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The implicit ethics of designing

Abstract

The relationship between ethics and design is most usually thought of in terms of applied ethics. There are, however, difficulties with this: for instance, conventional ethical stances such as deontology or consequentialism depend on procedures (predefined rules, optimisation) that are inapplicable in the sorts of complex situations which designers commonly face. In any case, it is not as if ethics is a settled body of theory that can act as an authority with which to guide practice. Depending on which theories we refer to, we receive different, and often directly conflicting, guidance. Paralleling the idea that design has its own epistemological foundations, rather than needing to import ideas from science, I propose an alternative way to think of the relation between design and ethics, looking to (1) the ethical questioning implicit in what designers do, and (2) the similarities between those situations which they encounter as a matter of course and those questions with which normative ethics is both most concerned and confused. I suggest that we might reason about ethical questions in design in design's own terms and, also, that rather than apply ethical theory to design we explore what design can contribute to ethics, inverting the more usual hierarchy.

Design and ethics

The relationship between ethics and design is most usually thought of in terms of applied ethics—as the application of normative ethical theories to design practice, for instance in terms of questions about agency, professional ethics or our relationship to technology or the environment. There are, however, difficulties with this. Firstly, as with any instance of applying theories to design that are external to it, what is special about design itself can become obscured. Secondly, it implies that ethical considerations are external to design questions, a view that can lead to seeing ethics as conflicting with design, either as an amelioration of design ideas or a radical innovation. In any case, it is not as if ethics is a settled body of theory that can be straightforwardly treated as an authority with which to guide practice: depending which theories or ideas we refer to, we receive different, and often directly conflicting, guidance as to what to do.

There are parallels between this and the relationship between design and science. With the exhaustion of the attempt to provide a rational basis for design through the application of the scientific method, usually referred to as the Design Methods Movement, Nigel Cross, John Naughton and David Walker (1981) argued that, given what they identified as a state of epistemological chaos in science at that time (following critiques such as those of Paul Feyerabend, 1975/1993), scientific method was not a fruitful basis for design. Similarly, while we may wish to treat ethical philosophy as authoritative, it is unstable as a point of reference. As Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 229) has noted, we might expect to agree on general principles and diverge on particulars, yet we have no common view on many everyday ethical questions. Even with those questions where we have widespread agreement over an action being ethically good or bad, there is little agreement on *why* this is the case. Whether this state of disagreement is understood as a conflict between objective goods (Berlin, 1958/1998), an inevitable property of our subjectivity (Sartre, 1948) or as resulting from the dissipation of any overall idea of the good life with which to make different goods commensurable (MacIntyre, 1981/1985), the situation in which we find ourselves is that anything to which we refer to help clarify an ethical

question is itself contestable.

In this paper I explore an alternative way to think of the relation between design and ethics, one that avoids applying ethical theory to design practice but instead looks to recognise the ethical questioning implicit in what designers do. This approach is suggested by the way that, in response to the difficulties in referring to science as a paradigm for design that I noted above, design theorists such as Cross (1982) and Bruce Archer (1979) put forward the idea that we understand design as having its own epistemological foundations as a discipline. A particularly strong version of this argument was presented by Ranulph Glanville (1981/2014, 1999), who argued not just that design be understood as having its own foundations independent of those of science, but, reversing the usual hierarchy, that scientific research was itself a specially restricted form of design.

Paralleling the idea that design has its own epistemological foundations, I suggest that there are ethical considerations at the core of what designers do, even when they are not explicitly addressing ethical issues, and that, accordingly, we can reason about ethical questions in design in design's own terms. Further, just as Glanville argued that an understanding of design might inform science, making these connections opens up the possibility that reflection on design might also inform ethics, reversing their more usual relationship.

There are two avenues of investigation that I put forward here: firstly, regarding the sorts of situations with which designers are concerned, which are similar to questions of central concern in ethics not just in terms of content but also structure; and, secondly, regarding the ways in which designers explore these situations, which implicitly involve ethical questioning.

Wicked problems and ethical dilemmas

One way of characterising the situations that designers typically encounter is as what design theorist Horst Rittel and planner Melvin Webber called "wicked problems" (Rittel, 1972; Rittel & Webber, 1973, 1984). Unlike the well defined problems that they refer to as "tame", wicked problems have no right answers, no stopping rule and no immediate or ultimate test because of their conflicting, incomplete and changeable requirements. They cannot, therefore, be overcome through the sort of linear problem solving advocated by the Design Methods Movement.

Underlying each of the features that Rittel and Webber describe is the way that design is always concerned with creating the new. It follows that it is not possible to fully analyse the situation in advance or to definitively frame the problem at hand because new questions, and with them new criteria, emerge in the process as the situation is explored. While Rittel went on to develop particular participatory responses to such situations, wicked problems have since come to be seen as characterising those situations with which designers deal as a matter of course, often without regarding them as being problematic (e.g. Glanville, 2011). It is with such situations that design claims disciplinary expertise.

Rittel and Webber's original account of wicked problems was concerned with ethical issues, regarding how we design for others. (Note, though, that the wickedness of wicked problems is not meant to imply any ethical wickedness but, rather, complexity). This ethical aspect is part of their difficulty: unlike science, where falsification is an integral and acknowledged part of the process of research, designers have "no right to be wrong" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 166) because of the significant impact their actions have on others. This leaves designers in a bind: they have no way to be right, yet no right to be wrong. There is a sense, then, that when designers grapple with wicked problems, as they do as a matter of course, they are dealing with at least some difficult ethical questions (although here I leave open the question of *how well* they do this).

As well as this connection to ethics in terms of content, there is also one in terms of structure. Wicked problems resemble those ethical dilemmas with which normative ethics is both most concerned and confused. That is, not only do wicked problems involve ethical dilemmas but, also, ethical dilemmas are wicked problems. This is not to say that all ethical questions are wicked but that with tame questions in ethics being easily solvable, it is with the wicked ones, those that present us with dilemmas, that we look to normative ethical theories for guidance. Similarly to wicked problems in design, the dilemmas that form common examples in ethical theory typically involve conflicting or incomplete premises such that what action to take is contestable. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1985, pp. 6-7), for instance, describes a series of familiar contemporary debates, which are characterised by the clash of contradictory positions following from premises that are, in themselves, reasonable but which are incompatible with each other. It might be countered that the contestability of such situations may be resolved through one theory or another. For instance, we might make the conflicting premises commensurable with each other, either through some form of consequentialist calculus, such as in utilitarianism, or through a unified conception of the purpose of human life, such as proposed by MacIntyre. Alternatively, we might apply moral rules discerned from rational thought or divine revelation. However, the plurality of ways to “tame” (using Rittel and Webber’s term) ethical dilemmas is part of their underlying wickedness. We may have many ways in which to come to definite answers to ethical questions but whichever way we choose leads to quite different answers and we have no way to choose between these different approaches. As with wicked problems, the “choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 166): different normative ethical theories lead to different characterisations of the same situation and so different proposals for how to act.

Given that wicked problems have no right answers, the idea that ethical dilemmas are wicked is a challenge to the very idea of normative ethics, which seeks to give us definitive standards to guide action. While it could be argued that this is only a quality of situations as we encounter them, and that normative ethics deals with questions of what is right in principle rather than practically what to do in some particular situation, the idea of what is good conduct must refer to an action that it is possible to take in a situation as we find it. To separate ethical theory from the actuality of circumstance assumes an unworkable objectivity akin to the sorts of linear design methods that, as Rittel and Webber describe, could only work given an implausibly complete description of the situation.

Indeed, neither of the two most commonly articulated positions in normative ethics, consequentialism and deontology, can in principle guide us with wicked problems (and even if it is argued that the incommensurability of many ethical dilemmas is circumstantial and could be clarified, at least some ethical problems, those designers face, are wicked). The reasons for this mirror the limitations of the attempt to rationalise design according to the scientific method, as have been made evident, for instance, in the research of Nicholas Negroponte’s Architecture Machine Group, whose work raises similar points to those put forward contemporaneously by Rittel and Webber. Consequentialist ethical theories involve the optimisation of our actions against a predefined overall goal yet, as Negroponte (1975) has pointed out, optimisation is “extremely antagonistic to the nature of architecture” (p. 189). Likewise, while deontological approaches to ethics require that we conform to predefined moral rules, “any axiom or rule can find a situation where it will fail or generate disaster when blindly executed as a truism” (p. 33). Where, as in the situations in which designers typically work, there is no clearly defined goal or problem, it is not clear which rules to apply or which goal to seek.

Implicit ethical questioning in design and conversation

While wicked problems seem intractable when viewed in terms of logical reasoning, they are characteristic of the situations that designers encounter and deal with as a matter of course, to the extent that from a designer's perspective it is difficult to see what the fuss is about. For instance, that a problem is not understood until after the formulation of a solution is to be expected in design. As Lawson (1979) has shown, designers explore the situations for which they design through the making of proposals rather than through analysis. In this way they avoid difficulties with problem definition at the outset, redefining the scope and aims of the project in process.

Of central importance to how designers navigate wicked problems is the interactive way in which they work, which can be thought of as a conversation which they hold with themselves and with others, often through making drawings and models (see for example Gedenryd, 1998; Glanville, 2007; Schön, 1983/1991). While this can be thought of as occurring at various scales across the design process, it is best exemplified in the characteristic design activity of sketching where marks are simultaneously made and reinterpreted, paralleling the way that in a conversation we continually turn between speaking and listening. Just as a face-to-face conversation cannot be defined in advance but evolves and changes course as it develops, so too designers use the conversational structure of the way they work to develop new and often unforeseen ideas, redefining their understanding of the situation for which they design as they work.

While this is most obviously an epistemologically activity—a way of grappling with the complex situations that designers encounter—it is also one in which, as in conversational interaction more generally, a degree of ethical consideration is, at least potentially, implicit (these connections are in part suggested by a cybernetic account of epistemology, an understanding that invites analogies with both design and ethics; see Sweeting, 2015a). There are different aspects of this, one of which, and that on which I focus on here, is the way that the consideration of others is an integral part of how designers work (other aspects include responsibility and purpose; see Kenniff and Sweeting, 2014; Sweeting, 2014, 2015b). While this consideration of others by designers is partly manifest in attempts at participation, such as for instance consultation with stakeholders, it is also part of the conversations that designers hold with themselves. Just as a conversation involves us looking “through the eyes of the other” (to use a phrase that cybernetician Heinz von Foerster (1991) attributed to Victor Frankl), so too designers use drawings to “walk through” their proposals from the point of view of those they are designing for, many of whom, such as the future users of a building or its passers by, they will not be able to meet, let alone consult. In this way, even designers' dialogue with themselves, such as through drawing, can be understood as a participatory activity, involving ethical considerations, as well as an epistemological or practical one. Mirroring this, the conversations that designers hold with other stakeholders, whether through standard forms of consultation or more ambitious participatory design techniques, are not solely attempts to involve others for ethical reasons but part of how designers learn about the situation in which they act and the significance of what they propose. That is, while participation with others is often viewed as either an amelioration of design or an addition to it, its inclusion within the design process, in whatever form, is not solely for ethical reasons (involving others in what will affect them) but as part of designers' thinking, analogous to the conversations they hold with themselves via drawing.

Conclusion

Whereas ethical considerations are often thought of as external to or even as in conflict

with design, the conversational way in which designers work intertwines the ethical and participatory with the practical and epistemological. Comparing the case of drawing to that of participatory design, we can distinguish genuine dialogue from monologue in both cases and contrast the participatory quality of the dialogue that designers conduct with themselves with the often monological nature of supposedly participatory consultation. This is not to say that design always incorporates others or considers ethical questions either successfully or genuinely. Yet, it is significant that such considerations are not external limitations on design, as is implied when the relationship between ethics and design is understood in terms of the application of normative ethical theory to practice. The consideration of others, the example I have taken here, is an integral part of what designers do, even when they are not explicitly considering ethical issues. It is, therefore, possible to explore at least some ethical questions in the context of design in design's own terms.

Furthermore, the parallels between the structure of wicked problems and that of ethical dilemmas, which I have noted above, suggest that the way designers work has significance for ethics beyond just design's specific context. The two most commonly articulated positions in normative ethics, consequentialism and deontology, cannot guide us in the context of wicked problems. They depend on procedures (optimisation, predefined rules) that are unworkable in such situations, which are characterised by shifting goals and missing information. Given this, the way in which designers approach wicked problems is, I suggest, also relevant to ethics more generally. Indeed, we can look to design to inform ethics, reversing the more usual hierarchy, as those dilemmas that are of central concern in ethics are similar in structure to the situations that designers commonly encounter. Rather than understanding the relationship between ethics and design in terms of the application of the former to the latter, a relationship where in any case one receives conflicting advice depending which theories one refers to, we can look to design as an example of a way of acting, applicable in complex and ethically charged situations, in which ethical considerations are implicit.

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