

Design ethics: Reflecting on the ethical dimensions of technology, sustainability, and responsibility in the Anthropocene

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Ethics is integral to design in many ways. But design ethics has remained underdeveloped despite an increasing relevance in the Anthropocene, when many novel ethical issues and problems are anticipated to emerge from man-made artifacts and systems. The aim of this article is to revitalize the discourse of design ethics. Firstly, I define ‘design ethics’ in relation to the distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. Secondly and through the perspective of ethics, I draw out new issues and questions by examining three commonly encountered categories in design, namely, ‘technology’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘responsibility’. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that it is important not to relinquish the formative potential of ethics for design despite its complexity, or its ostensible intractability.

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1 Introduction

Design is quintessentially an ethical process (Devon & Van de Poel, 2004, p. 461). Which problems designers choose to solve—and why—and who to include or exclude as beneficiaries of this design not only presume choice preferences but also more fundamentally, value positions on the good or worthwhile life. And in radical design with few guidelines in place, designers also confront value conflicts: which value to prioritize and how to make an acceptable trade-off between two equally valued goods—for instance between safety and sustainability—are intrinsically, ethical questions (Van Gorp & Van de Poel, 2008). Despite this recognition that ethics is integral to design in many ways, design ethics remains ‘massively underdeveloped and even in its crudest forms remains marginal within design education’ (Fry, 2009, p. 3). This knowledge gap in design ethics has become especially urgent in the Anthropocene because the world we inhabit is, increasingly, also the world we have made (Aicher, 1994; Purdy, 2015, p. 3).

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In view of this knowledge gap, it is paramount to revitalize the discourse of design ethics in some form. This article represents such an attempt but it is hardly the lone voice in the wilderness on design ethics. Scholarly research on this subject area within design studies—uneven or sporadic that may be—spans at least across three decades (see, d’Anjou, 2010; Devon & Van de Poel, 2004; Findeli, 1994; Flusser, 1999; Fry, 2004; Manzini, 2006; Mitcham, 1995; Naoe, 2008; Parsons, 2016; Steen, 2015; Tonkinwise, 2004; Van Amerongen, 2004; Van de Poel, 2015; Van Gorp & Van de Poel, 2008; Zelenko & Felton, 2012). But relative to the extent, impacts and ramifications of design in the Anthropocene, and in spite of this diverse scholarship, design ethics has yet to gain steady traction in either practice or academia—resulting in little prospect for the development of a body of ethical knowledge commensurate with the moral challenges posed by design today.

2 *The significance of ethics in the Anthropocene*

The overall aim of this article is to revitalize a discussion on design ethics in the context of the Anthropocene; and through this discussion, to draw out new issues and perspectives that ethics can offer design. Specifically, this article aims to contribute in the following two ways. Firstly, this article will begin by defining ‘design ethics’. While the concept ‘design ethics’ is conventionally taken to represent the systematic study of ethical concepts or principles in design, what it actually means, and why it should be the preferred term of reference, have remained largely unclear. Secondly and using the conceptual vehicles of ‘technology’, ‘sustainability’, and ‘responsibility’—three commonly encountered concepts in design studies—this article will further show how ethics can prompt new avenues to understand design, which in turn may catalyse new research possibilities or design innovations.

Importantly, this article argues that design ethics has become paramount in the Anthropocene. Admittedly, the Anthropocene is not yet officially established; it has also gained a reputation for being a ‘trending’, academic buzzword (Stromberg, 2013). Yet the use of the Anthropocene here is deliberate for two key reasons. Firstly and despite its ‘unofficial’ status, the Anthropocene has become something of an empirical consensus. Presently, the Anthropocene has developed into a nascent but growing discourse observable in many conferences, published articles and even books. Within this nascent discourse, it has been recognized that the state of the Earth system now no longer provides the same kind of functional stability assumed in the Holocene (that is, the geological epoch before the newly proposed Anthropocene), and this emerging turn towards greater uncertainty and volatility implicates the very notion of conventional ethics, which tended to presume environmental stability (Schmidt, Brown, & Orr, 2016, p. 193). For instance, the ability presumed by consequentialist ethics to reliably estimate consequences or predict the full ramifications of actions in non-linear systems has become very limited in the

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