

Introduction

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Ihde's Training

Due to the traditional prejudice that philosophy is primarily a rational enterprise that aims at discovering objective and universal truth, many philosophers avoid personalizing their inquiry. Don Ihde's philosophy, however, is replete with biographical references. Taking this reflexive dimension of his style as an interpretative clue concerning his core philosophical commitments, it seems useful to begin biographically. Ihde was born in Hope, Kansas, on January 14, 1934. The son of a farmer father and a housewife mother, Ihde grew up in a rural German-American community where his education began in a one-room schoolhouse to which he commuted by horseback. While his formative years passed in accordance with the expected rustic routines, including driving tractors and threshing wheat, Ihde departed from his peers by learning to enjoy opera and engage critically with literature.

At the University of Kansas (BA, 1956), Ihde majored in Speech and Drama, served on the debate team, and took parts in the experimental theater. Although his philosophy classes focused upon the figures (A.J. Ayer and Gottlob Frege) and themes (positivist philosophy of science and philosophy of language) that were dominant in the late 1950s, his genuine philosophical interests were existential: the works of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Paul Tillich figured prominently.

Determined to become a philosophical theologian, Ihde received a fellowship to attend Andover Newton Theological School (M.Div., 1959), a place where continental philosophy was taught as part of the curriculum, including the works of Martin Buber and Karl Jaspers. Ihde studied theology under Tillich, pursued his interest in higher criticism in Biblical Studies under the supervision of Norman Gottwald, and wrote his M.Div. Thesis on the philosophy of Nicolas Berdyaev.¹ By his second year in theological school,

Ihde was appointed to the United Ministries as a Chaplain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He held this post until he completed his doctorate in philosophy at Boston University (Ph.D., 1964).

As his graduate studies progressed, Ihde's theological interests became surpassed by philosophical ones. His focus shifted to phenomenology—Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—even though this group of European philosophers comprised something of an underground trend in academic philosophy. Under the direction of John Lavelly and Erazim Kohak, he wrote the first English-language dissertation on Paul Ricoeur.² Later on, during a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Paris (in the eventful period of 1967–1968), Ihde crafted the first systematic study in English of what was then Ricoeur's corpus of work. Ricoeur wrote the preface to the book, and in it he exclaims: "I am grateful to Don Ihde for having given me the courage to continue by indicating the vectors which call for further development."³ Shortly after, Ihde edited and wrote the introduction to the English translation of *The Conflict of Interpretations*, one of Ricoeur's most renowned works.

Ihde's first tenure-track position was at Southern Illinois University (SIU), and he remained there until 1969. During this period Ihde became interested in the phenomenology of work; this, in turn, began to draw his interests to tools and other technologies. Upon leaving SIU, Ihde made the transition to his second and, ultimately, final academic post, a position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. From the start, the Stony Brook department (which had just been scheduled to create a new doctoral program) provided him with challenging scholarly and pedagogical opportunities. During his first year there, Ihde broadened the curriculum by introducing courses in both existentialism and phenomenology. By his second year, he helped formalize the plans to make a pluralistic Ph.D. program that contained a strong Euro-American component.

Ihde continually exerted a strong presence in shaping the direction of the Stony Brook program. Not only was he the initial doctoral program director (a position that he would return to during intermittent periods of his career), but for eight years he served as department chair and for five years he acted as the dean of humanities and arts. Over the years, the Stony Brook program modified its original design only slightly and came to be regarded as one of the best North American programs in Continental Philosophy. Recently, however, Ihde succeeded in enlarging the scope of inquiry conducted at Stony Brook by founding the Technoscience Research Group. Visiting international scholars from a variety of disciplines have come to take Ihde's technoscience seminar—a forum devoted to reading only living authors, and, when possible, bringing these principals to campus for a "roast."

Although typically regarded as a Continental philosopher, Ihde's diverse philosophical corpus is unified by a rather analytic tendency. He has always

been drawn to the philosophical task of problem solving, and consistently has expressed minimal interest in figure-oriented, textual analysis.⁴ Thus, despite his authoritative command of Ricoeur scholarship, it appears that Ihde was always determined to avoid becoming pigeon-holed as a Ricoeur scholar.⁵ Similarly, despite having written numerous essays on Heidegger throughout his career, Ihde has never integrated them into a unified collection; nor has he tried to assume a prominent role in the Heidegger Circle.

Ihde's Publications

Although Ihde's fascination with the experience of sound is already evident in many of the essays collected in *Sense and Significance*, his *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* can be characterized as the first monograph-length result of his decision to pursue a philosophical path that is not devoted to textual commentary. In this book, Ihde attends to concrete experiences, such as being immersed and penetrated by the sound of a distinctive voice during a face-to-face conversation, in order to analyze the phenomenon of auditory linguistic presence as an embodied experience. While Ihde is remarkably prescient concerning later criticisms of "ocularcentrism," the research trajectory that he inaugurates has not received the attention it deserves in philosophical circles. Even today the topic of auditory experience remains unduly neglected.

By the time he writes *Experimental Phenomenology*, Ihde is able to apply his style of "doing phenomenology" to an active pedagogical approach for introducing students to the study of phenomenology. While Ihde does not shirk from the responsibility of providing a succinct précis of the canonical phenomenologists, he departs radically from the typical exegetical format of introductory texts by correlating concrete visual examples to step-by-step perceptual variation exercises. By participating in these exercises, the reader learns to appreciate how the intentional act of perception is an embodied praxis, even when it is hermeneutically structured. Furthermore, by analyzing the "constitution" of multistable perceptions of ambiguous drawings, such as Necker Cubes, Ihde establishes that phenomenological analysis is an experimental form of conduct; in some instances it has more to offer epistemically than scientific analysis. (At the time that *Experimental Phenomenology* was written, scientists putatively could only explain a delimited number of possible perceptual variations through the mechanism of neurological switch.)

Above all, Ihde will probably be remembered as one of the first U.S. philosophers to make technology itself the subject of philosophical reflection. Carl Mitcham, for example, refers to Ihde as "the single most important person to develop an uniquely North American version of phenomenology

and to bring phenomenology as a whole to bear on that singularly important North American phenomenon known as technology.” He further insists that, “It is difficult to overestimate the importance and insights that Ihde has brought into the philosophy of technology.” In 1979, the year that Mario Bunge argued that, “[Philosophy of Technology] is an underdeveloped branch of scholarship...suggested by the fact that so far no major philosopher has made it his central concern or written an important monograph on it,” Ihde published his first book on the philosophy of technology, *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology*.⁶

In this book, written during a sabbatical in Oxford, England, Ihde analyzes the ability of technology to transform perception, particularly when it is embodied in scientific instruments and imaging technologies. In arguing for the intentional and embodied character of *techné*, while emphasizing that any use of technology is non-neutral (as it always transforms experience), Ihde articulates a phenomenological framework—one that he consults not only for descriptive purposes, but also to discern and assess epistemological and ontological errors that arise from the failure to appreciate fully the concrete experience of instrumental relations. In this context his analysis of the limitations of such concepts as “objectification” and “reification” is significant. Equally impressive is his assessment of why previous praxis philosophers had failed to understand the ontological dimensions of and interactional relations to technology; his rejection of the existentialist’s drive to romanticize handcraft technologies; and his indictment of technological determinism. Furthermore, the recent revival of interest in Hans Jonas (notably in the biotechnology debates) suggests that renewed interest in Ihde’s critique of Jonas’s ethics might develop.

As Ihde began to focus more upon human-technology relations, it became clearer to him that our involvement with technologies impacts our existential situation dramatically, particularly the way in which we understand our world and our humanity. *Existential Technics* is thus the culmination of his reflexive (or “noematic”) studies on human self-interpretation. Hubert Dreyfus may be the phenomenologist most often associated with pioneering the phenomenological critique of computers, but Ihde’s chapters “Technology and Human Self-Conception” and “Why Do Humans Think that They Are Machines” stand out as exemplary investigations in to the significance of human self-understanding in a technologically saturated milieu. Indeed, Ihde’s thesis “that all self-interpretation takes its shape in a certain way with respect to some basic form of existential praxis which is projected upon the world and reflected back in ways which become dominant ways of understanding ourselves and our world” remains highly relevant today (*ET* 22). Whereas Ihde appreciates the value of questioning what makes it possible for humans to ask existentially if they resemble (or fundamentally are) machines,

some contemporary cyborg theorists and adherents of the computational conception of mind risk reifying technology by obscuring crucial ontological differences between humans and machines.

Perhaps Ihde's most widely read work in the philosophy of technology, however, is *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, a book that incorporates cross-cultural dimensions into an examination of the lifeworld role of *technics*. In it Ihde makes the compelling case that even though the non-neutrality of human-technology relations manifests in different ways in the context of different traditions, different geographies, and different time periods, it nevertheless remains invariably the case that "*human activity from immemorial time and across the diversity of cultures has always been technologically embodied*" (TL 20). This emphasis upon embodiment is philosophically significant because it permits Ihde to capture the primary structural features of technological intentionality: "embodiment relations," "hermeneutic relations," and "alterity relations."⁷

While these three relations exist on a continuum, and there is no decisive point at which one relation ends and another begins, specificity can be provided. Embodiment relations arise when we enter into optimally transparent practices with artifacts in order to amplify our bodies' perceptual abilities. For example, after a very short period of user adaptation, eyeglasses enable vision to be amplified. People who wear glasses are scarcely aware of having them on; apart from occasions in which peripheral vision feels compromised, their use falls into the background of conscious awareness and the perceptual world is perceived as directly experienced. Phenomenological precursors to this view can be found in Heidegger's discussion of the "ready-to-hand" (e.g., the hammer functioning as an extension of the arm's capabilities), as well as in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the blind man's cane functioning as an extension of his perceptual awareness. Hermeneutic relations arise when we enter into practices with artifacts in order to ascertain knowledge about the world that would not otherwise be available (or, would at least be more difficult to ascertain). Hermeneutic relations do not amplify or replicate the body's sensory abilities; instead, they engage our linguistic and interpretative aptitudes. In this context, technologies that facilitate hermeneutic relations are best understood as being "text-like"; their effective utilization requires interpretation through the activity of reading. For example, in order to ascertain precisely how hot or cold something is, a thermometer can be inserted in-between the self and the world; the significance of the numbers on the thermometer's display depends not only upon the material composition of the tool and the aspects of the world that it comes into contact with, but also upon background scientific convictions that permit one to perceive the numbers as significant data. Clearly, these two types of relations, embodiment relations and hermeneutic relations, require different levels of skill. Whereas most

children can learn to use glasses almost immediately upon being given them, learning to read (the paradigmatic hermeneutic relation) typically requires considerable formal training and effort.

Finally, we enter into alterity relations when we enter into practices with artifacts that display the feature of “otherness” (i.e., an evocative quality that transcends mere objecthood but resonates with less animateness than actual living beings such as people or animals). Unlike embodiment relations and hermeneutic relations, alterity relations focus attention upon the technology itself. In a video game, for example, the field of display that captivates need not refer to the transcendent world. Of course, to play most video games, one must enter into embodiment relations and hermeneutic relations. Without the ability to use a joystick or interpret graphics as significant, the game cannot be effectively played.

Ihde’s focus upon the cultural dimensions of technoscience is one of the key differences between *Technics and Praxis* and *Technology and the Lifeworld* and it was motivated by his 1982 trip to Colombia, South America. During a faculty seminar, Ihde was denounced as a cultural imperialist for failing to notice that the North American question of distinguishing science from technology obscures the fact that the two are thoroughly intertwined: both function ideologically and materially as instruments that can be readily appropriated toward the end of extinguishing indigenous culture. This confrontational experience was transformative, and, accordingly, many of Ihde’s subsequent reflections have emphasized the cultural dimensions of technoscience. In *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction* Ihde not only presents an overview of the philosophy of technology (both its classical and contemporary variations), but he also provides an extended meditation on the postmodern value of “pluriculture.” Pluriculture is the relativist condition in which one performs an “identity” by appropriating resources from different cultural possibilities in a bricolage fashion. As Ihde notes in “Image Technologies and Traditional Culture,” while traditional cultures are now confronting modernity after being exposed to modern secular images, so too are provincial American (as well as Eurocentric) audiences calling aspects of their own identities into question after being exposed to traditional religious iconography. A technology such as television thus presents contemporary viewers with the opportunity to engage with international affairs reflectively. For example, Americans can note that the multiperspectival, international coverage of the recent “War on Terrorism” suggests that the conflict between East and West cannot be adequately explained by the partial metanarratives that both sides present (and disguise as complete explanations).

In both *Instrumental Realism: The Interface Between Philosophy of Technology and Philosophy of Science* and *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science*, Ihde expands upon a position that he had hinted at in his earlier

work. Specifically, Ihde provides formal arguments about the historical and ontological priority of technology over science. He contends that the philosophy of science, as traditionally conceived, is an incomplete enterprise because it fails to examine critically the role of technology in scientific contexts. By focusing upon the phenomenological theme of embodied perception—both micro- and macroperception—Ihde establishes the importance of interpreting science in terms of the concrete technologies that frame the manner in which scientists perceptually engage their research. In emphasizing how the use of instruments makes scientific observations possible, Ihde demonstrates that our understanding of the production of modern scientific knowledge is obscured when it is characterized as a process of representing a reality that putatively exists and can be known without reference to human intervention and the limits of human representation. In rendering aspects of reality visually perceptible that would otherwise remain invisible, scientific instruments (such as computer tomographs and ultrasound scanners) limit how reality can be understood; interpretative possibilities are materially and conceptually constrained.

Ihde thus develops a material hermeneutics that enables instrumental presence to be interpreted as a nonlinguistic analog to textual presence. In doing so, he provides a framework for understanding how the reality that scientists study and intervene in is constituted by a matrix: the world, the technological instruments that scientists use, and the interpretative biases that render this conjunction between perceiver and perceived meaningful are all constitutive. This stance differentiates Ihde from the neo-Diltheyan critics who maintain that while hermeneutics and the natural sciences might have some superficial similarities, they remain, at bottom, fundamentally separate and distinct enterprises. For example, Karl-Otto Apel argues that it is possible to conduct a hermeneutic history of science or a hermeneutic sociology of science, but a hermeneutics of science proper (or of its objects) is impossible. For Apel, but not for Ihde, the distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften* is absolute.

As a metaphilosophical framework, Ihde's hermeneutic analysis of material culture also reveals why the image of science generated by the logical positivists continues to circulate in Continental circles. Continental philosophers tend to characterize the historically sensitive, reflexive nature of the hermeneutic enterprise as one that is essentially antithetical to the scientific goal of formally generating universal, covering laws. This tendency resonates as much with Wilhelm Dilthey, Husserl, and Hans-Georg Gadamer as it does contemporary discourse; proponents of the hermeneutic enterprise continue to depict the world of science as fundamentally divorced from, and derivative of, the lifeworld. By endorsing the primacy of the lifeworld in a manner that renders science an abstractly rational, hypothesis generating domain, hermeneutic theorists continue to obscure the phenomenological dimensions of

scientific *praxis* (i.e., the embodied activities, typically instrumentally mediated, that enable scientists to capitalize on and expand the Gestalt tendencies of perception). For example, recent programs of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy reveal that the topic of science arises in Continental circles typically in the context of papers and panels that criticize how the sciences define human activity and human nature in a reductive manner. In this way, “science” becomes translated into “technoscience” in the Heideggerian sense of *Gestell*: the goal of scientific inquiry is presumed to be oriented by the putative essence of technology, and the only philosophical story worth telling concerns how it transforms all of reality into “standing reserve.”

In his most recent work, *Bodies in Technology*, Ihde develops further the distinction between the phenomenological body, which he calls “body one” (i.e., the body that corresponds to our motile, perceptual, and emotive being in the world) and the social and cultural body, which he calls “body two.” What is unique about this book is that it contains his first critical assessment of some of the leading science and technology studies (STS) practitioners. This trajectory, in which philosophical concerns are applied to STS theorists and their treatment of the topic of “symmetry,” is developed further in his coedited collection, *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*. That Ihde is willing to use “postphenomenological” resources to engage with a new group of interdisciplinary interlocutors at this stage of his career demonstrates the lasting value of treating the visual as complex, synesthetic, and always referring back to the active and embodied manner in which the world is perceived.

Ihde’s Philosophy: A Gestalt

Ihde’s success can be attributed to many factors, perhaps the most prominent being his sense of interdisciplinary diplomacy. This trait is most evident in his philosophy of technoscience where he has demonstrated that different types of inquiry will be unable to fulfill their own disciplinary ambitions without collaborating better with other styles of investigation. On the one hand, Ihde warns us that it is problematic to allow scientific and technological development to occur without the aid of critical philosophical examination. His long-standing plea for philosophers to enter the research and development phase of innovation challenges those who believe that philosophy should play “second fiddle” to the more “technical” disciplines.⁸ On the other hand, Ihde has always insisted that in order for scholars in the humanities to actively participate in a meaningful conversation on science and technology, they need to refrain from succumbing to an overly dystopian perspective. The godfathers of Continental interpretations of technology, for example, attempted to legitimate themselves as proxies for high culture by focusing solely upon the worst aspects of science and technology. By substituting sweeping ontological analy-

sis and nostalgic rhetoric for careful attention to empirical research, they attempted to inaugurate a historical reversal in which the irrelevant humanist transformed into the authoritative critic. In doing so, they exacerbated the “two-culture” view of dividing intellectual labor and perpetuated a divisive academic environment in which scientists and engineers could feel justified in ignoring philosophers and other critical theorists. By contrast, while Ihde insists that technoscience critics should indeed play a necessary and valuable social role, he also maintains that such critics need to be “lovers” of the fields that they appraise. From Ihde’s perspective, a genuine technoscience critic would not feel justified in appealing to a labyrinth of textual citations in order to bypass a more direct engagement with diverse empirical complexities that affect cultural practices in varied and complex ways.

In emphasizing Ihde’s diplomacy, it is important that we do not lose sight of his proclivity toward iconoclasm. Much of Ihde’s recent energies have been devoted to developing an account of “epistemology engines.” An epistemology engine operates when some particular technology, in its workings and use, is seen suggestively as a metaphor for the human subject and often for the production of knowledge itself. Although to date Ihde has focused predominantly on the relation between the *camera obscura* and the invention of modern epistemology (in both its rationalist and empiricist variants), it appears likely that he will continue to develop this trajectory of returning the history of ideas to the lifeworld from which they initially emerge. We can, perhaps, look forward to a volume provocatively titled *Against the History of Philosophy*.

In closing this historical introduction, it seems apt to return to the origin of Ihde’s scholarship by considering a comment that David Carr once made about Ricoeur: “In spite of his shifts away from traditional phenomenological concerns and his critical reservations about Husserl’s original method, Ricoeur never totally gives up his allegiance to phenomenology.”⁹ Although Ihde has used many labels to characterize his style of philosophical inquiry, although he has rejected the foundational enterprise of traditional phenomenology, and although he has discarded much of the traditional tribal language found in the historical phenomenological discourse, he has always remained loyal to the spirit of phenomenology. The present volume is thus titled *Postphenomenology* and is as much about future transformations as it is about historical legacies.

Notes

1. During this time, Tillich taught at Harvard Divinity School.
2. Ihde’s dissertation is entitled, “The Phenomenological Methodology and Philosophical Anthropology of Paul Ricoeur.” It is worth noting that during the time in which Ihde was writing his dissertation, Ricoeur was not well-known. Only a few publications had been translated into English.

3. Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), xvii.

4. Ihde's first post-Ph.D. article is entitled, "Some Parallels between Phenomenology and Analysis."

5. Ihde has written numerous essays on Ricoeur after his early Ricoeur period, such as "Interpreting Hermeneutics," "Variation and Boundary: A Problem in Ricoeur's Phenomenology," "Text and the New Hermeneutics," "Paul Ricoeur's Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition," and "Literary and Science Fictions: Philosophers and Technomyths."

6. Mario Bunge, "Five Buds of Techno-Philosophy," *Technology in Society* 1 (1979): 68.

7. Although this taxonomy was developed in earlier writings, *Technology and the Lifeworld* remains, perhaps, the most frequently cited text by scholars who discuss this dimension of Ihde's corpus.

8. See Don Ihde, "Technology and Prognostic Predicaments," *AI and Society* 13 (1999): 44–51.

9. David Carr, "Husserl and Phenomenology," in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard Popkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 680.