

Postphenomenology and Pragmatism: Closer Than You Might Think?

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Abstract

In this commentary on Evan Selinger's book *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*, I begin with Carl Mitcham's claim that with respect to Don Ihde's "postphenomenology" there are "challenges both to and from pragmatism." I discuss four points on which postphenomenology and pragmatism seem to be in agreement, and then two points on which I believe pragmatism offers a program that socially thicker.

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Introduction

When I picked up Evan Selinger's *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*, the first essay I turned to was the one by Carl Mitcham. This was due in part because anyone familiar with our discipline knows that Mitcham's historian's eye overview of the philosophy of technology is without equal. I therefore hoped that he would discuss some of the points of contacts – and some of the differences – between Ihde's phenomenological take on technology and the pragmatist view that I have advanced as representing the insights of John Dewey. I was not disappointed.

Of course Mitcham is correct to indicate, as he does on page 27, that my own work is not exactly straight-up Dewey. I have in fact attempted to push Dewey's insights beyond what is there on the printed page – and in the electronic record of his correspondence – in order to see where they lead, and what contribution they can make to the ongoing discussions within various strands of our discipline. It is in this connection that I am most interested in Mitcham's suggestion that with respect to Don Ihde's work "there are both challenges to and from pragmatism. The challenge to pragmatism is to consider what Ihde's phenomenology of human-instrument relations might imply for pragmatist instrumentalism. The challenge from pragmatism is to consider in what ways Ihde's phenomenology might be a basis for societal, political, and technological reform" (Selinger 2006, 27).

Beyond Dystopianism

Now even relatively inattentive readers of Ihde's work will probably have noted certain points of agreement between his "postphenomenology" and Dewey-type pragmatism. First, there is a rejection of the dark, brooding dystopian warnings of some of the early members of the Frankfurt school. To be fair, philosophers such as Adorno were as a matter of fact living and working in a dark, dystopian era in which technology tended to be identified, as Ihde properly points out, with military/industrial tools and the techniques of totalitarianism and death. We know that some of them had to flee their native countries as a result of that situation, and that some of them even died before they got to their destinations. But is it fair to lay the blame for those circumstances at the door of technology? And what does it say about their conception of technology that they would do so?

Ihde is clearly pragmatic on this count: dystopian type approaches to understanding the relation of human beings (and other animals as well) to their tools have cast a dark shadow over the type of research that can illuminate such relationships. And this is surely what Ihde's own research is about. For Ihde, research is descriptive postphenomenology, where "post" means something very much like Dewey's anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, functionalism, perspectivism, emphasis on the interplay between means and ends, and rejection of the fact/value split. For Dewey it was, of course, all of these things as they promoted research into the way we communicate, the way we think, and the ways that we can create tools for our schools and our publics that can be utilized to enrich experience and thus promote the growth of individuals and communities.

Beyond Romanticism

Second, there is Ihde's famous – or if you are one of the Heideggerian faithful, his *infamous* – rejection of the type of romanticism that characterizes Heidegger's post-WWII work. Here again, Ihde and pragmatists of the Deweyan sort are on the same page. Ihde goes about this in a way that exhibits his own version of "truth as un-concealing," and he does it in terms that are at once both deeply informed and, at least to some, highly entertaining. His now-famous riff on the Shoreham Nuclear Reactor, set against Heidegger's own riff on the Greek temple, surely un-conceals what was concealed, and therefore arguably false, in Heidegger's appreciation of the ambiance in which "Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are" (Ihde 1993, 104). In response to this, Ihde does a little background research and finds out the story behind the backdrop to the Acropolis, that is, the "bare dry mountains. . . and the ruins of an environment which they [those temple-building Greeks] desolated..." (Ibid.). In short, Ihde notes that Heidegger's paean to the Parthenon fails to take account of the hard reality of ecological devastation.

Dewey, of course, also rejected this type of nostalgic romanticism. He thought that the task of the philosopher is to look to the future – to reconstruct the tools and techniques of the past in ways that render them more appropriate to future action. Nowhere is this more evident than in his social and political philosophy and his philosophy of education. As for his reading of the history of philosophy and the history of technology, he was highly critical of the Greeks for their inattention to the manner in which their ontologies tended to reflect their defective social structure, and the ways that the concrete tools and techniques of the artisans were expropriated and exploited in order to construct ontologies that he thought were pretty much over the top in terms of their empty abstractions.

In this connection, Ihde's postphenomenology shares with Dewey-style pragmatism a view about the future of work within the philosophy of technology that has been eloquently articulated by Peter Paul Verbeek in *What Things Do*. For Verbeek, the way forward is to simply "bracket" some of the main themes in classical philosophy of technology, such as the attempts by Heidegger and others to "understand technology from its conditions of possibility, from what must be presupposed in order for it to be possible" (Verbeek 2005, 7). For Verbeek, for Ihde, and for Dewey-style pragmatism, to attempt to apply this "transcendental" approach to understanding technology is simply to get things backwards. Dewey's instrumentalism is concerned with the conceivable practical consequences of tools and techniques, not the conditions for their possibility. You can see this clearly enough in his groundbreaking 1905 essay "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (MW.3.158-167)¹. For his part, Ihde applauds this "empirical" turn.

Practical Arts, Fine Arts

Third, if pragmatic technology refuses to wax nostalgic for the distant unrecoverable past, neither does it accept what Ihde terms “the great difference of evaluation and connotation between art objects and technological objects” (Ihde 1993, 105). Dewey was especially clear about this last point in his 1934 book *Art as Experience*. “It is customary, and from some points of view necessary,” he writes, “to make a distinction between fine art and useful or technological art. But the point of view from which it is necessary is one that is extrinsic to the work of art itself. The customary distinction is based simply on acceptance of certain existing social conditions. I suppose the fetiches of the Negro sculptor were taken to be useful in the highest degree to his tribal group, more so even than spears and clothing. But now they are fine art, serving in the twentieth century to inspire renovations in arts that had grown conventional” (LW.10.33). For his part, Ihde moves seamlessly back and forth from medieval wood cuts and Egyptian papyrus drawings to clocks and radios.

Heidegger’s Typewriter

Fourth, on a related point, Dewey’s pragmatic technology and Ihde’s postphenomenology share a concern with the multivalence of tools and artifacts that tends to be highly constricted within some competing accounts. A case in point is Heidegger’s distaste for the typewriter, which he links to what he terms the “destruction of the word” (Ihde 1993, 106). The only way I can read this remark is as, first, an implied recognition of the multivalence of the writing machine, and second, an attempt to constrict its use to the point that it and its users are reduced to a “one size fits all” formula. This case – involving typewriter and typing skills – is just one among many that are indicative, I suggest, of Heidegger’s tendencies toward a Procrustean approach to tools and techniques.

What would Heidegger have had to say, for example, to individuals who have been diagnosed with mild forms of ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder? Taking him at his word, and following his constricted view of matters, academic careers would have been cut short absent the typewriter, and later, the computer. For people with even mild forms of this malady, it just takes too long to write in longhand. The train of thought gets lost. Ihde gets this point. McLuhan got it. Dewey got it. But Heidegger didn’t seem to get it. It occurs to me to wonder how far those who hold the work of Heidegger in high regard would want to travel down this road. I suspect that it would not be very far. I think that it is appropriate that Ihde raises the issue.

Multivalence

Even though they are in basic agreement, however, I do think, Ihde and Dewey treat the matter of multivalence somewhat differently. For Ihde, multivalence, or what he terms multistability, is the subject of a phenomenological analysis whose descriptive power is both wide and deep. He subscribes to “relativistic ontologies” which, he says, are not relativisms, but rather “take into account both the context and the observer’s positionality” (Selinger 2006, 275). In his story, pigs, and even church bells, can and do function in different ways in different contexts. This may be a descriptive enterprise, but it is not one that is otiose. The point of such analysis is, as I understand matters, to open up research possibilities, to begin to see opportunities, and to be able to take into account and appreciate alternative “positionalities.” In terms of research programs, Ihde wants to get philosophers of technology out of their traditional role as simply reacting to designs already

formulated and produced. He wants to get them into the R&D phase of the production of new tools and artifacts where they can make a positive difference. His approach also has obvious implications for enhancing cross-cultural understanding and what has been termed “global citizenship.”

For his part, Dewey located the issue of multivalence within a larger theory of inquiry which is both descriptive and normative. “Meanings,” he writes in *Experience and Nature*, “are rules for using and interpreting things; interpretation being always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence” (LW.1.147). Some eighty pages later he continues this thought. “But meanings, ideas, are also, when they occur, characters of a new interaction of events; they are characters which in their incorporation with sentiency transform organic action, furnishing it with new properties. Every thought and meaning has its substratum in some organic act of absorption or elimination of seeking, or turning away from, of destroying or caring for, of signaling or responding. It roots in some definite act of biological behavior” (LW.1.221).

Notice the dynamic, transactional language that Dewey employs in this passage. It is not just that artifacts have many meanings, some of which are exhibited under certain conditions and others of which are exhibited under other conditions. No. The situation is in fact much more complex than that. Dewey emphasizes the progressive, dynamic function of meanings: they transform organic action, generating new properties. At one point (LW.1.152) Dewey even employs a sexual metaphor, writing of meanings copulating, bringing forth new meanings.

Steve Woolgar and Geoff Cooper provide an example of this phenomenon in a somewhat different context. Langdon Winner had claimed that the bridges over the Long Island Expressway were deliberately designed to exclude busses so that poor people and blacks would be excluded from Jones Beach. With bus timetables in hand, however, Woolgar and Cooper confidently report that “the bridges did not prevent buses traveling down the parkways on Long Island” (Woolgar and Cooper 1999, 435).

Implications of Postphenomenology for Pragmatism

Taking up the first part of Mitcham’s challenge, therefore, what can we say about the implications of Ihde’s phenomenology of human-instrument relations for pragmatic instrumentalism? The brief answer is that what makes Ihde’s postphenomenology “post” instead of “classical” phenomenology is precisely its embrace of certain planks in the pragmatic program, including its anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, functionalism, perspectivism, emphasis on the interplay between means and ends, and rejection of the putative fact/value split. Moreover, Ihde’s program offers increased dimensionality, increased traction, to what Dewey termed “the denotative method.” In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey describes this method, differentiating between “the objects of primary and of secondary reflective experience” (LW.1.15-16). The objects of primary experience set the problems, furnishing data. The objects of secondary experience

define or lay out a path by which return to experienced things is of such a sort that the meaning, the significant content, of what is experienced gains an enriched and expanded force because of the path or method by which it was reached. Directly, in immediate contact it may be just what it was before – hard, colored, odorous, etc. But when the secondary objects, the refined objects, are employed as a method or road for coming at them, these qualities cease to be isolated details; they get the meaning contained in a

whole system of related objects; they are rendered continuous with the rest of nature and take on the import of the things they are now seen to be continuous with. (LW.1.16)

In short, what Mitcham terms Ihde's "pragmatic phenomenology" provides excellent examples – case studies – of the ways that Dewey's denotative method works, and how it can be enhanced. And this is no small matter. First, because there are other, less successful competing methods that many people nevertheless find highly attractive and that seek to supplant the denotative method. And second, because the denotative method is the basis for successful research in the technosciences.

Implications of Pragmatism for Postphenomenology

But what of the second part of Mitcham's challenge – the challenge from pragmatism "to consider in what ways Ihde's phenomenology might be a basis for societal, political, and technological reform"? It is here that we encounter the problem of normativity. To be sure, the core of Ihde's project is descriptive phenomenology. But there is much more to the story. First, as I have indicated, the point of his project is to open up new avenues of awareness of the world of tools and artifacts in which we live and which provide novel research possibilities. And second, there is a stated sympathy with the "neo-enlightenment" strain in American pragmatism that looks very much like what Dewey described as relatively stable "platforms" of action.

Nevertheless, I am afraid that I will have to take the side of certain of Ihde's critics, including Mitcham and Paul Durbin, who would like to see him address more fully some of the implications of his work for social and cultural reform. My modest suggestion is that one of the ways this could be effected would be through the application of his insights to primary and secondary school curricula, and this with a view to enhancing the students' perceptual-inquiritual tools and consequently their appreciation of the richness of our increasingly "globalized" environment.

In addition to the question of the social and political implications of Ihde's work, however, there is another point on which there seems to be an important difference. If I read him correctly, at least in some of his essays, Ihde seems to honor, at least implicitly, a "material technology/culture" split that has deep roots in the history of our discipline, but that is probably long overdue for reconsideration.

A Crucial Difference

All of us who teach courses in the philosophy of technology are, or at least should be, indebted to Ihde for the wealth of case studies and examples that he provides, from sardine cans to Necker cubes, to drawings of Egyptian gardens. Nevertheless, I find it curious that he can write of the "instrumentless navigational techniques" of the great Pacific navigators (Ihde 1993, 24). After a beautiful description of what he terms their "perceptual navigation system," he concludes with the observation that Europeans had difficulty understanding the accomplishments of the Pacific navigators because of their "assumption . . . that instruments must mediate controlled interactions with nature" (Ibid).

Dewey would, I think, have described this situation quite differently. One of his projects was to functionalize the material technology/culture distinction in ways that emphasized what he regarded as an important solution to an ancient and debilitating philosophical problem. In a 1916

address to the Columbia philosophy club, he argued that the traditional philosophical problem of the status of logical entities, for example, could be solved by simply treating them as tools or instruments. When coupled with his argument that the separation between organism and environment is much more permeable than generally recognized, Dewey seems poised to recognize such things as the strategies of the Pacific navigators as legitimate cases of instrumentality. In these cases there is more than just “perception.” There is a (cognitive) deployment of conceptual tools and techniques – instruments – to achieve certain goals. For Dewey, the distinction would not have been between the instrument and the non-instrumentally perceptual, but between instruments of different functional types: those that are relatively exterior to the organism and those that are not. The determination and systematic use of patterns of rising and setting stars (the southern hemisphere has no pole star), the classification of wave patterns, and taxonomies of bird flights as aids to navigation are, in Dewey’s lexicon, instrumental. (Like Aristotle’s protoscientific taxonomies of shellfish, they are locally systematic. Unlike the instrumentalist breakthroughs of seventeenth century science, however, they are not globally systematic.)

Conclusion

I have attempted to make the case that Ihde’s postphenomenology and Dewey’s pragmatic technology are much closer relatives than they might appear on the surface. I would like to add one final note regarding how much I have learned from Don Ihde over the years. If he had not existed, those of us who teach courses in the philosophy of technology would have to have invented him.

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Endnote

¹ References to John Dewey's published works are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), and published in three series as *The Early Works: 1882-1898*, *The Middle Works: 1898-1924*, and *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. These designations are followed by volume and page number. MW.3.159-167, for example, refers to *The Middle Works*, volume 3, pages 159-167.