



DON IHDE: 1934 - 2024

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Earlier this year, Don Ihde passed away just a few days after his 90th birthday. It is simply impossible to overstate his importance to so many of us as a friend, a mentor, and an influence and inspiration as a writer on philosophy, science, technology, and the world.

Ihde leaves us with not only a towering body of scholarship, but also a community of scholars that continue to work together to take these ideas and themes forward. His kind and generous mentorship has helped support the growth of an international and interdisciplinary gathering of people, encouraging the friendships and work partnerships of scholars across the world.

As a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Stony Brook University in New York, Ihde was a fighter for Continental philosophy in the US, and an important developer of the field of philosophy of technology. At Stony Brook, Ihde brought together students, advisees, and a continuing procession of visiting scholars to his Technoscience Seminar, a course held every semester through the aughts exploring philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and other perspectives on technology. This included an annual “roast” of a major figure in the field whose work would be read extensively before a visit in which they’d be both celebrated and interrogated. All of this was part of what Ihde called his Technoscience Research Group, the annual reports for which included all of his various accomplishments, but also those of his associated colleagues and students.

As a writer, Ihde was original, prolific, playful, useful, and full of insight. Over the course of his long and decorated career, he authored over two dozen books, edited several more, and produced stacks of book chapters and journal articles. These works tackle a dazzling range of topics, themes, ideas, and case studies. He’s made important contributions to phenomenological philosophy, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of technology, but also across the fields of media studies, sound studies, and design, among others. His writings explore everything from medical imaging, to video games, to human anthropological history, to ocean navigation techniques, to virtual reality, to instrumentation in science including his decades-long study of the camera obscura and its legacy, to art making and art criticism, to the worldwide development of different forms of archery, to the evolution of writing implementation, to the technical criticism of figures from the phenomenological cannon, to musical instruments including electronic synthesizers, to the behaviors of all manner of animals, among so much else. Seriously, he was always ready at any moment to launch into discussion on the newest and most interesting findings on animal intelligence and tool usage. Ihde’s versatility wasn’t only impressive; it was inspiring. He had that rare ability to make seemingly everything open to inquiry, and make everything seem as if it had exhilarating details just below the surface. And as an interlocutor or a reader, he made you feel like you could do it too.

Ihde’s early career includes innovative work developing the phenomenology of sound and vision (1973; 1977). One clear influence is his friend and mentor, Paul Ricoeur. Ihde is said to be the first to do a dissertation on Ricoeur in English, and the first to write a fully-fledged English-language study of his works (Ihde, 1971). Ricoeurian themes of the creative exploration of the overlap between hermeneutics and phenomenology are clearly visible across Ihde’s own corpus.

However, Ihde is surely most well-known as a philosopher of technology. His 1979 work, *Technics and Praxis*, is often referred to as the first English-language monograph on the topic. Here, he sets off on what would become the backbone of his writing career: adapting and expanding insights from the phenomenological canon for the deep description of human relationships with technology. According to Ihde, our technologies are not merely one of the many things of the world that we experience, e.g., the things we see, the things we hear, the things upon which we perform actions. Technologies must be understood as mediators of experience, transforming our perceptions and actions, and transforming the world and ourselves in the process. Across his career, Ihde develops an assortment of concepts, examples,

interpretations of the works of major figures, and original case studies for describing and analyzing human-technology relations (e.g., 1990; 2002; 2009; 2021).

In developing his innovative approach to technology, Ihde also innovated phenomenology. He moved beyond the romantic rejection of technology that was characteristic of some classical approaches in phenomenology, arriving at what he started to call 'postphenomenology'. Bringing together phenomenological insights from Merleau-Ponty and Husserl with pragmatist elements from the work of Dewey, Ihde developed an approach in which human-technology relations are foundational for the relations between human beings and their world, rather than alienating humans from some 'primordial' or 'authentic' way of being in the world. In Ihde's approach, technology is part of the human condition, and the task of phenomenology becomes to unravel the various ways in which technologies help shape practices, perceptions, and interpretive frameworks. This also resulted in what he called 'material hermeneutics': hermeneutics that is not only about studying textual interpretations but just as much about the hermeneutic role of material technologies. Technologies mediate interpretations, and at the same time, they are being interpreted themselves in the relations that human beings have with them: they are both 'multistable,' subject to human interpretation, and 'hermeneutic mediators,' helping to shape how human beings understand the world.

Ihde was proud to be identified by the philosopher Hans Achterhuis and his school of Dutch scholars as one of the key philosophers of technology of his generation, what Ihde often referred to as the "Achterhuis list," putting him alongside Langdon Winner, Donna Haraway, Andrew Feenberg, Hubert Dreyfus, and Albert Borgmann (Achterhuis, 2001). The Lifetime Achievement Award that he received from the Society for Philosophy and Technology in 2017 testifies to this. In both the fields of philosophy of technology and Science & Technology Studies (STS), it is fair to say that Ihde is a go-to figure—and perhaps even *the* go-to figure—for understanding an individual's experience of technology usage. His masterwork in these efforts, 1990's *Technology and the Lifeworld*, is a modern classic. His extended critiques of the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger focus largely on issues of technology (2010; 2016). Even his work in the philosophy of science centrally emphasizes human relationships with laboratory instrumentation for issues of scientific progress, realism, and image interpretation (e.g., 1991; 1998).

One way that Ihde's ideas will continue to evolve is through the work of those doing mediation theory and postphenomenology. This refers to the study of human-technology relationships through the framework of concepts advanced by Ihde and others, including the integration of these ideas with American pragmatism, actor-network theory, critical constructivism, and feminist new materialism, among many other perspectives. We can see this work in the institutions that have sprung up around him, including the ongoing panels at conferences such as the meetings of the Society for Philosophy & Technology (SPT) and the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), as well as the Human-Technology Relations conference, an event on exactly these themes. There is also the "Postphenomenology & the Philosophy of Technology" book series, co-founded by Ihde, with monographs and collections, including the ongoing line of books with the titles "*Postphenomenology and X*," including collections on postphenomenology and media, architecture, imaging, methodology, and educational technologies. And, of course, a central institution continuing work inspired by Don Ihde and those that have built upon his work is our very own *Journal of Human-Technology Relations*.

There is simply no way to fill Don Ihde's shoes. That's not what he would have wanted anyway. It is instead the time to be sad about the loss of this inimitable friend, mentor, and influence. It is the time to honor his legacy by following our own passionate explorations of the technologies of our everyday world. And it's time to cherish the expansive web of friendships that has flourished under his care.

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