

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Celebrating Don Ihde

*Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*

Edited by Evan Selinger

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*Review by Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen*

We are our bodies—but in that very basic notion one also discovers that our bodies have an amazing plasticity and polymorphism that is often brought out precisely in our relations with technologies. We are bodies in technologies.

—Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technologies*

Understanding our world means we have access to information from many different but equally necessary sources. As the Editor of *Postphenomenology A Critical Companion to Ihde*, Evan Selinger writes in this introduction, “(Ihde) has demonstrated that different types of inquiries will be unable to fulfil their own disciplinary ambitions without collaborating better with other styles of investigation.” It is important, from Ihde’s perspective, that critical philosophizing should be used to aid scientific and technological developments. This is problematic in the eyes of many a philosopher of science. Science comes first, philosophy is merely there as a retrospective control device. Ihde’s philosophy is in many important aspects an attempt to show how philosophy may be used; how philosophy is praxis; enthusiastic engagement in the living world, not abstractions on mouldy parchments from the ivory tower.

It is often stated that Don Ihde is one of the most influential modern thinkers in US today. I would like to add: in Europe as well! Ihde seems to spend just as much time over here as over there, he is always in demand, and rightly so—his presentations always inspire reflection and lively discussion. Maybe his popularity also has to do with his personalized style and being such a dynamic personality. Written by another influential thinker, Albert Borgmann, “Don Ihde is the great mediator of contemporary philosophy. He has connected phenomenology with postmodernism, philosophy of

technology with philosophy of science, Continental philosophy with analytic philosophy. He has tirelessly mediated across oceans..." In other words, Ihde embodies the spirit of the American Pioneer. Although he has spent years in the wilderness, to me it seems he has found his way. Not only has he discovered new trails during years of exploration, he has also managed to map his discoveries in such a way that others can set out on their own with their minds overflowing with ideas, however not without danger. We cannot live other peoples lives, think other peoples thoughts, we must do that on our own.

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This volume is a critical companion to Ihde. A companion is a guide to a persona, or a field of investigation, or, as is the case with this volume, a comprehensive account of pioneer thinker Don Ihde's *oeuvre* and its importance to American and International philosophy of technology and science and technology studies. This book is an important contribution to not only understanding Don Ihde but also to better comprehend technology and its impact on the human condition. It has been superbly edited by a coming star in philosophy, namely professor Evan Selinger from RIT.

The aim of *Postphenomenology*, according to Selinger, besides being directed towards Don Ihde's *oeuvre*, is to address the legacy of phenomenology and discuss its future possibilities. Most of *Postphenomenology's* nineteen essays deal with phenomenological issues. With this book we get a most appreciated look through the lenses of leading critics and proponents of phenomenology. Ihde himself is a critic; he has under the years developed an ambivalent relationship to classical phenomenology, even if he identifies with it. The ambivalence has to do with what kind of philosophical approach is proper in relation to understanding technology and its impacts on man and the environment. His criticism concerns method. The divergence between his approach and transcendental phenomenology (Husserl), and also existential phenomenology (Heidegger), is due to his interest in the pragmatist John Dewey's work. The important aspect then, which the reader is invited to take part in thinking through, is how phenomenology might be developed further into a new foundational form of investigation. "Postphenomenolog" is what Idhe calls his coupling of pragmatism and phenomenology.

There are many perspectives on various philosophical topics in this volume that will be of interest to many scholars working in the interdisci-

plinary fields of STS and philosophy of technology. In my own case I find the “perspectives on useful ways to integrate phenomenological insights into the study of scientific practice” most valuable reading. But there are many other perspectives. There are essays on the phenomenology of sound; on ethics, phenomenology and technology; contemporary Heidegger scholarship; embodiment—the Ariadne’s tread of course being Ihde’s work through the last forty years.

There are twenty essays (including Ihde’s own commentaries) in this volume written by an impressive assembly of writers.

The first part consists of two essays trying to bring out Ihde’s Unique Voice. In Vivian Sobchack’s paper it is Ihde’s method in philosophy of technology, a nonfoundational approach beginning with the autobiographical (the known) before venturing into unknown territory, called, by Ihde himself, as “variational practice.” This is where “the metaphorical meets the literal.”

The next essay is by Carl Mitcham. Carl Mitcham is a world leading scholar on the history of the philosophy of technology. In his “From Phenomenology to Pragmatism: Using Technology as an Instrument” he discusses the American Pragmatists influence on Ihde’s philosophy of technology. Mitcham conveys his usual flair for overview, embracing in his prose the various thinkers’ tendencies through shifting epochs, keeping track of the complexity of interconnections of ideas and the periods in which they arise. We are generously provided with Who-is-Who of American Pragmatism and this particular school’s influence on modern philosophy of technology in general. Mitcham writes: “Unlike many phenomenologists, Ihde has been in regular dialogue with pragmatism, and has on more than one occasion challenged its late twentieth-century manifestations. By weaning phenomenology from any residual foundationalist pretensions, as well as bringing it out of the more purely philosophical traditions and introducing it into the scientific laboratories and their heavily instrumented practices, Ihde has created a postphenomenology that is, in effect, a pragmatic phenomenology.”

The next part, consisting of three essays, deals with phenomenology and sound. Here we are presented to the phenomenon of understanding sound. Lenore Langsdorf writes about the primacy of listening, a theme dear to Ihde. Listening and understanding sounds has been a much neglected area of research among philosophers. Trevor Pinch’s essay bears the title “Voices in the Electronic Music Synthesizer: An Essay in Honor of Don Ihde.” Pinch has been inspired by Ihde’s phenomenological approach, “listening and

voice are always part of our world. Sound is inseparable from language and culture,” he writes in his introduction. Trevor Pinch is not a phenomenologist. His approach is empirical and his research on the synthesizer builds on interviews with participants in the synthesizer culture. This is a thorough study of the synthesizer as a technology.

Visualization of the musical object is the last essay in this part, and is written by Judy Lochhead. This is an analysis of how to make sound visible, in other words, what Lochhead offers is nothing less than an in-depth study of visualizations—and conceptualisations, as such. Lochhead states: “To ‘visualize’ implies...a bringing to visibility... (a) comprehension through conceptualization and it affords a kind of ‘sharability’.”

Part three deals with “normative commitments.” The first essay in this section is Selinger’s very provocative “Normative Phenomenology: Reflections on Ihde’s Significant Nudging.” Ihde has in his philosophy created an outlook of our lifeworld that avoids the use of doomsday prognosis and dystopian diagnosis. However, he has been criticized for not taking the normative dimension into account. Selinger deals with this problem by offering the reader a comparison of Ihde’s thinking to renowned thinkers such as Hubert Dreyfus and Albert Borgmann. Selinger finds that although Ihde has a strong emphasis on the epistemological aspects, Ihde does indeed “present a normative critique of the type of theorizing that obscures the subtler dimensions of engaging with technoscience.” Many of the dystopian perspectives his critiques offer do not correspond adequately to reality. Mostly they are theoretical distortions concocted from selective understandings of the lifeworld. In other words, these are theoretical or idealized constructions without much empirical reality at the base.

The next two essays in this part are by Paul B. Thompson and Peter-Paul Verbeek. The first one is about Ihde and his standing with technological ethics. Contrary to Selinger, however equally provocative, Thompson finds that neither Ihde nor his students have brought their work into the normative realm: “...while Ihde’s work in philosophy of technology holds out great promise for technological ethics, it is a promise that one must regard as still largely unfulfilled.”

Verbeek, on his side, talks about the normative dimension in connection to things we ourselves have created. Verbeek comes from the very big Dutch STS/philosophy of technology community. In Europe, the Dutch are forerunners and torch bearers in the study of technologies. It must be said, one of the strengths of this book is that it presents us with players from the

international arena of philosophy of technology, not only from the US.

However, Verbeek's essay is very interesting. He grapples with questions such as "Can things be considered moral agents, and if so, to what extent? And is it morally right to go even one step farther and try to explicitly shape this morality of things, by consciously steering human behavior with the help of the material environment?" Although this essay does not provoke in the same manner as Selinger's and Thompson's essays—being critical to Ihde's normative commitments, Verbeek manages to provoke normative thought in a different direction by focusing on the morality of artefacts.

Part four of *Postphenomenology* takes up the somewhat complex relationship between Ihde's philosophical method and Heidegger's existential philosophy. Robert C. Scharff, Richard A. Cohen and Peter Galison present quite different views.

Scharff thinks Ihde's critique of Heidegger is off the mark and that Ihde should reconsider and give more credit to Heidegger's earlier and later work. Cohen, on the other hand, believes that Ihde's critique of Heidegger is too soft; Ihde has simply not been negative enough in addressing Heidegger's dystopian view of Technology. It is however a surprise when Peter Galison applies Heidegger in his essay on technological breakdown, dealing with the space shuttle Columbia's accident over Texas February 1, 2003. Galison connects with Heidegger's notion of man being engaged in the world. Man does not see himself from within himself but through his engagement in the world—and its many natural and manmade things—surrounding him. The self of the individual is formed and reformed by his use of things. Galison sums up, "Global climate change, groundwater draining, species extinctions... we know these things and don't know them. We believe contradictory positions, sliding effortlessly between conflicting identities; we gasp at disaster and continue to work. Our world stars us in the midst of powerful effective, and failing technology—here we are, neither as tragic hero, broken hammer in hand, nor as Enlightenment scientist, laboratory at the ready."

Part five is called "Perceiving Bodies." Here you can read essays by Donna J. Haraway, Andrew Feenberg, Don Welton and Andrew Pickering, all with reference to Ihde's last book *Bodies in Technology*; but also with reference to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of bodies and even to Sartre. Especially Merleau-Ponty's thinking has had great impact upon Ihde's work on embodiment. Perceptual experience has a bodily nature, Judy Lochhead points in her essay. For instance, there is seldom agreement in the camp

on what should count as necessary constituents for intelligent behavior. Pickering, for one, has a different notion about intelligent behavior and embodiment than Ihde. As Pickering states: "Ihde's ontology is not the same as mine..." Ihde, as Merleau-Ponty, sees that embodiment is the location of all intelligent behavior. And according to Ihde, Pickering wants to replace the notion of embodiment altogether. Instead of embodiment there should be cybernetics, that is, some kind of self-organizing of the same kind we find in thermostats, which should show that intelligent behavior is not necessarily embodied although it is in some sense situated.

The last four essays concentrate on "reframing science." Here Robert P. Crease writes about "From Workbench to Cyberstage"; Finn Olesen deals with "Technological Mediation and Embodied Health-care Practices"; Albert Borgmann is "Mediating Between Science and Technology"; and Hans Lenk is looking "Toward a Practice-Oriented Methodology and Philosophy of Technoscience." These are all superbly written and in their enlightening analysis are scrutinizing Ihde's attempt to mediate between technology, science, philosophical traditions and approaches, and between humans and the reality they create and inhabit.

The essay by Hans Lenk takes Ihde's philosophy away from the discussion about the phenomenological approach and instead focuses on Ihde's philosophy of science. There are, according to Hans Lenk, three traits that are specific to this endeavour: "the development of experimental techniques and instruments; on the 'embedding' of these instruments in the respective scientific and experimental contexts; and on the 'embodying' of scientific enterprises in the practices that involve technological instrumentation." There are three particularly important players, and besides Don Ihde we also find Ian Hacking and Ronald Giere. What is common ground, according to Lenk, is some sort of practical realism, i.e. "instrumental realism" (Ihde), "experimental-manipulative realism" (Hacking) or "modelistic constructive realism" (Giere). They share the view that scientific knowledge cannot be correctly understood without the practical aspects of science, and which, to state this strong enough, should be brought into the very foreground of the epistemological enterprise. A typical approach has been to do as the positivists did, namely to study theory without attending to perception, technology, or experimental instruments. As Hans Lenk points out (and in agreement with Pickering and Giere, but not entirely with Ihde), there may have been differences whether one sees *by, through, or via* instruments, and of social "praxis." Nevertheless, the turn of focus from theory to praxis caught the

attention of European philosophers. The Europeans began to view the “accumulating integration and interconnection between technology, science, society, and economy” as being the ground on which they could begin to get a better understanding of how scientific knowledge is constructed. Lenk writes, “We know that gaining knowledge is a sort of *action*; at times it is a higher-level activity, namely acting with models, preparations, or experimental arrangements.” Knowledge is to great extent constructions “but it is equally true that knowledge and insights in experimental science are not merely constructions and interpretations that will fit into arbitrary models.” Knowledge in this context never means relativistic or arbitrary.

The last part is Ihde’s own reply, which sums up some of the central topics in the volume and addresses his critiques.

In conclusion, *Postphenomenology A Critical Companion to Ihde* has an enormous value to everyone interested in an interdisciplinary, nonfoundational, variational practice philosophy of technology. This volume is a *must* for all scholars working within the philosophy of technology area, science studies and STS. As Finn Olesen writes, “Ihde has done philosophers of technology a great favour by fleshing out the trajectory from classical phenomenology to postphenomenology. Hopefully, we will be able to bring his argument forward to designers, executives, and politicians.” This volume bears all the marks to do just that.