

Gathering Design and its Center(s)

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Review of *Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-Centered Worlds*, by Ron Wakkary. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021.

Ron Wakkary's *Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-Centered Worlds* is an expansive, intricate, yet ultimately humble argument for reframing design as an epistemological practice from a post-humanist standpoint. In contrast to *transhumanism*, the author is not so much interested in the biological, moral or cognitive qualities of human beings that ought to be technologically modified or left behind as a matter of design. On the contrary, Wakkary does not outline what is necessary for improved or even continued human existence, but rather argues for the role that design as a practice does, can and could play when viewed from this standpoint. This argument firstly maps to the commitment of "methodological post-humanism" (Sharon 2013) that lies at the heart of much contemporary philosophy of technology; as for instance expressed in Bernard Stiegler's thesis on humanity's "originary technicity" (cf. Stiegler 1998) or the various strains drawing from Ihde's or Latour's notions on technological mediation. Human existence is shaped by design; through tools, symbols and things that embody, modulate and perpetuate what the human as an embodied and encultured being is as such. Secondly, as he makes clear in the first pages of this book, to Wakkary post-humanism is specifically "the sharing of the center between humans and nonhumans" (5). Accordingly, readers can expect an infusion of strains of new materialism into a field that frequently orients analyses of technological mediation on the

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human scale exclusively.

Wakkary's book, then, is oriented at a more expansive understanding of what design can do and how it could be understood so as to transcend the established formulas of *human-centered design*—and specifically, the latter's unreflective humanism and narrow conceptual constraints of human-centered ergonomics and utility. Ultimately, Wakkary argues (1) that the generally dominant logic of the latter belies the complexity of moving and active parts (human and non-human) in the things, phenomena and practices of designing; and (2) how acknowledging the former brings opportunities for design along post-humanist lines of thinking. Opportunities towards, for instance, more sustainable, just and equitable futures through design that take seriously the urgent need to take a more ecological view that does not place the human scale as the only or most important one to cater for.

In this regard, *Things We Could Design* stands in line with much recent work that, particularly in light of changes to design practice brought on by digital technologies and the dual spectres of late capitalism and climate change, questions the epistemological and ontological sureties of design (see, e.g., Rosner 2018; Redström and Wiltse 2018; or Mareis and Paim 2021). In a similar vein, this objective resonates with work of interest to *Technē*, such as Science and Technology Studies (STS) or philosophy of technology that studies actual technologies and the array of phenomena associated with them not as simply given, but with a regard to how people, things and phenomena are made in relation with, to and via each other.

Wakkary is, first of all, eminently suited as an author on this subject. A central figure in the more designerly areas of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research, Wakkary has led and supported design research that pushes boundaries on how interactive things can be made using a variety of materials and processes (e.g., Wakkary et al. 2017; Wakkary et al. 2018), and on how to think of and through such things conceptually, theoretically and

methodologically (e.g., Wakkary et al. 2015). On its own, therefore, the design work being conducted in and around Wakkary's positions at Simon Fraser University (where he heads the Everyday Design Studio) and Eindhoven University of Technology (where he is a fellow of the Future Everyday Cluster) would already be of relevance for philosophy of technology following the “empirical turn” (Achterhuis 2001). As has been prominently articulated by representatives of the latter such as Verbeek, design articulates and shapes the relations between humans and their world(s), and as such is a way of doing philosophy or ethics “by other means” (Verbeek 2015). This symbiotic relationship has been further developed and exhibited by a range of design research practitioners and theorists operating in a similar field and often in connection to Wakkary, such as Audrey Desjardins (cf. Desjardins and Wakkary 2016), Sabrina Hauser (cf. Hauser et al. 2018a; Hauser et al. 2018b), Angella Mackey (cf. Mackey et al. 2017), William Odom (cf. Odom et al. 2016), and Doenja Oogjes (cf. Oogjes et al. 2022). The continuous development of Wakkary's thoughts on and work in design has now found its most expansive expression in his monograph, *Things We Could Design*. Here, Wakkary approaches design on multiple fronts through three intimately connected parts concerned with *nomadic practices* (Part I), *things* (Part II) and the *designer* (Part III) respectively, whose main points I summarize in the following.

In Part I, Wakkary focusses on the task of decentering or ‘unbuilding’ (5) human-centered (i.e., extractive, hierarchical, ergonomic, and utilitarian) design towards what he refers to as *nomadic practices*. The latter is presented as an “epistemological theory” (35) that conceives of design not as a coherent discipline of set patterns and objects that is shored up by academic or economic structures, but rather differentiates design into practices which only assemble around the “somethings” (36) they design. This requires some unpacking. Wakkary draws extensively from Deleuze and Guattari's body of work around nomadism as an onto-epistemological settling and unsettling (52 ff.), along with Latourian notions of gatherings. In

a nutshell, there are many nomadic practices, each assembling themselves around a particular notion of design (or any other type of knowledge production) that creates a particular ‘something.’ The core of this assembly lies in the particular “shared intentionality” (36) a nomadic practice gathers that is formed by the alignment of multiple intentionalities of agents, phenomena, technologies etc. Intentionality, here as in (post-)phenomenology, is the ‘directedness’ of things or non-/human agents towards the world in specific ways: one cannot be conscious, but only ever conscious *of* something. Similarly, one does not design, but only ever designs *for* something, etc. The utility of this argument lies in the differentiation it allows Wakkary, for example, to distinguish between the existing *fors* (i.e., intentionalities) of nomadic practices of design: “artifacts [for human use], objects [embodying ideals] and products [as an economic matter]” (15, see 65 ff. and 82 for the relevant discussion) in the second chapter of this part. In contrast to the disciplinary (i.e., 'territorialized') ideal of design as creating a ‘preferable situation,’ Wakkary thereby diffracts design into multiple potential epistemological practices that depend on and shape relationally whatever is gathered around the practice. One of the major benefits here is not only that design(s) viewed this way becomes situational, multiple and relational; but rather that this move further grants a new type of “accountability” (54 ff.) outside of the logic of profit or usability. Namely, a nomadic practice is one that “is accountable based on who and what it gathers both in quantity in kind” (54), meaning that (i) it *becomes* what it is through a process of gathering and (ii) has a responsibility for what (and who) it does and does not integrate in this gathering.

As has already become apparent, these are complex points in unconventional and even idiosyncratic vocabulary to get across. However, Wakkary draws from his own practice and the field of design research to establish a consistent way of presenting his main arguments: each chapter is ‘seeded’ through a prologue featuring a selection of design projects, frequently from his own or colleagues’ work; before being advanced theoretically

through its particular focus, and then referring back to the initial conceptualization. For Part I for instance, the notion of nomadic practice is pre-articulated through projects that are ‘gathered’ around the conceptual stance of “slow technology” (cf. Hallnäs and Redström 2001)—things designed for reflection and exploration in contrast to speed or efficiency. And when differentiating design into various nomadic practices of designing *some things*, he can rely on diverse materials sourced such as Peter van der Mark and Bas van Abel’s *Fairphone*, Dieter Rams’ work at *Braun*, or the concept car *Kar-a-Sutra* by Mario Bellini. The richness of practices, and particularly the inclusion of design projects outside the ordinary normative frameworks of utility and ergonomics, works in favor of Wakkary’s argument throughout *Things We Could Design*: rather than relying on thought experiments that take the arrangements of concepts and things in design for granted, this approach furnishes readers of either designerly or philosophical backgrounds with actual instances where nomadic practices of design and their various *some things* are gathered. This has implications for how designers or philosophers of technologies may consider their work: as, for instance, a distributed process of material knowledge production on the one hand, or as analytically finding the core to a particular practice that is reflected in the assemblages involving actual technologies on the other hand. Having outlined his foundational conceptual structure in the form of nomadic practices in Part I, in the second part Wakkary moves on to the purpose of the concepts of nomadic practices within this book, namely, “to find a structure with posthuman commitments over humanist ones in order to create the speculative room to investigate a nomadic practice of *designing things*” (15).

In Part II, Wakkary proposes his nomadic practice of ‘designing things;’ which is (i) seeded again through an eclectic selection of design projects, (ii) generally based in post-phenomenology and mediation theory, and (iii) further advanced through new materialist and post-humanist theory. In contrast to the previously identified nomadic practices of designing

artifacts, objects or products; where the gathered intentionalities (of, e.g., designing *artifacts* for *slow technology*) originate predominantly from the human domain, things for Wakkary possess distinctive characteristics (see 108 ff.). Specifically, they are (i) inextricable from human goings-on but are also *transformative* of human activities and concerns, (ii) they are further *interconnected* with humans and nonhumans alike, (iii) they are *relational* in that they co-shape what they connect with and via, and (iv) are *vital*—by which Wakkary means “a certain aliveness through forms of intentionality and agentic capacities” (148). The examples enlisted at the beginning of each of this part’s two chapters are again illuminating. Whether considering William Gaver and colleagues’ spirituality-supporting *Prayer Companion* (Gaver et al. 2010) or Wakkary and colleagues’ own idiosyncratic household items *Morse Things* (Wakkary et al. 2017) or even a smartphone-oriented traffic light system (Scully 2017), the nomadic practice of designing things transforms human goings-on in a way that distributes how phenomena, efficacy and agency are usually considered—that is, revolving exclusively around a human center—into an assemblage of humans and nonhumans (cf. 156 ff.).

Remembering Wakkary’s overarching goal, it becomes clear that this is a matter of importance: insofar as the anthropocentric norm of design (which artifacts, objects and products also prescribe to more or less) is a guarantor for anthropogenic catastrophe, articulating ways in which design can become unmoored from this center is key—while still persisting with a clear relevance to practice.

Here I want to note that, to my mind, this section is the first time the post-human conceptual vocabulary used to articulate Wakkary’s notion of *things* obscures what exactly is being proposed, and how it differs through the preceding nomadic practices. From a practical standpoint, it seems that the notion of nomadic practices fleshed out in Part I is already functional (in its counterfunctional antidisciplinarity) in a way that does not need to be substantiated by further vocabulary. However, this section becomes clearer when drawing on

a further scaffolding structure, the initial overview chapter for the book that is somewhat lengthy but nonetheless is both necessary and productive (cf. 1-31). Indeed, the overview finds Wakkary at his most precise, for instance in clearly stating that “things are nonhumans made by both humans and nonhumans” (10), that they are mediators on a more comprehensive scale (spatially, temporally and agentially) than is typically considered in design or indeed investigated in empirical philosophy of technology, and that they manifest conceptually as well as concretely and therefore not only touch upon the immediate concerns of use for this or that, but rather straddle layers of politics and ethics (11). Also of note in this regard is the recurring conceptual diagram of a stool whose three legs make up the basis for a theory of things—in regards to which Wakkary notes with humility that this conceptual edifice “too will rock” (11) over the course of the book. This humility, a general and welcome feature of Wakkary’s writing, is the major and, to my mind, most productive facet of the final part of *Things We Could Design*.

In Part III, Wakkary seeks to decenter the *designer* itself from an exclusively human position to both a generic (thingly) as well as specific (human) subjectivity. Connected to the prior outline of the nomadic practice of designing things, this argument first proceeds by articulating that the designer of things is not a singular (human or nonhuman) being, but rather a “*biography*” (163) of a particularly constituted lifeworld—a “bringing together of agentic capacities across humans and nonhumans in ways that create things” (173). Biography as a human subjectivity-overriding conceptualization is a potent choice because it makes concrete that the process of designing things “constructs and inscribes itself into the world” (174) while also insisting on an ethical commitment: “to fully know that to design while cohabiting this biosphere is to be inseparable from the thing that is designed” (177). At this point, the question may again be posed in how far this argument can be related to either design practice, or how it may inform philosophical analyses.

This is where one of the most insightful proposals of Wakkary's comes in: that of the human as a non-optional, and irretrievably 'privileged,' member of a biography—as the latter's *speaking subject*. This is a welcome contrast to much other post-humanist design theory, as Wakkary readily acknowledges the need to distinguish the human role in a nomadic practice as the major agent of articulation: “In a human and nonhuman assembly of the designer of things, it is humans who speak for and among mute things and matter” (185).

It makes sense not only from a philosophical perspective, but also from a designerly consideration: in relating humans and nonhumans via symbolic communication (e.g., language and its externalization in graphics, functions, aesthetics), it is the quasi-linguistic translation work of designers that is irreplaceable. In the kind of practice that Wakkary advocates, humility is again a key concern here insofar as the human member of a biography speaks “on behalf” (187) of its members, bearing the role of a speaking subject in mind is an ethico-political matter that a human designer needs to heed if they are to speak of themselves as, e.g., non-extractive or indeed post-humanist. In the remainder of this part, Wakkary further shores up this proposal by articulating that a designer (as a biography of things) has a particular *constituency*, which aligns intuitively with mediation theory's focus on how technological mediation co-constitutes subjectivities and objectivities. Importantly, Wakkary recognizes that his proposals can be used to not only characterize and make things that align with the values of post-humanist design he argues for. He refers to such counter-examples as *anti-biographies*, i.e. practices of design that do not attribute the constituent (and distributed) force of non-/human or thingly intentionality but rather abstract away from the concrete, situated and material interconnectedness of things to a narrow design 'problem.' Particularly astute observations in this regard are the omnipresent plastic grocery bag patent or the tragic ubiquity of AR-15 rifle designs (193 ff.).

However, I also argue that the connection between the constitutive agglomeration of

the biography and the designer's practical work as speaker could have been made clearer, potentially by relating this aspect to a different strain of thought than post-humanist or new materialist theory. Given that this is a journal for philosophy of technology, this is a fruitful point to dig a little deeper into the theoretical work Wakkary undertakes in *Things We Could Design*. It connects to Part III of the latter, to my mind the strongest part of the book, in a way that neither completely invalidates Wakkary's work nor lessens the major take-aways outlined above, yet points to opportunities that have not been taken but are now available for further research and analysis. This is hinted at in other points that could also be levied for critique, such as the light reading of Heidegger and particularly the ontological mode of analysis (see 104 for an example where the relationship between ontic and ontological is inexhaustively articulated)—which, to be sure, Wakkary shares with much of phenomenological work following the empirical turn (see Zwier, Blok, and Lemmens 2016 for a poignant discussion). This light reading is in and of itself not detrimental, but perhaps it strikes readers from a more philosophical background as odd given that many of his subsequent vocabulary choices revolve around (at least a Latourian) Heidegger (e.g., gathering, thing, etc.). However, it is not so much a scholarly question that this points to, but rather to an important discussion about design which could have taken a different route in this book. To my mind, this route arises from a missed opportunity for the treatment of the relationship of (a) the articulation performed by the designer as speaking subject and (b) the status of *symbols* or *symbolic qualities* in nomadic practices. If a thing's *biography* depends to a certain extent on the symbolic register available to a human designer in order to 'speak,' then could there be an analytic unfolding how a thing's *constituency* co-shapes the choice of 'speech?' In other words, if the *ontic* speech activity of a designer-subjectivity depends on an *ontological* amalgamation of the given non-/human constituency and historical symbolic registers (e.g., forms, indices, icons), then there are plentiful characteristics yet to be

articulated for nomadic practices that may resonate more strongly with design practice as well as philosophical analysis. Here, Heidegger's ontological method that was treated too lightly rears its head—but even more so, work from philosophical anthropology such as Cassirer's classic *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* or Ciano Aydin's recent *Estimate Technology* (Aydin 2021) could furnish an appropriate extension to Wakkary's work.

Particularly the historicity of, e.g., 'gathering' structures Wakkary may be highly interesting. For instance, can an evolving structure of the process of gathering which results in different kinds of symbolic 'interfaces' or 'registers' for a speaking subject be theorized—how things “structure and pre-structure” (Coeckelbergh 2020) the biographies of other things? Recent work in philosophical anthropology, particularly Davor Löffler's theory of process-emulative recursion (see, e.g., Löffler 2018), suggests that such an approach to design is indeed feasible. It is here, I argue, where design and philosophy of technology could benefit each other yet more fruitfully—and Wakkary's work can be put to good use at exactly this intersection: how the symbolic level which the empirical turn relies upon *comes to be* through the constituency of biographies, and the ways in which these designate and are designated by their speaker. At the same time, it must be stated (and praised) that the core conceptual work that Wakkary has undertaken—nomadic practices, things, and the 'explosion' of the previously exclusively human designer—make this route readily available.

For this and many other reasons, I find that Wakkary's book evocatively articulates that design can (and perhaps must) be reconsidered for transcending the catastrophic path-dependencies of capitalism. While beyond the scope of this review, I further wish to highlight that the choice of design exemplars (21 total, not to mention the plentiful references) is inspired, and the theoretical concepts Wakkary draws together insightful. Lastly, with his plea for humility, the most valuable contribution of Wakkary's framing lies in bringing home how generous, humble and reflective design in both thought and deed can and could be.

When you go all in, conceptually, then *Things We Could Design* leaves the reader with a richer understanding of what design can be beyond utilitarian constraints or anthropocentric inadequacies. For designers, philosophers or any other nomadic practitioners, this may mean following Wakkary by “[acting] with and on behalf of nonhumans in ways that are accountable for how we quite literally live-together—even after our human life is over” (240).

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