Self-Knowledge by Proxy: Parsons on Philosophy of Design and the Modernist Vision

Abstract  Glenn Parsons’s 2016 work, The Philosophy of Design, looks deeply at design in general, and at the Modernist approach to design in particular. The book would make an excellent textbook, but one could equally treat it as a research monograph. This article provides a detailed review of the book as a contribution to design research. The author’s efforts are original and commendable, although the work is not entirely immune to disagreement. The article highlights the main line of reasoning to guide future readers, and develops a number of considerations. These include a reflection on the feasibility of Modernist design thinking, some background on the nature and origins of the philosophy of design as a discipline, a defense of the notion of a stable essence of the concept of design, and a critical analysis of Parsons’s definition of design.

Keywords  Definition of design
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Introduction

Serious reflection on the wonders and puzzles of design is a delightful way to tickle your mind. If you are a student or practitioner of design, it is potentially empowering, too, because it affords you a deeper understanding of what you are doing, and awareness of the consequences your work may lead to. For example, such reflection may enable you to appreciate design as a means of affecting people’s everyday lives for the better in many small ways, and perhaps some bigger ones. And it may draw your attention to the moral responsibility you incur as a designer.

To be effective, serious reflection on design requires philosophical flair and craftsmanship at a level that designers are not trained to master. How fortunate we are, therefore, that a professional philosopher came along, took the time and effort to acquire a thorough understanding of design, its history, and its literature, and then present his philosophical reflection about what design is and how it works. His insights are about us, in our capacity as human beings in general, and designers in particular. That is what Glenn Parsons has done in his recent book *The Philosophy of Design.*

Parsons is the first philosopher ever – as far as I am aware – to generously offer us an entire book full of deep, professional self-knowledge to be gained by proxy, as it were. All we need to do is find a good chair and the requisite peace of mind to read and contemplate what he has to say.

This paper offers a thorough review of Parsons’s book, and responds to certain parts of it. Arguably, the book has a dual aim – first, to function as a textbook introducing broadly the philosophy of design as a (rather new) subject in its own right; and second, to explore an original research problem within that broad field. I will consider the book primarily in its capacity as a contribution to design research.

In the following section, I outline Parsons’s aim(s), main line of reasoning, and contributions, and I make some comments along the way. I hope other readers of *The Philosophy of Design* will use the outline as a convenient, pocket-sized roadmap showing the main roads and distinctive landmarks of the rich philosophical terrain the book surveys in much greater detail. In this way, I also aim to highlight Parsons’s original research contribution. Parsons is far too modest about the merits of his work. For example, he announces that he “will consider the book worthwhile if it succeeds in showing that design is a realm worthy of philosophical exploration in its own right.” Parsons not only demonstrates this in his book – he also contributes to that exploration in a substantial way.

After the outline follows a discussion. On a cursory reading, this section may be skipped, in whole or in part. It provides some background information on the nature and origins of the philosophy of design and also features a more critical and in-depth consideration of certain aspects of the book that caught my attention.

The exposition and discussion of Parsons’s book ends with a short conclusion – including a warm recommendation.

Aims, Main Line of Reasoning, and Contributions—an Outline

*The introduction (pp. 1–3)*

Parsons gently introduces philosophy as a means of cultivating the “ability to see one’s daily practice” from “a broader perspective,” in “relation to other important dimensions of human life,” and thus to “think through its place in the grander scheme of things.” When applied to the daily practice of design, philosophy so conceived may be a source of professional self-knowledge for designers, as I suggest above.

According to Parsons, philosophers have largely neglected design so far, at least as a subject for study in its own right. But since “design today has a prevalence

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2 The present review was originally commissioned as a traditional book review by the editor-in-chief of *Shi Ji*. It grew into something more research oriented. As a result, the editor suggested it be considered a hybrid “full-length article in the form of a book review.” For a review with a different profile of emphasis, see Mona Sloane, “Book Review: The Philosophy of Design by Glenn Parsons,” London School of Economics and Political Science, April 27, 2016, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/04/27/book-review-the-philosophy-of-design-by-glenn-parsons/.
4 I include page ranges so that page numbers cited in the Discussion section can be traced back to the relevant part of this outline.
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