Ethical Design Frameworks:

A Christian Synthesis

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Ethics
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Thesis: In any discipline of design, particularly industrial design, the work of the designer is inevitably tied to an ethical system.

I. Introduction

II. Background, history, definition, etc.
   a. Design definition: shaping the human experience (applies to many disciplines)
   b. Design ethics
      i. What is/has been design ethics?
      ii. A rather new conversation

III. Christian design framework
   a. Created to create
   b. The greatest commandment
   c. The image of God

IV. Industry frameworks of responsibility
   a. Responsibility to the client and user
   b. Ethical design hierarchy
   c. Recognizing negative outcomes, Tragic Design

V. Ethical design: synthesis and application
   a. Safety
   b. Honesty
   c. Dignity

VI. Conclusion
In August of 2018, I had an experience that I will never forget; an experience that I would equate to looking through a pair of blurry binoculars, and then finding the satisfaction of perfect focus. I was driving to Faith Builders to start my two-year studies, so I scheduled a visit to International Center for Creativity. I had some extra time, so I decided to visit the Columbus museum of art before my tour. At the museum, I was overwhelmed with the depravity of some of the work I saw, and I remember a light depression that settled, making me second-guess my dreams of pursuing an art major. Later, when I arrived at the ICC, the first thing in my line of sight was a shelf with probably half a dozen examples of reciprocating saw. There was something redemptive and compelling about seeing something beautiful that I was able to associate with usefulness and practicality. And I hoped once again that I would have a seat at the table of design. My experience of being moved by a shelf of modeled tools is not only a reflection of me. More than that, it speaks of how the human experience is impacted and shaped by the spaces, products, and images that we interact with. With this kind of weight resting on design, it becomes apparent that in any discipline of design, particularly industrial design, the work of the designer will inevitably be tied to an ethical system.

When people think of design, their mind often goes toward graphic design, which is fair, because that is a media which we all interact with on a daily basis, usually without thinking about. But design is much bigger than that. It includes industrial design, product design, interior design and many others. I will be using design in a broad sense, as all designers are responsible for the ways they impact human experience. I will return with some frequency to the assumptions of Trine Falbe, writing for *Smashing Magazine*, who claims,
If a design does not support human rights, it is unethical. If it supports human rights but does not respect human effort by being functional, convenient and reliable (and usable!), then it is unethical. If it respects human effort but does not respect human experience by making a better life for the people using it, then it is still unethical.”

This sounds rather strong, but a pithy statement like this can sound that way if the author has not been given the chance to expand it. It is also fair to recognize that designers will all work out of different frameworks, but they can still create ethically. As a Christian, my work should be shaped by my faith. I have a duty, not only to the rules of my own framework, but also to the expectations of others.

Where does a Christian begin to form a specifically Christian ethic, or you might say philosophy, of design? Dorothy Sayers, in The Whimsical Christian, helps to answer this question. She uses the word “esthetics” in a broad sense that I believe considers the field design, even though for Sayers, writing and language are where she pulls her examples from. She says,

Looking at man, [the author of Genesis] sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the ‘image’ of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, ‘God created.’ The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and ability to make things.

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If indeed we find our own creativity by being made in the image of God, the Christian painter, architect, or poet should find profound liberation to complete his task. This liberation quickly turns to responsibility. It is not as though something fun has been placed in our lap to play with, but rather, art has been given to us more as a tool belt with which we are responsible to build. In reflection of a chaotic and broken world, Sayers notes the synthesis of two things. First, the creative artist is in some way a builder, and secondly, Christianity claims to bring us into a relationship with a creative God. It is under these two premises that we can understand “what creativeness is, and, secondly, on its significance for the common man and his affairs.”

I know that Sayers is writing for creators of all types, but for designers especially, there is a clear responsibility put forth, as designers are tasked with shaping “the common man and his affairs”. From this combination emerges the definition of a Christian designer.

A second part of the Christians design framework should come from scripture. At the risk of trying to force this framework into a specific mandate, I would still appeal to the two greatest commandments: to love the Lord thy God, and to love thy neighbor as thyself. A Christian designer will design in a way that honors both God and his neighbor. However, a confusion sometimes still lies when these two do not look the same. There might be times when what seems to honor man is clearly not honoring God. But I would argue, that with the right focus, a Christian designer will be able to align these two considerations.

A third framework that a Christian will work out of is understanding the way that humans are created in the image of God. This reflects the first framework I mentioned but addresses the other side of the matter. As image bearers, we are to create knowing that we

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3 Sayers, 123
have the stamp of a Creator God on us. Yet we also create with the knowledge that it is image-bearers who will interact with the objects and the experiences that we create.\(^4\) This not only gives a higher standard of achievement, but it also gives the designer some footing in areas where more secular systems may struggle to adequately deliver any solution.

A very tangible example of this came to me about a year ago when I had the privilege of visiting a the Bruderhof in Southern Pennsylvania. The visit came at a time when I was struggling to see the industry of design as something more than a pretentious fashion show. However, walking through their factory, I saw, up close, wheelchairs, toilet seats, and bath lifts design for handicapped children. Anyone could choose to design these things, but it was obvious to all of us there that the dignity-giving design of the products we saw came from a deep understanding of imago dei, the image of God. I was deeply moved, and I still consider that moment to be defining in the way that I have pursued my vocational interests.

It does not take much research to realize that the leading voices in design ethics are not necessarily Christian voices. A secular designer and Christian designer may often end up at the same place functionally, whether or not their motives come from the same framework. Responsibility is a word that can give some categories for thinking about secular design ethics. In a talk at San Francisco Design week, Mike Monteiro reminded his fellow designers of their responsibilities: “We need to fear the consequences of our work more than we love the cleverness of our ideas. Design does not exist in a vacuum”.\(^5\) He also mentioned how, as being

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\(^5\) “Design Ethics with Mike Monteiro” YouTube video, 2:30, Posted by Kevin Page, April 29, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7_fXgCw71s
unlicensed, designers are also more vulnerable to the repercussions that licensure would normally protect them from. As consumer driven corporations grow, designers are finding themselves with more power, and consequently more responsibility.

Designers, specifically those working in consulting, are regularly put in awkward positions as they are called on to serve both a client and that client’s customer, or user. A designer may be already working on project and their client asks them to do something that pushes the boundaries of what they feel comfortable with. In *Tragic Design*, the Jonathan Shariat and Cynthia Saucier recommend keeping a “will never do list” to help work through those tough decision. Establishing principles up front is vital to ethical design.

Another consideration in design ethics is hierarchy. Maslow developed a hierarchy of human needs that many are familiar with, but a couple of designers at ind.ie came up with more condensed and specific chart. This puts very basic human rights as the foundational layer. The middle layer is then human effort. This would promote design that is functional, efficient, and productive. The last, and third layer, is focused on delightful design, or the pleasant and enjoyable. It is interesting to note the similarities of this hierarchy to the Christian mantra of truth, goodness, and beauty. This model goes beyond simple function and tolerability, and seeks for pleasure as well.

In *Tragic Design*, the authors explicitly lay out the negative effects of poor design. There are suggestions for how to fix it, but the material is simply focused on bad design.

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7 Ethical Design Hierarchy, about page, https://2017.ind.ie/ethical-design/
chapter, the negative effects are listed. Design can kill, design can anger, design can sadden, and design can exclude. It is around these four premises that authors Jonathan Shariat and Cynthia Savard Saucier push for fixing tragic design.

The ways that design can kill are things that users do not think about until whatever it is that they are interacting with fails. Millions of people fly safely around the world every year, unaware that they are doing so because whoever designed the aircraft was working, not only from a specific skillset, but also from an ethical standard of production. A badly designed trigger safety or poorly placed gas tank in a vehicle can quickly become reminders of this point. This consideration of human life seems obviously necessary, and the actions that lead up to avoiding deadly design are usually straight-forward as well. That one makes sense, but what about the other three?

Anger, sadness, and exclusion are in a bit more of their own category as they deal with the emotions more than physical well-being. For that reason, they are also new considerations. This could be for several reasons. One, our modern culture cares about feelings, and whether or not that care is properly balanced, this is still a reality. Secondly, these three considerations are significantly more relevant to web design. To the men and women designing automobiles and factory machinery, physical well-being was always an issue, but in web design, the implications have to do more with issues like privacy, discrimination, manipulation. While a good designer will keep these four in mind, the field they work will likely dictate their focus.

I started off with a Christian framework of design ethics, and then took a look at questions that are being raised in the industry itself. And rather than comparing and contrasting the two, it may be more helpful to find a synthesis of application. Because, the reality is, the
application will often look the same. A synthesis of these two frameworks will value, in some way, safety, honesty, and dignity.

Physical life and well-being matters. We live in an age where industry is getting faster, stronger, and more intelligent. Designers of any field will always fail if they don’t recognize this and don’t centralize the concern of public safety and well-being.

Design of any sort needs to be honest. More accurately, the designer needs to be honest, but the reason that we call design honest or dishonest is that its message typically outlives the designer. Long after a designer has moved on to other things, that project is still sending messages. The reason modern design can seem dishonest and pretentious is that value is often placed on it arbitrarily. Anyone walking into an art museum can have a front-row seat of this. Ethical design is honest design.

Everyone is deserving of dignity. Every person logging onto Twitter, reading the paper, or driving their wheelchair is deserving of dignity. Christian designers, especially the conservative ones, may come up against problems that they feel they cannot solve without compromising their own moral standard. In any case, though, dignity is always an option. Not only is this the responsible thing to do, but it is also incredibly rewarding, and has the potential to bring meaning and purpose to a designer’s work.

We consider the industrial revolution to be history, but we still live in a world run by giants like Amazon, Tesla, and Google that are driving innovation forward faster than the consumer can keep up. Designers all over the world will inevitably find their work tied to their ethical system. Design, in a sense, is the work of solving problems and answering questions. And because of this, it is important the designers develop a robust framework so they can work
responsibility. And for the Christian designers out there, their work matters, and it is important.

Do not shy away from design because it asks hard questions. Find ways to synthesize, compromise, and produce something that is an honest expression of yourself, your world, and your Creator. Make something good.
Bibliography


Ethical Design Hierarchy, about page, https://2017.ind.ie/ethical-design/


Ethics for Designers — The toolkit. These tools will help you uncover, explore and discuss the ethical aspects of your designs. The tools are grouped based on www.ethicsfordesigners.com. KlickUX. Klick's extraordinary UX team. Follow. Ethics for Designers is a set of tools that help designers incorporate ethics into their work. Download the templates to get started for yourself. Mastering your ethical skills will help you grow as a responsible designer. Moral sensitivity. Frameworks. Ethical OS Framework by IFTF and Omidyar Network "The Ethical Operating System can help makers of tech, product managers, engineers, and others get out in front of problems before they happen. It’s been designed to facilitate better product development, faster deployment, and more impactful innovation. All while striving to minimize technical and reputational risks. This toolkit can help inform your design process today and manage risks around existing technologies in the future." Ethics within UX design can be divided into three primary categories: Existent Values: This is central to our existence as designers and what our values are in relation to what we create. These issues are more rooted in the self, but are perhaps the first we should consider in our pursuit of ethical design. The following ethical issues represent situations where the design is clearly of ill intent. Dark Patterns. Ethical design is, therefore, design made with the intent to do good, and unethical design is its black hat counterpart. Ind.ie is a social enterprise striving for justice in the digital age. Human-Centered Design is a framework as well as a mindset. At its core, working human-centered means involving the people you serve early and continuously in the process, i.e. using research to establish the needs of these people, understanding what problems they have, and how your product can help solve these problems.