

Ethical Education: Transforming a Maximum into a New Minimum

Keith Owens

Introduction

The 2009 AIGA *Living Principles for Design*¹ is the latest in a long line of manifestos, ideological tools and vision statements exhorting designers to apply themselves to solving pressing environmental, economic, social and (now) cultural problems. The document is one part call to action and one part archive of past efforts to reform design. It also stands as the current terminal point in the profession's longstanding desire to compose a practical framework within which designers can translate good intentions into integrative ethical practice.

This evergreen desire for enlightened design practice is driven in part by a widely held belief by designers that they and their colleagues should act (positive) responsibly or (negative) be held responsible for their acts. This belief in turn rests on a variety of individual, often interconnected and at times conflicting justifications: deontological, environmental, economic, humanistic among others.

For example: That as self proclaimed professionals, designers have a duty to the common good much like doctors or lawyers; that by virtue of their unique abilities coupled with their social role designers are responsible for promoting visions of the good that entail the reduction of materials density, the care for the biosphere and an enlarged conception of due care for non-humans. Or is it that because of their willing participating in the market economy, designers have a responsibility to help reduce unbridled consumerism while

assisting the underserved consumers of design: the aged, the poor, the politically disenfranchised and the disabled.

Like the 27 documents upon which it draws for inspiration, *Living Principles* is an example of altruistic impulse, suggesting that it is necessary (and tacitly, possible) for designers to use their ability to enhance rather than diminish the world. The document attempts to distill ‘the collective wisdom found in decades of sustainability theories’ into an integrative framework and accessible resource for designers striving to achieve what might be considered a ‘maximum’ response to pressing human concerns.

And like its progenitors *Living Principles* runs aground on sharp design pragmatism indifferent to altruistic impulse. This strand of pragmatism wraps itself in everyday practicality but is largely formed out of political, professional and juridical traditions to which many designers tenaciously cling and from which emerges more cautious ‘minimum’ design responses to the selfsame issues. For instance, designers advocating economic justice based on positive rights — the obligation to care about others, the worker, the biosphere, the world — are often viewed with skepticism by other designers allegiant to neoliberal economic liberty based on negative rights: the freedom and economic necessity to pursue profit or private goods unhindered by external restraints be they promulgated by state or organizational code.² For every designer who believes *Living Principles* could become a deeply moral and necessary action plan existing on an ethical plane above the law, another views it as a superfluous conceit when placed next to extant laws already inscribed with normative moral precepts.³

The soaring goals embodied by *Living Principles* and the hard edged realities weighing on their realization combine to produce one of the most significant challenges today’s design educators face: how to equip students with the skills necessary to connect the minimum and maximum thinking that shape design’s response to important human concerns.

This essay will introduce and provide details on one educational response to this challenge: a new graduate course in design ethics that represents a chance for students to ground vague altruism in lived experience and elevate pragmatism out of cynical determinism. Specifically, it will first offer and contextualize the organizing principles and corresponding propositional foundations framing the class, and then delineate learning outcomes at which the class will aim and the teaching strategies its instructors will employ. Finally, the essay will conclude by briefly discussing a multi-phase class project informed by these foundations, desired outcomes and strategies.

Organizing Principles

The course rests on two organizing principles that acknowledge the following: 1.) useful ethical deliberations focus on integrating rather than choosing between conflicting moral alternatives, and 2.) the need for comprehensive moral solutions to contemporary concerns that are sensitive to the fluid but certain relationship between free will and the constraints of circumstance — between internal states and external reality.

The first principle is skepticism of the belief that altruism and pragmatism are somehow inconsistent with one another. The two constructs properly formulated can share common ground and to deny their mutuality is to mischaracterize realistic conceptions of human agency and institutional power. Altruism and pragmatism align when the former is not characterized as utopian dreaming and the latter not viewed as a sensible reaction to the unassailable ‘ways of the world’. When both conceptions are recalibrated to become starting places for realistic approaches to affecting change or ensuring fairness, they combine to create a roadmap to what could be through the landscape of what is.

Certainly, altruistic impulses focused on ultimate ends untethered to existent realities are open to justified charges of utopianism and dismissal. But, when selflessness tied to visions of a better future are framed and examined critically — an unsentimental grasp of present circumstances, the realization that power is a function of scaled interest alignment and the acceptance of the fact that change is usually slow and often unwelcome — they become realistic possibilities awaiting action.

Conversely, a pragmatism that views current reality as an unchanging description of all possible futures resembles cynicism more than prudence. By adopting a richer Dewian or Davidsonian formulation, pragmatism can be seen more as a realistic collection of “ways to act so as to realize human hopes of happiness”⁴ and less as an inevitable hermeneutic necessary to cope with some unchanging brute circumstance — a freely chosen plan for changing reality rather than a deterministic guide to its immutability.

Universal suffrage for women and institutionalized civil rights for African Americans were considered utopian, even subversive in their respective times. Each started as an unselfish or self-justified impulse to right a perceived wrong. Both were criticized as unrealistic and, practically speaking, doomed in the face of historically entrenched biases and social convention. Nevertheless both altruistic impulses became durable strands woven into the social fabric of modern life through pragmatic ‘ways of acting’. These examples demonstrate why it is important for design students to understand that any meaningful change built out of responsible design practice draws from a critical understanding of the relationship between altruism and pragmatism. And that redefining and bridging these two important conceptions simultaneously require and build on ethical awareness and criticality.

It is also vital for students to grasp the second organizing principle framing the class: that hopes for meaningful change sparked by integrative design practice require

transformations in the minds of designers *and* to the circumstances in which they operate. Without one, a better future cannot be imagined, without the other, it cannot be realized. For example, when advocating for more responsible forms of design, Thackara⁵ promotes a new conception of design thinking — a ‘mindful’ way that addresses design and larger social issues synthetically. Agreeing with Thackara and others⁶ who believe that designers operate under special moral obligations, Christensen nonetheless disagrees with how this group should respond to its role-based duty. Arguing that individual designers however mindful (moral) can only act as responsible as “the conditions under which ... design takes place are themselves right, i.e., such as to allow the designer to proceed mindfully (as a rule rather than as the occasional exception).”⁷

Thackara and Christensen are both correct albeit offering opposing views about the location and scale of ethical agency. Without moral imagination to guide new forms of design thinking, students cannot envision alternative ultimate ends. Concomitantly, the scale, complexity and interconnectivity of modern society dictate imagining collaborative design interventions scaled to overcome “deeply entrenched structural conditions without relying on heroic acts of self-sacrifice by individual designers.”⁸

Flowing from these two organizing principles are four propositional foundations framing the general contour of the course. These propositional foundations are certainly not new. All appear frequently in extant discourse on ethical education, principally in applied ethical formulations rather than more general or philosophical discussions about normative or meta-ethics. Their regularity as topics of study suggests their salience and significance. Moreover, they are particularly germane to this course in that they all: connect normative ethical theory with grounded ethical learning experiences, encourage fluid interchange between rationally

integrated opposites and situated moral choice, and function as viable pedagogical prerequisites for constructivist teaching strategies.

Four Propositional Foundations

Two of the four propositional foundations underpinning the course are drawn from fourteen originally proposed by Laczniak⁹ in his answer to the lack of ethical education in business schools. Laczniak argues that the subjective nature of ethical education does not obviate the possibility that ethics instruction can provide students with the ability to systematically understand and grapple with the inevitable moral conflicts awaiting them. Laczniak's two salient propositions are:

- That difficult ethical choice is inextricably linked to business (or a subset, design) practice and therefore unavoidable. Moral conflicts framed by circumstance will impinge on personal moral aspirations. Their successful resolution often requires modifying or synthesizing internal impulse and external reality.
- That just moral behavior necessarily supersedes legal standards, the law being the lowest common denominator of acceptable behavior. Moreover, the reactive nature of jurisprudence and proactive nature of ethical thinking place the two conceptions in an oppositional formulation requiring integrative thinking to reconcile.¹⁰

The third proposition is drawn from McDonald and Donleavy¹¹ and their related scholarship countering objections to teaching (business) ethics in academic settings. Answering one particular concern, that ethics courses are ineffectual in the face of preexisting moral beliefs, McDonald and Donleavy cite studies¹² that indicate:

- Beliefs are open value sets subject to continued modification through emotional, behavioral or cognitive engagement — making it reasonable to believe that ethical

instruction may have statistically significant impact on student moral attitudes and provide hope that their moral imagination can be enlivened.

Fears of classroom indoctrination — imposing personal values on students — naturally accompany discussion about tinkering with existing moral attitudes. Therefore it is vital to recognize that this course does not exist to impress instructional or institutional moral worldviews — notwithstanding its foundational assumptions about modern conceptions of justice, equality and human rights and the need for scaled power to affect meaningful change. Therefore, it is not surprising that the fourth foundation guiding course instruction is drawn from Hosmer¹³ and his perspective on the relationship between ethical instruction and indoctrination.

- That ethics courses exist not to teach students moral standards but rather to educate them on how to rigorously reason through complex moral issues employing the standards they already possess. The goal being to enable students to develop the ethical criticality necessary to transform vague altruistic impulses in rational arguments for realistic and reasonable moral action.

Hosmer frames the difference between moral indoctrination and ethical education as the difference between the two questions: “Shall we take the right action?” and “What is the right action to take?”

With the organizing principles and propositional foundations delineated, the essay now turns to tactical aspects of the course: the learning objectives at which it will aim and teaching strategies its instructors will employ to spark moral imagination and sustain ethical criticality.

Learning Objectives

A literature review into ethics instruction yielded over 80 articles¹⁴ citing a 1980s Hastings Center¹⁵ study into the state of ethics teaching in higher education. According to its abstract, the study explores the nature of “ethics in higher education, outlines some of the main goals of ethics education, and gives some advice on how to go about teaching ethics in an undergraduate or graduate setting.”¹⁶

The study yielded a volume titled *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*,¹⁷ considered one of the foundational works in ethics education. In one of its essays, editors and authors Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok identified four essential goals for ethics courses:

- stimulating the moral imagination
- eliciting a sense of moral obligation
- developing analytical skills and
- tolerating moral ambiguity

When forwarding these goals, the authors emphasize three aspects vital to their realization. First, that moral imagination is of paramount importance, critical because students need to realize that the moral dimensions of professional conduct cannot be avoided and that business actions can result in untoward outcomes. Second, once the moral imagination is stimulated, students should be provided with the skills necessary to rationally judge the validity of their emotional responses and develop the criticality necessary to ground their impulses in realistic action. And third, students should understand that the most difficult ethical decisions are those that attempt to reconcile differing but valid moral positions and are thus encouraged to accept these differences and to “argue without rancor, and to disagree without personal invective.”¹⁸

Because of the significance and relevance of the study, the goals Callahan and Bok extracted from it were adopted for the course. It is believed that learning experiences tethered to these objectives will enliven the ethical awareness of students and hone their ethical reasoning abilities, thereby encouraging students to connect their rational altruistic impulses to richer forms of pragmatic action and reconcile their inner moral states with the external circumstances impinging on any ethical calculus.

Teaching Strategies

Course instructors will initially employ three teaching strategies: case study, collaborative learning and an innovation on the Critical Incident Technique, a research model developed by the Air Force that was later adopted by others as a means to frame ethical situational understanding.

The three strategies were selected because, collectively, they will allow the students to construct rational ethical positions and moral actions out of lived reality ‘made vivid’ and help them overcome the “blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.”¹⁹ Within the constructivist paradigm the strategies foster, students begin to understand that useful ethical insight arises out of knowledge of how human beings actually behave toward one another and that ethical deliberation is necessary when “the objects of confrontation are not good and bad but different legitimate alternatives.”²⁰ The strategies were also adopted based on scholarly literature and research supporting their respective suitability and efficaciousness.

Case study (or case method) exposes students to ‘cases’ or relevant narratives of authentic situations that clearly state a dilemma without resolving it ²¹ thereby provoking conflicting views, compelling decision making and — more specifically for design students —

sharpening ethical criticality through the analysis and synthesis of disciplinary or practice based moral dilemmas. Case-based learning approaches include role plays, empathetic simulations, debates, rational reflection and collaborative problem solving. The learning strategy is common in legal, medical and business education²² and belief in effective learning through case methods is supported by scholarship into situated cognition, adaptive response theory and social constructivism.²³

Collaborative learning “is an umbrella term for a variety of education approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together.”²⁴ Collaborative learning approaches include cooperative learning, problem-centered instruction, guided design, cases, simulations, writing groups and peer teaching. Collaborative learning is often used when educators wish for students to construct new ideas or insights out of existing knowledge or experience, to be immersed in challenging tasks or questions, and to build the capacity for empathy and tolerance. Specifically to this course, the approach will strengthen basic social empathy, a necessary component in moral behavior shaped by perceived obligation to others. Scholarship into and supporting the effectiveness of collaborative learning often manifests in one of three principle theoretical approaches: socio-constructivist, socio-cultural and shared cognition theory.²⁵

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) “consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems...”²⁶ CIT arose out of a desire by the United States Army Air Forces Aviation Psychology Program to develop functional descriptions of human behavior in defined situations during and immediately after World War II. Their goal was to create a systematic means to ascertain and gauge expressed behavior in relation to stated situational norms. More

recently the technique has been employed to measure institutional performance, procedures and proficiency as well as to set ethical standards.²⁷

The technique entails conducting interviews of individuals or groups of individuals: 1.) who can characterize the nature of a particular situation, 2.) who have observed others active in the situation and 3.) who can judge the saliency of this observed behavior in relation to the situation, so characterized. The results of this research activity, the categorized observations, forming the basis for what the original researchers named critical incidents.

Student groups in the course will use the CIT as a means to collectively and systematically gather and categorize data (directly and anecdotally) from individuals involved in and proximate to design including designers, design clients and design consumers. They will be seeking descriptions of design related situations, interactions or outcomes that required ethical consideration, moral choice and behavior justification (named critical incidents in CIT terminology). Student groups will also use CIT as a means to collectively audit and negotiate inter- and intra-group understanding of current human conduct as it finds expression across the panoply of media available for human expression, thereby creating a grounded framework for bridging altruistic internal states to pragmatic design practice and connecting the pair with the wider world.

In the concluding section of this essay, a proposed course project is presented to demonstrate how these three teaching strategies — informed by desired learning outcomes and supported by underlying theoretical propositions — can animate a specific course learning experience.

Course Project: Brief Overview

The course project introduces the critical incident technique and combines it with case method and collaborative learning. The project has three principle goals:

- 1) Sensitize students to the larger situated nature of personal ethical dilemmas and the moral gradations that color contemporary design practice.
- 2) Ground their ethical analysis and moral imagination in lived, professional experience rather than disassociated ethical theory.
- 3) Create collaborative relationships where students are required to negotiate and compromise to successfully systematize and analyze research data.

The project has three phases:

- *Phase 1* – Ask student teams to employ the critical incident technique (CIT) to gather contextual descriptions of critical incidents from working design practitioners. In this task students are asked to interview designer's to obtain their respective descriptions of one or more professional moral dilemmas that precipitated situated ethical reflection, moral decision making and behavior justification.
- *Phase 2a* – Ask the student teams to systematize these incident descriptions by collaboratively aggregating the individual moral conflicts into larger categories by virtue of their putative similarities.
- *Phase 2b*. Within each sorted moral category of dilemmas, have the student teams arrange the corresponding moral responses along a continuum representing (in their critical judgment) more to less meritorious actions. For example, in response to dilemmas arising out of conflicts over the rights of a client and the good of a larger

social group, a ranking might place diligence to balance the rights of design buyers and end users equally' at the top and 'a belief that meeting contractual obligations trumps any notion of social justice' at the bottom, or vice versa, depending on a particular group's collective ethical rationale.²⁸

- *Phase 3* – Finally, have each student team use their research findings and analysis as the basis for a written case study. Each group's case will focus on one particular category of aggregated moral dilemmas and ranked ethical responses. Each student team then presents their case as a means to defend their collective ethical reasoning as it was used to aggregate the moral dilemmas and to justify the rankings of the corresponding moral responses. Student teams will also be encouraged to envision and support alternative responses to the identified moral dilemmas, thereby augmenting ethical analysis with moral imagination.

Conclusion

The altruistic impulse animating the AIGA *Living Principles for Design* and the pragmatic incredulity that will inevitably confront it suggest that two visions of design ethicality, legitimacy and agency continue to battle for dominance with both locked in an ongoing skirmish for the hearts and minds of practitioners and for the territory where they practice.

This essay has suggested that in a conflict where both parties have legitimate claims to the future, an armistice is preferable to a pyrrhic victory. It is an accommodation achieved not through ideological stridency but through synthetic transformation — grounding vague altruism in lived experience and elevating pragmatism out of cynical determinism, and lucid discernment — acknowledging the inescapable interdependency of internal ethical states with external circumstances.

One path leading to this rapprochement is through the classroom. And along that path is a compelling learning experience introduced in this essay: a new graduate course in design ethics structured to teach students how to understand and reconcile the altruistic impulse that is the best in design practice with the hard-edged pragmatism common to its everyday practice. It is a necessary forum where future generations of designers can begin to transform dreamed of maximum responses to human concerns into a new pragmatic minimum for ethically informed and morally responsible design practice.

Notes

¹ To view or download this document visit: <http://www.livingprinciples.net/index.htm> (Accessed January 12, 2010).

² For critique of neoliberalism see: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ For an exposition on the tension existing between moral codes and the law see: James Fieser, “Do Businesses Have a Moral Obligation Beyond What the Law Requires?” *Journal of Business Ethics* 15 (1996): 457–468.

⁴ Richard Rorty, “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London, Penguin Group, 1999): 23 – 46. Rorty explores Goodman’s conceptions of pragmatism and actions informed by belief in ultimate truths, along with Dewey and Davidson’s in this chapter of his book. In chapter 4, “Ethics Without Principles,” Rorty examines the same issue from another perspective. Suggesting that we should guide our actions less to answer the traditional question, ‘Is our knowledge of things adequate to the way things really are?’ and more to address the practical question, ‘Can our future be made better than our present?’

⁵ John Thackara, *In the Bubble – Designing in a Complex World* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005).

⁶ For example: Nigel Whiteley, *Design for Society* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 1993). Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

⁷ Carleton B. Christensen, “Popping the Bubble: the Ethical Responsibility for Design (review of John Thackara’s *In the Bubble*),” *Design Philosophy Papers* 2 (2006): ¶130.

⁸ Dean Nieuwsma, “Alternative Design Scholarship: Working Toward Appropriate Design,” *Design Issues* 20(3) (2004): 13–24.

⁹ Gene Laczniaik, “Business Ethics: A Manager’s Primer,” *Business*, (January-March 1983): 23–29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ Gael McDonald and Gabriel Donleavy, "Objections to the Teaching of Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 14(10) (1995): 840.

¹² James R. Glenn, "Can a Business and Society Course Affect the Ethical Judgment of Future Managers?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 11(2): 217–223.

¹³ LaRue Hosmer, "The Other 388. Why a Majority of Our Schools of Business Administration Do Not Offer a Course in Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 4 (1) (1985): 17–22.

¹⁴ For example: Muriel J. Bebeau, "The Defining Issues Test and the Four Component Model: Contributions to Professional Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 31(3) (2002): 271–295. Terrence R. Bishop, "Integrating Business Ethics into an Undergraduate Curriculum," *Journal of Business Ethics* 11(4) (1992): 291–299. Gael McDonald and Gabriel Donleavy, "Objections to the Teaching of Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 14(10) (1995): 840–853. George L. Pamental, "The Course in Business Ethics: Can it Work?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 8 (1989): 547–551.

¹⁵ According to its website, "The Hastings Center is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit bioethics research institute founded in 1969. The Center's mission is to address fundamental ethical issues in the areas of health, medicine, and the environment as they affect individuals, communities, and societies." <http://www.thehastingscenter.org/About/Default.aspx?id=892> (Accessed April 12, 2010).

¹⁶ Cited by The Ethics Education Library, <http://ethics.iit.edu/eelibrary/?q=node/187> (Accessed April 13, 2010).

¹⁷ *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, Edited by Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok (New York: The Plenum Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Daniel Callahan, "Goals in the Teaching of Ethics," in *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, pp. 61-80. Edited by Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok (New York: The Plenum Press, 1980): 68.

¹⁹ William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1899): ¶2.

²⁰ Philippe Gauthier, “Not good enough? a response to Wolfgang Jonas, ‘A special moral code for design?’” *Design Philosophy Papers* 4 (2006): ¶5.

²¹ M. M. Lombardi, “Authentic Learning for the 21st Century: An Overview,” Educause Learning Initiative, Diana G. Oblinger (Ed.), (2007).

²² For instance: Gael McDonald and Gabriel Donleavy, “Objections to the Teaching of Business Ethics,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 14(10) (1995): 840–853. George L. Pamental, “The Course in Business Ethics: Can it Work?” *Journal of Business Ethics* 8 (1989): 547–551.

²³ See: A. Collins, “Cognitive Apprenticeship and Instructional Technology,” In Lorna Idol and Beau Fly Jones (Eds.) *Educational Values and Cognitive Instruction: Implications for Reform* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991): 121–138. And: R. Spiro, P. Feltovich, M. Jacobson and R. Coulson, “Cognitive Flexibility, Constructivism, and Hypertext: Random Assess Instruction for Advanced Knowledge Acquisition in Ill-Structured Domains,” (1995), In Duane B. Graddy, “Cognitive Flexibility Theory as a Pedagogy for Web-Based Course Design,” *Teaching Online in Higher Education Online Conference*, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, (2001). And: Dimitrios Thanasoulas, “Constructivist Learning,” <http://eltnewsletter.com/back/April2001/art542001.htm> (Accessed April 3, 2010).

²⁴ Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor, “What is Collaborative Learning?” in Anne Goodsell, Michelle Maher, Vincent Tinto, Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor, *Collaborative Learning: A Sourcebook for Higher Education* (National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University, 1992): 1.

²⁵ For respective examples of the three theoretical strands, see: W. Dose, “The Development of Individual Competencies Through Social Interaction,” in H.C. Foot, M.J. Morgan, and R.H. Shute (Eds.) *Children Helping Children* (Chichester: J. Wiley & Sons, 1990): 43–64. L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). J. Lave, *Cognition in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

²⁶ John C. Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique," *Psychological Bulletin* 51(4) (1954): 327–343.

²⁷ Nicholas Hobbs, "The Development of a Code of Ethical Standards for Psychology," *American Psychologist* 3 (1948): 80–84.

²⁸ Aggregating and ranking should be informed by ethical rationale negotiated between respective members of each group. The critical thinking employed to arrive at these rationales is as important as their analytical rigor and justificatory content.