

## **BOOK REVIEW**

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### ***The goods of design: Professional ethics for designers***

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The other day, I visited my doctor's office. Accustomed as I was to checking in with the staff behind the counter, I did so again, only this time to be told—with difficulty through glass and masks—to use the new (rather diminutive) kiosk machines beside the counter. *What a pointless exchange*, I thought. *Why not hang a large banner instructing electronic sign-in?* But my embarrassment and frustration were only beginning. The kiosk prompts were legion, barely applicable to my visit, and I stood so long answering them that my legs began to ache. One prompt, finally, struck me as beyond the pale. Accompanied by a blank signature line, it read something like: “My health requires commitments on my part, to the medications, therapeutics, and behaviors recommended by my provider. I agree to maintain an active role in managing my health and well-being.” *I certainly do not agree to your empty buzzwords*, I thought. Who was demanding this commitment of me, to play what role, and toward what good? The vacant signature line glowed up at me, bereft of any pass-through buttons by which I might decline or defer. To undergo a routine checkup that day, I had to sign my name to an open-ended campaign about matters unknown, for parties unknown, and it seemed morally wrong that patients should be so humiliated.

If Ariel Guersenzvaig agrees that I experienced immoral treatment (however mild) that day, it is likely because he sees undefeatable and unduly paternalistic kiosk questions as user-distressing (148, 23–33) design outputs that the most professional clinics avoid. For in his book, *The Goods of Design: Professional Ethics for Designers*, he develops a virtue-ethical account of morality for precisely those who sequence kiosk questions and finalize lobby layouts, and he identifies professionalism as a currently underappreciated means to human flourishing. Who, then, count as designers, and what makes for professionalism? These questions occupy part I, chapters 1–4, of the book. Guersenzvaig calls design a “cousin profession” of engineering (94), and he includes within design some obvious specialties like graphic design and app programming. But in the Introduction and Overview he recognizes “no definitive consensus” for a definition of design, and he designates as designers those who undertake “the conception and the planning of the human-made world” (6, footnote omitted). Among his first ethical appeals is for design students to resist the tendency to compartmentalize the moral concerns and intuitions that arise in one's personal *versus* one's professional life. Guersenzvaig counterargues that people degrade themselves by such moral disintegration (3), and that human flourishing results from synthesizing personal and professional ethics.

How design generates ethical concerns is the focus of chapter 1. Guersenzvaig identifies two ingredients for such generation, in human intentionality and creativity. Designers design with

a purpose, and that purpose may or may not promote the auxiliary purposes of an artifact's end users. Designers are also necessarily *creative*, a trait by which they hazard novel contexts for artifacts, with resultant novel harms and frustrations. Generalizing on these observations, Guersenzvaig argues in chapter 2 that all professions are “moral projects.” He adopts an essentialist account of professions, attributing to them the requirements of “extensive training,” of a strong “intellectual component,” and of bestowing on society a vital good: namely, that of obtaining or manipulating the world's now-indispensable technologies (42). Acknowledging the abuses perpetrated by self-serving specialists in various disciplines, Guersenzvaig nevertheless points out “the drive professionals often feel for their professions” (48), a drive on which he thinks a virtue ethics can be based.

That *design* is a profession, then, in both its cognitive and its public-service dimensions, Guersenzvaig argues in chapter 3. He presents empirical evidence on the growth of teaching institutions for design and highlights the dependence of society on designed spaces and artifacts. Some authors in the literature deny the professional status of design, however, and in chapter 4 Guersenzvaig tackles the objection that his own criteria for design's professional status fails. The objection is that “manipulation, consumerism, and unintended consequences” (89) inevitably undermine design's public-service component, and Guersenzvaig's response appeals in part to the professional self-reflexivity (my term) already mentioned. The very process of becoming (or remaining) a professional, Guersenzvaig hopes, can deter a designer from exploitative projects, such as coercive online sales rhetoric (90), detrimentally habit-forming apps (92, 95), or gratuitously short timescales of planned obsolescence (103).

Guersenzvaig broaches details on the ethics of becoming and remaining a professional in part II, chapter 5. In the theoretical space overlapping “ethics of the designed” and “ethics of designing,” he positions his own view, dubbed “design professional ethics” (127). While the nuances of this placement exceed the depths of this review, Guersenzvaig injects the fundamental insight (attributed to Richard Buchanan) that “[b]eing able to reason about what justifies and grounds one's practice is essential to professionalism” (125). These grounds just are the principles of the profession, and Guersenzvaig's point is that while (for example) a finance or accounting department might work alongside a design team, the financiers should follow finance-professional ethics, as lawyers follow “legal professional ethics,” marketing psychologists follow their professional ethics, and designers practice design professional ethics (129).

To pursue the “*designerly* way toward the good” (139) that is design professional ethics, Guersenzvaig advocates in chapter 6 a theoretical “foundation” (143) in virtue ethics. He briefly reviews alternative foundations in Kantian deontology and utilitarianism but rejects them for their apparent failure to motivate good action generally (155) and professionalism specifically (156). In virtue ethics, on the contrary, he values the “emphasis on the person's dispositions and motives” (143), and how these traits come to constitute eudaimonia, the good life of personal effectiveness. Indeed, a central element of Guersenzvaig's account is the designer's “sense of satisfaction or regret over [their] action” (148; cf. 220–21) and the negative motivational force of *not wanting* to become disposed (213) to carelessness about others' purposes, or about transgressing the norms of one's professional community. Interested as he is in this professional-communal ethos, it is perhaps unsurprising that Guersenzvaig endorses a MacIntyrean virtue ethics of social practices.

Well known is MacIntyre's sea change of contextualizing virtue within distinct social practices, each of which possesses its own internal and external goods, traditions and standards of excellence, and susceptibility to “extension”—a technical term that according to Guersenzvaig means something like improving the standards of excellence and the practitioners together (160). I will not in this review assess Guersenzvaig's faithfulness to MacIntyrean orthodoxy (if there is one), because, as I later opine, the best features of Guersenzvaig's account have little to do with getting MacIntyre right or wrong. Nevertheless, we learn in chapter 6 that the internal or intrinsic goods of design include the aforementioned “creativity” of its practitioners, the

“multiple constraints” on any commercialization of technology, the verification testing of new product, teamwork among designers and the personal relationships ensuing therefrom, the “joy” of conceiving solutions, the “tact” needed with “difficult clients,” and the “industriousness” needed to finish a job (163). Contrasting with these goods are design's external goods like money and notoriety or fame. Although design needs money and reputation for its survival, neither of them makes design what it is. Hence one can understand internal goods to bestow upon a practice and its practitioners a purpose, and in chapter 7, which begins part III, Guersenzvaig attempts an organic discovery, from examination of cases, of what the “overarching purpose” (177) of design might be.

Drawing again from work by Richard Buchanan, Guersenzvaig identifies for design the meta-purpose of facilitating the purposes of end users of artifacts (179). But he seeks to craft this purpose as one that is distinctly professional. Through much definition and argumentation that defies recreation here, Guersenzvaig arrives at the following overarching purpose: “[D]esign seeks to expand human capabilities through the conception and planning of the human-made world so that others can flourish” (194, italics in original). “Capability” is another technical term, and it encompasses not just a human power like literacy but also the opportunity to exercise that power—the requisite time and mental energy for reading (193). Thus, simplistically put, an automatic dishwasher does not (yet) teach anyone to read, but it does conserve time that may extend its owner's capability for reading and flourishing. More seriously, Guersenzvaig's definition is supposed to indicate why otherwise astute designs are unprofessional and thereby immoral. Examples include high-quality playgrounds that lack shade in sunny climates (195–96), impersonal or over-mechanistic cancer diagnostics (186), and the “elegance and crispness” of uniforms donned by certain fascist totalitarians (184).

For the remainder of the book, Guersenzvaig forges theoretical connections between professional purposes and good character. The character trait analyzed in chapter 8 is responsibility, understood as the quality whereby a professional tends to decide to finish tasks strongly, to research relevant variables about the capabilities of end users, and so on. Guersenzvaig follows Jessica Nihlén Fahlquist's division of responsibility into three components: “care, moral imagination, and practical wisdom” (211–12). According to Guersenzvaig, responsible designers treat professional design as an “object of care” (212); they imagine “different perspectives” (219) about artifact use from those assumed by the design brief or even by the practice; and they wisely allow themselves to be governed both by their professional practice and by their personal consciences. He also answers objections alleging that market forces and the inherent paternalism of design render the virtue of responsibility practically impossible. Chapter 9 elaborates additional tensions that the designer can expect to face between internal and external goods, before the book ends with a Coda, “Teaching Design Professional Ethics.”

I think that *The Goods of Design: Professional Ethics for Designers* succeeds, with qualifications, as a timely advancement in applied virtue-ethical theory. That said, I would not recommend the book as a course text for philosophy novices. There is simply too little coverage of competing views (utilitarianism, deontology, natural law) for a novice to acquire more than a sophomoric preference for Guersenzvaig's subtle position. I call the book timely, on the other hand, for its focus on professionalism. Guersenzvaig wrote parts of the text during the COVID-19 pandemic, and he might not have realized before publication how much design and other work would by now have moved entirely online, with employees working from home. From the evidence of one social-media scandal after another, moreover, I hardly need argue that people tend to act anything *but* professionally online, and thus a design ethics grounded in professionalism seems apropos.

Against other elements in Guersenzvaig's account, I direct stronger criticism. In his chapter 8 discussion on the virtue of responsibility, for example, he suggests that being responsible means “being able to accept the inherent unresolvability of certain dilemmas and the intrinsic uncertainty of some situations” (224). This remark arises in the context of a discussion about

the practical wisdom needed to be responsible, specifically the wisdom needed to negotiate project variables like time, budget, and other operational demands (223). But then in chapter 9 arises an anecdote about the fictional “Taylor” (whom I will call “she”), who is hired to program into a shopping website a “big red button” (245), the function of which is to initiate checkout by way of adding promotional items to the shopping cart (239). The purpose of the button seems to be that of manipulating users into overspending, just by wearing them down. Taylor initially feels moral reluctance to implement the button, but Guersenzvaig credits her with “integrity” for finally doing so, precisely because she avoids compartmentalizing the decision as a strictly professional one (245).

To be clear, Taylor had (at least) four options concerning the assignment, according to Guersenzvaig. She could have (i) quit her job on the strength of her moral convictions, (ii) simply compartmentalized her views and implemented the button for the paycheck alone, (iii) compartmentalized and implemented it after a prolonged effort to call her superiors to higher ground, or (iv) “realize[d] that there [was perhaps] no single truly good outcome to start with” (246), and implemented it in a decompartmentalized state (245–46)—which she finally did. Granted, Guersenzvaig is not quite *instructing* designers to default to option (iv), as he likely recognizes that such a default would deform virtue ethics into an ethical nihilism or relativism that rejects any eudaimonistic mode common to different people. He remarks, “The way Taylor has approached decision making is more crucial than the result [she has] obtained” (246), and in a sense I agree, because practical reasoning must transpire from the first-person perspective. But Guersenzvaig’s suggestion that there *are* any true ethical dilemmas goes completely unargued and seems to precipitate Taylor’s capitulation with moral adversity rather than inspire her to the challenges of casuistry. This kind of capitulation, or the readiness for it, strikes me not as virtuous but as weak, the height of irresponsibility, and wholly disintegrating. Thus, Guersenzvaig’s admonition not to compartmentalize is right, but for the wrong reasons. What the mature professional may realize is that not all human rules need to be kept like God’s rules (so believed), or that some rules cannot be strictly followed but must be strictly recorded and openly endorsed, or that some stakeholders have a right to sloppiness in matters about which others think that no one should be sloppy, and so forth. The good professional will not, I hope, discover that “my conscience bothers me, but it doesn’t matter because the world sucks after all.”

Said another way, Guersenzvaig avoids self-sabotage in the Taylor passage, but it is hard to agree that he gets “integrity” quite right (notwithstanding whatever MacIntyre thinks). His version anyway differs from the enthusiastic drive to excellence captured by design writer Adrian Shaughnessy (2010), who claims that integrity requires “time” and “hard work” (18). One might wonder, on the contrary, if Taylor’s capitulation, especially once habituated, requires any time or work. Shaughnessy also remarks that “designers who believe in nothing only ever attract clients who don’t believe in them” (25), and the virtue ethicist should be wary of believing in “moral dilemmas” that might be nothing at all. Lastly, Guersenzvaig’s version of integrity seems to contravene the virtue-friendly natural law tradition, especially the New Natural Lawyers who convincingly elevate the preservation of self-integrity to a moral absolute (Tollefsen 2014, chap. 5). Such elevation need not entail endless option-(i) heroics, but it arguably affords Taylor more justified means for changing her mind than Guersenzvaig suggests. I wanted to say also how much the book would benefit from a section or chapter on the internal goods of *design for manufacturability* and *design for an existing release process*, and how these goods require *curiosity* as a regulative ideal, but I have reached the limits of my space constraints. Guersenzvaig’s book is one the most readable I have picked up in years, and I recommend reading all of it but chapter 9.

## REFERENCES

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