Toward a Philosophy of Technology


Technology—its development, impact, and existential meaning—has only recently become a subject for philosophical questioning. Unlike science, education and, to some extent, politics, technology is not an offshoot of philosophy. Consequently, philosophical inquiry into technology has been discouraged by the lack of a defined conceptual basis to technological development. However, in this respect, inquiry into technology is not different from philosophical questioning of society or nature. In none of these does philosophy generate its object. Don Ihde points out that technology has predominantly been viewed as applied science and, consequently, as of subsidiary importance. Behind this characterization lies an idealistic "primacy of theory" based in the mind/body dualism of Plato and Descartes which involves a denigration of embodiment and practice as philosophical problems. In philosophies of praxis, notably Marxism and existentialism, technology has been addressed, largely through the theme of alienation. Ihde's purpose is to continue this tradition of a materialistic philosophy of technology based on a theory of action. He inverts the idealistic view and regards science as originated by technology. Moreover, a materialistic approach cannot accept a mechanistic interpretation of the body, which could not account for the "excessive" inventiveness of science. Only the living self, which is a perceptually embodied whole, can provide the basis for
a philosophy of praxis which comprehends technology as a "form of action which asserts and denies various possible values" (pg. xxvi). With a concrete phenomenology of technology the myth of the neutrality of technology is finally laid to rest.

*Technics and Praxis* is a loosely connected collection of essays. It begins with a phenomenology of instrumentation that presents a categorization of technological experiences as a basis for further research. After this exciting beginning, however, the various essays lack direction and pursue the initial program in a rather tantalizing and diffuse manner. The final three essays on Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, and Harvey Cox describe the author's intellectual debts and criticisms, in which Heidegger's influence looms especially large. It is a desultory end to a research program that began on a strikingly original note.

The innovative implications of Ihde's phenomenology of instrumentation stem directly from the intentional correlations of phenomenological description. Beginning from the intentional direction of human experience to the world and reflection back from the world to human self-understanding, technology is characterized according to the place of the technological artifact in this structure. Thus, there are three fundamental types of technological experience. In *embodiment relations*, technology alters our perceptual apparatus with which the world is experienced. On the other hand, in *hermeneutic relations*, we are directed to the reading of technological artifacts as quasi-others in the world. In a third type, technology consists of *background relations* among machines—the technosphere which surrounds our experience in the world. These three types of human-machine relations can be schematically represented as modifications of the intentional structure of experience.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Intentional experience:} & \text{Human} \quad \text{---------} \quad \text{World} \\
\text{Embodiment relation:} & \text{(Human-machine)} \quad \text{--} \quad \text{World} \\
\text{Hermeneutic relation:} & \text{Human} \quad \text{--} \quad \text{(machine-World)} \\
\text{Background relation:} & \text{Human} \quad \text{---------} \quad \text{(machine)} \\
& \quad \text{World}
\end{array}
\]

There are common examples of each type. In using a cane, a piece of chalk, or a telescope, perceptual experience of the world is instrumentally embodied and transformed. On the other hand, when concerned with reading or adjusting dials and gauges are in order to use a stove or see how fast an automobile is going, one is engaged in hermeneutic relations. Background relations subsist in the various