QUESTIONS OF VALUE - ETHICS IN THE DESIGN CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

Decisions made by designers multiply in their consequences, as products are mass-produced. With changing designer roles addressing systems, services and symbols the questions of value a designer faces also grow. The Ethics of Design is gaining new importance, and is again frequently discussed in literature. This article discusses educational challenges and opportunities equipping design students with knowledge and skills in exercising informed judgement about questions of value. To elucidate how ethics is dealt with in (higher) design education, the authors reviewed perspectives on ethics and its role in education, interviewed 6 program directors, and based on reflections from these employed insights in a workshop with design students.

Keywords: Decision-making, values, ethics in design curricula.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Questions of value in design

Ethical issues in design are getting more attention than ever. Commodities are mass-produced and globally used, and decisions made by designers multiply in their consequences. The design professions are gaining increasing influence in society and designerly methods are frequently applied in other areas [1]. With these changing roles addressing systems, services and symbols, the questions of value a designer faces also grow. The Ethics of Design is here gaining new importance, and is again frequently discussed in literature e.g. in the fields of graphic design [2], design for sustainability [3] and Human-Centred Design [4].

Addressing ethics implies addressing people's values and beliefs. While having values, norms and ethical attitudes are a part of the human condition, and the human challenge is to understand what is right or wrong and act accordingly, the task for a designer is to learn how to recognize values and norms, how to decide which have to be met and how to realize them in a product or service [5].

One way of categorizing existing perspectives on ethics in design and design curricula is to see them within three dimensions [6].

1. Ontological i.e. concepts and approaches that discuss the designers' role and responsibilities: 'designers as moral beings'.
2. Epistemological/methodological i.e. in relation to the design process and its trade-offs, e.g. tools and or methods that consider ethical aspects such as ethical decision-making
3. Practical i.e. in relation to 'ethically' correct products and services, such e.g. recycled or energy saving products, social entrepreneurship etc.

1.2 Ethics

On a general level, several perspectives can be taken on ethics. Ethics comes from Greek "ethos" way of living, and concerns theories about moral action. For example: Do workers in the 3rd world have the same labour rights as workers in the 1st? If yes, is it then right to buy cheap clothes?

While ethics is theoretical, moral concerns practical decision-making. The term moral comes from the Latin "mores" and means "custom", "lifestyle". It is a decision about the right action. For example: When I believe, that all workers have the same rights and nevertheless want to buy cheap clothes, I have a moral problem.

Western moral theories or ethics can be structured within in three areas: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics [7]. Meta-ethics examines the origins or sources of ethical principles and provides definitions of ethical concepts in order to understand what can motivate moral conduct. Normative ethics takes a practical role in forming theoretical moral standards to regulate right and wrong conduct. The main meta-ethical concepts are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Ethic theories [8]

Position	*Type*	*Criteria of moral action*
Teleological: Moral actions must have a goal	**Utilitarism** (e.g. Bentham, Singer)	**Happiness**. The most moral action gives the most happiness to as many people (beings) as possible. Example: Everybody shall have the possibility to live a good life.
	Eudaimonism (e.g. Aristotle)	**Good Life** Moral actions are those which contribute to a good society.
	Ethics of Responsibility (e.g. Jonas)	**Minimising harm.** In case of doubt one has to skip an action until the consequences are known.
Deontological Moral actions are independent from actual circumstances and universally valid.	**Ethics of Justice** (e.g. Rawls)	**Justice.** The criterion for morally right action is a hypothetical test, where the participants decide only by criteria of general human interests.
	Ethics of Duty (e.g. Kant)	**Categorical Imperative.** The criterion for a morally right action is if its maxim is universal applicable: "Act in a way that the maxim of your action can always become a general law."

Applied ethics examines and resolves specific controversial issues by using the conceptual tools of meta-ethics and normative ethics. Contemporary examples of applied ethics in design are, besides the fields mentioned above, consumer and -marketing ethics [9] and 'technoethics' [10].

1.3 Ethics in the curricula

National Higher Education (HE) regulations in Sweden [11] and Norway state that students should be demonstrate understanding of societal and ethical aspects. Norway's National Curriculum Regulations for Engineering Education declares: "The education is to facilitate and safeguard the interaction between ethics, environment, technology, individual and society" [12]. Realising the objectives may however be challenging. Despite regulations like these, the issue of students' ability to contextualise their work have been an issue on which many Swedish design programs received negative comments in the quality assurance evaluation [13].

Some key aspects that have been discussed in literature in relation to addressing ethics in the design curriculum are: a) Raising awareness and understanding of ethical issues in (engineering) design, partly through theory and partly through practical projects [14] b) Fostering justification of arguments [15], and c) Developing strategies and methods for ethical judgements in design trough practical assignments [16].

1.4 Aim

HE needs to prepare students for addressing ethical issues, but is HE really prepared to do this? This article presents a step within a wider series of activities aimed at addressing reflections, starting points and ethics in design research and –education. A first aim is to examine how ethics is addressed in design education, with a focus on overall curricula. A second aim is to identify practical educational challenges and opportunities equipping design students with knowledge and skills in exercising informed judgement about questions of value.

2   THE INTERVIEW STUDY

Comprehending how current design HE actually work with education on ethical questions, we conducted interviews with 6 program coordinators from Swedish and Norwegian universities, each lasting roughly 30 min. Participants were asked about ethics in the curriculum (e.g. how well prepared the graduating students were, Teaching and Learning activities, Intended Learning Outcomes, Assessment tasks), as well as their understanding of the relevance of ethics to the design professions. The interviews were recorded, and transcribed into summaries, which served as a basis for a bottom up content analysis.

The interviewees all claimed to address ethics within their programs, though some admittedly think they could do it in a more informed way. The primary topoi of relevance seemed to be environmental and social issues. In addition, several participants expressed ethical concerns when becoming professionally involved with topics such as designing for weapon and/or tobacco industry.

2.1   Ethics in design

There seems to be a general agreement that ethics is important to design, exemplified with a general assertion that 'Designers are a relatively engaged group of people who are used to raising questions'. Furthermore, participants emphasised a designs relation to ethics: 'You have to understand people- be somewhat of a thing-psychologist'. They also described a general assumption about making things that are positive for people on basis of societal values: 'You are indoctrinated in the well and woe of users'. This also influences the students: 'It is surprising how fast the new students adopt the design role model and realize the responsibility that lie in developing products and systems at based on users and society's conditions'.

Several of our informants put forward explanations for why design might hold a special position: describing e.g. how: 'It has always been important for designers to understand the target group/.../ it has always been like that, empathy long before these ethics discussions'. Two participants made claims about designers possibly through the holistic of the profession may be especially sensitive. Furthermore it was put forward that the design profession has lively ethical discussions, and that this also applies to HE: 'Design education is strongly anchored in ethics, stronger than in other disciplines /.../we talk about the aesthetics of systemic design /.../ethics and aesthetics are closely linked, and respect and humbleness are important values'.

However, as described by one of our participants there is a general consensus that 'Designers should make the world a better place to live in, not work for maximizing corporate profit', but that taking the next step may be more difficult. A key challenge brought forward by some of our participants was the scope of questions discussed and the students' comprehension. Participants commented that 'Everyone wants to be on the good side'. In several cases they mentioned on how explicating one's position was not only important for one self, (s)he in many cases also need to collaborate with others, why one in some cases have to be careful about becoming associated with certain types of products. Being explicit, was stressed as even more important in a commercial context: 'In the comfort of the Uni you can afford to be different compared to the commercial world'. Another notes 'Designers work a lot with intuition, there is a risk of not being able to explain the underlying intent'. The participant further explains how this is a problem when designers to an increasing degree work in teams. A need for making arguments explicit was noticeable in relation to professional roles: 'When you work in practice you need to argue, you have to be able to convince- feeling is not enough'.

Other participants stress a need to straighten out one's position in advance in order to be able to make a difference; 'My experiences as a practicing designer is that ethical questions can come very surprising /.../ If you haven't then thought through your position, it is easy that someone else takes the decision, that the window of opportunity for influence closes'.

2.2   Learning ethics in design

One of the participants described how the typical early revelation for students is that they are part of consumption society, but that their understanding is typically at least initially limited: 'They think they are well prepared because it is a theme they have heard a lot about and are familiar with'. Others commented on how some issues tend to become one-sided; that questions are so to speak already solved, and that it becomes more interesting when there is a diversity in positions: 'Students should become aware of conflicts of interests- They need to see that questions change over time and that there is not ONE answer'.

Our informants also commented on the degree to which students engaged with issues, stressing e.g. the importance of making students aware that opinions may differ- and the importance of taking a stance. One participant described ethics as 'Subjective- what feels right'. Another describes how some students struggle with ethical, issues and in some cases get provoked, while 'Others have a strict academic relation to it'.

2.3 Teaching ethics in design

Several of our participants commented that ethics is often thought of as taught implicitly; 'Would like to think that the students are well prepared upon leaving college /…/there seems to be an assumption about this as something we know and do without a need to be very explicit'. Teaching ethics may be challenging for various reasons; e.g. because it was found difficult to delimit; 'big questions often become very difficult to manage', and that issues also change over time. In terms of strategies for arranging Teaching and Learning Activities, several participants describes using external parties for introducing ethics, in e.g. workshops and seminar discussions.

Ethical issues also in many cases came into more general projects; 'we run project based education which means they need to relate to the situation in which you act'. In some cases the ambition seems to be to set a good example; 'Throughout the years, none of our students have worked with or considered working with arms related projects'. Another participant brings up projects that could be problematic; 'I encourage the students not to just say no to things that could be questioned but where you could possibly make a difference'. Problematizing is in some cases also made intentionally; 'We run projects with things that provoke a bit- critical design and things like that'. Some even use the provocation as an explicit teaching strategy: 'We work with project that have an ethical anchoring, but also projects that are purely provocative- To see if they react to it'.

Our respondents claimed to have explicit learning objectives concerning ethics, but they did not seem to be driving how ethics was taught. Similarly, our participants were of the opinion that ethics was brought up not so much in a distinct teaching and learning activity, but throughout their educational programs; '…give room for reflections, not just one truth and politically correct projects. /…/ It says in the curriculum that it should be part of. But it is probably more like an ingredient that should be part of the totality". In terms of specific Intended Learning Outcomes our participants quoted general descriptions about e.g. sustainability. However, it seems like Intended Learning Outcomes were not always formalized, but in some cases remained a tacit expectation based on norms. However: 'We need to be careful about planting too many values. You can end up brainwashing people', or as put by another participant 'There are some problems with taking one ideal or another as a starting point for teaching. Who's ideal is it that should be followed?'

While several participants comment on ethics as being central to the profession and to many projects; they seemed less confident that it is explicitly addressed in assessment; '(We assess) novelty of ideas, how well the product is adapted- and through that also the ethical I suppose'. Another participant put it 'We don't address ethical questions directly but we expect students to present in a way that shows awareness in relation to questions and norms'.

2.4 Insights

Not surprisingly, the interviews indicate that students may need support in engaging with ethics, but ethics as such did not appear to be at the core of teacher's competence. While participants also brought up some alternatives, the dominant teaching strategy seemed to be based around discussions in relation to projects based on more or less tacit norms. Nevertheless there seem to be some keys in relation to teaching ethics. More particularly: students could be provided with situations triggering reflections, opportunities to see nuances of issues, being able to see and respect the positions of others (e.g. users), and understanding bases for these positions. Themes for assignments could also be selected as to be more or less engaging / provocative to students.

3   THE WORKSHOP

The authors hosted a small workshop with postgraduate students, lasting 3 hours. In this we strived to incorporate some of the insights from the interviews. The onset was to through as series of moves (see table 2) trigger reflections, engage the students in elaborating issues, and to convey some basic alternative foundations for moral reasoning (see table 1). Furthermore it was considered important to draw on examples of relevance to participants. The ambition for the workshop was to find themes that

were of significance to participants, take them one step further in explicating their own positions, make them aware to realize other positions, and consider alternative grounds for making priorities.

Table 2. Moves in the workshop

Workshop phase	Activity
Preparations	Students reflect on answers to preparatory questions about examples relating to their practice where they have a) taken a position b) find challenging
Explicating issues	Students describe their problems and explain their positions to peers
Presentation	Teacher give short lecture covering examples and a conceptual framework stressing dilemmas
Identifying dilemmas	Students actively employ a model in elaborating dilemmas in 'their' problems
Feedback & Discussion	Teacher gives feedback, discussions in group
Presentation	Teacher give short presentation of alternative principles for making ethical judgements
Considering alternative positions	Students actively experiment with alternative ways of looking at their dilemmas.
Feedback & Discussion	Teacher gives feedback, discussions in group

Regarding the content of ethical challenges, students brought up issues around e.g. Nuclear power, Inequality between 1st and 3rd world, and gender issues with toys. Commenting outcomes and benefits from insights one student emphasized being able to see inconsistencies in own positions but also seeing that there are alternatives and possibly thereby respecting others results in having different choices. Other students agreed; 'Like you said: I thought I had a clear opinion but now to understand myself better'. In this, we also had some positive comments in relation to introducing theories/conceptual frameworks; "the frameworks helps you take a stance. For me it was very easy to come up with answers to the three questions, but it was really interesting to expand with the different perspectives. However, students also pointed out that universal principles can be difficult to access without concrete practice; 'I think it helped to have a test and try the theories. Have taken course where most of the theories were applied but having a tangible exercise wand listening to the other examples really helps.'

4   DISCUSSION
The following section categorizes findings within the aforementioned three dimensions of ethics in design:

Ontologically, Both in design literature and amongst educators there seem to be a conviction that design is steeped in ethical issues, with a dominant theme being that designers need to understand the position of others.

Epistemologically / methodologically, there seem to be reliance on tacit reasoning; on established professional norms and intuitive moral reasoning. However, some educators also show a concern for situations were students are to mimic a value-system, calling for more informed approaches. Our workshop also showed that it is possible to make students realise that different positions can be taken, and that it is possible to give them complex conceptual tools and methods also within quite a limited period of time.

Practically, designers face a range of value laden decisions, both in relation to concrete design tasks and in relation to deciding whether to take on a certain project or not. It may be that some industries are easily avoided, while a person can also chose to take on the challenge of engaging with a project with transformative aspirations. Relating to ethics in design education the practical level can be used to reflect upon students' own design decisions related to products and services, but also how the communicate with stakeholders. It is also important to make students aware that they can make a point for their decisions in projects but are not alone responsible for the chosen solution. Finally educators should consider if a particular case requires ethics since not all design practice require ethical reflections.

5   CONCLUDING REMARKS
This paper is to be seen as an initial attempt at approaching value-laden questions in design from the perspective of ethics. The interviews were held with limited number of informants, sharing their reflections on how ethics is taught. A more formal analysis based on a more extensive theoretical and

empirical material, would be desirable, and we are grateful for suggestions as well as critique as we are planning to extend the study. Conclusively, ethics remains central to the design professions, and given the professional needs we expect it to be necessary for teachers and students to acquire skills in ethical decision-making in the future. Actively supporting students in comprehensive reflections beyond surface level acceptance of doing good, poses an important challenge to HE design programs. Conceptual tools, frameworks and theories, can at least to some degree support such reflections. For the future it remains to clarify and expand the ethical considerations/criteria for the development of product solutions and to implement them systematically in the overall product development decision-making and its trade-offs.

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