

Technics as Hermeneutics

Keywords

Hermeneutics, non-linguistic meanings, philosophy of technology, philosophy of technics, philosophy of science, the concept of practice, Wilhelm Dilthey, Joseph Rouse, Don Ihde, Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey.

Abstract

Wilhelm Dilthey (1956; 1957), an important hermeneuticist, coupled hermeneutics with language, especially texts. He used that notion to distinguish human sciences from natural sciences: the former are essentially hermeneutical, while the latter are not. (E.g. Palmer 1969.)

Joseph Rouse (1987: ch. 3) and Don Ihde (1998: chs. 11—14; 2009: ch. 4) have questioned that. They have argued that natural sciences are profoundly hermeneutical and involve interpretation. The hermeneuticity of science follows from two things: (1) Rouse and Ihde understand science as an ensemble of specific practices (rather than an ensemble of representations); and (2) these practices typically involve using instruments. Any practice is meaningful on its own right, and it is also a means of interpreting other things. In science, such interpretation typically employs specific instruments which produce displays of phenomena unobservable to the naked eye. Ihde argues that science involves what he calls “visualism”: instruments provide different kinds of images, and the interpretation of such images is an important species of hermeneutic activity in science.

If Rouse and Ihde are correct, then there are, besides linguistic meanings which traditional hermeneutics studies, also non-linguistic meanings which can be communicated with practices, instruments, and images. The existence of non-linguistic meanings prompts a significant expansion of the domain of hermeneutics. But Rouse and Ihde do not define “meaning” and “interpretation.” They also do not provide a theory, how meaning arises from non-linguistic interactions with the world.

In this presentation, I will fill in these two lacunae. I will argue that (1) the pragmatist theory of meaning is capable of accounting for non-linguistic meanings; and that (2) it is also capable of explaining, how they arise from experiment. If I am correct, then the pragmatist theory of meaning provides a theoretical basis for Rouse's and Ihde's expansions of hermeneutics.

The founder of pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce, argued that “what a thing means is simply what habits it involves” (CP 5.400; EP 1: 131). If he is correct, meanings are habits or practices. Hence they cannot be exhausted by language. Rather, language is one practice among others. On the other hand, the recognition of non-linguistic meanings allows pragmatists to explain, how it is possible to make sense of the world and act in it without language.

Another important pragmatist, John Dewey, explained the emergence of meaning from experiment: when a cause—effect relation is discovered, it can be reconceptualized as a means—ends relation, and thereby the cause and the effect become signs of each other ([1925] 1929a: 369—70; 1929b: 84). Thus, for Dewey ([1925] 1929a: 168, 186—8) meanings are *methods of action* and *tools of tools* – that is, that which makes tools what they are. In a word, they constitute *a species of technics*.

By these considerations, I will argue that technics, understood as involving both practices and instruments, is a species of hermeneutics.

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