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Postphenomenology vs Postpositivism

Don Ihde vs Bruno Latour

Introduction

Contemporary studies of technology and its relation to science are inspired by the works of Don Ihde and Bruno Latour. In a very concise manner we will describe Don Ihde as a phenomenologist who has developed a very original synthesis between phenomenology and American pragmatism that he has named “Postphenomenology”. The work of Ihde, based on his studies of the work of Paul Ricoeur implies also an expansion of hermeneutics to embrace the interpretation of science and technology. On the other hand, Latour’s writings, which have been identified with the general name of ANT (actor-network-theory), are akin to the works of the Postpositivists, e.g. Kuhn’s sociology of science along with Austin and Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language with the additional outsider influence from Foucault’s work, specially his theory of power as bio-power. Let us see how Ihde understand Postpositivism:

By the late fifties the strong version of positivism was already under attack by Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos, who effectively reduced verification to a combination of falsification plus consensual research programs. Paul Feyerabend, perhaps the most radical of the iconoclasts, although active in this time, followed Thomas Kuhn with *Against Method*. But it was Kuhn who both won the antipositivist battle and ended up the new “reframe” of science construal. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* remains the most cited history and philosophy of science book in the twentieth century. The most important indicator, however, is the use of “Kuhnian” language in the self-interpretation of scientists which can be found in virtually every issue of *Science*,

Scientific American, and other widely read science magazines.¹

As Ihde described it, Postpositivism –also labelled as “Postempiricism”- arose as a consequence of the crisis of Positivism suffered in the West after the Second World War and the Vietnam War. This crisis opened empiricist philosophy for the readings of Phenomenology and other specific approaches traditionally belonging to Continental Thought. Let us see in the next section about the particularities of these two different approaches.

The Phenomenological standpoint

The first aspect of Phenomenology that we want to stress is that “all my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view”; these are words from Merleau-Ponty:

[Phenomenology] is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing. Husserl’s first directive to phenomenology, in its early stages, to be a ‘descriptive psychology’, or to return to the ‘things themselves’, is from the start a rejection of science. I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world’ of which science is the second-order expression.²

In short, phenomenology cannot and does not try to approach the world with

¹ Ihde, Don. *Expanding Hermeneutics*. Visualism in Science; p. 143.

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; p. VIII.

impartiality or objectivity. “Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality.”³ For phenomenology, the things of the world show “existential existence”, and therefore are very “fragile”, changing in all possible ways and becoming fixed only in concrete moments of existential experience. The phenomenologist relations to things is “intentional” that means that “*to look at an object is to inhabit it*, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it.” Let us read the whole worlds of Merleau-Ponty:

The object-horizon structure, or the perspective, is no obstacle to me when I want to see the object: for just as it is the means whereby objects are distinguished from each other, it is also the means whereby they are disclosed. To see is to enter a universe of beings, which display themselves, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects. Any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously reiterated among all those objects in the world, which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the others 'see' of it.⁴

For phenomenology, there are no objective things with fast forms and properties. Neither the usability of things is forever determined because through intentionality the Ego “inhabits” the things of the world changing with experience. The family of approaches that consider essential the subjective perspective is known with the general name of “Continental

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice; p. XIX.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; p.68.

Thought". In this family of philosophies there are different expressions of earlier forms of phenomenology:

[Phenomenology] Has been long on the way, and its adherents have discovered it in every quarter, certainly in Hegel and Kierkegaard, but equally in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. A purely linguistic examination of the texts in question would yield no proof; we find in texts only what we put into them, and if ever any kind of history has suggested the interpretations which should be put on it, it is the history of philosophy.⁵

One common characteristic of Continental Thought that has been particularly influential to Postpositivism is the hermeneutical approach, which makes the question of "truth" contextual dependent.

Some aspects of ANT

Actor-network-theory also tried to break with the radical dualism of the Cartesian metaphysics. This is achieved by creating the category of the world of things as *hybrids*; the former Cartesian objective world populated with objective things becomes now a world populated by things that are both "culture and nature". In that sense is correct to assume that ANT attempts to distance itself from Positivism and consequently approaches to Phenomenology. Don Ihde described the incorporation of hermeneutics to the postpositivist perspective as follows:

A second set of Field-clearers, from a different perspective, began to gain ground, largely in the seventies on: the so-called social constructionist sociologists of science. [...] The new "post-Mertonian" sociologists of science, in the simplest perspective, apply the methods of the various social sciences to *science-as-institution*, thus making of science a culture. [...] In stark contrast to the "theory machine" of earlier positivism, the sociology of science looks at daily practice, usually at what

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice; p. VIII.

goes on in experimental and laboratory science. Early and strongly discussed work centered on the "strong program" of Bloor et al., the look at laboratory life by Steve Woolgar and Bruno Latour and by Karin Knorr-Cetina, and the examination of how scientific "products" are "constructed" as in Andrew Pickering's *Constructing Quarks*. [...] Again, I shall not follow out the details, but note in passing that; first, there is some indirect connection here with the P-H traditions among these thinkers. Pickering, in particular, draws from the "social construction of reality" tradition of Berger and Luckmann, who in turn draw heavily from Husserl and Schutz, so there is a quasi-phenomenological background lurking here. Similarly, the popular and highly visible work of Bruno Latour clearly draws from the continental traditions, and the shadows of both Derrida and Foucault are not hard to detect.⁶

But the worldview of Positivism was characterized not only by a Cartesian metaphysics but also by a radical "anti-subjectivism". Positivism has been possible through the negation of the cognitive importance of the subjective dimension. We notice that ANT does not break with this anti-subjectivist tradition and this makes its approach closer to the family of Positivism.

Latour's categories

Latour's work has been described as a critic to Modernism (understood as a positivist endeavour) and in this sense his work include a critic to Positivism. Reading the title of Latour's book we discover very soon that for Latour "Modernity" *is not a historical category*. Latour refers to the categories of *postmodernity*, *premodernity* and *modernity* but he is not referring to historical periods but to the names of *epistemological* frameworks. Let see how Latour presents his standpoint. Latour exhorted us to assume a new paradigm choosing some specific aspects from premodernity, modernity and postmodernity:

⁶ Ihde, Don; p. 144-145.

| | What is retained | What is rejected |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| From the moderns | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-long networks-size-experimentation-relative universals-final separation between objective nature and free society | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-separation between nature and society-clandestineness of the practices of mediation-external Great Divide-critical denunciation-universality, rationality |
| From the premoderns | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-non-separability of things and signs-transcendence without a contrary-multiplication of nonhumans-temporality by intensity | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-obligation always to link the social and natural orders-scapegoating mechanism• ethnocentrism• territory-limits on scale |
| From the post moderns | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-multiple times-constructivism-reflexivity-denaturalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-belief in modernism-critical deconstruction-ironic reflexivity-anachronism |

Figure 5.1 What is retained and what is rejected

Latour, Bruno, *We have never been modern*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993; p. 135.

As we can see Latour's work fits into the positivistic reduction of historical periods to epistemological standpoints.

Latour and "non-human" agency

At the center of Latour's work we find the concept of "acting" performed by artifacts described as "non-humans". It is obvious that Latour is meaning this seriously attributing intentionality to technologies. Latour's words:

Early this morning, I was in a bad mood and decided to break a law and start my car without buckling my seat belt. My car usually does not want to start before I buckle the belt. It first flashes a red light "FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT!," then an alarm sounds; it is so high pitched, so relentless, so repetitive, that I cannot stand it. After ten seconds I swear and put on the belt. This time, I stood the alarm for twenty seconds and then gave in. My mood had worsened quite a bit, but I was at peace with the law—at least

with that law. I wished to break it, but I could not. Where is the morality? In me, a human driver, dominated by the mindless power of an artifact?⁷

There are some aspects in Latour's work that reminds the approach to artefacts which characterizes Merleau-Ponty, but there are clear differences too. While the first perceives things as "the mirror of all others", Latour sees in things "the hidden and despised social masses that make up our morality". From a phenomenological perspective, it is acceptable to consider that artefacts and technologies in general *mediate* intentionality, but this mediation is only relevant in a study of intersubjectivity. That what is interesting in a study of technology is their "human face" and not their non-humanity. Let us see how Latour expresses the way things make up our morality:

I expect sociologists to be much more fortunate than cosmologists, because they will soon discover their missing mass. To balance our accounts of society, we simply have to turn our exclusive attention away from humans and look also at nonhumans. Here they are the hidden and despised social masses who make up our morality. They knock at the door of sociology, requesting a place in the accounts of society as stubbornly as the human masses did in the nineteenth century. What our ancestors, the founders of sociology, did a century ago to house the human masses in the fabric of social theory; we should do now to find a place in a new social theory for the non- human masses that beg us for understanding.⁸

The agency of things in Latour's approach remember us the efforts made by the defenders of artificial intelligence and artificial life in the earlier days of computer science. The origins of the idea of the agency of an artificial intelligence, is found already in the work of the English mathematician Alan Matheson Turing. During the 1950's he publishes "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" in the journal of philosophy *Mind*. In this article, his thoughts transcend the limited circles of the specialists and became an important issue in

⁷ Latour, Bruno. "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts"; in Bijker & Law (1992) - *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. MIT Press, 1992; p. 225-226.

⁸ Latour, Bruno. "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts"; in Bijker & Law; 1992, p. 227.

the foundation of a new ideology for technological action. In those historical pages, Turing asked, “can a machine think?” His answer was affirmative, arriving to it through a series of pragmatic substitutions to the initial question. We can see that Turing identified mechanical “communication” with human communication and “processing” with thinking. That can be attributed to the erroneous use that engineers and scientists made of terms that were originated in an intentional context, for example the terms “intelligence” and “communication”. If we now translate Turing question to a Latourian context and ask us: “Is it possible to distinguish a *non-human actant* (the car when it “does not want to start before I buckle the belt”) from a person in the moment of “non-face-to-face” communication? Can I really believe that my car “does not want to start before I buckle the belt”? Of course this perspective discovers a kind of *fetishism* that refuses to see the person behind the thing. To answer the question it must be reformulated as follows: “can I be capable of recognizing the voice of the technician that programmed the behavior of my car in spite of his/her absence?” That is possible because the “human” *programmer* is able to condense the rules of human communication (human thought) in such a way that these could be expressed by mechanical procedures. The question about the artifacts capability to think is similar to that of asking if the gramophones “can sing”, or if a video camera “possesses the sense of sight”. While the gramophone reproduces the voice or music and the book reproduces words, the computer reproduces *abstract human action* (no “acts”). The great contribution of Turing and his generation is that of being able to capture the formal structures of human action into mechanical procedures; however as many times before and after, this achievement was interpreted philosophically in an incorrect manner creating false problems and false expectations. The essence of programming (that is to say, the art of understanding and reproducing the rules of human action) consists on describing the steps of any process in its atomic units, one by one, in a univocal way. But what are captured are the physical aspects of the human acts, namely “actions”, never the acts themselves.

Intentional congruency and causality

The “non-humans” of ANT are responsible of social behavior; they make us humans and other non-humans to do something according to their wishes. They are carrying *scripts* that work as Austin’s performatives. Madeleine Akrich explained this as follows:

Designers thus define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways. A large part of the work of innovators is that of “inscribing” this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a “script” or a “scenario.”⁹

However there is an important difference between Austin performatives and the scripts of the program of a machine; the first is an intentional linguistic act, the second is the reduction of human intentionality to a series of non-intentional actions. In this sense, the scripts of the technics that surround us cannot make us to do anything without our willing it. For example, in Latour’s example according to which “my car usually does not want to start before I buckle the belt” implies that “I” cannot drive without buckling the belt, which is clearly wrong. The flashing red light of the text “FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT!” and the relentless high pitched and repetitive sound of the alarm *have no authority upon the subject*. It is easy to avoid the “demands of the car” for instance buckling the belt before sitting. Very different would be the case if a person demands or commands me to fasten my belt because *not doing it would imply an intentional conflict*.

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⁹ Bijker & Law; (1992); p. 208.

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