

Beyond Duty and Virtue in Design Ethics

Philippe d'Anjou

Introduction

An important issue concerning design ethics is the nature of the moral character of the designer.¹ Ethics in the disciplines of design has essentially been articulated around notions of duty and virtue,² which correspond broadly to Kantian and Aristotelian views respectively.³ These in turn belong to two general conceptions of ethics, namely imperative and attractive moralities.⁴ The imperative view refers to the principles of duty and universal law achieved through reason and to which one must obey in all circumstances. This is, for instance, what Kant calls the categorical imperative. Most professional codes of ethics and practice in design disciplines belong to that tradition. Virtue ethics is the practice of one's virtues that leads to the perfection of moral character, which implies that the character of the individual is somehow a fixed attribute or an objective feature.⁵ It is in opposition to these conventional conceptions of the imperative principle of duty and universal law, on the one hand, and of virtue ethics which treats a person's character as a collection of objective facts, on the other hand, that Sartre's view of human freedom and ethics has to be seized as a possible foundation for design ethics. Indeed, Sartre provides a radically different perspective on the nature of human character. A conception of design ethics based on a Sartrean existentialist conception of human reality may offer a particularly enlightening and useful perspective on the nature of the moral character of the designer and therefore a ground for design ethics.

In a Sartrean perspective, cause and motive⁶ (reason and emotion) cannot provide a definitive basis for the action of the individual in the pursuit and justification of moral duty or moral virtue. Cause and motive are to be placed in relation to a much more basic reality, namely the freedom of the individual. Indeed, the designer confronting a moral choice is free to choose, and by making a free choice he/she is creating his/her existence.⁷ According to Sartre, the "authenticity" with which the individual faces his/her freedom is the primary criterion for judging actions as ethically good or bad. Thus, if the designer's moral character (i.e., authenticity) has meaning in a Sartrean perspective, it is to be found not in instrumental reason but in being reflectively conscious of his/her human condition and acknowledging and accepting his/her freedom. For

- 1 An insightful account of design in relation to ethics can be found in the work of Tony Fry, where ethics is ontologically embodied in the agency of design, which is represented by both the designer and the designed. The focus in this article is on the person aspect of the agency of design ethics. See the essays by Tony Fry in *Design Philosophy Papers*. See also T. Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).
- 2 A quick survey of the literature that addresses design ethics, which has been growing since the last fifteen years, shows that the discourse articulates mainly according to these two ethical traditions. Without being exhaustive, I refer the reader to some prominent examples such as: W. Fox, (ed.), *Ethics and the Built Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000). W. Fox, *A Theory of General Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006). L. Pelletier, and A. Perez-Gomez (eds.), *Architecture, Ethics, and Technology* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994). B. Wasserman, et al., *Ethics and the Practice of Architecture* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2000). A. Snodgrass, and R. Coyne, *Interpretation in Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006). T. Spector, *The Ethical Architect* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001) and N. Ray, (ed.), *Architecture and its Ethical Dilemmas* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

- 3 Kant's ethical theory is mostly developed in his work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Morality for Kant is based on the obedience of universal principles established by reason. Kant is somehow the source of the deontological tradition in the professional disciplines. All code of deontology derives from such a tradition. The ethical study of Aristotle is mostly presented in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, morality is based on the exercise of a series of virtues that the individual practices in life in order to achieve the good life.
- 4 M. Canto-sperber, *La Philosophie Morale* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 52–53.
- 5 Findeli and Bousbaci propose an epistemological paradigm for architecture based on Aristotle and virtue ethics and the concepts of *poiesis* and *praxis*. See "More Acting, Less Making, a Place for Ethics in Architecture's Epistemology" in *Design Philosophy Papers 4* (2005). Snodgrass and Coyne propose similar insights for design education in *Interpretation in Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 111–15.
- 6 Sartre uses the French terms *motif* and *mobile*. In the English translation of *Being and Nothingness* by H. E. Barnes (1992), these terms are translated with *cause* and *motive* respectively. Cause in this case is understood as *reason* for action and refers to an external fact or situation without carrying the idea of determinism. Motive refers to an inner subjective fact or attitude, 562, 800, 804.
- 7 The Sartrean perspective presented in this paper is from his early work *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 1992.
- 8 Sartre explains the notion of "bad faith" in *Being and Nothingness*, chapter 2. Bad faith is the attempt by the individual to escape from responsibility and freedom by using self-deception.
- 9 In addition to the present article, I have written two other articles that address the issue of design ethics from a Sartrean perspective. See P. d'Anjou, "The Existential Self as Locus of Sustainability in Design" in *Design Philosophy Papers*, 3–4 (2007); and P. d'Anjou, "Toward an Horizon in Design Ethics" in *Science and Engineering Ethics*, (2009). DOI: 10.1007/s11948-009-9157-y.

the designer engaged in bringing a world into existence through the act of design, the main obstacle to achieving an authentic character is the attitude of "bad faith."⁸

Once we accept the idea that a person's morality does not consist of acting according to universal laws or is not made of fixed and objective virtues, then the following questions arise: on what basis do we judge the choices and actions of a designer who constantly faces ethical choices in ambiguous and complex situations? What sense can be made of the notion of "authentic" character for individuals in the practice of design? How is bad faith manifested in design decisions and actions? How might a Sartrean approach in design education and practice direct us toward authenticity in design and therefore in design ethics?

Sartre's writings are neglected in design ethics literature,⁹ yet his perspective on human freedom and character has relevance.¹⁰ This paper will introduce and explore the implications of such a perspective for design ethics, with specific attention to how such an approach might suggest changes in the way ethics is considered in design education as well as the way the designer deals with ethical issues.

Freedom: The Foundation of Action

In *Being and Nothingness*¹¹ Sartre addresses the role of "cause" and "motive" in the conduct of humans by clarifying the concept of action. He defines cause as the rational considerations that justify the action and motive as emotional subjectivity that drives one to act.¹² In order to understand the place of cause and motive in the conduct of the designer, it is essential to see how they relate to design as action. Sartre defines action in the following way:

... to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end; it is to produce an organized instrumental complex such that by a series of concatenations and connections the modification effected on one of the links causes modifications throughout the whole series and finally produces an anticipated result.¹³

To act is indeed to bring something into existence; but what is important is that action is intentional.¹⁴ Sartre asserts that no action can be causally explained. Further, intention is to be understood as seeing a lack and action implies as its condition the recognition of a *desideratum* (objective lack).¹⁵ For instance, a group is in need of a place for worshiping; a building for worshiping is therefore lacking in the present. The act of the designer is described as "creation of a building for worshiping." This action necessitates the conception of a new building that is lacking but is possible and desirable. What Sartre calls objective lack is what the act of creating the building is meant to fulfill. The designer acts in view of a desirable reality not yet realized. Intentions are not constituted of the simple consid-

- 10 The analysis here is limited to Sartre's early philosophy, mainly exposed in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, and to what scholars call his first ethics, i.e., ethics of authenticity. For more on Sartre's ethics see T. C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).
- 11 J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*
- 12 Ibid., 800, 804.
- 13 Ibid., 559.
- 14 Ibid. Also, on the issue of design defined in terms of intentional action, see P. Galle, "Design as Intentional Action, a Conceptual Analysis" in *Design Studies*, 20:1 (1999), 57–81.
- 15 Ibid., 560. Sartre calls that objective lack a "négativité" (negation).
- 16 Ibid., 561.
- 17 Ibid., 562.
- 18 Sartre calls the consciousness of the person, the conscious being, *being for-itself* as opposed to the nonconscious beings that he calls *being in-itself*. These notions are at the core of his ontology as encountered in *Being and Nothingness*.
- 19 *Being and Nothingness*, 59.
- 20 Ibid., 563.
- 21 For Sartre the apprehension of conditions and their meaning "implies for consciousness the permanent possibility of effecting a rupture with its own past, of wrenching itself away from its past so as to be able to consider it in the light of a non-being and so as to be able to confer on it the meaning which it has in terms of the project of a meaning which it does not have." Ibid., 563.
- 22 Causes and motives, "have meaning only inside a projected ensemble which is precisely an ensemble of non-existents. And this ensemble is ultimately myself as transcendence; it is Me insofar as I have to be myself outside of myself." Ibid., 564.
- 23 Ibid., 565.

eration of the real state of things.¹⁶ The statement that a group needs a place to worship does not imply in itself any judgment. But to claim that there should be a place for such worshipping is to consider the situation as lacking. Seeing the attributes of a context as lacks compared to a desirable possibility provides the basis for the designer's intention to transform the given context—creating a building. To act presupposes the conception of what *is not*, what *can become*, and what *should be* the reality in the mind of the designer. Hence two conclusions:

No factual state of affairs whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, a person's psychological "state," the forces of globalization and economic competition) is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the individual's consciousness toward what is not.

No factual state of affairs can determine consciousness to apprehend it as a negation or a lack.¹⁷ To the first conclusion, Sartre adds that an action is a projection of the person's consciousness¹⁸ toward what is not. This means that in acting, the designer aims at a non-existing reality in the present, and nothing that exists in the present can point to something that does not exist in the present. Sartre holds that the individual only—consciousness—effects the reference to what is non-existing. "Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world."¹⁹ The second conclusion emphasizes that no existing reality presents itself to a conscious individual with intrinsic meaning. Only humans are capable of imposing such meaning onto factual reality. Then "the indispensable and fundamental condition of all action is the freedom of the acting being,"²⁰ a freedom that consists in the designer's projection of a particular end. Actions being intentional involve that situations be comprehended as lacking. From here Sartre goes on to consider two aspects.

First, consciousness has the capability to break with and distance itself from its past and its surrounding conditions, and to confer a new meaning on them.²¹

Second, the individual's freedom is a basic condition of action, and causes and motives of actions can be grasped only in relation to this freedom.²² By positing the possibility of an ideal reality that does not exist, the designer gives him/herself causes to act. Likewise, motives can be understood only in relation to an end. The non-existent reality which the designer posits gives to a present motive its meaning, and if it is impossible to find actions without motives or prior causes, it is because motives and causes are integral parts of actions. However, the act is not explained by these causes and motives, rather, it is that "which decides its ends and its motives, and the act is the expression of freedom."²³

Sartre acknowledges the general meanings of causes to a point. Causes, or objective states of affairs, are used to explain actions. For instance, a design student's adoption of the principle

of sustainability can be explained with reference to a dominating academic or market ideology, which represents an objective fact. In this sense, "the cause is characterized as an objective appreciation of the situation."²⁴ However, an objective appreciation can be made only in light of a presupposed end and within the limits of the individual's project toward this end.²⁵ Consequently, the meaning of cause is qualified in this way:

We shall therefore use the term cause for the objective apprehension of a determined situation as this situation is revealed in the light of a certain end as being able to serve as the means for attaining this end.²⁶

Compared to traditional meanings, it is not the objectivity of realities that Sartre alters. The key element is that constituting some reality as cause for acting depends on the ends the individual proposes for him/herself. For instance, the instrumental implications of an object depend on what we intend; a knife can be used as a screwdriver. The cause as an objective evaluation of situations does not determine an action; it "appears only in and through the project of an action."²⁷ The individual must have projected him/herself "in this or that way in order to discover the instrumental implications of instrumental-things."²⁸ In brief, "the world gives counsel only if one questions it, and one can question it only for a well-determined end."²⁹

While cause refers to an objective calculation of a reality in light of a given end, motive refers to the subjective structures which are correlative with the cause.³⁰

In projecting toward some end, the individual constitutes causes of an objective reality. In the example above, the design student sees the power of sustainability as a cause for adopting its principles. The motive is being conscious of moving toward an end in light of which the cause was constituted. "The motive is nothing other than the apprehension of the cause insofar as this apprehension is self consciousness."³¹ The student's ambition is the subjective correlate of his/her constituting the power of sustainability as a cause for action. But such motives are not forces that pre-exist, they are embodied in the projects of which they are partial structures.

The cause, the motive, and the end are the three indissoluble terms of the thrust of a free and living consciousness, which projects itself toward its possibilities and makes itself defined by these possibilities.³²

Sartre concludes that the idea of rational choice arrived at by an objective deliberation about objective factors is an illusion. "How can I evaluate causes and motives on which I myself confer their value before all deliberation and by the very choice which I make of myself?"³³ Indeed, "When I deliberate the chips are down."³⁴

In summary, causes and motives are understood only within the structure of action, which is intentional. While causes are

24 Ibid., 575.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 575–76.

27 Ibid., 578.

28 Ibid., 577.

29 Ibid., 578.

30 Sartre puts it this way: "The consciousness which carves out the cause in the ensemble of the world has already its own structure; it has given its own ends to itself, it has projected itself toward its possibles, and it has its own manner of hanging on to its possibilities: this peculiar manner of holding to its possibles is here affectivity." Ibid.

31 Ibid., 579.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 581.

34 Ibid.

objective evaluations of realities, the constitution of causes from them depends on the interest or personal projection of the self. Motives are the subjective counterparts of causes constituted by the individual's projections in certain ways. But these projections do not refer to "will" which is equivalent to choosing some action. This could not happen without a prior projection of the self-guiding deliberate choice. In turn, choices make the projected individual become real. A number of questions arise about the nature of rational character in Sartre's philosophy if causes and motives are constituted in the individual's projection toward his/her possibilities. What are these more basic projects? How can one know them? Is it possible to find any causal meaning in them?

The particular causes, motives, and ends of actions, and actions themselves, are all part of a more inclusive structure. The fact that the individual could have acted otherwise leads to articulate the problem like this: "I could have done otherwise. Agreed. But at what price?"³⁵

The projects that give meaning to causes and motives are basic choices of oneself in one's way of responding to the world. The individual witnesses the choices he/she has made within the meanings that he/she ascribes to the world.

The value of things, their instrumental role, their proximity and real distance . . . do nothing more than to outline my image—that is, my choice . . . —that is, my being.³⁶

Thus, when the designer opts for a particular action, he/she chooses a particular project that is part of a fundamental project. The specific choice and action are not arbitrary; they are part of a certain way to envision the world. Doing otherwise involves a fundamental modification of the designer's choice of self. But "this modification is always possible."³⁷

The person's consciousness of his/her freedom to choose his/herself can bring out feelings of anguish and responsibility. The person becomes aware that his/her choices are not justifiable but are simply free assertions of his/her self.

. . . we are perpetually engaged in our choice and perpetually conscious of the fact that we ourselves can abruptly invert this choice and "reverse steam". . . . By the sole fact that our choice is absolute, it is fragile.³⁸

Thus, the project, from which causes and motives emerge, is a choice of the self at a fundamental level. And this choice is absolute.

The contention that freedom is absolute raises the question of the status of various conditions in human experience. Who can say that the individual is free in relation to objective conditions? In order to clarify the question of limits to human freedom, and to show again Sartre's view of how causes and motives emerge, it is necessary to review Sartre's discussion of some of these conditions.

35 Ibid., 585.

36 Ibid., 597.

37 Ibid., 598.

38 Ibid.

The given . . . could never be a cause for an action if it were not appreciated. In addition, the appreciation, if it is not to be gratuitous, must be effected in the light of something. And this something which serves to appreciate the given can be only the end. Thus the intention by a single unitary upsurge posits the end, chooses itself, and appreciates the given in terms of the end.³⁹

This does not mean that conditions are chosen to exist. Instead, “by the choice which it makes of its end, freedom causes the datum be revealed in this or that way, in this or that light in connection with the revelation of the world itself.”⁴⁰ Situations are constituted by the way that the individual relates to conditions. The level of difficulty in situations reveals as much about a person as it does about condition. To an architect, a building is easy or difficult to renovate, whereas to a pedestrian it is beautiful or ugly. Moreover, whether the building will be easy or difficult to renovate is not an objective property. What is difficult for one can be easy for someone else.

In a similar way, the past as a determinant of action depends on the person’s freely constituted project in the present. No individual can change the past. Still, the meaning of the past depends on the person’s commitments in the present.⁴¹

Character: The Project of Oneself

Character is often depicted as a given nature about a person. For Sartre a persistence of character only means that the person persists in a certain projection of him/herself. He argues that,

. . . character is a vow. When a man says, “I am not easy to please,” he is entering into a free engagement with his ill-temper, and by the same token his words are a free interpretation of certain ambiguous details in his past. In this sense there is no character; there is only a project of oneself.⁴²

The aim of Sartre’s description of various conditions is to clarify the human situation. His conclusions give rise to the question of whether causes or motives ought to be the priority of design ethics. While the individual lives among conditions, it is he/she who imbues meaning to those conditions through his/her way of being. The situation comes into being only as he/she transcends—projects—the given toward some end. Yet the situation is neither solely subjective nor objective. It is neither the impression of reality nor reality itself.

The situation . . . is a relation of being between a for-itself and the in-itself which the for-itself nihilates. The situation is the whole subject (he is nothing but his situation) and it is also the whole “thing” (there is never anything more than things). The situation is the subject illuminating things by his very surpassing, if you like; it is things referring to the subject his own image.⁴³

39 Ibid., 615.

40 Ibid., 626.

41 “. . . by projecting myself towards my ends, I preserve my ends, I preserve the past with me, and by action I decide its meaning. Who shall decide whether the period which I spent in prison after a theft was fruitful or deplorable? I—according to whether I give up stealing or become hardened. Who can decide the educational value of a trip, the sincerity of a profession of love, the purity of a past intention, etc.? It is I, always I, according to the ends by which I illuminate these past events.” Ibid., 640.

42 Ibid., 705.

Because situations exist in terms of the individual's projection of him/herself, Sartre asserts that a situation or a point of view cannot have any special importance. To say that a situation has particular significance is to say that the objective facts should receive some countenance. Yet "the world gives counsel only if one questions it, and one can question it only for a well-determined end."⁴⁴ With respect to a projected end, circumstances will be more or less suitable and have value from some viewpoint; the point of view assumed is the individual's own, and each situation, by virtue of the individual being in a certain relation to factual realities, is concrete.

Freedom and Morality

Should cause or motive be the priority of design ethics, and which is more likely to contribute to human well-being and happiness? On the one hand, motives stress the potency of emotions and attitudes in guiding what we do and what we believe. On the other, causes stress the importance of having good reasons for actions. Sartre transforms the way of responding to the question with the argument that both causes and motives come from something more fundamental in human action, which is the individual's free projection of his/her way of being. If the priority of design ethics education and practice is to be contemplated in terms of action, the attention should be on the designer's freedom of choice.

Thus, Sartre's view lessens the importance of rational character, if rational means evaluating objective conditions as means to specific ends. The evaluation can be objective, but it is necessarily done in light of some ends, which emerge with the designer's free projection in a certain way.

It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.⁴⁵

However, we can find in Sartre a particular sense of being rational. He strives to awaken people to authentic existence. If authenticity is the ethical value, and being rational means to accept consciously and deliberately the human condition of freedom and responsibility in the way of being, then the major problem is "bad faith"—the way of being that prevents such acceptance.

A man is not . . . a waiter, or a coward in the same way in which he is six feet tall or blond. . . . If I am six feet tall, that is that. It is a fact no less than that the table is, say, two feet high. Being a coward or a waiter, however, is different: it depends on ever new decisions. I may say: I must leave now—or, I am that way—because I am a waiter, or a coward, as if being a waiter or a coward were a brute fact.

43 Ibid., 702.

44 Ibid., 578.

45 Ibid., 76.

Actually, this apparent statement of fact veils a decision.⁴⁶

A person is not what he/she is—an architect, an engineer, an artist—in the same way that a pen is a pen. The human being has the possibility to choose his/her way of being. Imposing a role on oneself in a deterministic apprehension of the self is the means by which the individual rejects his/her awareness of his/her freedom and responsibility. Bad faith takes place in the duality of the being of humans, i.e., fact and transcendence. Judgments of ourselves in bad faith “aim at establishing that I am not what I am.”⁴⁷ Bad faith is to escape responsibility.⁴⁸

Bad faith . . . consists in not accepting one’s responsibilities as a For-itself, in seeking to blame someone or something for what one has done freely oneself, in choosing to assert one’s freedom only where it is expedient and on other occasions to seek refuge in a theory of psychological determinism. It is to pretend that one is born with a determined self instead of recognizing that one spends one’s life pursuing and making oneself. It is the refusal to face the anguish which accompanies the recognition of our absolute freedom.⁴⁹

Rationality, understood as conscious and deliberate acceptance of freedom as human condition, requires that individuals avoid bad faith, which undermines the authentic acceptance of our freedom and responsibility.

In summary, what a designer does, how he/she acts, determines his/her apparent character. A designer defines him/herself by choosing and acting in a certain way, but at any moment he/she is free to choose and act differently, and this regardless of the past. Humans are not to be apprehended as objects by whoever practices design. Design actors—including the designer—should not be motivated, controlled, or molded into definite roles. Treating people as objects is contrary to treating them as free subjects. The individual’s freedom is what constitutes his/her humanity. The designer consist of his/her choices and choosing cannot be avoided; not to choose is still a choice. Even when trapped in inevitable conditions, the designer still chooses how he/she is in those circumstances. In choosing what appears to be only for him/herself, the designer is, in a profound sense, choosing for all humankind.⁵⁰ Finally, bad faith is pervasive and poses a persistent threat to authentic life. The designer acts in bad faith whenever he/she regards him/herself as object, with a fixed identity, instead of as a free person.

46 W. Kauffman, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1956), 44.

47 *Being and Nothingness*, 99.

48 *Ibid.*, 110.

49 Barnes, 1992, xxxviii–xxxix.

50 S. Priest, (ed.), *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2001), 41.

Implications for Design Ethics

The major benefit of using such Sartrean view on design ethics is to foster the awareness that the deepest moral dilemmas are not as amenable to being objectively solved as applications of traditional moral theory may suggest. Also, for design ethics to draw upon Sartrean philosophy, no particular process needs to be deployed; authenticity cannot be imposed. The points raised can be translated into practice through an inventive manner. If character is interpreted in a Sartrean way, authenticity should become the center of attention in design ethics. The principles of Sartre's view for design ethics point toward design education and design decision-making, two important aspects to address with regard to the task of fostering authenticity.

Beyond learning processes of ethical reasoning, design students are to be assisted in seeing that such reasoning processes are embodied in larger structures of action. In the delineation of reasons, the role of the design instructor is critical. Causes are constituted as the design student defines a design project. Situations are not simply the objective conditions or facts; rather, situations come into being as the student questions the facts from some point of view. The problems in design situations reveal as much about the designer as about the conditions. A treatment of the facts from conflicting points of view would begin to show the import of choice of starting points in intellectual analysis.

Sartre shows how each of us has a fundamental project. The designer's free acts are always outlined for him/her against the backdrop of his/her fundamental project. The designer can see his/her choices in the self he/she has created, and the projects that give meaning to causes and motives are basic choices of him/herself in his/her ways to respond to the world. Surely design educators can create many opportunities in the treatment of the conditions of the design projects so as to foster the intellectual apprehension of the role of the attitude in the definition of design situations; and part of that apprehension involves seeing that there are alternative definitions and thus alternative attitudes.

Although the fundamental project of the student in design emerges within the conventional background of the design world, he/she still has to choose how to act within the design world; his/her free actions may or may not reinforce the values of the design practice status quo. The important thing is that the individual be conscious of his/her freedom. Thus, the graduate from any design discipline program is in a situation where he/she can choose the kind of professional design practice that he/she wants to work in.

Every purpose, however individual it may be, is of universal value. . . . In every purpose there is universality, in this sense that every purpose is comprehensible to every man. Not that this or that purpose defines man for ever, but that it may be entertained again and again. . . . In this

sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made. I make this universality in choosing myself; I also make it by understanding the purpose of any other man, of whatever epoch.⁵¹

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the moral implications of Sartre's philosophy lead to what she calls the "ethics of ambiguity."⁵² The ability of the designer to deal with uncertainty is important to consider. People who can't handle uncertainty may opt too quickly for design solutions, may be less prepared to apprehend all aspects of a design problem, may accept too rigidly a first solution even if there are better alternatives, and may be less able to recognize the frequent need for compromise and best-fit design solutions. In order to reach moral maturity, the designer has to recognize that there is much he/she cannot know; and yet he/she must act. The problems that complex societies and technologies have to face cannot be addressed with simple solutions, hence the importance for those involved in design decision-making to have a broad view.

Sartre's viewpoint suggests that the individual should strive at understanding and accepting his/her human condition of freedom in order to avoid projecting his/her own choices on circumstances and others. The individual is brought to squarely face his/her decisions, choices, and character.

Taking a Sartrean stance means that the moral character does not consist of objective traits. Neither cause (reason) nor motive (emotion) should be the priority of design ethics. Authenticity may be described as an attitude, since it is a way to engage the world and actions. Thus, Sartre's view is character-oriented and depends on the degree of awareness of an individual's acceptance of his/her freedom and responsibility imbued by that freedom as he/she acts. For design ethics, it means that the designer's attitude in action as authentic or in bad faith is the real focus of moral scrutiny; not whether his/her design actions conform to rules and codes. What has to be stressed is that the meaning of a design action be apprehended in the larger project of which it is a part and the attitude (authenticity or bad faith) with which the action is exercised. What is ultimately at stake is the choice between two possible types of being—authentic or in bad faith—for which there is no possible common decision criterion.

In this sense, a design student might be torn between pursuing the lucrative life of a profitable practice versus working for a humanitarian cause in a non-profit organization. A choice based on one's motives rests itself on a prior choice about what counts as a morally meaningful motive. A careful, rational deliberation is pointless; indeed, if the individual engages in deliberation, it is simply a part of his/her original project to realize motives by means of deliberation rather than some other form of discovery. Deliberating means that "the chips are down."⁵³

51 S. Priest, 40.

52 S. de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

53 *Being and Nothingness*, 581.

Conclusion

When a designer chooses whether or not to accept a way of being in the world through design actions and projects, moral argument, deliberation, and the search for a rational justification come to an end. He/she finds him/herself at a dead end in seeing and doing things, and he/she has to choose from a perspective that is characterized by ignorance, epistemic finitude, existential contingency, and moral uncertainty. With this comes the realization that even if the choice appears to be sure and well made, it does not justify itself and it cannot be supported by an external foundation. It is not possible to put the choice of a way of existing, choosing, and acting on a definite and rational foundation.⁵⁴

For many difficult situations in design, there may be no single and well justified answer other than what Sartre indicates: “you are free, choose, that is, invent.”⁵⁵ This shows the importance of taking a Sartrean perspective, especially in the disciplines of design, since dilemmas tend to be addressed by applying theory and deductive reasoning processes.⁵⁶ Dealing authentically with design dilemmas means that the designer confronts the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the design situation.

What is being offered here is an insight in Sartre’s views about human freedom, with the intention to demonstrate how his ideas might complement and improve the standard ethical approaches offered in most design ethics discourses, as well as to enhance ethical life in the world of design.

The value of such a perspective on design ethics is not to provide technical or definite guidance in the resolution of moral dilemmas. Rather, it is to expose the nature of human character and freedom so that hidden assumptions and beliefs about it may be questioned and apprehended in radically different ways. Perhaps such an insight into how the philosophy of Sartre gives human freedom a supreme status can indeed be related to the education and practice of design in regard to ethics.

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54 This is well exposed in the famous example of Sartre’s pupil: “Who could help him choose? . . . Nobody . . . I had only one answer to give: “You’re free, choose, that is, invent.” No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world. The Catholics will reply, “But there are.” Granted—but, in any case, I myself choose the meaning they have.” J-P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (New York: Haskell House, 1948), 28.

55 Ibid.

56 This is well exposed in G. Legault, *Professionnalisme et délibération éthique* (Montreal: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2006); and in B. Wasserman, et al.

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