

Postphenomenology, Embodiment and Technics

Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking University Lectures*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2009 and *Embodied Technics*. Automatic Press/VIP, 2010

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Don Ihde has published two new volumes, which together form a good introduction to his style of philosophy. Whereas the first volume presents the different aspects of Ihde's distinctive postphenomenological philosophy of technology and is also meant as introductory, the second volume goes more deeply into some of those aspects, a choice that causes some repetition across the two volumes. Ihde writes easily, but the seeming ease and theoretical unpretentiousness should not mislead the reader, since Ihde definitely takes stances, without, however, engaging in extensive dialogue with other positions. Yet, this lack of debate that the reader may experience does not hinder the fact that Ihde's way of thinking first and foremost opens intellectual doors to others. One should also keep in mind that these two slim volumes extend the long list of books and publications by Ihde, and that Ihde's position has stabilized or is—in the Husserlian sense—more or less sedimented within a certain circle of philosophers of technology and/or science. Nonetheless, we will also concentrate on those places where Ihde opens doors to the thoughts or ways of thinking of others and where he—maybe unwittingly—enters into dialogue with thinkers he does not mention.

The first and second lecture of the Peking University Lectures are very instructive and offer vital insight into Ihde's perspective, since they briefly and clearly expound the theoretical background for the other chapters. As the title indicates, this volume consists of a series of lectures Ihde delivered at Peking University in 2006. Of all chapters of this volume and probably also the other volume, these two chapters are the more challenging and the more inviting for fundamental dialogue, because they explain how postphenomenology relates to

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phenomenology and pragmatism, and in what sense postphenomenology can be considered “post” and new. The remaining chapters of *Postphenomenology and Technoscience—The Peking University Lectures* (PT) and most chapters of *Embodied Technics* (ET) exemplify postphenomenology and in particular the “empirical turn” that is essential to postphenomenology.

Ihde has adapted much of Deweyan pragmatism into phenomenology, an intellectual operation resulting into postphenomenology. An obvious question is whether postphenomenology is still phenomenology, or in what sense the relation between phenomenology and postphenomenology resembles the way postmodernism is still part of the larger project of modernity. If postmodernism is a consequence of the impossibilities of modern thinking, what are the phenomenological tensions that Ihde wants to overcome in postphenomenology? The answer is twofold. On the one hand, the key idea of postphenomenology, intentionality, plainly belongs to the phenomenological tradition. The idea that technologies or instruments alter this relation, is also not proper to postphenomenology. Both Heidegger (1927) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) have focused on the way technologies alter our being-in-the-world. The prefix “post” therefore does not necessarily refer to a shift in subject matter, but rather to the philosophical method and underpinning of postphenomenology, for both the pragmatist threads and the empirical turn of science studies that are incorporated into postphenomenology resist the *transcendental* perspective of the major phenomenologists of the twentieth century. And the precise mixture of pragmatism and phenomenology would be worth a study. For example, there certainly are pragmatist elements both in Merleau-Ponty and in Heidegger. But whether, e.g. Heidegger’s transcendentalism is compatible with his more pragmatist elements remains debated (cf. Blattner 2007). Also, the hotly debated project of the naturalization of phenomenology (Petitot et al. 1999), in which descriptive results of phenomenology and naturalist explanations for experience are integrated, encounters many obstacles. That may point to a possibly problematic status for postphenomenology as well. As Aikin (2006) says, phenomenology is inconsistent with pragmatism’s epistemic and ontologic naturalisms.

Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and all may be interesting, but that does not make them relevant to genuinely naturalist research programs. They may even be humanistic and deep, but that does not make their conclusions and arguments available to the naturalist pragmatists. (p. 328)

Although it is doubtful that Aikin would accept this argument, one could object that postphenomenology merely retains some important *themes* of phenomenological philosophy (intentionality, embodiment, the lifeworld), but leaves behind phenomenological methods. Postphenomenology’s aim is therefore *not* to save phenomenology as a philosophical method. And yet, Ihde also wishes to retain from phenomenology a methodological aspect, namely “variational theory”—Husserl’s method of free variation which is closely connected to the eidetic reduction, but in postphenomenology does not lead to essences, but to Ihde’s important notion of multistability. However, the connection between both methods may be too loose to

speak of a truly phenomenological method. A similar phenomenological reproach is present in the field of “phenomenologized” cognitive science.

What is saved as ‘phenomenology’ is no longer a philosophical strategy or method but the simple requirement that experiments involving Necker cubes, duck-rabbits, or blind-spot demonstrations (first person reports, all) are relevant to cognitive science and the enterprise of the study of the mind. (Aikin 2006, p. 329)

On the one hand, one may be tempted to think that Ihde’s use of variational theory, indeed introduced on the basis of Necker cubes, and extended to, e.g. variations in archery, results from such a simple requirement. On the other hand, postphenomenology seems to lead to a genuinely hybrid form of phenomenology, and Ihde’s earlier *Experimental Phenomenology* (1986) pleads for an empirical psychology guided by phenomenology.

Ihde himself situates the divergence of postphenomenology and phenomenology, and thus the departure from transcendentalism, in a “nonsubjective” and “interrelational” phenomenology, i.e. phenomenology corrected by the organism/environment model of pragmatism. Ihde’s analysis of the bodily technique of archery as a multistable phenomenon (i.e. a structure following different stable trajectories leading to variations in the phenomenon) embedded in cultural-historical lifeworlds shows that consciousness is an abstraction and that experience is a matter of embodiment and situatedness. There is a wide range of contemporary anti-dualist and anti-representationalist studies in situated and embodied cognition strongly related to phenomenology, in particular to Merleau-Ponty’s work, and which highlights the interaction of organism and environment. Although these studies clearly represent “post-subjectivist” and “post-objectivist” positions, Ihde does not mention them, nor does he seem to be in implicit dialogue with them. Enactivist theories (cf. Menary 2006), e.g. would form an excellent philosophical underpinning for postphenomenology. Therefore, it would be a very interesting undertaking to question Ihde’s choice for pragmatism and to compare the advantages of a pragmatist underpinning to those of a contemporary underpinning that is more aligned with phenomenology. Thus, on the one hand, and because of its pragmatist underpinning, *postphenomenology*, in its most recent guise, might be less *post-* than it is *hybrid* or *alterphenomenology*. On the other hand, and from the point of view that Ihde focuses on the mediating capacities of technologies, the name *postphenomenology* may be very well chosen, since in general, post-movements precisely abandon faith in the “real” beyond media and in the idea of the unmediated and the transparent. It is not always very clear if Ihde shares this goodbye to the “real”, but many examples that illustrate Ihde’s empirical turn at least point to the idea that mediating technologies are co-constitutive for our experience.

In general, it would be interesting and useful if someone were to study this issue seriously and tried to elucidate the complex and sometimes intricate relations hidden in the seemingly straightforward term “postphenomenology”. Such a

challenging enterprise could turn out to be crucial for the continuation of postphenomenology in the twenty-first century.

A second important issue is the “empirical turn” (a term coined by Hans Achterhuis), which also implies a turn away from looking at transcendental conditions. In Ihde’s (2009) words:

It is the step away from generalizations about *technology überhaupt* and a step into the examination of *technologies in their particularities*. It is the step away from a high altitude or transcendental perspective and an appreciation of the multidimensionality of technologies as *material cultures* within a *lifeworld*. (p. 22)

The point is thus not that phenomenologists would have neglected the phenomenon of technology. Heidegger paid a lot of (rather negative) attention to technology, and Merleau-Ponty (occasionally) analyzed very concrete technologies in his account of embodiment. However, when Ihde discusses the empirical turn in his second chapter, he claims that he *adds* technologies to the Husserlian analysis. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that Bernard Stiegler, another contemporary philosopher of technology, whose inspiration is both phenomenological and postmodern, considers Husserl’s analysis of writing (an issue that Ihde analyzes in his own way in ET) as paradigmatic for a philosophy of technology (cf. Stiegler 1998). Interestingly, both Ihde and Stiegler seem to agree that Western philosophy has excluded technics and techniques from its questionings, and both thinkers are involved with phenomenological philosophy and beyond. Also, Ihde clearly appreciates Husserl’s analysis of writing, especially because of its link with the lifeworld, but it is remarkable how a similar appreciation by two contemporary philosophers of technology then leads to naturalism (Ihde), then to a post-modern form of transcendental thinking (Stiegler). Also, Ihde’s repeated emphasis on the fact that some material technologies are older than *homo sapiens sapiens* is closely related to Stiegler’s rejection of the idea of a second origin, i.e. a point where humans “fell” into technology.

Nonetheless, it remains true that the turn to very concrete studies of very concrete technologies is crucial for understanding Ihde’s undertaking. Ihde proposes a set of human-technology relations developed mainly in his *Technology and the Lifeworld* (1990). It is mainly the embodiment activity of embodiment relations, i.e. relations that incorporate material technologies into bodily experience, that displaces the overstressing of consciousness in classical phenomenology. In ET, Ihde nicely shows how it is Merleau-Ponty’s merit, and later on Dreyfus’s, to replace pure consciousness with embodiment. According to Ihde, these are moves in the right direction, but not yet radical enough. And here the claim of postphenomenology as a non-subjective kind of phenomenology returns. As embodied beings, our particularly structured body shapes our actions, experience and knowledge in a particular way. Also, our action, experience and knowledge are situated, and learned awareness of those shapes is attained *interactionally*.

I claim *we do not have direct, introspective knowledge of our visual shaping*. Rather, this self-knowledge must be gained *reflexively* and in strict *interaction* with our experience of being-in-a-world. (...) In all of this we learn about our directional, shaped and situated structures of vision – but this is not *introspective*. It is rather *inter-relational* and *reflexive* and in each case involves ‘external’ perception. (Ihde 2010, p. 41)

This insight is extremely important to Ihde because it is one of his reasons for appreciating Dewey’s pragmatism. According to Ihde, pragmatism counterbalances Husserl’s overstressing of consciousness and the epistemology of early modern philosophy in general.

What we have here is Ihde’s version of embedded, situated embodiment, and his answer to the question of how we attain knowledge of the very structure of our experience. The status of this self-knowledge, however, remains unclear. Of course, in interacting with the environment we develop skills, and skills are considered as embodied, practical knowledge, or in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, as *praktognosis* (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945). Is this what Ihde means? If so, the displacement of consciousness is carried out by Merleau-Ponty, or earlier by Heidegger, who rejects Husserl’s overstressing of abstract consciousness early in his philosophical career. Skills indeed presuppose knowledge of the structuring of our experience, but this knowledge is bodily and does not imply—and often even resists—reflective or intellectual knowledge. Ihde’s real question therefore seems to be how we can become *theoretically* acquainted with those structures or shapes. And here, some nuance might be useful. Some structures are indeed easily accessible, e.g. the fact that we are binocular and forward oriented in vision. What this implies for experience can indeed become clearer if we compare to animals that have other visual systems. Those are, however, the easy cases. It becomes more difficult if we want to become acquainted with those structures of experience that we do not experience that easily, e.g. by looking into the mirror or by comparing to other animals. In other words, this is the problem of the *pre-reflective* aspects of experience (cf. Legrand 2007). One could say that the difficulty no longer consists in opposing introspection and knowledge gained in interaction (a kind of knowledge Ihde calls *reflexive*), but in opposing what is “*reflexively*” accessible and the “*prereflective*” aspects of our experience. Whereas the first opposition parallels, according to Ihde, phenomenology and postphenomenology, the second opposition, one could say, parallels rather uncomplicated forms of phenomenology and much more difficult forms of phenomenology. The crux is what method (and what epistemology) we need in order to become aware of the shapes or structures that constitute our experience in view of the fact that many such structures are transparent in experience, i.e. also in interaction with others and in interaction with objects or with the environment.

This problem is not limited to so-called unaided experience, but extends to the use of instruments and technologies. And in this domain we encounter the particular merit of postphenomenology: to combine embodiment and technology from the point of view that embodiment replaces subjectivity (or at least a Cartesian form of subjectivity). Here, Ihde’s account becomes penetrating: the possibilities and the

constraints of an instrument are not derivable from simple material properties, nor is one directly aware of them. In contrast, what we need is a thorough account of the embodied, embedded use of technologies. Ihde's analyses are important here, not in the least because they can save us from technofantasies, be they utopian or dystopian.

In PT, Ihde presents a case study in which imaging technologies are examined. Ihde argues that we have entered a second scientific revolution, produced by *postmodern* instrumentation no longer analog to or isomorphic with the human sensorium. This should not be confused with a posthuman condition, however, for postmodern instrumentation still translates its results into the realm of the human. The hermeneutics therefore remain embodied. This observation parallels Ihde's repeated warning, in ET, against technofantasies, in which the constraints of human embodiment tend to disappear. In contrast to these fantasies, our bodily experience of technologies most often shows that re-embodiment into new technologies is rather precarious or at least very imperfect. According to Ihde, embodiment contains the clue to recognizing the constraints of recent technology, e.g. of virtual reality.

With regard to postmodern imaging technologies, Ihde nicely describes how the translation process between input and output (image) is very compound and complex and incorporates computers and digital technologies, such that abstract and calculative processes are the foundation of images. It would have been interesting if Ihde had confronted his insights into the fundamentally altered nature of postmodern images in science with the issue of how culture in general is affected by this postmodern kind of image production. We think here of the almost evident dialogue with the philosophy of Vilém Flusser (cf. Flusser 2000), influenced by Heidegger and Husserl, and focusing on a new form of hermeneutics that is necessary if we want to avoid an equally postmodern form of illiteracy, in which the illiterate is unacquainted with contemporary technologies' black-boxed, digitalized and calculative processes that engender images. A major reason for entering the confrontation, is that contemporary science, certainly in its popularized forms, also takes advantage of this new form of illiteracy. As Ihde says, the translational mediation has to be decoded or interpreted, whereas according to Flusser, the illiterate is easily fooled when he or she does not realize the non-analog, programmed origin of the image.

In Chap. 5 in ET, Ihde again broaches the issue of contemporary imaging and the necessity to translate data into the realm of the bodily-perceptual. Here, however, he puts more emphasis on the necessity of decoding or interpreting the translational mediation and on the fact that we have to *learn* to read this kind of images. One could wonder if contemporary imaging techniques still are a matter of *material* hermeneutics, as Ihde claims. The reversible relation between data and images and the abstract processing of the data might call for a digital hermeneutics, in which we are less sensitive to the material aspects of technologies, and more aware of the software and the specifically digital, abstract and black-boxed processes behind the formation of images.

In PT, Ihde also focuses on other new technologies, mainly in musical performance and letter writing, and he resumes these two issues more elaborately in ET, respectively in Chap. 3 and Chap. 6. In general, his empirical turn to concrete

and embedded technologies shows that instruments or mediations are non-neutral and co-constitutive of the results obtained by means of them. Very often, in order to understand this non-neutral and co-constitutive nature of technologies, we have to take into account human embodiment and the embeddedness into a specific cultural and historical milieu.

It is philosophically interesting if one finds out, after having read someone's work, that a lot of work remains to be done. In Don Ihde's case, the task he leaves us with is twofold. First, there is the challenging and critical task to disentangle the epistemological and ontological presuppositions of postphenomenology, and to assess Ihde's particular combination of phenomenology and pragmatist underpinning. Second, and Ihde probably would agree more here, there is the task of relating Ihde's insights with other contemporary thinkers in philosophy of technology, in order to explore the further possibilities of postphenomenology.

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