

Untangling the Dilemmas of Social Design

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ABSTRACT: This workshop addresses issues that arise when thinking and talking about the creation of social structures and processes. I make a distinction between organizational design and societal design, although both of these are discussed. The workshop begins with the following position statement in which I propose certain uses for words that inevitably lead to “dilemmas of discourse” in conversations on these topics. By proposing such uses at the outset, I intend that these dilemmas surface and be discussed immediately, rather than that they emerge, without reflection, later in the workshop. I would like to see the workshop itself demonstrate that discourse on the dilemmas of social design is social design.

Society, Organization, Culture

“Society” is one of those many words used in a wide variety of ways in different contexts. For example, there is society as all the people and the interactions among them, or society as all the institutions that constitute it. Talking about society as all the people and the interactions among them makes no distinction between the use of the word “society” and the use of the word “organization”; that is, society is conceptualized as one very large organization. I would suggest that we (at least I) do not use the words “society” and “organization” as synonyms (the American Society for Cybernetics being one gross exception). Talking about society as all the institutions which constitute it (government agencies, corporations, churches, schools, prisons, etc.) focuses on the static products of an ongoing process; that is, society is conceptualized as a stable, relatively unchanging system of entities performing various homeostatic functions. This is not to say that these institutions do not change, only that the word “society” does not relay a dynamic concept when used in this way. I would like to criticize both of these uses of “society” in the context of social design. Similarly, while I regard institutions as important objects of study in understanding society, I prefer to think of society in a dynamic context, an ongoing process in which the possibilities of design are continually shifting.

I would therefore like to make a case for society as the constraints that emerge from interaction among people and institutions and that limit that interaction. These constraints are both implicit and explicit, and include laws, morals, customs, ways of talking, available knowledge, value systems, ways of thinking, etc. The institutions that make up society are manifestations of these constraints, the static products of a dynamic process. I contend that whenever two (or more) people enter into conversation they are designing society. Constraints are implicit in the language used, molding the patterns of possible interactions; new constraints emerge from the interactions and get embedded in the language.

I propose avoiding the word “culture” in the context of social design. Some use it when talking about value systems. Others use to talk about the artifacts (religion, art, music, literature, etc.) which present these values. I have found the word to confuse rather than to clarify the issues surrounding societal (and organizational) design. “Culture” is for me an inherently stagnant concept that interferes with the concept of society as a dynamic process and I increasingly see it used as a buzzword. I do, however, find it useful in a relative context, i.e., when contrasting the differences between two or more societies.

Problem Solving, Choice, Design

The most common approach to social design that I encounter involves identifying problems and then searching for the best alternatives to solve them. There are, in my opinion, inherent difficulties with this approach. I use the word “problem” when I have a desirable situation that does not coincide with my perception of the current situation. The rational approach to a problematic situation is to select the best (i.e., optimum) course of action to arrive at the desired state. This desired state is usually specified as a goal, objective, or ideal. While there may be simple situations where this approach works to the satisfaction of the individual, it fails when there are conflicting desires and values and/or conflicting perceptions of the current situation. Characterizing this conflict may be high degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity, richly-joined (i.e., turbulent and dynamic) environments, or outright contradictions. Since I see conflicting values and perceptions as ubiquitous in social processes of even very small groups of individuals, I contend that the rational, problem-solving approach to social design is badly flawed.

Furthermore, I regard the differences between individuals that can lead to conflict to be desirable. Hence, any attempt to argue that a rationalistic approach to design should be pursued by seeking agreement on values and perceptions cannot be universally normative.

Purpose, Goals, Freedom

There are certain words that inevitably enter a discussion of social change and design. Among the most troublesome is the word “purpose.” “What is the purpose of society?” “What is the purpose of the design you propose or of your approach to design?” “What is the purpose of change?” I find that I, and most of the others with whom I talk, use the word on almost a daily basis. Sometimes it is used to talk about any entity that appears to be organized for some function; for example, if I see an interesting contraption on the table, I may ask “What is the

purpose of that device?" At other times, I may talk about my purpose in taking a particular action; in these cases, I am using the word in a rationalistic framework where my purpose is the prespecification of a desired end. And occasionally, I may use the word to talk about the property of a system that leads me to call it autonomous; that is, a purposeful system is one that exhibits choice behavior. While I think the latter usage has some merit, I find that the other common usages tend to creep in and often interfere with conversations on autonomy and purposefulness.

In a rationalistic framework, goal and purpose are almost synonymous. To some, the word "goal" is used only to talk about a consciously selected end state. To others, it is used to talk about any end state that a process is tending toward. In either case, it calls forth an image of a fixed end point, even though goals are sometimes very abstract and ambiguous. As a way of specifying needs, wants, desires, and values, I find this an extremely limiting concept, and to approach social design from the point of view of societal goals is to fall into the rationalistic trap. On the other hand, I find myself continually thinking and acting on needs and desires as though they were goals. I have, in the past, tried to explain this away as rooted in the way I have been trained to think, and think about thinking. As an alternative, I have proposed that needs, desires, values be conceptualized as constraints. This provides me with a better way to explain the behavior of those I observe and how that behavior influences the social systems in which these others engage each other. However, my ability, as an observer, to experience choice is so important to me and to a description of myself as autonomous that I can no longer dismiss the concept of goal as a mere flaw in descriptive machinery.

To choose is to act on goals. Choice, however, transforms constraint in the society in which it is performed, altering the choices of others. It is this dialectical relationship between goal-oriented and constraint-oriented approaches to desire and value that brings forth additional dilemmas of social design that I would like the workshop to address. I contend that both are needed, that one generates the other, and that the dialectic generates a dynamic theory of design.

Similarly, the concept of freedom also carries with it dialectical notions. I take sharp exception with those who say that all humans are free by virtue of their autonomous design. (A statement I have heard often at cybernetic meetings!) First, I would argue that autonomy requires at least two - self and other - in order to generate the descriptive mechanism required to have a concept of autonomous design. Hence, autonomy does not arise independently from the autonomy of others; it arises as a particular form of relationship among autonomous entities. Second, the experience of choice made possible by autonomous description can only be realized in the

context of these relationships. Again, I am constrained in my choices by the choices of others, and my choices constrain those of others and circuitously of myself. I am not free to jump off the Empire State Building and live; I am not free to stop the President of the United States from bombing Libya; I am not free to provide food to all the hungry of the world, or of this country, or even of this city; I am not even free to continue this workshop two (or one) hours beyond its scheduled termination time. And, no amount of telling myself that I really can choose to do so will change that. This is not to say that I cannot make a difference, only that what I do is constrained by the system of interaction in which I live - society.

Utopia

I do not know what utopia is. What I know is that whenever I act on my wants, needs, or desires, I do so with utopian intentions. When I do so, I am influencing in some way the society in which I find myself. However, if I realize that my autonomy - my ability to experience choice - requires a relationship with others who possess a similar propensity, I must accept that they may have different wants, needs, and desires, and that indeed that is desirable. Hence my starting point for a discussion of utopia is an ability and a willingness to enter into a conversation on desirability. The dialectical and dynamic process referred to above is realized in this conversation, with ideas on desirability in continual flux. The constraints that constitute society are realized in the language employed in conversation. Reflection on these languages, whether they be visual, mathematical, gestural, musical, or verbal, is an active process of social design; constraints can be made explicit, and then can be created, dissolved, or transformed. New constraints emerge, get embedded in the languages, and alter the patterns of possible interactions, which in turn generate new constraint. With new constraint comes new visions of the possible, and of the desirable.