Towards a Postphenomenology of Artifacts: A Review of Peter-Paul Verbeek's *What Things Do*

Evan Selinger
emsgsh@rit.edu
Rochester Institute of Technology

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What are artifacts? As the "technological developments of the past century have made this question more pressing than ever," Peter-Paul Verbeek's book, which attempts to provide a definitive answer, is relevant to, and deserves to read by, scholars throughout the humanities as well as the disciplines concerned with issues of design and engineering (1). Moreover, since Verbeek contextualizes his contemporary concerns against an explicit historical background, that is, since he constantly probes into why the "questions posed by the classical philosophy of technology deserve a new set of answers," his ruminations on the significance of things can appreciated by students of varying levels—even ones with limited philosophical exposure (3).

Overall, Verbeek's text is *ambitious* in scope and replete with *rigorous* interventions. Because it is *clearly written* and *coherently organized*, every single chapter proves rewarding. This positive experience became amplified in the book's concluding remarks. There the work as a whole coheres programmatically. It even has the potential to inspire one to perform complimentary aesthetic and moral inquiry into material cultures.

To concretize these observations, it can be said that Verbeek's project is *ambitious* because he does not aim to merely survey canonical sources or rehash well-trodden meta-philosophical tirades about the denigration of materiality and embodiment in the Western philosophical tradition. Rather, he attempts to reformulate the very enterprise of the philosophy of technology as "postphenomenology"—a perspective in which artifacts mediate the relation between human beings and their world so thoroughly that our ability to understand "subjectivity" and "objectivity" depends upon our ability to grasp how artifacts reduce and amplify the "forms of contact" that relate people to one another and to nature. To accomplish this goal as a charitable reader requires, at the very least, two rare virtues: diligence and the ability to appreciate that the

relation between novelty and continuity is complex. Recognizing these points, Verbeek sets out to: (1) discern the limits of traditional approaches to understanding and assessing technology, (2) display sensitivity towards phenomenology's underlying ambitions even in those instances where the motivating goals have not been fully satisfied, and (3) demonstrate that some core phenomenological insights remain pertinent even in those instances where the traditional phenomenological vocabulary and thematic orientation require alteration. For these reasons, Verbeek's *modus operandi* is dialogical engagement with traditional existential and hermeneutic discussions of method, operative concepts, and subject matter; abandoning intellectual history and beginning anew—neo-Cartesian impulses expressed routinely in some iconoclastic Anglo-American philosophy and Science and Technology Studies literature—are not considered viable options.

Verbeek's discussions are *rigorous* in that he not only provides a thorough exegesis of core ideas exposited by Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Don Ihde, Bruno Latour, and Albert Borgmann, but he also articulates subtle and provocative criticisms of (some of) their primary epistemic, ontological, and normative commitments. In line with recent trends, the pioneering works of Jaspers and Heidegger are depicted as historically important, but, ultimately, as emblematic of failed transcendental projects:

Close inspection reveals that Jaspers and Heidegger failed to support their analysis of technology adequately. They reduced technology to its conditions of possibility and then proceeded as if what they said about those conditions applied to technology itself…Both philosophies appear governed by what one might call a "transcendental fix" (100).

Although Verbeek is not the first person to provide this diagnosis, he happens to articulate it with a rare level of detail. Similarly, although he is not the first person to turn to Ihde, Latour, and Borgmann for the purpose of locating conceptual resources that would allow the concerns that animated the transcendental approach to "do justice to the concrete empirical reality of technology," he brings a perfect balance of reconstruction and assessment to their core ideas. (Here, it is worth highlighting that even though Jaspers no longer occupies center stage in philosophy, Verbeek provides a compelling demonstration of the value of reflecting on his views on "mass existence." In light of the evocative links that Verbeek makes to the Frankfurt School, a

revivable of Jaspers' thought—perhaps one akin to the recent returns to Henri Bergson and Hans Jonas—may be facilitated by this publication.)

With the assistance of Robert Crease's meticulous translation, Verbeek's text maintains *clarity of presentation* throughout. Considering the amount of technical vocabulary that Verbeek engages with, as well as his desires to (1) interface different theoretical traditions (which, in turn, requires relating Latour's unique prose to the more familiar phenomenological idioms) and (2) articulate a new conceptual framework for the philosophy of technology, this is a significant accomplishment.

Finally, Verbeek's *coherent organization* enables his core thoughts to be articulated in a compelling manner. His discussions of Ihde, Latour, and Borgmann all benefit from the earlier analyses of Jaspers and Heidegger. Indeed, the explicit and subtle shifts in orientation provided by the former simply could be not explored adequately without having first presented a thorough analysis of the latter. New conceptions of materiality and agency, as well as different ways of conceiving the relation between empirical and transcendental analyses, only make sense against a carefully circumscribed historical horizon. And, perhaps most importantly, Verbeek's last chapter, "Artifacts in Design," provides the reader with a concrete sense of how to "apply" the insights of the revised philosophy of technology. Here, Verbeek turns to industrial design and clarifies how postphenomeonological considerations are well-suited for helping us to understand how and why people can become "attached" to artifacts. His analysis of the ecological ambitions of the Dutch organization Eternally Yours is an exemplary instance of how philosophers of technology could, and indeed should, make the "empirical turn."

In light of the above observations, it is hard to imagine how someone could finish this text and fail to understand what central concerns have animated the classical philosophy of technology, or why the field is revisiting its traditional assumptions about agency, alienation, causality, classification, and meaning. Likewise, it is almost inconceivable that someone could engage with Verbeek's "principles" of analysis and still maintain that the general conceptual framework provided by the philosophy of technology is less valuable than the discursive frameworks found in the more specifically attuned and applied branches of technological analysis (e.g., medical ethics, biotechnological assessment, *et cetera*). For these reasons, the book solidifies Verbeek as a dominant principal in the field.

Having now complimented Verbeek on all of his admirable accomplishments, it only seems fair to highlight the one dimension of his analysis that I disagree with. In the chapter "Postphenomenology," Verbeek writes as if he is not only providing a *précis* of what this research program means to Ihde, but that he is also expanding upon ground that Ihde pioneers in a preliminary fashion.

> In the introduction to *Postphenomenology*, he [Ihde] says that his philosophical orientation includes a strong sense of 'proliferating pluralism' and the loss of centers and foundations, but he does not then go about showing what a reformulated phenomenology might look like under those conditions. This is the aim of the more radical interpretation of phenomenology that I am proposing (113).

This claim should pique the reader's interest because Ihde figures prominently throughout Verbeek's book. One not only can find the influence of Ihde's style of interpretation when Verbeek analyzes the godfathers of Jaspers and Heidegger, but Ihde's presence remains, in explicit and subtle ways, when he addresses more contemporary thinkers and issues. Thus, the idea that Verbeek might be clearer about what a "reformulated phenomenology" would look like than Ihde has been is intriguing—particularly, if what is presented is truly "more radical."

Despite this tantalizing announcement, Verbeek essentially restates claims that Ihde has already made. Specifically, in the pages that immediately follow, Verbeek appeals to Ihde's concepts of "technological intentionality" and "multistability." With respect to the latter, Verbeek reiterates Ihde's insight that "artifacts can only be understood in terms of the relation that human beings have to them" (117). He even illustrates this idea by referencing Ihde's paradigmatic example of the multiple visual possibilities that can arise by looking at Necker cubes in different ways and with different expectations. By proceeding in this manner, the reader is left with the impression that since Verbeek endorses Ihde's version of multistability, he must surely be expanding upon Ihde's conception of technological intentionality.

According to Verbeek, Ihde's concept of technological intentionality refers to the "inclination or trajectory that shapes the ways in which things are used" (114). Fountain pens, for example, typically allow users to write slower than word processors do; as a consequence, they "allow the user to think over the sentence

several times while composing" (114). What this account of technological intentionality does not address, Verbeek claims, is the more radical view that is illustrated by Landgon Winner's discussion of the politics of artifacts

> The postphenomenological perspective described above [the Winner example] allows a more radical extension of Ihde's concept of "technological intentionality." The "intentionality of artifacts" consists of the fact that they mediate the intentional relation between humans and the world in which each is constituted. When human beings use an object, there arises a "technologically mediated conception of intentionality," a relation between human beings and the world mediated by a technological artifact (116).

In light of how this passage is worded, the following question therefore arises. Has the matter in which technologies can "codetermine" how "subjectivity and objectivity are constituted" really been articulated by Ihde with as limited attention as Verbeek suggests?

Like Verbeek, Ihde has also referenced Winner's example of the Robert Moses bridge design. Where Ihde seems to fall short, therefore, is at the conceptual level. In this context, Verbeek points out a putative difference between different phases of Ihde's philosophy of technology.

> By saying that mediation is located "between" humans and the world (as in the schema I-technology-world), Ihde seems to put subject and object over against one another, instead of starting from the idea that they mutually constitute one another. His analysis appears to suggest that he takes as a point of departure humans already given as such and a world already given as such, in between which one can find artifacts. Ihde does not address this problem in *Technology and the Lifeworld*, though it gnaws at the roots of his approach to the phenomenology of technology. Only later, in *Expanding Hermeneutics*, does he make clear—completely in line with the postphenomenological perspective—that subject and object are mutually interrelated, but he does not connect this thought with his earlier analysis of human-technology relations. The phenomenological insight that subject and object are mutually interwoven thus males it necessary to supplement Ihde's analysis of technological mediation (129).

Although Verbeek peppers this passage with qualifiers ("seems to put" and "appears to suggest"), he renders a decisive judgment. Like the later Maurice Merleau-Ponty who needed to develop a notion of the "chiasm" to get beyond his earlier subject-object phenomenology, we are informed that the philosophy of the later Ihde also tries to move beyond his earlier reliance on subject-object language and thinking.

I don't find Verbeek's interpretation of Ihde to be defensible on this point. He makes far too much Ihde's linguistic reliance on terms such as "I" and "world" and gives far too little consideration to what Ihde means when he uses these terms. Due their historical sedimentation, the terms may evoke traces of vestigial Cartesiansim. Ihde, however, uses them in a manner that focuses on connections, links, and bonds. More specifically, Ihde's phenomenology has never been about experience as such, but rather, it has always focused on the *relations* that make experience meaningful and possible. As Verbeek is himself aware, Ihde has always tried to avoid the subjectivist and objectivist trends in philosophy; what he emphasizes are the *ecological* dimension of intentionality, that is, its *reciprocal* and *relativistic structure* that inseparably links organism and environment. Far from suggesting that "humans," "technologies," and the "world" come to relate after each is "given as such," the conceptual triad of "I-technology-world" suggests both *hermeneutic* and *existential* theses: (1) humans change the significance and being of technologies when their technological activities occur in worldly contexts; (2) humans change the significance and being of the world when their technological activities occur in worldly contexts; (3) technologies change the significance and being of humans when they are used in worldly contexts; (4) technologies change the significance and being of the world when humans use them in worldly contexts; (5) the world changes the significance and being of technologies when humans perform technological activities in worldly contexts; and (6) the world changes the significance and being of humans when humans perform technological activities in worldly contexts. In the account of Ihde that I am providing, the only time that "I," "technology," or "world" appear "given as such" is at the beginning of phenomenological inquiry; there, however, they appear as *clues for further analysis*—further analysis that demonstrates how the constitution of each of the relata emerges from relations to other relata. Ihde has been writing this way for a long time, and not only to clarify technological relations. This position has enabled him to demonstrate convincingly why phenomenology is not an introspective method and why neither agents nor authors have a privileged relation over their behavior or texts.

Although Verbeek and I differ on how to interpret Ihde, such divergence is, ultimately, a "family" dispute. Regardless of which of us presents the "better" interpretation, we can both agree that the postphenomenological project improves considerably upon the work of its predecessors—but that it only succeeds in doing so by conversationally engaging traditional insights and commitments. In this context, Verbeek is to be congratulated on writing a timely volume, one that will likely be influential in setting the agenda for some time to come.

References

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