

Ethics in Industrial Design?

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Not so long ago, this would be a mute question. To design was to permit the production of useful objects. For instance: knives were to be designed so that they might cut well, among other things throats of enemies. It was found out that for a design to be useful, it also had to be true (in the sense of: according to scientific knowledge), and to be beautiful (in the sense of providing an experience for its user). The ideals of the designer was pragmatic (functional), and ethical (political) considerations were not his business. Ethical norms were provided by the public space, either by a superhuman authority, or by consensus, or both, and the designer just as much as the user of the product were subject to those norms under the threat of punishment in this or in the other world. But the question about ethics in industrial design, about the moral and political responsibility of the designer, has become valid (and even urgent) in the present situation. For at least three different sets of reasons:

(1) There is no longer any public space for it to provide norms. Though there are still authorities about (religious, political and moral ones), their norms are no longer trusted, and their competence with regard to industrial production is doubted. Authorities are no longer trusted, because the communications revolution has done away with the public space of tradition. And their competence is doubted, because industrial production has become very complex, and authoritarian norms of what ever type tend to misunderstand it. By thus being incompetent, public ethics tends to hinder or deform industrial progress instead of providing it with a guideline. The only authority still left more or less intact is science, but it claims to be value-free, and thus provides no ethical norms.

(2) Industrial production, including design, has become a complex matter. The amount of information at the disposal of the producer far exceeds the capacity of individual memories, and even if artificial memories are used, the problem is how to select the information to be processed. It has therefore become necessary to act in teams composed of human and artificial agents, and the final result cannot be ascribed to any single author. For this reason, no one single person is responsible for the product. Even if there were authorities to provide norms, nobody would feel bound by them personally. Now this moral irresponsibility built in the production process must result in ethically pernicious products, unless some kind of ethics in industrial design be elaborated.

(3) In the past it was tacitly believed that the moral responsibility for a product lies with its user. If somebody kills his enemy with a knife, the responsibility is his and not that of the knife designer. Thus to design knives was somehow a pre-ethical, value-free action. This is no longer the case, however. Many industrial products are used by automated apparatus, and it is absurd to hold robots responsible for the use of products. The division of labor has as a result the impossibility to assign responsibility to any one of the people involved in the process. If a robot kills, who shall be held responsible: the designer of the robot, of the knife, or

the man who has calculated the robot program? Is it not possible to ascribe ethical responsibility to some error in design, in programming, or in production? And what about assigning the ethical responsibility to the industry that produced the robot, or the whole industrial complex, or finally to the whole system of which that complex is part and parcel? In short: unless some kind of ethics in industrial design be elaborated, total ethical irresponsibility will follow.

Now of course this is no new problem. It rose its terrible head in 1941 when the question was asked: who is responsible for the crimes committed by the Nazis against mankind? At the occasion of the Nürnberg trials a letter written by a German industrialist to a Nazi functionary was found, wherein the industrialist meekly asked to be forgiven for the fact that his gas ovens were badly designed: instead of killing thousands of people at one stroke, it only killed hundreds. The Nürnberg trials, and the Eichmann trial somewhat later, showed clearly that (a) there are no longer any norms to be applied to industrial production, (b) that there is no single author to any crime, and (c) that responsibility is so widely diluted that in effect we are in a situation of total irresponsibility for the acts committed by industrial production.

The recent Irak war shows the problem even more clearly, because less absurdly bestially than in the case of the Nazis. The killing rate there was 1 allied soldier to 1000 Irakian persons. This rate was achieved through excellent industrial design, which was functional, scientifically true and no doubt esthetically impressive. Is there any ethical or moral (let alone political) responsibility involved here? Consider the image of a pilot leaving his helicopter after a raid and addressing a TV reporter. His helmet was still on, and as he turned to the reporter, the guns of the vehicle turned in the same direction. His helmet was synchronized with the guns, and his eyes commanded the firing. Who is responsible for this post-industrial helicopter-pilot complex, and for the behavior resulting from this intervoven relation? Is there any instance capable of judging such a behavior, be that instance a judge, a priest, a national or international parliament, a commission of engineers, or of specialists in the analysis of complex systems?

We are assembled here to discuss this question. What is our competence to do so? Still: this is not the time to abdicate from responsibility in a sort of impotent despair. The fact that our symposium is taking place in the face of this problem is in itself a sign that we are becoming aware of it. If we do not find at least an avenue of approach to the solution of the problem of ethics in industrial design, Nazism, the Irak war and similar events will be only the initial stages toward destruction and self-destruction. The very fact that we are becoming aware of it is reason for some hope in the future.