

**Søren Riis**

## ***Postphenomenology:* ‘Festschrift’ for Don Ihde**

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Evan Selinger (ed.) et al., *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 307 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-7914-6788-6 (pbk). \$28.95 (Amazon.com).

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*Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* is an extraordinary volume, not least because it captures the spirit of Ihde’s *oeuvre* and conveys the appreciation experienced by a number of prominent scholars. Ultimately, the book successfully bends, breaks and extends the multi-stable lines of thought that appear throughout Ihde’s versatile work. Through provocative case studies and critical reflection, *Postphenomenology* establishes itself as an indispensable guide to Ihde’s research program, as well as to some of the cutting-edge discussions currently occurring in Science and Technology Studies. This review article takes the reader through a number of the substantial arguments presented in the book and tries to link them together, share their insights and make critical assessments where it can help to inspire further studies.

### **Introduction**

What do underwater animals, artificial limbs and a wrecked space shuttle have in common? Where do the humanities and the natural sciences intersect? Is technology a Leviathan in our midst, an aid that stabilizes and protects our fragile biology, or an instrument that propels us ever closer to salvation? Through a lifetime of thinking, probing and experimenting, Don Ihde has brought such questions to our attention and has

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generously been offering his insights to interlocutors across the disciplines. *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* is an extraordinary volume, not least because it captures the spirit of Ihde's *oeuvre* and conveys the appreciation experienced by a number of prominent scholars. Ultimately, the book successfully bends, breaks and extends the multi-stable lines of thought that appear throughout Ihde's versatile work. Through provocative case studies and critical reflection, *Postphenomenology* establishes itself as an indispensable guide to Ihde's research program, as well as to some of the cutting-edge discussions currently occurring in Science and Technology Studies.

### **I Ethics without prescription**

A number of the contributors to the volume raise critical questions about Ihde's approach to technological ethics, particularly in light of Ihde's disavowal of Martin Heidegger's pessimism about the current state of technological culture. For present purposes, it will suffice to highlight two such criticisms.

Paul Thompson contends that because Ihde presents an ambivalent treatment of innovation, the judgments he provides concerning the quality of technologically induced cultural transformation may be impeded. On the one hand, Thompson highlights Ihde's recognition that technological mediation is not a neutral intentional structure. Since technologies mediate both perception (through amplification and reduction) and interpretation (through concealing and revealing), they necessarily provide agents with value-laden access to the world, and, correlatively, remake the agents and the world in the process. Given these dialectical constraints and ecological effects, Thompson asserts that technology poses a danger, one that, in phenomenological parlance, is identified as 'forgetting':

To the extent that people become habituated to or enthralled with those phenomena made available through technical means, there is always the possibility that it is those aspects that 'stand out,' that are made more evident through amplification, which will become associated with 'the thing itself,' while aspects that are reduced may become forgotten or concealed. (116)

On the other hand, Thompson expresses concern that Ihde's actual philosophical observations on technological mediation are offered as if they emerged from 'a neutral position' (112). What Thompson alleges, therefore, is that descriptive bias inclines Ihde to resign himself to merely describe the subtleties of technological transformation; a critical position outside of existing technological practice is supposedly missing from Ihde's purview.

Over and against this ambivalence identified by Thompson, Robert Scharff criticizes Ihde for emphatically embracing technology. According to this interpretation, Ihde actually fails to substantively address ambivalence, as well as possible techno-scientific harm. Instead, Ihde allegedly takes such a pronounced distance from so-called dystopian critics of technology and science that he cannot help but be enamoured with ongoing innovation. Scharff thus asks: 'What makes him [Ihde] so sure that our current state of affairs is *not* the display of an excessive, or threatening, or dangerous techno-scientific hegemony, and that "working out a free relation" to it is *not* an urgent task?' (142).

From my perspective, these criticisms are invalid. As some of the other contributors realize, there are three distinct ways in which Ihde's philosophy stages a normative and coherent confrontation with both science and technology.

First, any comprehensive judgment about Ihde's normative position on technoscience needs to reckon critically with the significance of his style, an unmistakably *democratic voice*. In Vivian Sobchack's contribution, we are reminded that Ihde's phenomenological descriptions are so clear and so accessible that they can bring nearly any reader into direct contact with aspects of technological and scientific experience that the average person finds hard to grasp, much less assess. This 'grounding simplicity' is a 'democratizing' gesture because it has the potential to empower a range of stakeholders to discuss matters that they might otherwise feel are overly abstract, rarefied and specialized. As consequence of shattering widespread academic elitism, Ihde's *oeuvre* can be understood as an attempt to share the epistemological machinery of techno-scientific discourse with the general public for the purpose of inspiring them to action, that is, to civic participation and lively debate. Sobchack even goes so far as to link this style with educational reform, and may even be thinking of the notion of *paidiea*: 'In its clear call to an awareness of our lived experience and existential presence, Ihde's pedagogy seems to me of the utmost importance in the contemporary context of the commonly abstractive practices of the humanities disciplines in today's research university' (14).

Second, while Ihde does, in fact, maintain an ambivalent position towards technology, his outlook should not be depicted as uncritically immanent. Instead, it is more useful to view his analyses as pragmatic and non-foundational. Because he sees every material artefact as, in principle, open to multiple uses and subject to being perceived through multiple perspectives, the strongest normative recommendation he can propose to conscientious philosophers is to encourage them to analyze the patterns of engagement that emerge in ongoing techno-scientific practices. Over time, many of these practices will become so routine that theoretical analysis of their disciplining consequences will be impotent,

practically speaking. However, before this narrow window of opportunity closes, philosophers do have the opportunity to help the public become aware of how technology constrains their actions. Ihde calls this narrow window the 'R & D' position:

For more than a decade now, I have been advocating that philosophers seek 'R & D' (research and development) locations. While not wanting to eliminate or lessen the roles of philosophers in 'applied ethics' positions, such as medical ethics boards, doing business ethics and the like, I have argued that these positions function somewhat like an ambulance corps after a battle. (279)

Following Ihde's advice, Peter-Paul Verbeek presents an analysis of the normativity embedded in the actual material culture of ultrasound technology. Verbeek contends that the images ultrasound technology presents of fetuses are not neutral. Rather, they incline expectant parents to behave in particular and predictable ways:

For the people will have to make a decision about abortion on the basis of the outcomes of the test, the unborn child is translated into an organism with a chance to suffer from a disease. And the very act of having this test done already suggests what an appropriate response to its outcome would be. (123)

The important thing to note is that Verbeek does not propose moral standards to judge parents who make decisions about the future of a fetus based upon their reactions to an ultrasound image. Instead, his intervention occurs – even though he does not use the term – as a form of consciousness-raising. Verbeek's analysis alerts parents who have scheduled an ultrasound appointment to how the medical establishment can influence their decisions without needing to marshal discursive imperatives. In this context, both Verbeek and Ihde envision the descriptive enterprise of postphenomenology as an antidote to technocracy. For technocracy arises only when technology shapes human behaviour without humans being aware that their behavior is being shaped accordingly (126–7).

Third, as Evan Selinger notes, Ihde's relation to normativity is often staged at the meta-philosophical level. By showing how dystopian pessimism and utopian optimism both tend to be rooted in misunderstandings of the complexities of techno-scientific practice, Ihde's nuanced descriptions of technological mediation serve the well-established philosophical end of deflation. When Ihde's descriptions of 'I-technology-world' relations are juxtaposed against polemic and paean alike, it becomes possible to spot poorly posed problems, techno-scientific straw men and undue, instrumental optimism. In this context, Ihde may not himself be judging innovation, but his analyses help readers demarcate real cases of innovation that are worthy of judgment from faux cases

that exist only as theoretical projections which were constructed to be combated or celebrated.

Underlying the deflationary ambition, Selinger detects that Ihde is actually an adherent of a neo-Enlightenment set of values, a 'cosmopolitan ethos' (92). The problem with this allegiance, Selinger maintains, is that it does not follow, as a principle, from Ihde's postphenomenology: 'As an individual, Ihde admits to being empathetic to a neo-enlightenment set of values. But he never formally articulates why these values are useful for him to maintain or why others should want to endorse them as well' (105). Unfortunately, Ihde never fully addresses this lacuna. He does not provide a clear answer to the poignant query: 'What, if any, norm suggests that multiperspectival phenomena ought to be experienced in cosmopolitan terms that promote critical reflexivity?' (105). We may have to wait until future work for a more definitive response to this problem.

## II Symmetrical setups

One of the crucial current debates occurring in Science and Technology Studies concerns the concepts of and relations between 'symmetry' and 'asymmetry'. By addressing this topic, researchers hope to be able to better understand the extent to which reciprocity occurs in the interaction between humans and technology. Ihde has contributed to this debate by articulating how humans maintain an exclusive and non-technically reproducible stance in the world. He maintains that even when humans and technology co-construct one another, such reciprocity always contains an ineliminable asymmetrical dimension. Specifically, he insists, only human agency has intentionality. By way of diverse case studies, several contributors to the volume take up this discussion and thereby provide thought-provoking responses to Ihde's position.

Let us consider a few examples.

### a: Wrecked space shuttle

In Peter Galison's contribution to the volume, attention is given to how NASA's responses to technology changed in light of the disintegration of the space shuttle Columbia. What Galison's reconstruction of the events surrounding the breakdown suggests, is that complex technologies may be ontologically distinct from ordinary tools – or, at least, irreducible to the early phenomenological analysis of them. In particular, Galison shows that Heidegger's classic analysis of a malfunctioning hammer is an account of equipment that cannot be transposed to contemporary cases where complex technologies fail. Galison thus articulates what

could be called a postmodern appeal to ‘asymmetry’ between humans and complex technologies.

In one of the now famous examples in *Being and Time*, Heidegger tries to demonstrate that when a hammer malfunctions, its being changes from ‘ready-to-hand’ (an affordance of practical concern) to ‘present-at-hand’ (a detached object of contemplation). But as Galison indicates:

Columbia was certainly not merely ‘available.’ It was not a tool so effortlessly in use that its very being could be forgotten, assimilated into the intentional actions of its pilots and ground controllers. Nor did the Orbiter suddenly appear torn out of the world, thrown, so to speak, onto the physical world outside understanding. (167)

According to Galison, ground control displays an ‘ambivalent concern’ towards the events leading up to the disaster – interpreting them in a routine way, yet also constantly questioning if something is really wrong. In this practice, ground control is neither fully absorbed in routine nor transcendent to it. How, then, should we understand a technology this complex? The accident board investigating the disaster drew an interesting conclusion:

The Shuttle should *always* be considered as *developmental*, subject to constant intervention by NASA engineers who would pore over the anomalies and dangers that each flight presented. On this view, the Shuttle was *never* in routine flight, but on the contrary every time it flew it did so ‘in the realm of dangerous exploration’. (166)

Galison’s version of the breakdown thus exemplifies the limits of the dichotomous account of tools found in the early Heidegger. Extrapolating from the space shuttle to complex modern technologies in general, we find rudimentary immanent imperatives in these technologies to leave all routines behind and constantly reflect upon how instrumental practices expose us to risk, uncertainty and change.

#### **b: Artificial limbs**

Donn Welton furthers the discussion of symmetry in the case of technological complexity by examining the contemporary development of artificial limbs and therein demonstrating that technology can learn the language of the human body and become a real working part of it. In doing so, he makes the case of a subversive kind of asymmetrical symmetry. He not only explains how mechanical limbs can be ‘neurologically joined into the body’, but he also describes a promising experiment that aims to provide biocompatible vision to blind people (207). Through this technology, a blind man has already learned how to drive a car into a parking lot. This success raises many interesting questions,

in particular, 'whether we are seeing or the machine is seeing through us' (208). Welton's investigation of artificial limbs shows the intimacy of humans and technology and the principal difficulty in deciding which one of the two is interpreting and acting through whom. But do Welton's investigations in fact take us back to Heidegger's hammer, or do bionic limbs encourage us to come up with new categories for thinking about how technology uses us? If the latter, does this mean that classic phenomenology has been eclipsed, at least with respect to prosthetics?

### c: Cybernetic salvation

In Andrew Pickering's contribution, radical consideration is given to the symmetry between humans and non-humans through an explicit ontological polemic against Ihde. Most strikingly, Pickering challenges Ihde's claim that 'situated knowledge' is incompatible with the concept of symmetry. He thus writes: 'Ihde's thinking always seems to run along representationalist lines, as if the point of our being in the world were to represent the world to ourselves, rather than the unavoidable project of getting along materially' (215). According to Pickering, the cybernetic research conducted by Ross Ashby establishes that the practice of acquiring knowledge is thoroughly non-representational; it further suggests that, far from being autonomous, human agency is constantly impelled towards 'dynamic equilibrium' with the environment. In pursuing dynamic equilibrium, Pickering claims, both humans and non-humans engage in performative acts of agency that can best be understood along a monistic ontological continuum. According to this view, situated and apparently asymmetrical human knowledge only reflects a fundamental dynamic ontological symmetry between humans and their environment.

It is important to recognize that Pickering's argument is predicated upon the strategy of positing that the brain is an adaptive organ that fundamentally steers our behavior. In his account, the brain primarily 'enables us to get along, cope and come into equilibrium with environments that we have not experienced before' (214). But even if we humans actually do, as a result of our embrainment, aim for dynamic equilibrium with our surroundings, it seems that Pickering still ought to account better for the fact that we can negate and accept environmental tension in order to promote subsequent and greater goals. How is this kind of suspension possible? Can the brain in fact organize the moment of equilibrium at will and therefore also postpone it infinitely? And is it possible to recognize the difference between equilibrium and capitulation from an outside perspective? An adequate answer to these questions seems to challenge Pickering's notion of ontological symmetry and bring us back to Ihde's concept of situated knowledge.

**d: Scientific Entertainment**

Donna Haraway's point of departure in her contribution is the National Geographic Channel science TV show, *Crittercam*. By mounting small cameras on animals, this show was designed to enable viewers to uncover hidden worlds through the 'eyes' of different species. Haraway takes the reader through three perspectives on these 'crittercams' – perspectives that resemble a three-step 'phenomenological amplification'.

At 'first sight', the crittercams appear promising. They can reveal scientifically useful material about animals who live in environments that are alien to the human lifeworld, such as underwater habitats. But according to her 'second sight', emphasis is placed on how the scientific potential is stylized through the mediation of a culturally over-determined type of technological vision. This form of visual expression creates an 'un-naturalistic' symmetry because the world as seen through the 'eyes of the animal' is conveyed through the optics of 'videogame vision':

Especially in scenes featuring crittercam footage, the viewer is invited to adopt the persona of a videogame player by the semiotic design of the screen. Blocking any *naturalistic* illusions, the screen is literally outlined like a game space; and the shots from the heads of the critters give forward-pointing motion like that of a videogame avatar. (182; emphasis added)

In calling our attention to the mode of visual presentation, does Haraway suggest the ideal of a 'naturalistic' symmetry? Haraway also does not want to be cynical about scientific knowledge in general, but she still wants to make clear that a TV show like *Crittercam* makes her conscious of 'the culturally located technosocial apparatus of knowledge production. Folks in technoculture need their juicy epistemophilic endorphin surge as much as they need all sorts of sensory engagement. The brain is, after all, a sensory organ' (183). Through her 'third sight', Haraway reveals the broader semiotic agency of the animals in the hermeneutical set-up. It is easy to criticize the 'hermeneutic agency of animals' in this kind of television show, Haraway notes, but she wants to underscore the symmetry between the animals and the scientific agents at play: 'The animals make demands on the humans and their technologies to precisely the same degree that the humans make demands on the animals' (186). Although humans and animals challenge each other very differently as a result of this symmetry, it still allows 'the kind of insight that makes us know that we have epistemological-ethical obligations to the animals' (186). That this kind of symmetry warrants an ethical obligation to animals only seems to be a possibility. On 'third sight', this kind of symmetry does not really seem to be able to distinguish between technical instruments and animals.

### III What is Postphenomenology?

This short discussion of some of the contributions to *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* only articulates a few of the central reasons why the volume makes provocative contributions to philosophy and Science and Technology Studies alike. Still, even conceding these limitations, enough material has been covered for us to finally ask: How is postphenomenology to be understood? For even in the cases where contributors articulate critical proposals, their opposition actually enables us to gain a better understanding of Ihde's research program. It seems as if a kind of symmetry arises between postphenomenology and its critiques, a feature which also makes it difficult to draw any clear-cut demarcations between postphenomenology and alternative theoretical approaches. So the answer to the question, what postphenomenology means, is in this way reflected in all of the interdisciplinary discussions above. In fact, the interdisciplinary critical discussions of Ihde's project amplify the complexity and importance of his research program.

Despite these difficulties, several contributors are willing to help provide more definitive statements of the project. For example, Finn Olesen proposes the following initial assessment of postphenomenology: 'Traditional phenomenology is concerned with establishing that humans and technology are related. Don Ihde's postphenomenology is more radical in asking how subjects and artefacts constitute each other in a praxis' (280). Olesen then continues:

Hence, both humans and artefacts are shaped by the labour of the other. The immediate merits of this view is that one needs to depart from macro-social theory – where technological neutrality may seem reasonable – and move to microsocial studies of situated praxes. (232–3)

Verbeek seems to concur with this explanation and adds to Olesen's description:

Phenomenology can be interpreted as a philosophical movement that aims to analyze the relations between human beings and reality. In order to make phenomenology relevant for analyzing the morality of things, it needs to be elaborated to what Ihde calls 'postphenomenology' . . . To the classical-phenomenological view that humans and reality are always related to each other by the irresolvable directness of humans toward reality, postphenomenology adds the idea that in these relations both the subjectivity of humans and the objectivity of reality are shaped. (122)

In the last chapter, Ihde supplements these statements by emphasizing: 'Postphenomenology, I contend, substitutes embodiment for subjectivity. If there is a "subject" at all, it is the actional "subject" of bodily action' (280). He finally concludes: 'Postphenomenology begins with what is familiar, but then begins to move beyond that into more radical



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variational possibility' (289). I think the realm of 'radical variational possibility' is fascinating to explore, precisely because it is the most appropriate focus for studying complex modern technology. And I think this volume offers an excellent access to it.

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