Postphenomenology: In Search of Ihde

Evan Selinger (ed): *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2006, 307 pp + xi

John R. Dakers

How does one go about reviewing a critical companion? Am I offering a critique of the chapters by the various authors? Or am I searching for a better understanding of the concept of postphenomenology as located in Don Ihde's contributions to history, sociology, philosophy, science, sound studies, and technology studies, as mentioned on the back cover of the volume?

Perhaps what I should be seeking to explore is what it is that the various contributors think constitutes Ihde. Will I, by reading this collection, get to Ihde's essence so to speak? I am rather drawn to this latter exploration, and I am certainly helped in this endeavour by the Editor of the collection, Evan Selinger. In his introduction he not only gives the reader a short but succinct biography of Ihde, he gives us a biography of Ihde's work over 40 years "in the wilderness," as Ihde himself would have it. This certainly gives me an initial direction to follow in my quest for Ihde.

I wonder, as I attempt to seek out the essence of Ihde, what it is that actually constitutes this modern American philosopher and whether I will, in the process, reach a better understanding of the concept of postphenomenology, the main title of the book. If the book can help me to accomplish this end, then it will certainly be a worthwhile addition to the literature.

I have to say at the outset that Selinger has brought together a truly stellar cast for this collection of work. The book makes no attempt to conceal this fact: every contributor's name, including that of Ihde himself, can be found on the front cover. Those readers who have some knowledge of Ihde's work and of the work of the contributors, are therefore immediately given a sense of the likely characteristics, the intellectual feast of flavours, fragrances, and nuances that this volume is likely to contain. Those who are new to his oeuvre will undoubtedly be intrigued by the title

J. R. Dakers (✉)
Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow G3 6NH, Scotland, UK
e-mail: jdakers@educ.gla.ac.uk

"Postphenomenology," if not for its elusive meaning (I cannot find the term in any of my dictionaries) then perhaps for the fact that it contains seven syllables which, when pronounced, give considerable exercise to one's mandible. I am also certain that they will be intrigued by the rather strange picture on the front cover. It certainly appears to be a sketchy sort of caricature of someone and the reader would be correct to assume that it is Ihde, but is it intentional or random? It reminds me of Hilary Putnam's discussion about the intention of an ant when it draws out a recognisable representation of Churchill in the sand. Did the ant intend to draw a representation of Churchill or is the resultant caricature an accident? I think we will agree that the ant did not intend to represent Churchill since it has never seen Churchill. However, this collection of microscopic "whatevers," do actually conspire to reveal an uncanny likeness of the man. I know, I have met him. I also assume that there was some intention on the part of the artist, Jennifer Varn, to represent Ihde in this way. I think an explanation by the artist of what she intended would have enhanced this collection. A couple of paragraphs outlining what the artist intended (or did not intend as the case may be), would have offered a different perceptual variant that might have helped us in our search for Ihde.

In a recent conversation that I had with Don Ihde, I pondered the question: "Is this cover representation multistable?" He claimed that, as yet, he had not managed to see another variation. This intrigued me and, determined to find one, I spent several hours pondering the image from multiple perspectives. I believe I may have found one variation: that of a rather fearsome Japanese Samurai warrior. Turn the image upside down and there the warrior is revealed. He is wearing headgear with a large round emblem centred above his forehead and his headgear has two wings flying out from just above each ear. The warrior's mouth is masked and he has piercing eyes concentrating on some object beyond the viewer's left shoulder. Already I find this to be an intriguing book and I have yet to open the cover.

Now, as I open the book, I begin my quest: the search for Ihde. Immediately I find that I am drawn to the chapter by Donna J. Haraway, titled "Crittercam: Compounding Eyes in NatureCultures." This leads us into Ihde's world of perceiving bodies and Haraway, to this end, offers us an incisive commentary upon the use of the *Crittercam*. She argues that this is an invasive form of technological intervention which, from the program maker's perspective, will take the viewer into hitherto unknown territories that non-human members of the animal kingdom frequent. It is a sort of voyeuristic exploration into the private lives of animals. Haraway exposes many of the complexities that tend to be overlooked in this world where technologies such as the *Crittercam* tend to lure us, unwittingly, into (un)natural worlds. She warns us that we have "epistemological-ethical obligations to the animals." In concert with Ihde, she points out that our animal-human-technology relationships are not unilateral. "Insofar as I (and my machines) use an animal, I am used by the animal (with its attached machine)" (p. 186).

Haraway's account is a compelling one and in my quest to find Ihde, I find myself torn between the phenomenological arguments presented by Haraway, in concert with Ihde, and the Cartesian dualistic perspective offered us by the program makers. Do I have an epistemological-ethical obligation to Ihde in my quest to find him? I cannot help imagining fitting him with a *Crittercam* or, better, an *Ihdecam*! Would

this technological intervention help me discover aspects of Ihde that I might otherwise not observe? If I adopt the Cartesian program maker's perspective, I will be able to "reveal [Ihde's] hidden lives." Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "infolding of the flesh," would we be able to see "what happens in the folds" as Haraway explains? Surely the *Ihdecam*, like the *Crittercam*, would help me to watch Ihde philosophizing in ways that humans could not otherwise be able to see. But as Ihde says and as Haraway illustrates in her chapter:

> [I]t is the interactions, in the mutual questioning and interacting of the world and ourselves, in the changing patterns of the lifeworld that things become clear…In this interconnection of embodied being and environing world, what happens in the interface is what is important (Ihde 2002, p. 86).

This leads me to conclude that my *Ihdecam* may not reveal the true Ihde after all. Would I be revealing Ihde as what he calls his sensory body, his body one, or as his informed body, body two? Andrew Feenberg further complicates this for us by adding a body three, a dependent body, and a body four, an extended body. My *Ihdecam* idea is slipping away. Feenberg accuses Ihde of limiting his focus on embodiment towards activity, suggesting in contrast that "activity is only one dimension of the body" (p. 189). He illustrates this by adding body three and body four as mentioned above. Ihde does not argue against Feenberg's claims: on the contrary, he compliments Feenberg and suggests a "recalcitrant" body five as a possible further variation, brought about largely by the process of age.

Still on the theme of perceiving bodies, Donn Welton introduces us to the notion of body image and body schema in relation to our interaction or involvement with machines. This is an intriguing chapter which reminds me of Wiener's (1954) *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. Andrew Pickering follows the cybernetic theme and in so doing, challenges Ihde's notion of "epistemology engines" (the subject of a paper written by Ihde and Selinger). Pickering attempts to "transpose the notion of an epistemology engine into that of an *ontology engine*" (p. 213). He uses the case of interconnected homeostats as presented by W. Ross Ashby as a model for the brain. In so doing, Pickering's claim that a symmetry exists between humans and their material technologies is vociferously argued against by Ihde. Whilst Ihde claims that "insofar as I use technology, I am also used by technology" (2002, p. 137), he sees Pickering to be claiming that he should "abandon not only subjectivistic, but *human centered* relations" (p. 275) also. Ihde devotes three pages of his own chapter to clarifying his opposition to Latour's (and Pickering's, it would seem) notion of a full symmetry between humans and non-humans.

Has reading this selection of chapters helped me in my search for Ihde? I am most certainly developing a better understanding of the philosophical and phenomenological perspectives constellating around the notions of bodies and technology. I am also beginning to see some common elements or invariants relating to Ihde being revealed.

One particular invariant is revealed almost immediately. It is clear from the chapters, either explicitly or implicitly, that Ihde uses an autobiographical approach in his writing. He uses anecdote to help the reader understand better some of the

truly complex issues that he deals with. Selinger describes this as Ihde's unique voice, a capacity that Vivian Sobchack suggests makes his readers "comfortable enough to follow him anywhere" (p. 13). Carl Mitcham describes Ihde's style as building a "bridge between the appeal to concrete experience and that general experimental method that [has] become the hallmark of pragmatism" (p. 21). Certainly, when one reads *Experimental Phenomenology* (1986), for example, Ihde is seen to insist that in order to understand phenomenology one must *do* phenomenology. Or, borrowing from Husserl, Lenore Langsdorf suggests that Ihde "follows [the] phenomenological tradition in holding text and talk as secondary to investigating 'the things themselves'" (p. 38). Ihde introduces us to these "things themselves" through the use of lived vignettes. He discusses things that are accessible to the reader and in such a way as to locate the reader in his phenomenological lifeworld of situated actual experiences, whether listening to music or playing a video game with his son. Whilst I support the views expressed by Sobchack that Ihde does indeed lead us into the "phenomenological complexities and multistabilities of what seem familiar to us and then further–into less 'homey' places and practices" (p. 13), I do not agree with her that Ihde's work remains "unacademic" (p. 13). I am more inclined to support her views that the demands made upon his readers are complex, difficult and, for me at least, very academic. As a relative newcomer to the world of phenomenology, I find that I have to read Ihde several times over in order to begin to understand some of the complexities set within his powerful arguments.

Another invariant that emerges is the clear influence of Husserl's phenomenological approach on Ihde, albeit with certain limitations. However, a clear set of variations of opinion begins to emerge when we start to explore Ihde and his relationship with Heidegger. Robert C. Scharff contends that Heidegger has become Ihde's albatross. Ihde himself makes a literary allusion to Heidegger as representing, for him, a dark shadow in what might become a new chapter in *The Lord of the Rings*. He entitles this *Mordor and Heidegger's Dark Shadow*. He goes on to express his regret that he ever dedicated his book *Technics and Praxis* (1979) to the memory of Martin Heidegger, not on the basis of a sudden rush of morality in terms of Heidegger's affiliation with Nazism, but on the grounds of what appears to have become a "growing disaffection" (p. 271) with the later very negative thinking of Heidegger in relation to technology which, for Ihde, "end[s] up with exactly the same output or analysis" (p. 271), a sort of catastrophic universal dystopian form of stasis where technology is bad-full stop.

I wonder if perhaps an alternative allusion might be that of *Star Wars* where Ihde, resplendent with his postphenomenological light sabre, is resisting the lure of being pulled over to the Heideggerian dark side. I certainly find Ihde's almost vitriolic rejection of Heidegger surprising, although to some extent understandable. My surprise is based upon Ihde's strong rejection of what certainly appears to have been a major influence on his thinking. Selinger appears to think the Heidegger/Ihde relationship important: he devotes three chapters to this very topic. Indeed Ihde's account of Heidegger's allegedly "pessimistic totalising" (p. 132) is, for Scharff, "off the mark." Scharff contends that Ihde "candidly acknowledges" (p. 132) through certain themes in his writing that Heidegger has had an influence. In this

very collection Ihde does acknowledge his debt to Heidegger, but specifically to early Heidegger. The view expressed by Scharff is opposed to some extent by Richard A. Cohen who contextualises for us Heidegger's notion of the "false dyad of utopianism and dystopianism in understanding the significance of technology" (p. 146). Cohen has no hesitation in placing Heidegger squarely in the latter category, indeed only in this category.

Heidegger goes on to make several appearances in several chapters, but it is Peter Galison who completes the section devoted exclusively to Heidegger and Ihde. He takes us on a tour of the concept of breakdown which surpasses Heidegger's hammer. In line with Ihde's thinking, Galison exposes the embodiment relation we have with "our *use* of things" (p. 170), and the complexity of these relationships which, as a result of breakdown, help to reveal a world in which our very agency may be brought into question. "We act and don't act, warn and comply. Global climate change, groundwater draining, species extinctions…we know these things and don't know them" (p. 170).

Ihde's troubled relationship with Heidegger as revealed in several of the chapters does help the reader to get a better sense of the essence of Ihde, in opposition to Heidegger—although I now wonder if the term "essence" is appropriate. Perhaps the relationship between the two is multistable.

A significant area of Ihde's work relates to the phenomenology of sound and Selinger recognises this in his section which is charmingly and ambiguously entitled "Listening to Ihde." This is an area of Ihde's work that I personally have not yet had the opportunity to study in any great depth. It is with considerable interest therefore, that I find myself given the opportunity in this collection to find some interpretations of "early Ihde" in this respect. When considering his phenomenology of sound together with *Bodies in Technology* (2002), or "late Ihde," for example, I find that a particular insight begins to emerge with respect to Ihde's move from phenomenology to postphenomenology.

Finn Olesen clarifies the distinction thus: "Traditional phenomenology is concerned with establishing that humans and technology are related. Don Ihde's postphenomenology is more radical in asking how subjects and artefacts *constitute* each other in a praxis" (p. 231). This distinction between phenomenology and postphenomenology is further revealed by Mitcham. He highlights the connection between phenomenology and pragmatism as constituting Ihde's postphenomenology. Mitcham, whom Ihde considers to be "the most prominent 'historian' of philosophy of technology" (p. 31), clearly identifies Ihde as having produced the most extensive corpus devoted to the philosophy of technology ever, leading to what Mitcham describes as the creation of a "postphenomenology that is, in effect, a pragmatic phenomenology" (p. 31). Mitcham goes on to praise Ihde for being "a model of philosophical receptivity, willing repeatedly to learn from pragmatism" (p. 31).

When we "listen to Ihde" we often come upon the term embodiment. Ihde describes this as having "both an organic, bodily-sensory dimension and a hermeneutic or social-cultural dimension." This resonates with his notion of macro and micro perception. Trevor Pinch makes this clear for us. He supports Ihde's claim that "listening and voice are always part of our world" (p. 50). This philosophy essentially rejects Cartesian dualism. Pinch takes us on an exploration of

the synthesizer, an electronic digital instrument which can emulate the sound of conventional analogue musical instruments (amongst other things). It is by taking us through the history of the synthesizer that Pinch shows us the sociological aspects inherent in its development. It is "the social construction of sound…[that led to the] way the synthesizer slowly gained its voices" (p. 62). It is, however, not an emulation of a particular musical instrument that is heard when the synthesizer is programmed to play the sound of a violin or a trumpet, for example. The synthesizer serves to strip away the peculiarities of the ensemble of human, location, context, and particular analogue instrument. What we hear instead is a simulation, or for Pinch, "a new voice rather than a copy" (p. 63). Pinch clearly borrows from Ihde's phenomenological exploration of sound, highlighting Ihde's "low church" approach in tackling "big issues" related to the physics of sound. Once again we hear about Ihde's accessible style. If listening to sound is worthy of a phenomenological analysis, our search for Ihde would not be complete if we did not also visualise sound. Judy Lochhead assists us in this endeavour by pointing out that "Don Ihde…reminds us…that sound plays an important role in defining the world we see" (p. 67). He "hears with his whole body" (p. 67). Lochhead reminds us that we visualise sound in many ways. We may use visual metaphors to describe a melody as being blue, steely, colourful, or monumental. We use musical notation as a way to symbolise music and we can observe a graphical representation of our own voice on a computer recording system. There is more, it would appear, to listening than meets the eye!

What is becoming apparent as we work through this collection is the way in which Ihde distinguishes between technology and science. Paul B. Thompson notes that "Ihde's philosophy is a direct challenge to the view that technology can be understood as applied science" (p. 110). What becomes further apparent, however, is that Ihde does not see one as completely separate from the other: they are mutually constituted in each other. Albert Borgmann commends Ihde's approach for "its openness to theoretical science on one side and the concreteness of the technological culture on the other" (p. 250). Borgmann goes on to illustrate how Ihde sees what he calls "technoscience," as, in the words of Ihde, having an unavoidable link to "social-political and ethical philosophies" so that it "must turn its focus to issues of daily life, to the ethical impacts of philosophy" (Ihde 1991, pp. 139–140). Hans Lenk also sees this "accumulating integration and interconnection between technology, science, society and economy," as a justified criticism of the "classical positivistic philosophy of science for studying science without attending to perception, technology, or experimental instruments" (p. 260). But it is Thompson who concludes that whilst Ihde stands foursquare with those who would attempt to democratise technology, and does so from an optimistic platform, he simultaneously disassociates himself from what might be described as the Heideggerian "dark side." Yet, as Thompson postulates, Ihde's work, paradoxically, is influenced by and shares much with this dark side. Peter-Paul Verbeek takes the ethical theme further into human–technology relationships and raises questions concerning the Bruno Latour thesis surrounding the morality of things. "Morality should not be looked for only among humans, but also among things" (p. 117). This, for Verbeek, highlights the important role that technological mediation makes in

the moral decisions that human beings make. He gives an example of how the use of ultrasound technology can influence the decisions of parents about whether or not they should abort their unborn child if it is "seen," through the eyes of technology, to suffer from some undesirable condition. Robert C. Crease considers the way that technologies can influence human wants such as those illustrated by Verbeek. He argues that "experimentation as a process of inquiry" (p. 221) in science, made ever more possible through technological mediation, can lead to human decisions being orientated more towards "changing human wants, needs, and utilities" (p. 221). Crease uses the IBM "Blue Gene" project to illustrate his thesis. This project was engineered to produce a "supercomputer able to simulate protein folding" (p. 225). The impact of supercomputers such as this, which can simulate "reality" scenarios such as "work in the life sciences, meteorology, weapons research" (p. 228), Crease argues, highlights the need for Ihde's persuasive call for a "deep and critical analysis" (p. 229) incorporating the social-political and ethical philosophies which we, as members of a global technoscientific community, need to engage with.

So, now that I have read the various contributions, how has my search for Ihde, turned out? I need to consider two final chapters: that of the Editor, Evan Selinger and that of the subject of my quest, Don Ihde himself. Selinger makes an appearance in this collection three times: in the opening chapter, in a chapter in which he reflects upon Ihde, and in the final chapter. I have already alluded to the first. In the second, Selinger offers us a reflective view of Ihde. He defends Ihde against his critics who argue that his "philosophy of technoscience putatively lacks normative sensitivity" (p. 89). In so doing, Selinger takes us on a journey which helps clarify Ihde's thinking. Selinger starts by illustrating that Ihde's "metaphilosophical views on normativity" are centered around the notions of "situated analysis and phenomenological parity" (p. 90), all influenced by Husserl. This metaphilosophical analysis, he argues, reveals three biases, which for Ihde, have "historically limited normative judgments of technological practices" (pp. 92–93). These are social determinism, technological determinism, and those theorists who approach technology from either an exclusively dystopian or utopian viewpoint. Selinger then offers us a critical comparative analysis of two other contemporary American philosophers in relation to Ihde, Hubert Dreyfus and Albert Borgmann. The fundamental differences between those thinkers and Ihde, as argued by Selinger, help the reader to get a better insight into the phenomenological world of Ihde. Whilst I do not necessarily entirely agree with Selinger's interpretation, he does however, help to reveal another way of thinking about Ihde. Moreover, he makes a very solid defence of Ihde as presenting a "normative critique of the type of theorizing that obscures the subtler dimensions of engaging with technoscience" (p. 103).

It is in the last chapter entitled "Forty Years in the Wilderness," a reply by Ihde, that we encounter the third appearance of Selinger. In this chapter Ihde expresses his immense gratitude to Selinger for putting together this collection. I would add to these thoughts my own appreciation.

It is Ihde's closing chapter that helps me in my quest to find Ihde. Drawing upon Ricoeur, Ihde informs me that this very review, which I might think constitutes my interpretation, actually forms part of a larger collective hermeneutic that is ongoing and never-ending. Ihde refers to those who have influenced him over the years, in

the form of writing and in conversation. He illustrates the development of his thinking from what he calls "early Ihde" or phenomenological, to later Ihde or postphenomenological. What I discover is that I will never actually "find" Ihde. I may discover and interpret aspects about Ihde in evolutionary terms (phylogenesis) for example, or locate Ihde as part of a socio-cultural historical process, or by interpreting his individual development (ontogenesis), or by exploring his development through interaction within specific socio-cultural settings (macrogenesis). I can perhaps get a sense of Ihde by reading his interlocutors' various chapters, but it is by interrogating his reply that I may be led closer. I am particularly interested in Ihde's advocacy for bringing together philosophers with those involved with technoscientific research and development. This for Ihde must be undertaken as a formative process rather than after the technology is in place. I am, moreover, drawn to Ihde's perspective on ethics. His ontology of multistability, as Borgmann would have it, restricts him from supporting a transcendental ethics of technology, so to speak. It is in this respect that he acknowledges, for example, the artifactual politics of Latour's "sleeping policeman," but he does so whilst racing his SUV over it unawares!

It is his notion of embodiment together with his current preoccupation of analysing how we may understand science that takes up the latter portion of Ihde's chapter. He is clearly very happy to find four interlocutors who reflect his (continuing) interest in the auditory. "We listen with our whole body" (p. 280) echoes throughout this section that culminates in several references to one of his most recent works, *Bodies in Technology*. This, together with the interlocutors who tackle the questions of modern science, finds Ihde pretty much in complete agreement. However, it is with a return to multistability and the familiar territory of the duck/rabbit/squid/martian that Ihde decides to conclude. It is with this simple illustration, letting the familiar lead us towards more radical variational possibilities, that Ihde demonstrates the genesis of postphenomenology, or as Mitcham would have it, "a pragmatic phenomenology" (p. 22).

I am not sure that I managed to fulfil my quest in finding Don Ihde as a result of reading this collection, although I do believe that I now have a deeper understanding of the man. I am now more aware, for example, that Ihde rejects a "normativity that is predetermined by a dystopian (or utopian) cast" (p. 287). Having said that, he does recognise in his chapter that by so doing he "produces a tension with [Heidegger's] 'dark shadow'" (p. 270). I have also learned that he prefers the concept of multistability over that of essences, and sees embodiment as a more appropriate replacement for the notion of subjectivity. So my quest has been partially fulfilled. However, my secondary hope in reading this collection has been substantially confirmed. I have come to have a much deeper understanding of the concept of phenomenology and postphenomenology. I may not have found Ihde per se, but I have found my own phenomenological orientation revised and repositioned. This collection is indeed a critical companion to Ihde which will be of great assistance to anyone who wishes to study phenomenology and postphenomenology. This volume does two things. First, it summons forth the various phenomenological muses to come and speak to the reader, and secondly, it celebrates the landmark contribution that Don Ihde has made, over the last 40 years,

to the (post) phenomenological discourses around such fields as history, philosophy, sociology, science, sound studies, and technology studies.

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