

**Course:** Philosophy of Technology

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**Assignment:** Response Paper-1

**Question:-** What does Don Ihde mean by a ‘material hermeneutic’? In this context, discuss his conception of technological intentionality and its significance. What are the modalities of technological intentionality he distinguishes? Do you think these distinctions are exhaustive of our technologically mediated relation to the world?

**Answer**

The word *hermeneutic* is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a method or principle of interpretation” (“hermeneutic.”, Merriam-Webster.com, 2025). Other dictionaries might define it slightly differently, especially in associating it with its Biblical origins, which is fitting since that’s what hermeneutics is all about.

In the Europe of yore, Hermeneutics was confined to interpreting the Bible, but over time, it expanded to encompass the interpretation of texts at large to understand the role language plays in shaping the human condition. By prepending *material* to *hermeneutic*, Don Ihde attempts to figure out the roles artifacts/things/technology “play in the manner in which human beings interpret reality” (Verbeek 121).

This approach stems from the post-phenomenological critique of the existence of a genuine, unfiltered human experience of the world. Post-phenomenologists argue that human access to reality is always mediated, which allows them to see science and technology as a method of disclosure instead of a fetter obscuring access to an ‘authentic’ reality. Consequently, the presence of un-neutral mediators does not prevent post-phenomenologists from commenting on their mediated comprehension of the world.

Further, Don Ihde goes on to borrow the concept of *intentionality* from Husserl’s philosophy of

consciousness (the idea that consciousness is always directed toward something) and applies it to technological artifacts to highlight their directionality, which influences the way they are used. He refers to this as technological intentionality, a concept that also ties in with Heidegger's non-neutral conception of technology in the *zuhanden* state, wherein artifacts modify the human perception of the world while remaining outside the users' "field of attention" (Verbeek 114).

Verbeek goes on to conclude that technological intentionality can be interpreted in two different but "intertwined" (Verbeek 116) ways.

- a. technological artifacts shape the way in which they are used (e.g., 4Chan's anonymous design allows users to post xenophobic content without any social or legal ramifications, which is very different from how people would be treated if they used hate speech in a public forum.)
- b. technological artifacts shape the way the world is presented to users (e.g., Extending the previous example, 4Chan users eventually begin to see the people outside /pol/, in the 'real' world as *soyjaks*, *wagies*, *normies*, and purveyors of *goyslop*.)

When discussing material hermeneutics, the second conception, also referred to as "technologically mediated intentionality" (Verbeek 116), is more relevant. To illustrate the mediating role these artifacts play, Don Ihde "distinguishes three different ways in which human beings can relate to technological artifacts" (Verbeek 123): *relations of mediation*, *alterity relations*, and *background relations*.

Relations of mediation refer to relations with technological artifacts where artifacts serve as media to experience the world, extending the way in which humans can perceive the world. According to Don Ihde, there are effectively two ways technology can mediate humans' relationship with the world: *embodiment* and *hermeneutic relations*.

Embodiment relations come into play when we interact with the world through artifacts. In these relations, the artifact withdraws from the actual experience, turning transparent in a certain sense. For example, Clothes help humans modulate their body temperature, but clothes themselves do not attract the wearer's attention. Instead, they fade from the wearer's attention as the wearer

experiences the world.

On the other hand, Hermeneutic relations are mediated relations where humans interact with technological artifacts to interpret the artifact's 'representation of the world' (Verbeek 126). The artifact does not withdraw from the experience but instead performs a function on some aspect of the world and returns an output, which requires human analysis to make a definitive conclusion. For example, AQI Sensors regularly monitor particle pollutants in the air and display numbers on a screen for humans to read. Humans can then go on to make conclusions about air quality based on these numbers.

In Alterity relations, technological artifacts do not play a mediating role but instead play the role of a "quasi-other" (Verbeek 127) to/with whom humans interact. Technological artifacts are not simply called 'others' since they can never truly be living, sentient beings. This quasi-other-ness can be attributed to these artifacts' perceived autonomy along with their physical and functional similarities to living creatures. For example, in an [episode](#) of The Sopranos, while trying to watch a movie, the characters' TV malfunctions due to technical difficulties. In response, they curse and scream at the TV, eventually hitting it with a slipper furiously, similar to how they might discipline a dissenting member of their crew.

The relations covered so far form a spectrum, from quasi-I (embodiment relations) to quasi-other (alterity relations) with hermeneutic relations square in the middle. The fourth kind, 'Background relations' doesn't fit into this range since technological artifacts do not play a major role in the human experience in these relations. Instead, they work in the background, shaping the context of human experience. The electrical grid, oil pipelines, water supply, sewage systems, and other distribution systems serve as background relations for end consumers, as long as they keep functioning the way they are supposed to.

At this time, most technological implements I can think of can be categorized under one or more\* of these relations. However, In the future, if an android were able to pass the modern equivalent of a Turing test, and be indistinguishable from a human, it would no longer be

possible to characterize it as being in an alterity relationship with humans. In that case, we would need a new set of relations to account for its role.

\* For example, a phone can be used to function as a camera (embodiment), fetch the AQI (hermeneutic), be cared for (alterity), and transmit user information to data brokers (background) simultaneously.

## **References**

"hermeneutic." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, 2025. Web. 30 March 2025.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul. What things do: Philosophical reflections on technology, agency, and design. Penn State Press, 2005.

I have referred to Chapters 3 and 4 from Verbeek's book and whatever I remembered from the lectures to write this response paper. Additionally, I have used Grammarly to correct mistakes. All the citations are in the MLA format.