

Normative Judgment and Technoscience: Nudging Ihde, Again

Evan Selinger
Rochester Institute of Technology

Abstract

This essay interrogates the relation between descriptive and prescriptive elements in Don Ihde's philosophy of technology. I argue that while Ihde's philosophy contributes more to normative inquiry than is often acknowledged, it may be insufficient for addressing core issues concerning cosmopolitanism, ecological catastrophe, and animal rights.

Key Words: Globalization, Ihde, Postphenomenology

Introduction

Before *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* was published, Don Ihde had been accused of prioritizing the descriptive aspects of phenomenology in his philosophy of technology to the detriment of developing a critical approach to assessing the emerging moral and political issues that accompany technological innovation. To use a distinction made by Carl Mitcham, this line of critique depicts Ihde as an "engineering" but not "humanities" philosopher of technology. Ihde is said to unravel the complexities of technological mediation at the expense of advancing substantive claims about the proper role that technology should play in the good life, morally understood, or within democracy, conceived of in at least one of its political modes. In short, while Ihde is acknowledged to be a leading principal in the American Philosophy of Technology, the consensus is that Albert Borgmann's philosophy is the main source of moral insights into technology, while Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology is the main source of political interrogation.

Variations of this position continue to be articulated in *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. Robert Scharff, Paul Thompson, and Mitcham himself each raise provocative questions about Ihde's treatment of normative matters. Scharff claims that Ihde's descriptions can seem "strangely apolitical and 'neutral'" (131). Thompson laments that "neither Ihde nor his students have articulated or developed some of the most obvious and important extensions of his thought in the normative realm" (116). And Mitcham questions how deeply Ihde's philosophy overlaps with American pragmatism: "Ihde's interest in social-cultural reform has been less than what is typical of classical pragmatism, at least as exemplified by Dewey and promoted again by Durbin and Hickman" (31).

In my contribution to *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*, I departed by from the Ihde-is-not-sufficiently-normative bandwagon by arguing that he in fact does make significant contribution to normative theory (89-107). As I see it, Ihde makes these contributions by providing deflationary accounts of untenable utopian and dystopian depictions of technoscientific practice. Such accounts are normatively relevant because they expose a dominant "cheat code" that hinders the narratives provided by many heavy-handed normative analysts. In their narratives, fictitious descriptions of non-existent technoscientific maladies are misrepresented as being empirically and/or ontologically real.

This defense of Ihde's contributions to normative theory did not entail a complete exoneration of his philosophy from all relevant charges. Contrarily, I ended my chapter by raising critical questions about Ihde's approach to non-foundational philosophy and cosmopolitanism (103-105). These questions remain, and I will revisit the main themes by posing two challenges here.

First Challenge: Cosmopolitanism

The first challenge addresses a number of interrelated issues concerning Ihde's commitment to cosmopolitanism. For Ihde, cosmopolitanism amounts to viewing globalization from the inclusive perspective of "pluriculture," a perspective that treats diversity as a praiseworthy good. Since there are many ways to favor diversity, what makes Ihde's ideal vision of the global world distinct is that it is an unapologetically postmodern outlook. When Ihde articulates the type of world he would like to live in, enthusiasm is expressed for one in which diverse practices are permitted to flourish through hybridization. In this world, one pastiche forms after another, as old and new practices collide, reconfigure, and give rise to novel possibilities for living.

But what justifies Ihde's commitment to this particular vision of cosmopolitanism and diversity? As a non-foundationalist, he cannot justify diversity as a cross-cultural good by appealing to intrinsic worth. Nor can he take a utilitarian perspective and appeal to a connection between diversity and widespread pleasure. A virtue ethics stance, in which diversity is treated as a cross-cultural good that enhances the moral character of citizens is similarly off limits, as is an appeal to evolutionary ethics, according to which some link would be established between diversity and species egoism. And what about those traditionalists, particularly the so-called fundamentalists, who deeply oppose the type of world that Ihde is attracted to? On what philosophical grounds can their worldviews be contested?

Beyond these issues, Ihde does not comment on whether limits should be imposed on how much diversity ought to be allowed to arise in a global context. Does this reticence imply a shared commitment with Deleuze-inspired theorists who privilege the category of "becoming" and praise the ways in which a "dance of agency" allows for ever new human-machine assemblages to emerge? Not only might this issue re-orient the debate in *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* between Ihde and Andrew Pickering, but it also has direct implications for theorists and practitioners who are working on issues related to technology and cultural preservation (211-218, 275-276). For example, does Ihde's philosophy imply that it is a mistake to rebuild such decimated cities New Orleans, preserve decaying artworks and architectural structures, or repatriate artifacts that historically were coercively removed from a region? If so, why? If not, why not? Similarly, how does Ihde feel about instances in which technologies are used to violate human rights (e.g., cluster munitions), or patterns of development in which advances in technology deskill populations that, in turn, sink deeper into poverty? Are there any philosophical approaches to human rights and distributive justice that he endorses? Again, if so, which ones, and if none, why?

Finally, Ihde typically expresses his praise for diversity in conjunction with presenting personal reflections on traveling around the world. Clearly, Ihde has derived immense aesthetic satisfaction from experiencing worldly cuisines, rituals, and artifacts. More than this, he credits travel with improving the quality of his philosophy. As reiterated in *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*, a conference in Colombia, South America led him to think about multiculturalism and identity in a new and putatively better way (6). Beyond these subjective

rewards, one gets the impression that Ihde would like to make more substantive general claims, but refrains from doing so because of his aversion to foundational philosophy. For example, does Ihde think that it is possible to be a good philosopher of technology if one lacks direct experience in worldly travel? Can reading texts about other cultures, or having extensive dialogue with either members of other cultures or theorists who study other cultures, suffice to provide an education into phenomenological variation? Or, is it necessary to have a certain amount of direct experience in how other cultures organize their styles of engagement?

More broadly, might the issue of travel be a topic that unites Borgmann and Ihde in ways that have yet to be sufficiently explored? Borgmann gives us a clear sense of what our lives would lack, were we to live without focal practices, or were we to give them insufficient priority. Doesn't Ihde also want to suggest that a life bereft of travel is a life that is missing something essential? And, how does Ihde view his contingent relation to travel, one in which he moves about as a highly educated and financially secure American who often has clear and direct ties to a given host country, with the potentially more general views that he may wish to endorse? By addressing these issues, Ihde will clarify further what he views the "empirical turn" in philosophy to entail. That is, he will clarify which forms of mediated experience can yield appropriate insight into the empirically observable activity occurring in a given domain.

Second Challenge: The Threshold Problem

The second challenge to Ihde concerns what I am calling the *threshold problem*. This problem pertains to two types of restrictive contexts: (1) contexts in which it is undesirable to look for multi-stable possibilities, and (2) contexts that drastically curtail opportunities for multi-stable potentials to be reached. In order to explore this issue, it will be useful to proceed with a few remarks on non-neutrality.

With respect to the *praxis* particular to technological mediation, Ihde has long emphasized that the distinct character of technology is non-neutrality. In an interview for *5 Questions: Philosophy of Technology* (2007), Ihde was asked: "What, if any, practical and/or social-political obligations follow from studying technology from a philosophical perspective?" His reply emphasizes the connection between invention and normative consequences: "One important realization that emerges from the philosophical reflection upon technologies...is that all technologies are non-neutral...This means, minimally, that any invention will have some social and political consequence" (109).

As the multi-stable phenomenologist par excellence, Ihde can see variational possibilities in the non-neutral outcomes that technoscientific invention and practices facilitate in cases where others see only one-sided options and predictable conclusions. In *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde* Borgmann notes that Ihde takes "pleasure" in disclosing the "riches of multistability," and suggests that this capacity to find novelty where others find the eclipse of meaning may in fact reflect "Ihde's sunny disposition" (252). Regardless of how much weight should be attributed to personal affect, the fact remains that Ihde does depict critics who view technology as essentially threatening as observers who suffer from perceptual difficulties.

The price to pay for having such a high threshold for ambiguity is that *nothing appears catastrophic and dire* to Ihde. Indeed, the *praxis correlate to Ihde's generous affirmation of ambiguity is a pragmatic commitment to muddling through*. Radical activism that is guided by a sense of existing or impending disaster is not seen as necessary. Ihde's ethos thus seems to be the

following. Since technology has been non-neutral since its very beginnings, and since the human species remains intact despite recurring laments of crisis, there is, more or less, no justification for worrying more about technology than our ancestors did. They “persevered,” and so too shall we, even if such persistence involves ineliminable change.

Bill McKibben espouses a contrary ethos. He insists that while it can be very hard to grasp the existence of profound alterations that have the potential to change what it means, fundamentally, to be human and to lead a human life, there nevertheless are instances in which “discontinuous, sudden, and enormous” transformations occur that do, in fact, have such potential, and which, thereby, pose threshold problems. With respect to the problem of global warming, in *5 Questions: Philosophy of Technology* (2007) McKibben offers the possibility that “we might be standing on a strange moment in human history, right on a threshold” (138). Unfortunately, he contends, many people shy away from this awareness and organize their commitments around distortions: “Even if we, say, believe in global warming we think that it must be somewhat distant, happening fairly slowly; this distortion, probably due to our evolved mechanisms for assessing risk, makes our reactions slow and limp” (ibid., 137). Given the poor environmental policies that the Bush Administration has promoted, it is hard to disagree with McKibben’s sense that it may very well prove to be more beneficial to accept dystopian predictions about global warming as viable hypotheses than it is to deflate them through the openness that Ihde-style variation permits. Where, then, does Ihde stand on the use of foundational appeals to dire scientific predictions about environmental futures as a means of reorienting public policy?

The threshold problem extends beyond global warming and issues of human identity to technological practices that take place in environments that are so restrictive that non-human identities become radically changed. Consider, for example, the new book by Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat* (2006). Singer and Mason contend that eating is a moral activity because the food humans consume is prepared through practices that impact how animals, the environment, and other human beings are treated. In this context, the authors provide a rich examination of farming and fishing in order to show that a gap exists between what typical consumers imagine occurs with these activities and what actually occurs as a result of specific technological procedures. Within the context of these procedures, we are confronted with the primary concerns that Heidegger had about the essence of technology. The animals embedded in factory farming systems are treated like “standing reserve”; no aspect of their lives escapes from efficiency-oriented technological intrusion. Indeed, Heidegger may have been incredibly insensitive to equate factory farming with the Holocaust, but, as Singer and Mason show, Heidegger choose well in selecting factory farming as a paradigm case of closed-system, technological management. No amount of multi-stable gazing at a modern factory farm will enable what passes for chickens to resume living as real chickens.

Reflecting on such cases as factory farming remind us that technological multistability can only arise if several conditions are met. First, an artifact’s material must be flexible enough that it can be inserted into different practices. Second, a practice needs to permit some freedom for novel use in order for an artifact to be used in a novel way. Third, the human agents who use materially flexible artifacts in practices that permit some degrees of freedom need to have the physical capability to use artifacts in new ways. Fourth, there must be sufficient time for human agents to use artifacts in novel ways. By reflecting on these conditions, we can discern the underlying biases that structure Ihde’s depictions of multistability.

Ihde's discussions of multistability arise in two main contexts. Sometimes, Ihde simply performs an abstract perceptual exercise. The main example in his work is the recurring case of showing how the famous ambiguous image of a duck-rabbit can be extended to include other possibilities, including a Martian and squid. Exercises like this take great liberties with the issues of embeddedness and temporality. Ihde has all the time in the world to come up with as many variations as he possibly can. Moreover, he goes to work on an innocent example, one that is not fraught with tensions between morality, politics, and economy. No business, politician, or special interest group will feel threatened by Ihde's act of perceptually varying an image that nobody owns and which fails to incite radical action.

In other instances, Ihde draws from the histories of science and technology to show how over time artifacts come to be used in ways that differ dramatically from the intentions held by the original designers. For example, we are reminded that sonograms are not morally neutral. Sometimes, they are used as tools for determining whether or not an abortion should occur. Again, by selecting examples of technologies that transform over time, Ihde takes liberties. Over the *longue durée*, how surprising is it that all manner of devices and their contexts of use change?

Ultimately, the problem that factory farming poses for Ihde is that it is an example which, when looked at in the short-term, can best be understood as a closed techno-economic system that permits few, if any, degrees of freedom for alteration. In the short term, multi-stable perceptions of factory farming are abstract projections of possibilities that may or may not arise in an uncertain future. Given such austerity, and the compelling points that Singer and Mason make about pain and suffering, what is wrong with taking a foundational approach to judging factory farming to be an illicit practice, at least in the short term? This judgment can be made without endorsing Singer's version of preference utilitarianism in any other contexts. Similarly, it may be advantageous to endorse a dystopian view on global warming, at least in the present. This judgment can be made without validating any of the other dystopian analyses of technoscience that Ihde rightly finds problematic.

Conclusion

Despite Ihde's willingness to endorse disciplinary overlaps as well as conceptual and ontological hybrids that others find unacceptable (e.g., technoscience, pluricultural, multistability, expanded hermeneutics, etc.), he remains somewhat of a purist in maintaining a staunch nonfoundational position on normativity. The questions which I have raised suggest that it may be possible for Ihde to be more flexible on this matter. In the spirit of "strategic essentialism," he may be able to advance foundational positions on some forms of technoscientific practice and some aspects of cosmopolitan living, without accepting any particular moral or political doctrine as the general prism through which he views all instances of innovation and non-neutral, technologically mediated action, cognition, and perception.

References

- Borgmann, A. 2006. "Mediating Between Science and Technology." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 247-255.
- Ihde, D. 2006. "Forty Years in the Wilderness." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 267-290.

- Ihde, D. 2007. Interview in Olsen, J.K. and E. Selinger (eds.) *Five Questions: Philosophy of Technology*. USA: Automatic/VIP Press.
- Olsen, J.K. and E. Selinger (eds.). 2007. *Five Questions: Philosophy of Technology*. USA: Automatic/VIP Press.
- McKibben, B. 2007. Interview in Olsen, J.K. and E. Selinger (eds.). *Five Questions: Philosophy of Technology*. USA: Automatic/VIP Press.
- Mitcham, C. 1994. *Thinking Through Technology: The Path Between Engineering and Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mitcham, C. 2006. "From Phenomenology to Pragmatism: Using Technology as an Instrument." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 21-33.
- Pickering, A. 2006. "Ontology Engines." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 211-218.
- Scharff, R. 2006. "Ihde's Albatross: Sticking to a 'Phenomenology' of Technoscience Experience." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 131-144.
- Selinger, E. (ed.). 2006a. *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Selinger, E. 2006b. "Normative Phenomenology: Reflections on Ihde's Significant Nudging." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 89-107.
- Singer, P. and J. Mason. 2006. *The Way We Eat*. USA: Rodale.
- Thompson, P. 2006. "Ihde and Technological Ethics." In E. Selinger (ed.), *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press. 109-116.