COMMENTARY

Does an Ontic Whole Exist?: Conditions of Possibility and Technology Use

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Abstract

In this commentary, I scrutinize Coeckelbergh's criticism of postphenomenology, and question whether postphenomenology indeed tends to neglect the social dimension of technology use (ontic), and must necessarily be conceived as being in opposition to transcendental philosophy (ontological). Second, I suggest that the Wittgensteinian concepts that Coeckelbergh introduces are interesting additions to the concepts used in postphenomenology, but that his use of the term "transcendental" seems up to now primarily to be a rhetorical means enabling him to distance himself from postphenomenology.

Keywords Philosophy of technology · Postphenomenology · Transcendental turn · Empirical philosophy

1 Introduction

In this review commentary, I focus on what I take to be Coeckelbergh's two main criticisms of postphenomenology, namely that it fails to take into account how technology use is also socially structured, as well as that it neglects the existence of a larger structuring whole that cannot be accounted for in terms of how technologies mediate human-world relations. The difference between these critiques can be usefully casted in terms of the difference between the "ontic" and the "ontological": at the ontic level, Coeckelbergh criticizes postphenomenology for focusing on certain entities (technologies, human-technology relations), while neglecting other relevant entities (language, social actors). On the ontological level, Coeckelbergh's criticism amounts to postphenomenology's neglect of the transcendental whole that makes possible certain uses, experience, and understandings of technologies in the first place.

Coeckelbergh presents Wittgenstein as the go-to philosopher for a revision of postphenomenology in light of these criticisms, as Wittgenstein's work helps to connect the ontic with the ontological. This warrants a reading of Coeckelbergh's revisionary approach not

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primarily as a turn towards *language*, but instead as a call for a *holistic approach* in the philosophy of technology. It is this reading that forms the background of the points raised in this commentary.[1]

2 Which Empirical Turn is in Need of Revision?

2.1 The Ontic: Technologies Cannot be Isolated (I)

On Coeckelbergh's account, the empirical turn must be understood as a turn towards the artifact. In postphenomenology, this turn has led to a focus on how artifacts (i.e., technologies) mediate human-world relations. Coeckelbergh's criticism on this *turning towards* concrete technologies is that it resulted in a *turning away* from the social circumstances in which technology use takes place. That is, according to Coeckelbergh, postphenomenology analyses tend to isolate human-technology relations—as if they are objects that can be observed from a distance—from the practices in which humans engage with technologies (2020, 1).

If Coeckelbergh's characterization is correct, then postphenomenology faces a serious problem, since technology use is inevitably dependent on the social and practical context in which it takes place. But in what sense is the *turning towards* technological artifacts indeed a *turning away from* practice? For instance, can the focus on the obstetric ultrasound in prenatal care not also be seen as offering a *starting-point* for analyzing a practice, rather than implying a turn away from it? Indeed, isn't also one of postphenomenology's self-proclaimed strengths to start in "the midst of things," "departing from technologies," instead of using pre-defined categories to observe technological practices "from the outside" (e.g., Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, 11)?

Let me briefly point to two clues in postphenomenology suggesting that it does not *need* to isolate technology use from the wider social practice in which it takes place. First, in *Technology and the Lifeworld*, Ihde calls for a "cultural hermeneutics" that investigates how technologies are culturally embedded (1990, 124). This form of hermeneutics aims to investigate how technologies transform experiences in different cultures differently, and works with the central assumption that technologies are variantly embedded across cultures, such that "the "same" technology in another cultural context becomes quite a "different" technology" (Ibid., 144). Second, it has recently been suggested that postphenomenology's focus on technological mediations need to be complemented by a study of the human appropriations of those. On this account, a complete account of technological mediations should not solely focus on the materiality of concrete technologies, but be augmented with an analysis of how humans give meaning to technological mediations (Verbeek 2016).

Both of these clues suggest that there seems to be no principle reason to believe that postphenomenological analyses could not also further scrutinize empirically the social, practical, and cultural context in which technology use takes place. I leave open here whether postphenomenological research de facto has taken up these cues. Yet, Coeckelbergh's criticism on postphenomenology *qua* its focus on artifacts thus serves as a clear

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[1] For reasons of brevity, this review commentary focuses just on how Coeckelbergh's Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of technology is presented in this paper, and leaves out how it is developed in his other work.

reminder that one should not be misled to believe that technological artifacts can ever be encountered in isolation.

2.2 The Ontological: Technologies Cannot Be Isolated (II)

While the abovementioned criticism is an ontic one, Coeckelbergh's criticism of postphenomenology's disdain for the transcendental (i.e., the conditions of possible making possible the concrete use of a technology) is ontological. Just as postphenomenology has, on Coeckelbergh's account, no eye for the social context in which technology use takes place, it risks to lose sight of the whole that gives meaning to our experience and understanding of technologies in the first place. As I suggested above, addressing the social context might be still within the bounds of an empirical philosophy of technology. However, such empirical approaches remain impotent to address the whole in which technology use takes place in a transcendental sense—or at least, this is Coeckelbergh's suggestion. This whole then, so Coeckelbergh holds, must be understood as being transcendental in the sense that it "create[s] a grammar which shapes the experience and decisions of people" (Coeckelbergh 2021, 9). The implication of this critique is that postphenomenology is inevitably bound to the ontic, and is hence unable to address the grammar in which technology use is embedded, since grammar evades empirical (ontic) investigation.

One way of responding to this criticism would be to point to postphenomenology's self-proclaimed nonfoundationalism and anti-essentialism (e.g., Ihde 1993; Rosenberger & Verbeek 2015), implying that "postphenomenological claims are never about the absolute foundations of reality or knowledge, and never about the "essence" of an object of study. […T]hey are posed from an embodied and situated perspective, refer to practical problems, and are empirically oriented" (Rosenberger & Verbeek 2015, 1).[2] In this way, the claims of postphenomenology are lauded for how they contribute to practical problems occurring in the empirical world, and are contrasted with foundationalist and essentialist strands of thinking that allegedly lack this value. From this would follow that to the extent to which postphenomenology embraces as a strong non-foundationalism and anti-essentialism, it indeed seems to be bound to the ontic, and takes this to be one of its main virtues.

However, this image of postphenomenology's non-foundationalism as being in simple opposition to the transcendental can be nuanced. In *What Things Do*, Verbeek discusses what he considers the main downside of transcendental philosophies. On his account, "our picture of technology is distorted if technology is approached *exclusively* in terms of its conditions of possibility. For then we are speaking about technology's conditions of possibility as if we were speaking about concrete technologies themselves, and the transcendental picture becomes absolutized into *transcendentalism*" (Verbeek 2005, 7). What follows from Verbeek's critique of transcendental thinking is that he opposes its alleged tendency to *reduce* how technologies shape human experience and understanding to their conditions of possibility. Yet, this not necessarily amount to a dismissal of transcendental thinking *altogether*. While Verbeek dismisses the primacy of a whole in the sense that it would determine the shape of human-technology relations within it, he does not seem to deny that technology use takes place within a meaningful whole—or against a meaningful horizon.

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[2] For current purposes, I take this self-description at face value and will not subject it to critical scrutiny. However, I want to stress that this doesn't make me subscribe to either the idea that postphenomenology is in fact strongly nonfoundationalist and anti-essentialist, nor to the idea that only nonfoundationalist and anti-essentialist approaches can have a bearing on practical problems.

From this analysis it follows that for Coeckelbergh's revisionary approach to be successful, he needs to show that it has ontological import—besides adding new concepts that might contribute to postphenomenological analyses directed at the ontic level, such that it lays bare things that the empirical turn made philosophers of technology blind for. In other words, he has to give an account of why the grammar of a meaningful whole remains invisible when remaining on the ontic level. In the next section, I analyze if Coeckelbergh indeed succeeds in doing so.

3 Technology Games and Forms of Life

Coeckelbergh's "holistic and transcendental revision of postphenomenology" (2020, 2), is driven by two concepts developed by (the late) Wittgenstein: "(language) games," and "form of life". The concept of "(language) games" brings to the fore a view of language use—and in Coeckelbergh's proposal technology use as well—as always interwoven with a form of life that is the larger whole that gives meaning to particular usages. A form of life puts constraints on the range of meanings and is normative in the sense that it structures how to engage with particular technologies. Making this more concrete, we can think of the speed bump, whose use to slow down cars only make sense with reference to the larger "game" of traffic, and within a specific structure of meaning (and power) that renders it virtually impossible for individual drivers to stop in front of a speed bump and remove it from the highway with the right equipment (Romele 2020). In other words, understanding how a speedbump mediates agency, presupposes the presence of a particular game called "traffic," and the particular form of life of "(Western) car driver".

3.1 The Ontic: The Social Context of Technology Use

According to Coeckelbergh, a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of technology derived from these concepts adds to postphenomenology. One of the central postphenomenological concepts is that of "multistability," referring to the fact that a technology can be used for a variety of purposes and fits multiple contexts (the "multi"), while it cannot be used for all purposes and in all contexts (the "stability"). A key question for postphenomenologists then becomes why a technology attains certain stabilities rather than others, and even makes other uses potentially unimaginable (e.g., Rosenberger 2020). It is in addressing this question that Coeckelbergh's Wittgensteinian approach has significant potential, since it immediately puts a limit on the amount of possible usages: "*in practice*—that is, in concrete uses in a social context—there is not endless variability of use" (2020, 5).

When studying technologies in practice, there simply is no long list of stabilities that can be imagined, since their usage is part of a particular technology game within a form of life that puts constraints on the set of possible usages. The inseparability of technology use from the games and form of life in which it is embedded shows the difficulty to do a postphenomenological analysis "in the midst of things" and "from a concrete technology". It challenges the idea that a philosophy of technology "must be confident that it will be able to get a full view of technologies once it has left the realm of the transcendental and reenters the world of concrete materiality" (Verbeek 2005, 8). After all, "being in the midst of things" always implies to be "in the middle of the game," that presupposes an already meaningful structure: the "concreteness" of a "concrete technology" only appears as such

relative to a larger context of meaning. Accordingly, the concepts that Coeckelbergh develops can aid our understanding of technology use since they help describing particular stabilities of technology use beyond the material properties of technological artifacts.

3.2 The Ontological: The Rhetoric of the Transcendental

In what sense can a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of technology be called transcendental? Coeckelbergh terms his own approach transcendental because "in practice, the variability of use and meaning are limited by the *transcendental* conditions: the games and form of life" (2020, 5, my emphasis). Without integrating such a transcendental approach, then, "postphenomenology risks to miss the vocabulary to articulate the social embeddedness of technology, and the various ways in which not only material artifacts but also rules, discourse, etc. are part of the meaning and use of technology" (Ibid., 9). As suggested above, Coeckelbergh indeed offers an interesting conceptual vocabulary to augment postphenomenology. However, rendering his approach *transcendental*, necessitates an argument for why "games" and "forms of life" are *transcendental* (or ontological) conditions, instead of immanent (or ontic) ones.

For Coeckelbergh it is evident that pointing to the condition of possibility of technology use automatically implies to point to transcendental conditions of possibility. But playing the role of the skeptic, it remains unclear why we can't conceive of technology games and forms of life as empirical conditions of possibility that are constantly changing and contingent on social structures, historical developments, etc. For his argument to succeed, Coeckelbergh either has to show why these contingent conditions of possibility must be considered transcendental, or to argue that forms of life and technology games are not subject to socio-historical change. Let me summarize my reservations in the following question: What purpose does it serve to speak about *transcendental* conditions of possibility, besides the rhetorical one that a Wittgensteinian approach has a different descriptive focus than a postphenomenological one?

The second reason why Coeckelbergh advocates a transcendental approach is that it would make postphenomenological analyses less vague. Coeckelbergh imagines a (potential) postphenomenological analysis of gendered humanoid robots (such as the image of a female robot in *Ex Machina*) to be exemplary of this vagueness: "One could say, of course, that these robots "mediate" relations between men and women, but this is very vague and cannot be unpacked only by reference to what the material artifact does. Instead, one needs to articulate (and evaluate) an entire grammar and form of life" (Coeckelbergh 2021, 9–10). Indeed, the above analysis is vague, because it remains disconnected from the practices in which gendered humanoid robots are integrated.[3] As indicated above, it might well be worthwhile for postphenomenologists to be continuously aware of the social embeddedness of technologies. However, Coeckelbergh promises more: a transcendental approach bears the promise of eliminating this vagueness.

In the concluding section, Coeckelbergh applies his approach to the context of the Anthropocene. He writes that "the Anthropocene constitutes a new form of life, which shapes our thinking and doing. It is not only an "ontic condition" but also a kind of

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[3] For reasons of brevity, I am not going to challenge that Coeckelbergh captures in this example what is distinct about postphenomenology, although I do not think that such vague claims are exemplary of postphenomenological analyses.

transcendental condition" (Coeckelbergh 2021, 16), and that "earth can be an ontic entity or it can be a *kind of* grammar, a condition of possibility that makes possible our form of life and that perhaps *is* our form of life" (Coeckelbergh 2021, 18). These two statements points to the fact that human action and thought is bound to the context of the earth, and how this context changes in light of the Anthropocene. However, it is not immediately clear in what sense these analyses or less vague than a statement like: "the Anthropocene mediates the relationship between humans and the earth". This brings me to the question of how a transcendental approach in philosophy of technology gives rise to less vague analysis, and why this supposed vagueness cannot be overcome through detailed empirical research.

4 Concluding Remarks

This commentary can be read as a defense of postphenomenology, but isn't necessarily intended as such. The point of this commentary has not been to suggest that one should avoid turning attention to wholes, but rather that Coeckelbergh does not address the question: "does it make sense to speak of wholes on the ontic level?". Because of this, he does not make clear why the rules of (technology) games and the structuring role of a form of life necessitate a move from the ontic to the ontological. Because of this, his appeal to "the transcendental" can be considered rhetorical: this appeal presents a shift of focus on the ontic level as a radical shift in philosophical approach. And *as* a shift of focus, a Wittgensteinian approach is a valuable addition to the philosophy of technology, since it brings to our attention new ways in which technology use is structured. At the risk of misinterpretation, the crucial philosophical importance of this attentional shift to what was previously hidden can be considered as consistent with Wittgenstein's remark that "philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.–Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us" (Wittgenstein 2009, 55e).

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