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Intellectualism Versus Morality: Bridging the Divide.

Higher education is picking a fight with itself. According to those familiar with the debate, the fallout from this argument can profoundly influence university perspectives, teaching pedagogies and program curricula. It's a not-so-subdued dispute over "values" that pits those who believe institutes of higher learning should have a role in nurturing moral character against those who do not. This disagreement has often opened rifts that are difficult to mend — chasms whose depths recede into the shadow of conflicting belief systems and dogmatic ideology. Into this breach can flow onerous systems, standards and language that do much to stifle free inquiry. Neither taking sides in nor dismissing this debate has done much to reduce its energizing philosophies or banish it from academic institutions polarized by its divisiveness.

The dispute swirls around what were once thought settled but are now contested notions about academic freedom, civic engagement and the Good. Many groups both inside and outside academia have re-imagined these words in order to support their conflicting positions on a number of important, related questions: is the search for truth its own value or should knowledge be yoked to societal needs; should educational institutions remain autonomous or be subject to (some would say) more reasoned legislative oversight; does the need for pedagogical authority based on academic freedom mitigate a student's religious or political rights; should undergraduates be molded into critical thinkers or responsible citizens?

Should more than a dollop of morality accompany scholarship? The conflicting answers to that question underscore the continued existence of an educational system that remains pluralistic if not necessarily self-tolerant. The diversity that allows creedal colleges with ecclesiastical agendas to operate alongside amoral, liberal-arts universities is the same one that engenders the very conflicts roiling their respective campuses. And the debate is not confined to inter-institutional skirmishes. Faculty, programs and departments — through incivility, classroom practices or

institutional fiat — decry or endorse each other's movement toward academic autonomy or increased civic engagement. Regardless of one's personal stake in this unwieldy debate, any perspective should include an understanding that the disagreement is neither the exclusive product of America's reenergized culture wars nor did it find its genesis in the turbulent '60s, a time when America's living rooms were flooded with scenes of mass demonstrations, campus sit-ins and the painful sight of college students felled by members of the National Guard. Rather, the antagonists in today's skirmish are the co-inheritors of a late nineteenth-century revolution over the reasons for and roles of higher education. Ironically, all those who support or reject the compatibility of moral and intellectual inquiry collectively draw their inspiration from this earlier innovation. To understand why, one needs to look to the past.

The Democratization of Higher Education

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, America was changing: industry, not agriculture, was fast becoming the country's economic engine, rural populations in search of a better life were migrating to cities in increasing numbers, the country needed a more educated workforce to work in and become productive members of an increasingly complex society. In partial response to these societal shifts, the country began a revolutionary democratization of its higher education system. States across the land endowed numbers of public universities for the express purpose of "pursuing truth" and educating the "common man." A notable example of this desire for unrestricted research pursued alongside open classrooms was the Morrill Act of 1862. Signed into law by then-President Lincoln, the act committed over 17 million acres of public land to finance the Land-Grant Colleges — 30,000 acres per senator and congressmen in each state of the union.

This dramatic allocation of resources to public (egalitarian) rather than private (aristocratic) education elicited heated discussions over the types of values that should infuse institutions built upon the public trust. The architects of the modern, public university questioned whether the values of its predecessors — the nineteenth-century denominational colleges — were ones that would successfully lead the "people's schools" (and modern society) into a new century. Apparently, their answer was no. Educational values in vogue for the prior hundred years were

rejected and replaced with new ones. Important among them were two that would henceforth guide the modern university: academic freedom and civic engagement.

Academic Freedom

In its landmark 1915 *General Declaration of Principles*, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) created what came to be seen by educators as a canonical document. In it, the organization outlined their collective assertions about academic authority, the nature of the academic calling and the function of academic institutions. The AAUP did so in order to clarify and clearly state what they believed to be the essence of the academic experience — freedom for faculty and students, *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*. For faculty this meant freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of opinion, extra-mural utterance and action; and freedom of teaching. The organization created and promulgated this definition of academic freedom partly out of a desire to justify institutional autonomy and partly because of a belief that the pursuit of truth was the central purpose of an independent university.

In a broad sense, academic freedom was to become an institutionalized check to oversight by legislative, ecclesiastical or other external bodies that might take exception to the knowledge flowing from unfettered scientific research. Put more simply, academic freedom wrested academic authority away from the political or religious outsider and returned it to the faculty, their disciplines and the institutions that housed them.

This desire for autonomy grew out of tensions surrounding education's transition from denominational colleges to public research universities, from institutions encumbered by religious dogmatism to ones in search of immutable truths. Although privileged as a learning model within the universities, the overt rationality and deep skepticism born of the natural sciences were at odds with the beliefs of surrounding communities comfortable in their religious heritage. Nevertheless, with the license granted to them by academic freedom, universities dared to replace mythos with logos. Now the handmaiden to science rather than religion, higher education discarded its hallowed past to pursue its empirical future.

Their headlong rush towards discovery did not blind university administrators and faculty to their contentious situation. These groups were well aware that many of

their scientific pursuits and investigations ran counter to and seemingly repudiated what had been until then received wisdom and deeply held collective beliefs. Undaunted, they persevered. Darwin's triumph over Genesis was a notorious but by no means unique instance where higher education and its "imperial empiricism" found refuge from pubic censure behind a bulwark of autonomy built upon academic freedom.

Civic Engagement

Without question, the concept of academic freedom unleashed in higher education a search for truths liberated from any moral imperative. This new charter, however, neither removed universities from the culture at large nor excised their empathy towards its needs. The rigors of scientific research may have caused some academicians to reject transcendent grounds for altruism, but as a group, they generally remained steadfast and vocal in their belief that universities needed to contribute to the country's general and moral well-being. No better example of this ideal existed than the aforementioned Land-Grant universities established during the period from 1862 forward. Originally chartered to benefit agricultural interests, the working classes and those who would neither qualify nor want to be in classrooms, the principles that eventually emerged from this egalitarian social contract with America became general to all scholarship. For many, universities were seen as public institutions "engaged" in service to society; not islands whose inhabitants searched for truth impervious to the greater good.

Dissonance Then and Now

As nineteenth-century values gave way to those of a rapidly changing twentieth, public universities were established in part to be autonomous "place[s] dedicated to openness of mind" and where distinctions were made — "reason as opposed to faith, evidence as opposed to revelation, inquiry as opposed to obedience, truth as opposed to belief." These same institutions were also charged with creating engaged citizens whose duty it was "to provide the means to ends that society has chosen for itself." Each of these sentiments adopted by higher education was noble, each spoke to a higher calling for man that found its dignity in the unrestricted search for truth or a deeply felt commitment to society. Each was, however, fundamentally at odds with the other. For many in academia, the search for truth was its own value and loyalty to that master required a more narrow view of engagement with the world.

Thus, the content of education was not citizenship but scholarship. For others, civic engagement — long the province of other political and religious institutions — rightly belonged to higher education as well. If they were doing their job, universities formed citizens while expanding minds. The dissonance between these two early sets of guiding values informing public higher education ignited and fueled debates over whether universities should take on moral aims or remain aloof from the messy business of politics, religion and the Good. A sampling of its latter day manifestations illustrates how this early discord lives on and continues to engender modern institutional conflict.

Scholarship — yes, morality — no: Fish and Mearsheimer

Drawing their sustenance from the earlier rejection of creedal imperatives and external oversight, many in higher education continue to promote the superiority of rationality along with the need for academic freedom and institutional detachment. These values are clearly manifest in opinions held by professors Stanley Fish, dean emeritus of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and John Mearsheimer, distinguished professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Fish, in a number of polemics, and Mearsheimer, in a widely quoted freshman address, strongly advocated the need for autonomous institutions whose academic aims preclude morality in any form other than as a possible object of study. They represent those who believe that the proper business of a university is the search for truth — not the formation of character.

Stanley Fish is not one to mince words. In series of essays in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *The New York Times*, the retired dean has agued repeatedly and with great forcefulness that the search for truth and the call for morality don't mix. "You can't make [students] into good people, and you shouldn't try" is a classic Fish truism. Responding to and railing against what he views as civic-minded academic agendas, Fish believes that they not only divert energy from the limited number of things universities can actually accomplish (e.g., scholarship) but also constitute "a mishmash of self-help platitudes, vulgar multiculturalism and a soft-core version of '60s radicalism."

In a now-famous 1997 speech to the class of 2001, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago expressed similar sentiments (albeit less polemically).

During his speech, Mearsheimer articulated what he considered "The Non-aims of Education at Chicago." Of the two, one was teaching morality. According to him, the university, like its fellow elite colleges across the country, "operate[s] on the belief that there is a clear separation between intellectual and moral purpose, and it pursues the former while largely ignoring the latter." Mearsheimer went on to acknowledge that the university would make scant effort to provide any type of moral guidance to this or any other group of entering freshmen. Rather than teaching them what to believe, it would instead focus on teaching them how to think.

While their styles differ, Mearsheimer, Fish and those whom they typify all concur on a number of ethical perspectives: on the single exception to higher education's general amorality — the need to condemn those who cheat, plagiarize or commit academic fraud; on role-based ethical obligations — circumspect academic values that include among others showing up for class, teaching the subject matter advertised, providing accurate credentials or being objective in one's research; and on the foundational belief that universities must first and foremost stick to the search for truth, their *raison d'être*. According to Fish, this franchise is education's only guarantee that the institution will not become "a wholly owned subsidiary of something larger than itself." Mearsheimer echoes this sentiment, "… the university is not the institution equipped or authorized to meet [morality's] demands. Providing moral guidance is no longer in their job description."

Declarations Abounding: Higher Education's Higher Calling

Gathering at the Aspen Institute in the summer of 1999, a number of America's higher education glitterati attended a Presidential Leadership Colloquium convened by the Campus Compact and the American Council of Education. There they reviewed, refined and endorsed a declaration whose purpose it was to "articulate the commitment of all sectors of higher education, public and private, two- and four-year, to their civic purposes." A direct philosophical descendent of the Land-Grant tradition, the ponderously titled *Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* celebrated the birth of America's democratic traditions by launching an activist salvo across the bow of a university flotilla believing itself safely harbored in the bay of academic freedom.

Among the many authors of this document was Elizabeth Hollander, executive director of Campus Compact. She, along with Harry Boyte of the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota and the other participants at the 1998 Campus Compact–sponsored Wingspread conference, helped draft a similar document: the *Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University*. Like its fellow call to arms, this declaration challenged colleges and universities to check their drift away from society's needs and redirect their talents toward the greater good. Acknowledging higher education's ethical detachment from society, the authors put forth the belief that the institution could change its direction and commitment, reengage with society, reshape its culture and renew its civic mission. In sum, universities should again aspire to be counted among the "axial institutions of modern society."

For the two declarations' authors, higher education was not entirely composed of institutions whose sole purpose was the ascetic search for truth and its dissemination through teaching. It was also a rich tradition filled with "colleges and universities [that] have long embraced a mission to educate students for citizenship." The Wingspread document in particular cites Columbia University's shared breath with New York's working class, the University of Chicago's philosophy and sociology departments' debt to the Hull House settlement and the Land-Grant universities' role in "building rural democracy." Rather than strive to retain ascetic academic autonomy, universities should reach out and become engaged institutions attuned to and involved with those outside their "ivory towers." With a shared vision and language, these two declarations collectively challenged higher education to reassert its social stewardship in order to renew the country's democratic life, and to "transform [intrinsic] knowledge into [instrumental] wisdom."

Understanding the Challenge

Clearly, the proponents of these conflicting views exist in opposing philosophical camps from which each scowls at the incommensurate other. The two groups, believing in the justness of their cause, richness of their heritage and soundness of their beliefs, continue to clash over the nature of and basis for the values that should guide contemporary higher education. Although the dispute plays out today, its roots reach back to earlier times and antagonists frequently look to this past for their

guidance or authority. Whether or to what extent intellectual and moral education remain separate or become increasingly synthesized may never be fully decided.

Undeniably, though, debates of this sort have had dramatic impact on a number of colleges and universities situated throughout the country. To understand this, one need only call to mind yesterday's campus culture wars fought over "identity politics" or today's conflicts over "intellectual pluralism." And, while it may be difficult to predict how this particular fight over moral values might affect specific design teaching pedagogies or program curricula, it's not as difficult to image different scenarios in which it could come into play.

For instance, design educators, being concerned with the values informing design practice, would feel obliged to respond if the profession's current flirtation with (utopian) politics became a long-term trend. The highly institutionalized ideal of amoral, apolitical "professionals" could give way to one in which students are encourage to become "citizen designers" — practitioners whose altruistic ballast could hold their economic self-interest in check. Thus, if shifting professional values were to trump existing academic ones, design programs could find themselves, like it or not, grouped with those who believe higher education should shape character along with sharpening intellect.

Further, by siding with others who believe intellectualism and morality are compatible educational aims, design programs subject themselves to a number of thorny questions. Among them: If curricula were to be recast to reflect a heightened social or moral awareness, to which among the many conflicting ethical systems should design programs look to for guidance? If activist stances towards political or social engagement were adopted, how could design programs achieve their goals without offending factions on either side of the political spectrum? If politically or morally charged assignments were introduced, would design educators then join those already accused either by the right for their "extensive political pollution of [the country's] universities" or by the left for promoting agendas out of step with progressive perspectives on gender, race or multiculturalism? And finally, from an academic perspective, if they were to inject political or social content into the classroom, would design programs run the risk of violating their students' academic

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freedom by "taking unfair advantage of [their] immaturity [and] indoctrinating them with [the faculty's] own opinions?"

While it is true that each design program's situation is unique and that many may never face such issues, it is also true that they all share in a lack of immunity from the divisiveness engendered by this dispute. Given its history, durability, and ability to envelope programs of any sort, design teachers might be wise to remember that their discipline's heritage is also replete with conflicting philosophies about its nature and purpose. Much like higher education, the practice has also questioned whether its values are rightfully derived from intellectualism or morality, its existence grounded in a search for truth or a quest for meaning. And, in similar fashion, design has attempted to resolve this dichotomy by simultaneously adopting and coming to terms with the values of science: intellectual, positivistic methods of inquiry and non-sectarian detachment, and politics: moral desires to affect lived outcomes within socio-economic spheres. It is to this heritage that design education could turn for insight.

Intellectualism: Search for Truth(s)

Design's engagement with science is nothing if not regular. The discipline first attempted to "scientise ... in the 1920s, with a search for scientific design products." This was followed "in the 1960s, with a concern for scientific design process." Today, while appearing to be concerned with the "scientific," design's engagement is less a philosophical search than it is a visual sampling.

In its early years, design adopted the values of science in order to remain vital to the affairs of what it saw as a new century's new man: atomistic individuals who ironically constituted an increasingly interconnected mass society. Guided by a belief that extrinsic, immutable truths could be discerned through aesthetics, many early designers of the '20s felt that this new man would be best served by neo-platonic type-forms: ergonomically designed solutions to contemporary, functional problems. The products and processes of the time, outdated because of their "unnecessary diversity and pompous individualism," would be (re)formed through (re)design. A Modernist vision of technological progressivism (i.e., science) would be harnessed to create egalitarian collectivism practiced in "[a] living environment of machines and vehicles." Ironically, during this celebration of the common man's empowerment,

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many uncompromising Modernist designers made no allowance for the consumer's tastes or desires. As design moved beyond this period, however, the practice became market- rather than creator-focused and design's rationalist philosophy, process and products were tempered by subjectivist consumer responses.

Forty years later, the '60s saw design reacquire the values of science through its "design methods movement." Like their brethren in the '20s, devotees of this movement believed design processes (and their resulting products) should be based on scientific objectivity and technology. This belief grew out of their respect for the solutions science provided to the problems of the Second World War: unique scientific and computational methods "from which came operational research and management decision-making techniques." Although sharing its predecessor's belief in rationality, this movement saw design as applied science rather than applied aesthetics. For advocates of this approach, design methodology — a reasoned way to some truth — was to become that which "is concerned with deriving from the applied knowledge of the natural sciences appropriate information in a form suitable for the designer's use."

Carrying on the tradition, design today remains engaged with science on multiple levels. Many design theorists, while acknowledging an apparent lack of success in the application of scientific methods to a number of contemporary societal problems, continue to investigate design methodologies with a scientific basis or bias. Their findings not only inform program pedagogies and course content, but also fill the pages of scholarly journals and emanate from speaking podiums at national and international conferences. For many practitioners, on the other hand, science's epistemology is no longer the point. Rather, "filtered through design's brutally neutralizing style engine," science's visual language is processed to become an "idiom of choice." In a recent *Émigré* essay, designers Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel bemoaned this state of affairs by nominating the term *Faux Science* — design's appetite for scientific style over any meaningful participation in its articulation and dissemination. For Helfand and Drenttel, at least, design's earlier philosophical engagement with the sciences has now become a stylistic one.

Morality: Quest for Meaning(s)

In a moral sense, design has never been completely comfortable with itself. Certainly not when it frets over its role as an appendage to industry, or characterizes its wares as "insipid propaganda" created for the machines of consumerist culture. Its existential escape hatch was and remains recurrent calls for a (renewed) commitment to the common good; a shift in focus away from economic needs to ones more social, spiritual and cultural. These exhortations reflect the discipline's desire to broaden its narrow self-interests in order to become less like corporations operating in the private sector and more like institutions playing roles in the public realm; entities concerned equally with public and private interests. That design believes it can accomplish good works by joining the likes of education, law or medicine in civil society might suggest hubris to some and naïveté to others. In fact, design's ego and innocence merge to form a heritage of utopianistic self-perception fueling the discipline's desire to operate in the public interest.

Early designers, working in a world dazzled and numbed by industrialization's growing might, believed that "clear and logical forms, based on rational principles," could liberate society (from class struggle and bad taste) by providing it with inexpensive, widely available, mass-produced products. And while many designers of the time found truth in economy of means, honesty to materials and purity of form, others found meaning. Aesthetics was not only a tool to construct a "dynamic 20th century condition," but a fulcrum upon whose tip the discipline could balance the needs of business with those of society. This utopian spirit has continued undaunted through the years by accepting continually evolving forms of expression.

Latter-day designers, operating in a world increasingly connected yet balkanized by technology's ability to isolate, draw inspiration from the sentiment expressed by Milton Glazer's statement that "Good design is good citizenship." Prominently quoted in Heller and Vienne's popular book *Citizen Designer,* Glazer's stance reflects the discipline's continued (utopian) belief that it can and should function as a public force for civic responsibility, community building and social change. Finding meaning in visual expression's civic application, many designers still hold fast to their conviction that like other members of public institutions, they too can create artifacts, systems and experiences that allow society to collectively consider what might be rather than accept what is.

Lessons Learned

   Design has learned much from its engagement with scientific rationality and utopian political activity. Among its many lessons, one comes forward: by adopting the values of other intellectual or moral cultures, design also accepts their external criticism and internal disillusionments. For example, while ascendant now, the rational objectivism science offers is by no means the only world-view staking its claim on the marketplace of ideas. Dissenting voices can be heard from politics, spirituality and social activism — distinct realms united in their critique of science's deficiencies. On their list: the discipline's belief that empirical knowledge replaces moral insight, its calls for an objectivity that pulls devotees out of inhabited traditions, its intolerance for plurality, its fetishistic fascination with technology, and its amoral, mechanistic attempts to "fix the whole of life into a logical framework." By sharing in these values, design often finds itself tarred with the same brush.

Further, design has begun to acknowledge, as has science, that information gathered through empirical means answers only certain questions; an array of others remains opaque to rational interrogation. Keenly aware of its epistemological failings, some in design have begun to doubt science's ability to help with the "wicked problems fundamentally unamenable to [its] techniques." According to many of the attendees at the Design Research Society's 1980 conference, for instance, "the general feeling was … there was not so much for design to learn from science after all, and that perhaps science rather had something to learn from design." It would appear that more than a few skeptics walk design's corridors, disillusioned with science, believing that its language, methods and constructs have proven largely ineffective in helping design cope with the "tangled skein of human action."

For many of those holding this opinion, political activism offers an alternative world-view — that morally bound creative acts rather than those framed by science contribute more fully to society's well-being. This is the basis of design's utopian desire to construct meaning through aspirational acts rather than apprehending truth through intellectual exploration. For many, design practice can fulfill its true potential by moving away from a "concern with how things are" and toward "a concern with how things ought to be." That practitioners in the truest sense recognize the existence of and concern themselves with the social obligations design has to the society from whence it draws its inspiration and into which its artifacts return.

However, like those subscribing to intellectual constructs, designers who aspire to politically informed practice have also come to understand the difficulties arising from importing these particular external values. Their desire to break the shackles of economic servitude in order to serve mankind in the public arena is not without its problems. Among the many: design's inability to fully accept the duties and obligations normally associated with institutions operating in the public realm; the conflict of interests created by attempting to serve both the broad, public good as well as the narrow, private sector; and the profound risk to which design subjects the conditions of its existence by taking on actions unrelated to its declared or perceived societal purpose.

Bridging the Divide

The idea that colleges and universities should embrace moral and civic education as a goal is a contentious one. To those who value academic freedom, higher education is an amoral institution whose ultimate aim should be the independent pursuit of truth. The need for morality is granted but only as a local response to narrow academic imperatives. For other educators who value civic engagement, intellectual pursuits should be deeply colored by morality. Drawing upon early education's desire to involve individuals and communities in the richness of reciprocal learning, this group continues to believe that colleges and universities are neither separate from nor impervious to broader societal imperatives. Perennially energized by the intractability of its antagonists, the debate shows every indication of continuing unabated well into the future.

Design educators with little if any contact with this dispute may view it in somewhat academic terms, not because it plays out within the walls of higher learning but because of its seemingly irrelevant nature. However, while the debate may matter little to some, for others, it's all too easy to become enmeshed in its polarizing energies. Faced with this very real prospect, design faculty could begin to map courses that offer their students and programs clear paths between the cynical relativism that grows from ascetic moral detachment and the ideological dogmatism that rears up from calls to civic action.

Teachers might consider a fourfold series of actions in order to light their way. First, begin to recognize the dispute's existence and acknowledge its power to affect higher education in ways both large and small. Second, better understand the broader historical context in which the debate initially formulated and now continues to ferment. Third, strive to discern the underlying philosophical tenets and energizing rationale held by those participating in the debate. And fourth, attempt to draw insight from the parallel lessons learned by design in its attempt to reconcile the realities of conflicting value systems.

By acknowledging that neither intellectualism nor morality (in their various guises) appears to have all the answers, design educators can begin to see that neither truth nor virtue can claim the exclusive right to pilot a course through the human condition; that both forms of knowing — intellectual knowledge and moral insight — are needed if design education is to offer reasoned and meaningful answers to the pressing questions posed by an increasingly complex society.

This acknowledgement allows for a synthetic response to those who would insist on choosing between conflicting values. One that encompasses a commitment to open inquiry while at the same time encouraging a respect for plurality; recognizes the need to harmonize divergent interests while allowing for distinct boundaries; and gives design educators the space necessary to transcend entrenched positions. More importantly, this acknowledgement sanctions a search for knowledge that needn't compel faculty to privilege one set of values over another. In short, it would recognize the brilliance of Copernicus without demeaning the wisdom of Ptolemy.

In the face of a polarized and often uncivil debate over values, design educators should strive to become voices for synthesis, not roadblocks that others, looking for easy resolutions, marginalize in order to overcome. Whatever their respective philosophical positions in this dispute, design faculty should begin to realize that their unique perspectives and skills will enable them to create self-aware curricula that can not only weather these often divisive storms but also serve the ethical and prudential needs of their students, their institutions and their profession.

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