Blaire Hinkle

Design Ethics | FS25

Professor Ben Van Dyke

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Future Histories

Consideration and respect for others' values and ethics often lead to conflict when having differing personal beliefs and understanding that their beliefs are just as valid and valuable as your own, especially from the perspective of a designer. The creation of any type of work, whether it is a face scanner, a poster, a feedback loop, or the many different inventions and creations that we humans have fabricated, requires us to consider how the work we create impacts or will impact others. Every type of design has a political impact; creatives hold the power to continue feeding power systems upheld by technology and design, or to break those systems through improved accessibility and consideration for those negatively impacted and ostracized. It is my belief that being a good designer starts with being a good human. Showing humility, consideration, and openness to feedback while being aware of our own values and biases when we are creating is imperative to creating accessible and inclusive work.

Studying design ethics has made me consider how my core values and personal experiences impact my views and decisions as a designer. Being raised by a single mother in poverty made me very aware of the privileges I currently have, gave me a more diverse perspective, and has given me a stronger understanding of how biases can severely impact the treatment and opportunities afforded to those who have less or are not favored by systems of power. I also have Autism and ADHD, which often create obstacles for me in my cognitive functioning, and my understanding of others; These obstacles further push me to work harder to understand the "why" of others' values and beliefs. The experiences I had when I was young and my experience with neurodevelopmental disorders have solidified my main core value of respect, and by proxy, the values of honesty, understanding, and kindness. In my personal beliefs, I should approach every person, even those I disagree with, with a foundational level of respect, because living is the hardest thing you can do. Showing consideration and attempting to understand their beliefs is both showing respect for their lived experiences and allows me to learn and critically think about my own beliefs and values. I believe that it costs nothing to approach others with honesty, understanding, and kindness, which benefits me by allowing me to learn and evolve my values, just as long as my kindness is not allowed to be taken for granted.

In this essay, I have organized the questions that emerged from my coursework in design ethics into 5 sections: Instinct and Power; Social Justice, Equity, and Accessibility; Technology, Innovation, and Responsibility; Individual Moral Agency vs. Institutional Pressure; and Self-Actualization and Power. These sections have been organized by the categories that discuss issues affecting design, to the direct conversion of design and design practices. By organizing these sections in this order, the fundamentals of questions about the core ethics of design will be illustrated and build upon each other to create a foundation before covering more direct discussions of design and design

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practices, and how a designer's morals and beliefs are or are not intentionally implemented into the work they create, and why.

Human Instinct and Power

As I've had talks about our humility or selfishness regarding our actions as humans, I've often noticed a clear distinction between ourselves as humans and other animals. I find this separation extremely interesting, especially within conversations of our evolution and instincts. Instincts of creating community, appeasing others, and creating connections with others are all instincts that still linger today with our extremely social natures. It is because of these instincts that I have come to the belief that every action is inherently selfish, even those done out of pure kindness. I often perform good deeds simply because it makes me happy to see others happy, which is selfish. I don't believe all actions are bad because they are selfish; there are many good selfish actions, but I believe that it is important to acknowledge that almost every action is transactional in some way. However, it is the instincts for survival and power over others that have led to many actions, both good and bad, to play out. Such as inviting others into your community or life, which can be deemed as good in many ways, but also could be seen as increasing the number of people to hold more power than another rivaling community. And then the judgment of whether an action was good or bad comes from how that power is obtained, held, and utilized.

+ **Was the holding of power over others inevitable due to our nature, or was the progression of agriculture and using food as power the spark that led to the dehumanization of others to strive for our own pursuits?**
+ Is our disconnection of ourselves as humans from animals what leads us to view ourselves as altruistic, instead of categorizing our behavior as selfish and instinctual?
+ At what point are we learning to continue to keep our community systems open and accessible, versus learning to gain power and control over other communities?

Social Justice, Equity, and Accessibility

Coming from a background experiencing various levels of privilege has led me to try my best to approach almost every situation with an open mind and from a perspective of curiosity and understanding. I have learned a lot about my own morals, ethics, and biases throughout my interactions with my coursework. And in my reading of *Radical Humility by Jennifer Cole Wright,* I found myself getting "mildly pissed off" due to the rigidity of the view of true humility needing to

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come from a place of complete neutrality, which I think is simply impossible. There is no such thing as complete neutrality, as every single person who has ever lived has a bias. I believe that claiming not to have a bias is a direct lie and undermines the work being done to view a situation with humility; I think that to view the world with the most humility is to be aware of your own biases and understand how those biases can impact your view and understanding of a situation. Being a designer often requires me to utilize humility when creating my work and acknowledge where my biases have led me to create work that is inaccessible or insensitive to certain groups of people, as well as analyze designs that have unintentionally or intentionally done the same thing. In my design ethics course, we discussed how choosing not to address insensitivity or accessibility issues as a designer can perpetuate power imbalances and reinforce dangerous biases that directly affect the lives of many marginalized groups.

+ **Is it required that we pretend not to have a bias to behave in the most humanitarian way possible, or would you be behaving with more humility if you become fully aware of your bias and understand how it may affect your point of view when addressing the world in the most neutral and de-centered way possible?**
+ How does the inaccessibility to higher education in America impact the pool of diverse candidates going into fields requiring a degree?
+ How does the role of fairness and accessibility play a factor in discussions of the effects of design?
+ Does the amount of responsibility held by designers change because a problem affects a larger audience rather than a specific group of people?

Technology, Innovation, and Responsibility

Technology has become so deeply integrated into daily life that many people have become completely dependent on it. Functions such as instant messaging, Google searches, job applications, finding a home, and managing our finances have become lifelines for many; survival and success in society are extremely dependent on our ability to access and utilize these systems. Technology has created many opportunities, allowed for continued connection across large distances, and has had many other positive impacts; However, technology has also furthered the rift in opportunities afforded to those who are not privileged enough to access it or are outliers of the groups the technology was created to be utilized by, and for those who are capable of successfully utilizing technology, their information is continuously collected and sold by the companies controlling the systems we depend

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on. I have many feelings surrounding the further integration and growth of technology, and its continuing demand for our personal information. In a world where the collection of sensitive information would be treated as personal property, and not treated as a commodity, I believe that there is a lot of good that could come from surveillance, data collection, and a hypermap. However, this is not the case for the majority of institutions, making the hypermap more of a liability for many, especially those in marginalized communities, which would greatly compromise the benefits.

　　　　As a person from Gen Z, I have grown up with an almost constant interaction with technology, often viewing it as a necessity. As many of my peers and I have gotten older, I have found myself distancing from technology in much of my free time. With many of my hobbies, prioritizing the separation from technology simply because I have almost always had it there, and heavily associate it with the idea of work, instead of leisure. I now find myself questioning how I would like to raise my kids with the continued development and integration of technology, and its recorded effects on Gen Alpha. Ensuring my children don't have a dependency on technology without robbing them of communication, learning, and opportunities is a task that raises many logistical and ethical questions, as it would be impossible to provide my children with the same opportunities and connections I was able to have without allowing them to have a strong connection with technology.

+ **How are we capable of benefiting from a hypermap when we consistently prioritize the monetary gain from the collection of data and disregard the ethical issues raised by the daily collection of our data in our interactions with technology?**
+ How do we raise our kids in a way that limits their dependence on technology without ostracizing them from their peers?
+ How does technology impact the opportunities afforded to those who are not able to effectively use required systems?
+ What is the line between creation for the betterment of civilization and creation simply for the sake of it?

Individual Moral Agency vs. Institutional Pressure

　　　　As a worker who provides a service, it is often required that designers interact with work, projects, research, or even people they disagree with to pay their bills, keep their jobs, or even advance their careers. Reserving the right to refuse to award a service to someone is a right that I feel that many should have; you should never feel forced to provide something to someone if you do not wish to do so. However, the other side of this coin is having to be able to take a rejection of service myself because

someone does not wish to provide me with what I requested, which is perfectly acceptable if I can access the same or similar service elsewhere. However, if I or someone else is unable to access that service elsewhere, let alone the reasoning behind the refusal, it can cause a large range of ethical issues and questions to be raised.

In the case of 303 Creative v. Elenis, a designer refused a service to a same-sex couple and preemptively filed a lawsuit to protect their right to protect both their right to refuse service and their own beliefs. The designer was then sued by the state of Colorado for discrimination, and the case was taken to the Supreme Court, where the justices ruled in favor of the designer. While I agree that everyone should hold the right to refuse service, however, there should be a clear line between a refusal of service protecting a designer's individual moral agency and discrimination. This could also be taken in a way where someone may be afraid to refuse services because of the assumption that they are discriminating against someone or a group, or they may be afraid due to the consequences of their refusal, such as a negative impact on their business, career, or personal life.

+ Are the court rulings on 303 Creative v. Elenis based on the protection of the First Amendment, or was this case decided by the filings made and the order they were made?

+ How do the pressures of society and individual well-being impact the creative liberties of working designers?

+ **Is there a clear line between a designer protecting their individual moral agency through a refusal to provide services to a group or individual they disagree with and discriminating against a group because they refused services?**

Self-Actualization and Creative Practice

Many creatives, including myself, create personal projects and works that appease them and align with their beliefs in many ways; however, there are often many blocks that can keep designers from expressing themselves professionally, leading to a more neutral stance being taken in their work. This phenomenon is highlighted in *Citizen Designer by Katherine McKoy*, where McKoy illustrates the need for designers to express themselves more in their work and criticizes neutrality and its perpetuation in design education. Although I do agree with the sentiment, I believe that neutrality in professional design work is a much more complex issue than simply choosing to express yourself in your work, especially for young designers. Many outside pressures and a person's privilege can affect one's capacity to reflect their personal beliefs in the projects they participate in and the work they

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create. As an example, someone with less tenure, experience, or a less stable position in a company greatly limits their ability to choose to participate in projects they personally support when compared to a person with a more stable position. Many other outside pressures could also impact this capability, such as a person's race, sexuality, gender, financial stability, political climate, cultural pressures, etc.

+   **How would the world of design be affected if every designer were able to exclusively create work that aligned with their personal beliefs?**

+   Is the political climate in America expediting or hindering the occurrence of political messages being included in design?

+   Is the confinement of creative expression by professional guidelines hindering or propelling the growth and development of design?

Going through these topics in my design ethics course led me to understand the foundation of morals and ethics I hold myself to, and the reasoning behind why I conduct myself in the way that I do. This course also allowed me to become more aware of the blind spots formed by my biases and privilege. Although I do not feel that my thinking or values have changed through my interaction with this course, I do feel that I have been able to expand my thinking further by applying my morals and ethics to topics I wasn't even fully aware existed. The expansion of my thinking has allowed me to gain confidence in my capabilities of having complex ethical discussions with a wide range of people, each with their own views and beliefs, and come from an open and understanding perspective without compromising my own morals and ethics. I did not find much about the class surprising; however, I did find it extremely interesting and gratifying to critically think, form opinions, discuss, and even debate heavy topics. I plan on continuing to seek out ethical topics to research and apply the skills I gained in class to both my personal and professional life, and to continue asking questions with no right or wrong answers. And to leave a document full of questions with one last question, I must ask: How is a designer able to work in their fullest capacity and continue to exercise their skills within a professional environment that offers a multitude of restrictions?