

Ihde's Encounter with "Technological Determinism" in

Technology and the Lifeworld

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1. An Overview: Ihde's Contribution in the Philosophy of Technology

The philosophy of technology is an emerging discipline whose roots date back to Martin Heidegger's tools analysis in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927). In this book, Heidegger originally and creatively establishes a kind of hermeneutics of "human-tool relations" in which a clear distinction between two modes of being, two distinct relations of human-tool, are explored. For Heidegger, *Zuhandenheit* (ready to hand) and *Vorhandenheit* (present at hand) are two distinct modes of being in the world with their own specific features. According to Heidegger, *Zuhandenheit* is a "mode of being in the world" that shows itself in practice. For example, when one utilizes a hammer to hit a nail, the *Zuhandenheit* is constituted; the hammer is used to (in order to) do something. Regarding Heidegger's phenomenology in this example, the resulting function is pushing a nail; the hammer is not a "thing", rather it is a mode of being in the world used in order to do something. The *Zuhandenheit* is defined as the function of a tool which is designed in order to do something (Heidegger, 1927/2010, pp. 69-71). At this level, a thing appears as "equipment" (tool). Further, let us consider the outcome of a situation where there is an issue during the process of hammering (i.e. the handle breaking). In this situation, the relation of *Vorhandenheit* is formed. For Heidegger, the first relation with tools is an authentic one that is practice-oriented and context-oriented. On the other hand, *Vorhandenheit* is a theoretical relation that places tools outside of their usual context and occurs when the traditional utility of the tool fails in some way (Zimmerman, 1990, pp. 139-141).

By comparing these two relations, Heidegger shows that the *Zuhandenheit* relation ontologically is prioritized over the *Vorhandenheit* relation, namely, practice precedes theory in our real

lives. The ontological primacy of *Zuhandenheit* over *Vorhandenheit* means that *Zuhandenheit* is an authentic mode we live with it in the usual life, meanwhile the second relation occurs when the context and wholeness of “ready to hand” relations are obstructed or impeded.¹ This is one important aspect of “the practical turn” in the history of philosophy that is a central concept for Ihde.

Don Ihde is profoundly influenced by this new approach toward “human-tool” relationships. He sees Heidegger’s tool analysis (ontological primacy of *Zuhandenheit* over *Vorhandenheit*) as the practical turn in the history of philosophy.² For Ihde, the practical turn occurs when the priority of *Zuhandenheit* over *Vorhandenheit* is identified.³ Ihde’s project expands upon, but is not restricted by, this traditional notion. For example, in *Technology and the Lifeworld* (Ihde, 1990), Ihde demonstrates the main elements of Heidegger’s tools analysis and includes many case studies to show the practical turn in the history of philosophy.

Borrowing Mitcham’s famous distinction in the philosophy of technology, Heidegger is a “humanities philosopher of technology”, one who is against the “engineering philosophy of technology”. A humanities philosopher of technology focuses on the primacy of the humanities over technologies and emphasizes interpretative efforts to understand the essence of Technology (Mitcham, 1994).⁴ According to Mitcham, an “engineering philosopher of technology” prefers the primacy of technologies over technologies and case studies about technologies instead of thinking about the essence of Technology. In this context, Mitcham reasons that Heidegger seeks an

¹. I will further explore the philosophical relations between Heidegger and Ihde in Section 5. What I wrote here is my reading of (Heidegger 1927/2010, pp. 68-95) and (Olsen et al. 2008, pp. 65-70).

². In Section 5, I will show that this primacy, for Ihde, is an ontological-historical priority.

³. Ihde has highlighted this view in different writings. For example, see (Ihde, 2010, pp. 56-73) and (Ihde, 1979, pp. 103-129).

⁴. I use Technology (capital T) to remark that this approach frequently believes in one essence for technologies.

ontology for technologies. Further, Mitcham believes that Heidegger is not appreciative and/or optimistic in his approach to technology and is not interested in experimental studies. Thus, these characteristics make Heidegger a humanities philosopher of technology (pp. 39-55).⁵

Mitcham (1994) sees Ihde, like Dewey, as an engineering philosopher of technology. For Mitcham, an engineering philosopher of technology is interested in the internal features of technologies, criticizes the critics of technology, and highlights the importance of technology in human experience. This philosophy does not consider deeply socio-political applications and focuses on technologies more than philosophy (pp. 75-78). However, I argue that this overall picture is not correct. Ihde is at the intersection of humanities and engineering philosophies of technology. He is interested in pragmatism, case studies, internal characters of different technologies, and has some appreciation for the history of technology. In addition, Ihde is a phenomenologist (or postphenomenologist as he calls it) of technology. Therefore, Ihde is familiar with the humanistic philosophy of technology and uses its methods and themes in his writings, and his projects are filled with elements that for Mitcham are the humanistic and engineering philosophies of technology. In summary, unlike Mitcham's view, I see Ihde as both an engineering and a humanities philosopher of technology. Ihde's philosophical dialogue with Heidegger was originally explored in *Technics and Praxis* (Ihde, 1979), one of the first books on the topic of philosophy of technology in the Anglo-American philosophy cannon (Albrechtslund, 2003). As previously mentioned, Ihde's *Technology and the Lifeworld* (Ihde, 1990) is arguably the most important book in the field. By borrowing the "phenomenology of technology" from Husserl and Heidegger, Ihde pursues diverse case studies, develops different thought experiences, explores the

⁵. We can see a summary of the subjects and current waves of philosophy of technology in (Franssen et al, 2004).

relations of technology and culture, refers to his own experiences with technologies, rejects any utopian or dystopian approach to technologies, and finally creates influential concepts and terms in the philosophy of technology.

Besides their intellectual openness, Ihde's writings are distinctive in the literature of the philosophy of technology and incorporate a variety of personal experiences and stories. Ihde also refers to these personal experiences in a way that reflect the philosophy of technology as an interpretation of his personal life. In other words, these concrete narrations are not inconsistent with Ihde's main philosophical questions and projects. Additionally, he is interested in using different examples and allegories. For example, Ihde (Ihde, 1990) highlights the allegory of the "Garden and Earth" to make a distinction between a lifeworld that consists of various technologies to a lifeworld that does not (pp. 11-20). Ihde presents interesting concepts to illustrate these relationships with technology. Particularly, Ihde presents embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, and background relations to reveal how tools and technologies have different functions in different lifeworlds.⁶

Ihde's approach toward the history of philosophy of technology is unique and remarkable. The first unique feature of his project is that he is not usually interested in evaluating and criticizing other philosophers of technology. When Ihde refers to the writings of other philosophers— such as Feenberg (2003, 2005), Mitcham (1994), Haraway (1991), Borgmann (1984), and Dreyfus (1991, 2001) – Ihde shows great sympathy and respect for them. The red line for Ihde exists in the practical turn in the philosophy of technology which returns to Heidegger's distinction between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*. Ihde even rejected Thomas Kuhn's project, because he is unable

⁶. We will explore them in Section 2.

to reconcile the practical turn in the history of philosophy, and specifically in the philosophy of technology (Ihde, 1991a, p. 16).⁷ Apart from this obvious criterion, Ihde rarely has critical dialogues with other philosophers of technology. He is a “synthetic” philosopher who borrows what he needs from other philosophers, but in the end can develop his own project.

What is his project? From one aspect, I suppose his project is an intellectual challenge with elements of hard technological determinism. Apart from different accounts of hard technological determinism in the literature of philosophy of technology, it can be regarded as a view that focuses on determination of a certain direction by using given technological artifacts regardless of other forces and contexts (Ihde, 1979, p. 42).⁸ At the cultural level, it means a single, massive trajectory happens by the rise of high-technological culture and its attainment as a world culture (Ihde, 1990, p. 123).⁹ I believe that Ihde’s project cannot be fully understood unless one thinks about its challenge while keeping in mind this meaning of technological determinism. This is what this paper aims to pursue. Even though I argue that one can read the project by emphasizing other topics such as instrumental realism, science-technology interactions, bodies in technologies, technoscience and so on, I will prove that without focusing on Ihde’s dialogue about technological determinism, the other dialogues may not be understood properly. This is what I want to do in this paper, namely, the description and evaluation of his challenge with technological determinism. My point is that the indeterministic characteristics of Ihde’s philosophy not only starts by his postphenomenological approach, but continues by his dialogue with technological determinism. The final position is a synthesis between these two different theses.

⁷. This viewpoint will be highlighted in Sections 2 and 5.

⁸. I emphasized Ihde’s own reading of hard technological determinism.

⁹. In this paper, when I speak about technological determinism and do not refer to a specific account, I mean this definition of it.

My paper has six interconnected sections. After this introduction, in Section 2, I will explore “postphenomenology”, which is Ihde’s philosophical and intellectual approach toward human-technology relations. In Section 3, I will emphasize Ihde’s challenges with the elements of technological determinism. In addition, because of the relation of technological determinism and technological ethics, I will try to illustrate normative aspects of Ihde’s project in Section 4. Then, I will show the intellectual dialogue between Ihde and Heidegger in Section 5. In summary, Sections 4 and 5 will show some consequences of Ihde’s confronting with technological determinism that will be developed in Section 3. Finally, Section 6 focuses on my evaluation of Ihde’s dialogue with technological determinism.

Because of this uniqueness of his project, giving a report of it is not easy. However, I intend to show an accurate and comprehensive interpretation of Ihde’s project in four following sections. These sections are totally descriptive and I’ll only evaluate Ihde’s project in Section 6.

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