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Beyond the canon: Don Ihde and North American philosophy of technology

ARKADIUSZ MISZTAL

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Abstract

The paper seeks to discuss the origin and development of North American philosophy of technology against the background of the phenomenological canon. More specifically, it traces the trajectory of Don Ihde's thought, whose *Technics and Praxis* (1979) is usually cited as the first North American book specifically described as a philosophy of technology. While the phenomenological tradition provided a firm foundation for Ihde's project, it has never acted as a rigid conceptual framework. Enriching his theoretical perspective with insights taken from the engagements with pragmatism, Ihde departed from Heideggerian-style traditional phenomenological analyses of technology in a number of ways, which this paper discusses. In most general terms, as I argue, Ihde has reversed the direction of Heideggerian inquiry that concentrates on how concrete tools and procedures disclose their underlying reality and thus moved towards the analysis of technologies in their particularities. This shift has allowed him to approach the multidimensionality of technologies as material cultures within a lifeworld and explore the different aspects of experience that result from human-technology relations as embedded in specific cultural and social dimensions.

Keywords

post-phenomenology, technology, experience, culture, life-world technologies

Post-fenomenologia Dona Ihde'ego a północnoamerykańska filozofia techniki

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia początki i rozwój północnoamerykańskiej filozofii techniki na tle kanonu fenomenologicznego, analizując trajektorię myśli współczesnego amerykańskiego filozofa, Dona Ihde, którego monografia *Technics and Praxis* wydana w 1979 roku, jest powszechnie uznawana za jedną z pierwszych amerykańskich publikacji naukowych z dziedziny filozofii techniki. Chociaż tradycja fenomenologiczna dostarczyła Ihdemu solidnych podstaw do wyartykułowania własnych poglądów, nie stanowiła nigdy sztywnej, nieprzekraczalnej granicy dla jego myśli. Wzbogacając swoją teoretyczną perspektywę o koncepcje i podejście typowe dla amerykańskiego pragmatyzmu, Ihde odszedł już w swoich wczesnych pracach od tradycyjnej fenomenologicznej analizy „Technologii" w stylu Heideggera, koncentrując się na technologiach i technikach w ich konkretnych sytuacyjnych kontekstach. Ta zmiana perspektywy, jak argumentuje autor artykułu, umożliwiła Ihdemu przedstawienie wielowymiarowości poszczególnych technologii jako kultur materialnych i związanych z nimi praktyk społecznych oraz analizę różnych aspektów doświadczenia, wynikających z wzajemnej relacji pomiędzy człowiekiem a użytkowanymi przez niego technologiami.

Słowa kluczowe

post-fenomenologia, technologia, technika, doświadczenie, kultura, technologie świata społecznego

Philosophy of technology, like many other domain specific subfields of philosophy, is a relative newcomer, especially to the North American scene. In 1979 the respected philosopher of science and physicist Mario Augusto Bunge somewhat contentiously observed:

> Technophilosophy [Bunge's term for philosophy of technology] is still immature and uncertain of its very object, and does not exploit the entire scope of its own possibilities. That it is an underdeveloped branch of scholarship is suggested by the fact that so far no major philosopher has made it his central concern or written an important monograph on it. (qtd. in Ihde 1993: 15).

Bunge's statement was exaggerated, but his sense of timing was perfect. One obviously finds philosophical works in the mid 1970s on technology, but it was only in 1979 that the first monograph with a deliberate focus on philosophy of technology came out. This was Don Ihde's *Technics and Praxis* (1979), which is usually cited as the first North American book specifically described as a philosophy of technology. In the same year *The History and Philosophy of Technology*, edited by George Budliarello and Dean Doner, was published, and shortly after Friedrich Rapp's *An Analytical Philosophy of Technology* (1981) rolled off the press. These three pioneering titles were followed by a virtual explosion of scholarly works, including introductory college-level textbooks. Over the course of the 1980s philosophy of technology emerged as an academic field and its importance has grown exponentially in the past four decades. One of its central thinkers has been Don Ihde, who has established himself as a major figure in the field of science and technology studies and produced a number of important works, his most recent being *Husserl's Missing Technologies*, published in 2016.

The aim of the present discussion is to plot the trajectory of Ihde's thought against the background of the phenomenological canon. It is obvious to anyone who has read his early works that Heidegger and Husserl have been two strong

influences on Ihde. While the phenomenological tradition provided a firm foundation for Ihde's project and helped him to find his voice, it has never acted as a rigid conceptual framework. Enriching his theoretical perspective with insights taken from the engagements with pragmatism, Ihde departed from Heideggerian-style traditional phenomenological analyses of technology in a number of ways and developed his own version of a Husserlian approach. In what follows I will discuss some of the primary ways in which Ihde has moved beyond the phenomenological canon and developed his own post-phenomenological approach. I will focus in particular on two key concepts in Ihde's project, namely those of experience and of lifeworld technologies.

The idea of experience assumes a central position in Ihde's study. Drawing on the Husserlian and Heidggerian models of intentionality, Ihde has developed a relativistic account which takes as its primary phenomenon the structure of experience itself and seeks to examine the full range and multiple dimensions of that structure.[1] His method is directly derived from "the reflection in terms of the phenomenological understanding of intentionality as experience within a world" (Ihde 1979: 7), and as such it is to be taken as *rigorously* relativisitic. "The relationality of human-world relationships is claimed by phenomenologists to be an ontological feature of all knowledge, all experience" (Ihde 1990: 25). Phenomenological reflection recognizes also the actional dimension of human-technology relations as any use of technological artifacts implies human action or *praxis*, and rejects the view of technologies as isolated artifacts independent of the context in which they are placed. The presumed neutrality of technologies is an untenable abstraction as they are always contextualized and implicated in the human world-relation. "Not only are technologies artifactual but they are used (as well as developed, discarded, etc.) in their normative role. And although the use

[1] For a comprehensive survey of the concept of experience in European and American philosophical traditions, see Jay (2014).

may be immediate, distant, occasional, or delayed, the human-technology relation implies human *praxis* or action" (Ihde 1990: 27). Analysis of technology must thus both recognize the dynamics of perceptual-bodily activity in actional praxis and elucidate the relational structures of intentionality involved in the use of technological artifacts. These two elements, Ihde argues, can be combined by extending and appropriating the Husserlian idea of the lifeworld for the inquiry into technology.[2] The Husserlian lifeworld comprises two different level of praxes, one material and practical, the other ideal and theoretical. "Both belong in some way to the lifeworld, for both can be familiarized within some praxical pattern" (Ihde 1990: 29). The tension between these two levels becomes apparent in an analysis of human-technology relations and can be productively articulated in terms of perception.

Ihde distinguishes two senses of perception: the first is a sensory perception related to bodily existence and activity, the second is interpretive as it discloses meaning in different cultural-hermeneutic contexts. These two dimensions of perception can be theoretically distinguished from each other, but they cannot be separated in praxis as their relation is not one of derivation, but more like that of figure-to-ground. Micro-perception always occurs within its hermeneutic-cultural context, and all such contexts, in turn, are actualized only within the range of microperceptual possibility. The study of technology thus requires "a double-sided analysis of the range of human-technology relations within the limits of micro-perceptual and bodily experience; the other side must remain that of a cultural hermeneutics that situates our existential life" (Ihde 1990: 29). These modifications of the original Husserlian notion allow for a clear account of how technology changes the lifeworld and transforms both experience and culture.

[2] The other notion suggestive of technology in its praxical character is Husserl's recognition of "writing as a 'technology' that allows a new level of meaning development through its inscription process that can be repeatedly read" (Ihde 2009: 28).

Ihde pursues this double-sided analysis by inquiring into the forms of the lifeworld when technological artifacts are involved. He is particularly interested in the different aspects of experience that result from human-technology relations and distinguishes three general ways by which human beings can relate to technologies. The first is the relation of mediation, which occurs whenever perception is not directly related to the world but instead mediated through a technological artifact, as, for instance, whenever we wear glasses or make a telephone call. The second, the relation of alterity, is that to an artifact itself, in the form of confronting and being involved with a machine as a quasi-object or even a quasi-other (Ihde 2009: 43). The third kind of human-technology relation consists of background relations which shape the technological texture of our environment without becoming thematic in our relation to them. We find these "atmospheric" characteristics in numerous artifacts that make up the technosphere of our lives, such as air-conditioning or heating systems installed in our houses and offices. I will not follow all the subtleties of Ihde's analysis here, but will move on to sketch his encounter with Heidegger's thought and, in the concluding part of the paper, return to the concept of lifeworld technologies.

Building on insights from Heidegger's phenomenology of equipment, Ihde approaches technological artifacts as given within a context and endowed with specific intentionality. In Heidegger's idiom, each piece of equipment is a part of a meaningful whole, and each piece is "in order to". Technologies are thus "relative to concrete contexts-in-use" and characterized by what Ihde calls "an instrumental intentionality" (Ihde 2009: 33). Further, tools in our normal use of them are a means of experiencing, rather than objects of experience. To use Heidegger's oft quoted example, a hammer becomes prominent only when it fails to perform its function of driving in nails. Our very familiarity with tools obtrudes into the way we understand the relations we establish with them. Yet apart from explicating the peculiar "withdrawing" of technology from our experience, we should also consider how we are sensorily

and bodily related via technologies to the world. Ihde therefore deems it necessary to complement Heidegger's analysis of tools with Merleau-Ponty's study of embodiment in perception. As Peter-Paul Verbreek (2001: 126) has observed, "while Heidegger analyzes the ways in which artifacts are present to human beings, 'withdrawing' from their experience, Merleau-Ponty analyzes the relations to the world that can arise on the basis of the presence".

In a discussion of two examples of "the woman with the feather in her hat" and "the blind man with the cane", Merleau-Ponty shows in *Phenomenology of Perception* how technological artifacts can affect our body schema (schéma corporel) by stretching the spatiality of lived bodies[3] and even becoming a means of perception,[4] as is the case with the blind man's cane. When one has learned the skill of handling the cane, it becomes incorporated into the body schema and starts to function as one's bodily extension. "It is then experienced and used as part of the means by which one engages the world, rather than as an object in the world that one engages. It becomes a means through which skills are expressed, rather than an object of skilled action" (Brey 2000: 8).[5] Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the incorporation of an object into bodily

[3] "A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can 'get through' without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body. The hat and the car have ceased to be objects with a size and volume which is established by comparison with other objects. They have become potentialities of volume, the [sic] demand for a certain amount of free space. In the same way the iron gate to the Underground platform, and the road, have become restrictive potentialities and immediately appear passable or impassable for my body with its adjuncts" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 165).

[4] Merleau-Ponty characterizes the body schema as an organizing structure which presents one with a unified understanding of one's body so that it is always experienced as a unified whole. For a more detailed treatment of the two examples within the context of the body schema, see Merleau-Ponty (1962: 142-147).

[5] For a detailed discussion of this and other examples from Merleau-Ponty, see for instance Brey (2000).

experience is of crucial importance to Ihde's project as it reveals how, in a more general sense, "bodily intentionality extends through the artifact into the environing world in a unique technological mediation" (Ihde 2009: 36).

Combining Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's perspectives on technology and embodiment, Ihde approaches the structure of perception in terms of mediation. He distinguishes two basic sets of relations with artifacts which mediate the intentional relations between human beings and the world. In the first set, which he calls embodiment relations, technological artifacts are an inherent part of the noetic correlate as they are taken into our very bodily experience and can thus extend and amplify human sensitivity. To give an example, our vision can be mediated by eyeglasses or contact lenses, our listening by the mobile phone, and so on. "In each of these cases, our sense of 'body' is embodied outward, directionally and referentially, and the technology becomes part of our ordinary experience of _____" (Ihde 2009: 42). These relations can be formalized as: (human-technology) → environment. In hermeneutic relations, the second set that Ihde distinguishes, "we have moved from experiencing through machines to experiences of machine" (Ihde 1990: 11). If in embodiment relations technology withdraws and becomes quasi-transparent, hermeneutic relations reveal technology as an object of experience in use as it engages one's linguistic, meaning-oriented capacities. In such circumstances technological artifacts provide representations of the world. An artifact such as a thermometer or a timer becomes something like a text which requires our interpretation. Hermeneutic relations can be schematized as human → (technology-world).

All technological mediations are inextricably linked with a transformation of perception and reveal the non-neutrality of technologies. Mediated and ordinary experiences in the flesh are never identical. While technologies obviously differ from one another, yet they all affect, in different gradations, the structure of perception by amplifying certain of its aspects and reducing others. "But *for every revealing transformation there*

is a simultaneously concealing transformation of the world, which is given through a technological mediation. Technologies transform experience, however subtly, and that is one root of their *non-neutrality*" (original emphasis, Ihde 1990: 49). The transformation of experience can take the form of low contrast when it comes close to a naked perception (as with the use of reading glasses) or of high contrast when it provides a percept that is not normally available to the unaided eye (a spectrogram or fMRI scan image).

Ihde's argument of the mediating role of technologies in our experience follows a different trajectory from Heidegger's analysis of technology, which emphasizes its "reductive" and "controlling" role in an interpretation of the world. While Ihde takes his departure from Heidegger's view of the primacy of technology and the importance of praxis for science and philosophy, he reverses the direction of Heideggerian inquiry that concentrates on how concrete tools and procedures disclose their underlying reality. As Verbeek (2001: 122) has pointed out, Ihde breaks in this respect with "the phenomenological tradition's conception of technology as stemming from a specific and limited way of disclosing reality". Unlike Heidegger, Ihde is interested not so much in distilling "the essence of Technology" as in its concrete presence in our daily existence in the form of various technological artifacts. He replaces the totalizing Technology of Heidegger with "technologies" in their relational and contextual implications. "Instead of questioning 'backwards' [Ihde] questions forwards; that is, instead of reducing technological artifacts to the technological form of world-disclosure that makes them possible, he asks what form of world-disclosure is *made possible by* technological artifacts" (original emphasis, Verbeek 2001: 122). In this way Ihde moves away from generalization about "technology überhaupt" towards the analysis of technologies in their particularities. This shift is intended as, he himself admits, as "the step away for a high altitude or transcendental perspective and an appreciation of the multidimensionality of technologies as material cultures within

a lifeworld" (Ihde 2009: 22). Furthermore, the use of technological artifacts, their mediation and pervasive presence in our lives do not necessarily result in what Heidegger calls "bestellen" that "en-frames" the world as a stock of goods stored up and made ready for manipulation and control. The non-neutrality of technologies, in Ihde's view, does not make them "good" or "bad" but rather reveals them as inherently ambiguous. It is in the subtle cross-sorting between naked perception and perception via technological artifacts that one becomes ambiguous in relation to the other. When mediating our relation with the world, technologies have as much reductive as strengthening impact on our experience. They transform perceptions differently and while they can indeed constrict our contact with the world, they also provide new modes of access.

It is important to note that technological mediation does not simply take place between subject and object but transforms them in their mutual constitution. Ihde (2009: 23) describes this constitutive mutuality in terms of interrelational ontology: "By this I mean that the human experiencer is to be found ontologically related to an environment or a world, but the interrelation is such that both are transformed within this relationality". In other words, mediating artifacts not only affect the noetic and noematic correlates, "the way a predefined subject relates to a predefined object or the way a predefined object can appear to a predefined subject" (Verbeek 2001: 131), but also transform the interrelation itself between the subject and an object, the experiencer and an environment. Technological mediation as such co-shapes subjectivity and objectivity:

> Formulation in terms of 'access to reality' offered by an artifact should be read as relating to the way in which an artifact makes possible the constitution of a world and a human in the very process of perception. Humans and the world they experience are the *products* of technological mediation, and not just poles

> between which the mediation plays itself out. (Verbeek 2001: 131, original emphasis)

The mediation in its radical form can modify the relational structure of intentionality in such a way that "technologies can be the means by which 'consciousness itself' is *mediated*" (original emphasis, Ihde 2009: 23). In this way they can transform "the consciousness of_____ " by rising from the position of some object domain to occupy the "of" itself.[6]

As the above discussion makes clear, materiality and material mediations are central in Ihde's hermeneutic analyses of technoscience. In his recent works, Ihde defines his approach as a modified phenomenology incorporating aspects of pragmatism: "The enrichment of pragmatism includes its recognition that 'consciousness' is an abstraction, that experience in its deeper and broader sense entails embeddedness in both the physical and material world and its cultural-social dimensions" (Ihde 2009: 19). If Ihde's early texts such as *Technics and Praxis* are rather closely patterned after a phenomenological analysis of intentionality, his later works re-think Husserl's idea of the lifeworld with its cumbersome conceptual apparatus by embracing the pragmatist emphasis on practice. Ihde finds important parallels between Husserl's and Dewey's version of experience and argues that the deconstruction of early modern epistemology made in pragmatism can enhance the rigorous phenomenological analysis of the experiential. Ihde's argument is complex and defies a short summary. Suffice it to say that the pragmatist version of experience allows for the move away from the vocabulary of representation that Husserl had to struggle with and short-circuits the subject/object, body/mind, ego/consciousness conceptual pairs by replacing them with an organism/environment model. The human-technology relations appear then "as an affair of the intercourse of living being with its physical and social environment" (Ihde 2009: 10). This

[6] See for instance Ihde's (2009) discussion of the postmodern technologies used by science in chapter 3 of *Postphenomenology and Technoscience*.

shift in vocabulary is also visible in Ihde's project. For instance, the embodiment relations initially schematized as (I-technology) → world are subsequently formalized as: (human-technology) → environment. This pragmatist inflected approach allows, Ihde contends, for a more direct analysis of lifeworld technologies without raising the problems of subjectivism and essentialism. As such this post-phenomenological model is capable of addressing the human-technology relation in its experiential complexity and diversity.

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Arkadiusz Misztal
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8936-7890
Institute of English and American Studies
University of Gdański
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
amisztal@ug.edu.pl