' no matter what our culture, 'the world' is a designed phenomenon that arrives, as known, by the agency of language/signs. So framed, conservation is as much about giving the world (that is, for us) a value that re-designs, and remakes, a seeing and a knowing that can inform action in every sphere of human endeavour. Moreover, action itself, other than the mechanistic and the totally unconsidered, is sheeted back to the symbolic via the exercise of judgement.

What needs to be conserved demands thinking.

Historically, and potentially, such thinking is conserved by ontological philosophy. In such a context, the imperative to conserve is expressed by the concern with the 'Being of beings', which itself is translatable as the imperative to sustain. While the discourse of mainstream sustainability assumes an instrumental agenda, predicated upon the identification of large numbers of scientifically defined tasks, 'the Sustainment' depends upon the creation of a thinking that is able to think more rigorously what needs (beyond pure utility) to be conserved and how to do it. Such thinking clearly has to find a way to directly confront that thought which is predominantly 'the most taken for granted'. The continuation of what (unsustainably) exists in great part depends upon what appears remaining unseen – what is taken for granted goes by unquestioned, unexamined, unchallenged.

The question of ‘why philosophy’ has only been answered partially – this with a ‘what is philosophy’ design(at)ed as a particular kind of philosophy, one that can conserve a thinking able to inform what needs to be sustained. As such, this thinking manifests, and opens the way for, the Sustainment (the moment in which such thinking becomes constitutive of the ‘ecology of mind’ of the being of the culture at large). What ideas circulate, how they travel, what learning they prompt, what action they stimulate – all of this is encapsulated in the ‘ecology of mind’ of ‘the Sustainment’.

The future is put at risk if philosophy is devalued. To abandon philosophy is to open the way for a new dark age (be it illuminated by entertainment).

The Question of the Relation between Philosophy and Design

Fundamentally design (as process and its product) is decision that becomes inscriptively directive in its materialised and immaterialised objects.

Design is a (perhaps even the) substance of what Heidegger called ‘thinging’ – things are never simply passive but are animated by encounter. They have (as has been especially learnt from Chinese thought) a propensity.

Things, in their disposition to be, are in being in a particular way. As a result they realise themselves in a manner of prefigured intent (they are what they do in use, rather than what they appear to be as forms), as such, they constitute fields of effects/affects, environments, and offer themselves up to be seen in their moment of causal realisation. For example, a cooker/kitchen range is: a means of cooking food; a controlled and waste heat system within a safety regime; an element that constitutes the aesthetic of a kitchen (*in situ* and as linked to promotional imagery); a collection of surfaces that facilitates cleaning; an expression of ergonomics; a nodal connection of an energy supply system; an expressive form of a designer’s ego; a registration of a particular moment in manufacturing technique; a collection of materials with managed interfaces and more. Yet it is also an object of danger and potential neglect – it can burn, be used to create environmentally unpleasant or harmful emissions, be discarded as a waste object as a source of un-recovered reusable materials and an eyesore, as well as being icon (in use and as waste) of a particular kind of culture and its values.

All of what a cooker has been characterised above as, is gathered, managed and directed by design. The cooker itself, in common with myriad other things, is a mediation between an idea and its in-acted consequences.

All things are situated within the dialectic of sustainment, in their coming into being and use – they create e.g., functionality, pleasure, sign value, expanded worlds of desires and so on;

and they destroy e.g., non-renewable resources, environments, attachments of their predecessors (be this other objects or human skills) and the dream of the desired. The dynamic interplay between creation and destruction prefigures things in the world and the world's prefiguration of things. Dialectically, the nature of the limits of one (world/thing) delimits the nature of the other (thing/world).

Design is generally not recognised as either agency or decision – even within design theory, design practice, and above all else public culture. Decision is dominantly defined in our societies within the operative public spheres of politics (as governance and law) and economics (as managed exchange) and in the exercise of individuated choice. What, however, demands serious consideration, and engagement, is the facticity of the ontological direction, the determinism, the inscribed decision of the matter of things. Increasingly, because of the hegemonic status of technology, 'the fate of the world,' our fate, is being decided by things. Yes we make choices, but so often within the already-decided, be it an air-flight, computer hardware or software, furniture, a mobile phone, a motor car or almost every other thing. As it has become naturalised, become a nature, technology has moved out of reach. Like the weather, we can observe it in action, but our ability to control it is extremely limited and still weakening. However we can disclose things, and in modest ways build a new knowledge that makes the unsustainability that negates futures more evident, while at the same time contributing to the construction of 'the Sustainment' – which is a still underdeveloped counter project to totally giving oneself over to the instrumental world being technologically constituted. From what has been said, one cannot be free of technology, there is no overcoming, but there is a possible along sidedness, a possible supplementary nature.

Because so much of what has been put forward may appear to be totally impossible, impossibility has been selected as a topic to be examined in a future issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*.

Heidegger drew special attention, in so many different ways, to the principal task of philosophy being to expose and interrogate the taken-for-granted world. He rejected language as a medium of transparent communication, and drew a clear distinction between sight and seeing. It is possible, and critically important, to place design in the full light of such thinking, which is one of this journal's aims. Human beings are surrounded and directed by design, yet for all its seeming visibility it remains largely unnoticed and unseen (frequently by design). Likewise, the unsustainable shares the same fate of concealment.

The exegetic project of making Heidegger available has been enormously valuable, but it is not sufficient. Amongst what one learns from him is a practice of philosophy: a mode of inquiry, a questioning, a persistence and rigour, which he expected to be taken into ownership and constructively employed by his students

as a thinking realised in being. This is why his critics are so wide of the mark when they focus on ‘contamination’ by his ideas. His primary influence is method and its exemplification. So said, the question: ‘why philosophy’ still remains before us as a question.

Notes

1. There is an issue that begs future consideration here – which is making the difference between entertainment (indivisible from boredom) and pleasure (indivisible from involvement) clear.
2. See Martin Heidegger *What is Called Thinking* (trans J.Glenn Gray) New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
3. Martin Heidegger (1956) *What is philosophy?* (trans Jean T. Wilde & William Klubek) Albany: NCUP Inc. p. 33.
4. *What is philosophy?* p. 29.
5. *What is philosophy?* p. 65.
6. Michel Haar *The Song of the Earth* (trans Reginald Lilly) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
7. *What is philosophy?* pp. 32–33 and in Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson) Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962, where it is dealt with at length and linked to the phenomenological method (see especially H.19–27 – Section 6).