

## Active and Passive Bodies: Comments on Don Ihde's

### *Bodies in Technology*

Andrew Feenberg

Canada Research Chair in Philosophy of Technology

School of Communication

Simon Fraser University at Harbour Centre

Don Ihde has written a fascinating book on the body and its relation to technology from a phenomenological standpoint. The essays in this book cover a wide range of topics, from virtual reality to growing up male in America. Ihde offers some interesting autobiographical reflections unusual in a contribution to philosophy. I intend to follow his example here while enlarging on his approach.

Ihde's account of the body seems to me one-sided. Perhaps it is his orientation toward scientific perception and technical action that limits his focus. He is interested in the similarities and differences between the extension of the senses by instrumentation in scientific research and computer simulations and virtual reality. This tilts the weight of his discussion toward activity, but activity is only one dimension of the body. I will introduce the complementary passive dimension in what follows. I find this dimension missing on the whole from Ihde's account, yet it is the essential correlate of the activities he analyzes in so far as we are finite beings in the world.

Let me begin by remarking on Ihde's distinction between what he calls "body one," the sensory body, and "body two," the body informed and shaped by culture. I like this multiplication of bodies. It corresponds to a phenomenological insight into the specificity of our lived experience. To body one and two I would like to add body three and four, which I will call the "dependent body" and the "extended body."

I discovered the dependent body in the course of coaching my son's elementary school soccer team. We had a very energetic but undisciplined team member named Gabriel who could not seem to learn the rules and codes of children's soccer. But he did understand one profound fact about the game. Once when a team member was injured on the field, Gabriel shouted "Parents" at the top of his lungs and we all rushed over to help the fallen child. Afterwards, I realized that Gabriel was giving us the body of this child: injured children's bodies belong to parents. All children know this. Several years later, long after Gabriel had left the

team, he showed up one day at my doorstep with three comrades, one of whom had broken his collar bone in a fall from his bike. Gabriel handed over his friend Jose to me for care and I spent the rest of the afternoon finding Jose's parents and getting him fixed up at the local hospital.

Reflecting on these experiences I realized that we live our body not only as actors in the world but also as beings who invite action on our bodies by others. This is most obvious in medical situations. We bring our body to the doctor to be poked at and examined. We, like little Gabriel, know to whom our pains belongs. Inside our dependent body, we attend to unexpected sensations we have solicited. Our time horizon shrinks as we no longer control or plan the next sensation, yet we remain exquisitely alert. This is a peculiar passivity since we have set the stage for our own inaction and can at any moment reverse the situation and take control again. In a modern context, it is also a highly technologized experience: we are operated on by a whole panoply of devices. From the user of tools we become the object of tools.

The phenomenological point is, of course, not just this objective reversal of perspective, visible to third parties, but the deeper import of our lived first-person experience of our own instrumentalized status. That this condition cannot be analyzed in instrumental terms should be obvious from its regressive quality: the dependent body belongs to our childhood, returning in the present in this peculiar voluntary form. A phenomenology of the patient experience would be needed to work out the implications of the dependent body in medicine.

The dependent body also makes its appearance in sexual behavior. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have brilliantly analyzed this phenomenon. The body as "*chair*" or "flesh" becomes the immediate form of consciousness which hovers on the surface of the skin soaking up pleasurable sensations rather than watching as spectator from out of a situated identity in the world. Sartre rejects the notion that sex can be explained in terms of instincts or needs. Phenomenologically considered, it is a relation between subjectivized bodies. He begins his analysis with the caress which he treats as an incarnation of consciousness in the body of the subject attempting to achieve a parallel incarnation in the other. Sex is the construction of the dependent body of this other. Ritualized forms of passivity, which Sartre analyzes under the heading of masochism, carry the organization of subjective experience around the dependent body to the limit where consciousness dissolves in sensation and the person becomes a thing in the world of the other.

As in the medical example, the interesting question for phenomenology is the lived experience of being the object of action. This is quite different from the third personal relation to the body of the other available to the physician in the medical situation or the active sexual partner.

The example of sex appears, at first sight, to concern bodies stripped bare not only of clothes but also of any relation at all to technology. Our normal technological involvements come under the phenomenological heading of situations, that is, contexts of use in which the subject is clearly distinguished from its instrumentalities. In the medical case, the subject situates itself as object of the technology of the other and so reverses but also confirms this pattern. None of this applies in the phenomenological description of sex. Perhaps here we actually have the purified “humans” Latour decries in modernism. However, the apparent mutual exclusion of technology and sex is illusory. Consider the role of contraception in freeing the body from biology and history for the brief moment of the sexual encounter which phenomenology takes as its essence. In the absence of contraceptive technology, descriptions like Sartre’s are obviously partial and flawed.

I want to turn now to another more complex corporal phenomenon which I will call the extended body. Like the dependent body, this is a form of bodily experience which is characterized by a specific passivity. However, in this case the body uses instruments rather than being their object. I am not, however, concerned with the aspect of use but rather with its consequences for bodily objectivity and the subject’s awareness of those consequences.

Let me begin by reflecting on one of Ihde's own examples, drawn from Merleau-Ponty. Ihde notes that the lived body is not identical with the physical object called the body. “Such a body experience is one that is not simply coextensive with a body outline or one’s skin. The intentionality of bodily action goes beyond one’s bodily limits...” (Ihde 2001, 6). Merleau-Ponty describes the blind man’s cane as such an extension of the body. Indeed, the blind man senses the world through the cane and so is not directly conscious of the cane as such but rather of what it touches. The cane is a medium of perception not so different from eyeglasses in that respect. Merleau-Ponty thus describes it not as an instrument used by the blind man but as an extended sense organ: “To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the

world...”

However, the cane does more than sense the world; it also reveals the blind man as blind. His body is extended not only in the active dimension on which Ihde and Merleau-Ponty focus but also in the passive dimension of its own objectivity. Those around him recognize his blindness and are generally helpful. The blind man knows this is happening and has a non-specific awareness of the helpfulness of those who perceive him as blind because of his cane.

Again, eyeglasses provide a more familiar example. In wearing them, I not only see better, but am seen as a wearer of eyeglasses, an experience which I found very troublesome as a child attempting to keep up with the others in sports. We can clarify this with reference to Sartre’s analysis of the three dimensions of the body, the body-subject, the body-object for the other, and the body-object for the other as perceived by the self. As a 10 year old eyeglass wearer, I saw clearly as subject. But I also appeared as an object to others, as a particular kind of object, a boy handicapped by wearing glasses. As body-object for the others, I lived my body as mine in this perceived deficient condition. I was aware of my added fragility—eyeglasses fall off in rough play—and the connotations of eyeglasses in connection to “braininess” and presumed incompetence at sports. Living this eyeglass bound body I became cautious and hesitant in most sporting activities. Fortunately, we had a short soccer season, a few weeks out of the year, during which I could act confident, the ball was likely to stay on the ground and the other players at a safe distance. Thus, like Ihde, I was spared from total geekdom.

The extended body, then, is not only the body that acts through a technical mediation, but also a body that signifies itself through that mediation. I want to pursue this analysis further in relation to computer usage, a domain which is all too often analyzed, by Ihde too, in terms of the concept of disembodiment. This is a category that arises naturally from the contrast between what one can and cannot do in real and virtual bodies. But disembodiment does not adequately describe online self-presentation. I want to shift the focus from his example of virtual reality games to a far more familiar experience with computers that reveals another side of the extended body.

I have been engaged in online communication both personally and professionally since the early 1980s and have had plenty of occasion to observe the highly personal and engaging dynamics of written expression online. I am astonished that so many of my colleagues fail to recognize this aspect of online

communication and criticize it as impersonal and atomizing. This observation is relevant, in particular, to the key notion of disembodiment.

Am I disembodied in sending email or participating in an online chat or forum? Certainly, in one sense I am. My physical body is not present to my interlocutors. From this fact, Hubert Dreyfus, among others, has drawn all sorts of drastic conclusions. Without bodily involvement, Dreyfus has argued, there can be no commitment and risk. Moral engagement is impossible under these tenuous circumstances. Human relations are abridged and trivialized. And so on.

Such analyses are commonplace now and form a whole counter-literature to Internet hype. As such they are perhaps useful, but I would like to get away from the polemics and consider the experience of online presence, phenomenologically. From that angle the picture looks quite different from both the critique and the hype.

Let us recall once again Sartre's analysis of the body for the other. Sartre notes that our objectivity before the gaze of the other extends beyond our skin out into the world of things by which our presence is signified. We are objects of the one from whom we are hiding in the cracking of a branch underfoot. Our body extends to the glow of the cigarette that gives our presence away, or, to give a contemporary example, the ringing of the cell phone that embarrasses us in the middle of a lecture. This is the extended body in its simplest form.

On the Internet we experience our self as exposed to the gaze just as surely as the hiding subjects in Sartre's examples. Like them our physical body is invisible. But also, like them, our presence is signaled and our objectivity established through signs. In this case the signs are intentional and complex and consist in written messages.

Is this merely a metaphor? From the standpoint of objectivistic thought there can only be a figurative equivalence between our physical body and the extended body of our written expression. But phenomenologically considered, the point is not the objective thinghood of our physical self but what we live in the first person as our self in situation. As Ihde notes, mediated human contact is always measured against full bodily co-presence, however, the consequence of this situation is not simply a feeling of loss but evokes compensatory efforts to fill in the gaps, to enrich the "monosensory dimension" made available technically (8). Ihde does not follow up this suggestion because he turns to what he concludes are

fruitless attempts to overcome the reductive limitations of mediation through virtual reality. But there is much more to be said about the compensatory moves in relation to online writing.

Language is a way in which we objectify our selves. Where this form of objectivity is our entire social being, as in the case of online expression, it calls forth extraordinary compensatory efforts. Online writing is a conscious self-presentation. It constitutes what Ihde calls “an editing or fashion style of existence” (84). We could be said to “wear” language online in something like the sense in which we wear cloths in everyday life. It is a form of virtual embodiment as surely as what the fancy video goggles display. Others can often identify us from a few lines of our writing. We identify with it too as our extended bodily presence, in this case a strange kind of textual cyborg. Here Ihde’s claim that “our bodies have an amazing plasticity and polymorphism” is confirmed (138).

But like all forms of self-presentation, our writing reveals more than we intended and we are caught out by our interlocutors. Our role in an exchange or group is established before we know it by the expressions we use and such basic facts about our communications as their length and style. Our language shows us as neat or sloppy, formal or informal; we reveal our mood by our linguistic gestures as happy or sad, confident or timid. The fact that we can be proud or embarrassed, open or secretive, friendly or distant, all point to the complexity of this mode of technical mediation.

The role of written language can be analyzed in terms of Ihde’s phenomenology of technology, specifically, his distinction between “embodiment” relations and “hermeneutic” relations to the technical mediation of experience. In the embodiment relation, our experience is organized through a technical mediation and our identity merges with it, as in the example of eyeglasses. Self-expression through embodiment is a familiar experience from speaking on the telephone. We do not feel the telephone to be an external tool; it becomes an extension of ourselves as we talk through it to our interlocutor. For those who frequently use online communication, the same relationship prevails to the written means available in that technical environment. However, Ihde does not develop the reciprocal of this embodiment relation for such cases of mediated self-expression. Maria Bakardjieva points out that on the other end of these embodiment relations, someone receives a message which must be decoded in what Ihde calls a “hermeneutic” relation to technology. In this relation the

interpreted message stands in for the world, is in effect a world. In the case of mediated communication, a person and the social context of their presence is delivered in the message.

These observations bear on a controversial issue on which I have been doing research for the last several years: the nature of online community. Is online community possible at all? There is a school of thought which argues that community requires bodily co-presence. By definition then online community is a contradiction in terms. But community is a subjectively constructed phenomenon. It exists not because we are physically present to each other but because of the way we live our mutual connection, whatever it may be. To confuse that imaginative engagement with the other with simple physical presence is to completely abandon phenomenology for a crude objectivism. As Gabriel Marcel pointed out, I am far more fully “with” certain persons who are thousands of miles away than with the random individual sitting next to me in the subway. Community needs to be interpreted from the inside out, not as a geographical fact.

In that sense, the co-presence of extended bodies, constructed out of language in the online world, is a potential basis of community just as much as physical presence. Naturally, this will be a different type of community with different problems and potentials. Ihde’s analyses show the primacy of the “real” body with respect to virtual extensions. However, he is not dismissive of these extensions and rejects a reductionism that would sharply divide the human from the non-human, the real from the virtual. Here we are in agreement. I, too, intend to occupy his “middle ground” between implausible claims of total symmetry and a romantic refusal of all mediation (96ff). Thus, admitting various limitations of online community, I see no reason of principle to believe that the basic moral qualities of commitment, respect, and solidarity we expect in a face-to-face community cannot be achieved there too.

Naturally, to say these qualities *can* be achieved is not to say that they *will* be achieved because of the nature of the technology involved. We are way beyond that sort of determinism, although it continually rears its ugly head in popular discussions of the Internet. On the contrary, this phenomenological interpretation of online community leads to a consideration of the variety of technical mediations that either obstruct it or make it possible. The boundaries and affordances of online community depend on such technical facts as software design. A community which is open to the world has different characteristics

from one which is closed by a password provided only to qualified individuals. A community that can easily find traces of its own past interactions is different from one in which the past is erased as it advances forward in time. A community whose members are aware of each others' passive presence is different from one in which only active contributors are known to be present. Such technical aspects of online community shape the extended body of its members. Different types of software such as listservs, newsgroups, and web based forums offer a variety of possible structures, some more favorable to community building than others.

Ihde advocates that philosophers should get involved in technical decisions and design. I have done precisely this in recognition of the significance of software for online community and more specifically for online education. (For information on my software project, see [www.textweaver.org](http://www.textweaver.org)). As Ihde argues, "the very structure of technologies is multistable, with respect to uses, to cultural embeddedness, and to politics as well. Multistability is not the same as neutrality. Within multistability there lie *trajectories*, not just any trajectory, but partially determined trajectories" (106). The philosopher of technology can attempt to understand these trajectories in their human significance and to adapt technical design to ethical norms. This process is inevitably political.

This discussion of extended bodies appears to take us away from Ihde's concerns. But in fact we have never left the subject of his book, "bodies in technology." I have attempted here to develop his argument in a way he may find complementary to his own concerns, moving from the active side of the subject to its passive dimension. Both aspects of subjectivity are technically mediated today. A full picture of the bodily subject must take into account not only the classic concerns of philosophy with the perceiving and acting subject set in a natural environment, but the social subject in a technically mediated world. As such we are perceiving and perceived, acting and acted on in complex and unexpected ways that deserve the attention of philosophers. Don Ihde has given us a useful stimulus to thinking about this unprecedented situation.

#### Bibliography

Ihde, Don. *Bodies in Technology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 2001