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Gahrn-Andersen, Rasmus

Published in:
Human Studies

DOI:
10.1007/s10746-019-09493-8

Publication date:
2019

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for polished version (APA):

Gahrn-Andersen, R. (2019). Heideggerian Phenomenology, Practical Ontologies and the Link Between Experience and Practices. *Human Studies*, 42(4), 565-580. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-019-09493-8>

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Heideggerian phenomenology, practical ontologies and the link between experience and practices

Abstract: Postphenomenologists and performativists criticize classical approaches to phenomenology for isolating subjects from socio-material relations. The purpose of this essay is to repudiate parts of their criticism by presenting a nuanced account of phenomenology thus making it evident that phenomenological theories have the potential for meshing with the performative idiom of contemporary Science and Technology Studies (STS). However, phenomenology retains an apparent shortcoming in that its proponents typically focus on human-nonhuman relations that arise in localized contexts. For this reason, it seems to contrast with one of the most important assumptions behind practical ontologies: socio-practical significance extends beyond an agent's immediate situatedness. Turning to Heidegger and his notion of 'de-distancing', the essay explores how localized phenomena that pertain to human experience connect with global practices (e.g. socio-material assemblages and networks) and, thus, the possibility of consilience between phenomenology and the performative idiom in STS.

Keywords: Heideggerian Phenomenology; Practical ontologies; De-distancing; Local-global.

1 Introduction

In present-day Science and Technology Studies (STS) there are at least two positions that are overtly critical of classical phenomenology, namely postphenomenology and theories belonging to the performative idiom. Amongst these, the postphenomenologists are least critical. This particular strand of research was introduced independently by Johann Arnason and Don Ihde as a novel framework for exploring human relations with technology (see, Arnason 1993; Ihde 1993). It recognizes the importance of classical phenomenology as represented by, for instance, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (to mention the most prominent) but its proponents also emphasize the need to combine phenomenology with pragmatist approaches and modern philosophy of technology. According to Suzi Adams, this emphasis arises as a natural consequence of the subject-centeredness of classic phenomenology:

Whereas phenomenology was originally concerned with the philosophy of consciousness and the subject, postphenomenological approaches emphasize the anthropic confrontation with the world – and its cultural articulation – as a trans-subjective context of meaning in need of permanent elucidation and interrogation (Adams 2007, 3).

For Ihde, phenomenology in classic guise cannot stand alone because it focuses on the particular subject as someone who is more or less isolated from the world. Accordingly, insights from other disciplines are needed in order to avoid “the problems and misunderstandings of phenomenology as a subjectivist philosophy” (Ihde 2009, 23). The reason for Ihde's skepticism is plain: due to a focus on individual subjects, classical phenomenology has virtually nothing to say about how technology co-functions with human and nonhuman actors. Postphenomenological critique aims to transform “the ground of the phenomenological endeavour itself” (Adams 2007, 4) by proposing a “modified, hybrid phenomenology” (Ihde 2009, 23). Most importantly, Ihde holds, this makes the phenomenon of consciousness into “an abstraction” that has “embeddedness in both the physical or material world and its cultural-social

dimensions” (ibid., 19). Such a basis will enable the reappraisal of human existence in its interrelatedness with global communication systems and other advanced technologies.

Proponents of the performative idiom are more at odds with classical phenomenology. The main figures in the performative endeavor target the “subject-centeredness” and essentialism which, they hold, lie at the core of not just early-STS but also consciousness studies and particular areas of philosophy (see, Haraway 1991; Barad 2007; Latour 1999). The performative idiom builds on a commitment to nonhumanism in the sense that its proponents challenge the view that human subjects are “something rather non-problematic, stable and intuitive” (Rod and Kera 2010, 70) while they also grant agency to non-living entities (see, for instance, Latour 2004; 2005; Pickering 1995; 2017). Taking a performative and nonhumanist approach, Casper Bruun Jensen introduces a decentered view of anthropology and STS by using phenomenology as a negative target. Phenomenological theories, he argues, are incompatible with the practical ontologies of the performative idiom in that they “take human embodiment and sense-making capacities as their analytical ground” (Jensen 2016, 631). Contesting such a view, Jensen holds that “subject and object formations are emergent outcomes of material–relational processes” (ibid.). On this view, one cannot explore human-technology relations by focusing exclusively on human agents since we do not exist in isolation from material and technological artifices.¹ Thus, he offers a criticism of ‘subject-centeredness’ common to the performative idiom which mirrors the skepticism that lies at the heart of postphenomenological research i.e. the view that classical phenomenology is nothing but “philosophy of consciousness” (Ihde 2009, 19). Indeed, this skepticism sustains the so-called ‘ontology of practice’-turn in STS. For as Jensen (2004) shows, STS needs to move away from any “epistemological position” that implies a strive towards objectifying its object of research. The reason for this is clear-cut and can be exemplified by scientific practices:

Scientific ideas are generated in the interaction with obdurate materials with unknown qualities, and a prominent concern of epistemology has been with purifying science from the many biases that could potentially invalidate its knowledge in this interaction (Jensen 2004, 235).

This proposed shift from realist ontologies to practical ontologies involves “a move from an epistemological approach to one focusing on practical ontology, and from a representational to a performative idiom in the understanding of science” (ibid., 240). In being ‘epistemological’, past approaches to STS have “prioritized the abstract capabilities of the mind over the inadequacies of the body” (ibid.). However, proponents of the performative idiom also target another problematic assumption of early STS: They challenge the view that because human subjects are able to make truth statements about the world, they can take a neutral and objective stance. As Andrew Pickering (2017) argues, the performative idiom opposes the realist assumption that there is a single dominating ontology. By contrast, on the performative view, practices unfold through a myriad of ontologies - or, in Pickering’s terms *islands of stability* - which enable human existence to manifest countless processes of decentered becoming.

Critical points such as these make it seem that the endeavor of phenomenological research (in classical guise) is synonymous with a subject-centered, realist venture and, thus, at odds with performative and postphenomenological approaches to STS. In this essay, however, I argue that this is not the case. My overall aim is to pave the way for a dialogue between phenomenology and specific parts of STS in the sense that I abstain from considering STS as a whole. In section 2, I revisit the criticism by

showing that not only do those in favor of the performative idiom make use of concepts from phenomenology, but also that proponents of classical phenomenology reject the assumption that human subjects should be studied in isolation from the socio-material world. I consider Heidegger's Dasein-phenomenology as a phenomenological theory that in least ambiguous terms eludes the abovementioned critique. This brings me to section 3 where I use the criticism to argue that STS-style practical ontologies indeed pose a challenge to phenomenological thinking (including Heidegger). This challenge arises in that phenomenologists tend to focus on individual agents in an immediate spatiotemporal realm or: an embodied situation. Given this focus, phenomenology seems incompatible with allowing socio-technical relations to involve reterritorialization in the sense that one can permit material engagements to exceed the boundaries of local phenomena. This apparent shortcoming actualizes section 4's focus on Heidegger's notion of 'de-distancing'. The purpose of exploring this phenomenon is to show that Heidegger's phenomenology is useful for attempts to connect phenomenology - which is bound to be localized given its connection with the experience of human subjects - with global phenomena such as networks and assemblages.

2 The criticism revisited

Before presenting an argument that connects Heideggerian phenomenology with practical ontologies, I take a closer look at the nonhumanism that is central to the performative idiom. In so doing, I aim to show that not only are substantive parts of the criticism misplaced but also that the performativists themselves tend to evoke assumptions and concepts that stem from phenomenology. The purpose of section 2.1 is not to repudiate their criticism but rather to show that they also take human phenomenology to be of vital importance. Thus, the section serves to uncover the potential consilience between classical phenomenology and the performative idiom in STS. In section 2.2, I go a step further by showing why the criticism of phenomenology is bound to miss its mark.

2.1 The human in the nonhuman

It is important to bear in mind that proponents of the performative idiom, despite their critical attitude towards phenomenology and its subject-centeredness, are concerned with how technology influences human existence. Indeed, they do not explore technology in isolation from human agents. This is readily evident from the nonhuman aspects of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which is at the core of the performative idiom (cf. Pickering 1994). In fact, Edwin Sayes shows that Latour uses the notion of the 'nonhuman' in the following three ways:

1) to designate everyday objects (e.g. invoices, computers, files etcetera) that enable what mainstream sociologists would call the 'macro dimension' of human social relations. Latour sets aside the traditional 'micro-macro' distinction by advocating a flat ontology (Latour 1996a). On a Latourian view, human societies rely on, not just human capacity for using symbols but interobjectivity which allows human actors to engage with objects on a global scale and that consequently brings about a stabilization of social structures radically different from those of, for example, baboon societies (cf. Latour 1996b; Sayes 2014, 137);

2) to denote not only everyday objects but also animals, events and other phenomena that have an effect on how humans interact and, thus, function as mediators of socio-material networks. In being mediators, nonhuman entities are placed in-between human actors thus underlining their capacity for

modifying human social relations. For this reason, nonhuman entities are “endowed with a certain set of competencies by the network that they have lined up behind them. At the same time, they demand a certain set of competencies by the actors” (Sayes 2014, 138);

3) to name objects such as seatbelts in cars that interrelate with political concerns and moral issues and, by extension, socio-normative constraints (ibid., 134-149). Human actors can relate to these nonhuman entities in several ways. For instance, the entities can simply transfer social normativity to the actors or change established patterns of normative behavior (ibid.).

This synthesis of Latour’s view on the nonhuman reflects a crucial assumption about how nonhuman entities are considered by proponents of the performative idiom. Evidently, one cannot consider things, objects and other entities in isolation from human actors. Indeed, entities such as seatbelts, fishing boats and computers achieve their social *significance* as things only given their relevance for human agents. Thus, human experience and related activities that include interpretations and expectations are tacitly presupposed in how these entities contribute to ANT-style socio-material networks. But this not only goes for those who explicitly ascribe to ANT but also for those within the performative idiom who take humans to be part of, not a network but, for instance, an assemblage or a decentered practice.

With regards to assemblage-theory (e.g. Callon and Law 1992; Fortun and Bernstein 1998; Bennett 2010; Bear 2013; Protevi 2009), we do not need to look beyond how Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s introduce ‘assemblage’ as a theoretical concept in their *A Thousand Plateaus*. The following quotation from Thomas Nail offers a fitting overview:

First, all assemblages are composed of a basic structure including a condition (abstract machine), elements (concrete assemblage), and agents (personae). Although the content differs depending on the kind of assemblage (biological, amorous, aesthetic, and so on), the structural role or function of these three aspects are shared by all assemblages. Second, all assemblages are arranged according to four basic political types: territorial, statist, capitalist, and nomadic. Each type describes a different way in which the conditions, elements, and agents of the assemblage are ordered. Each assemblage is always a mixture of these four types to varying degrees. Finally, all assemblages are constantly changing according to four different kinds of change or “deterritorialization”: relative negative, relative positive, absolute negative, and absolute positive (Nail 2017, 36-37).

We must also note, however, that Deleuze and Guattari consider assemblages as relative to human agents (or, in their terms, *personae*). Assemblages are thus linked with experiencing individuals. Further, this is underlined by the fact that, as Martin Müller rightly observes, assemblages are fundamentally characterized as “desired” (Müller 2015, 29). Thus, assemblages not only relate to the desire production (and ‘desiring machines’) of global capitalism (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 2010) but also interconnect with embodied actors who partake in the production/satisfaction of desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, collective phenomena are linked closely to experience. Accordingly, no clear-cut distinction falls between, on the one hand, collective phenomena and, on the other, individual agents:

[I]t should not be thought that it suffices to distinguish the masses and exterior groups someone belongs to or participates in from the internal aggregates that person envelops in himself or herself. The distinction to be made is [...] between different types of

multiplicities that coexist, interpenetrate, and change places-machines, cogs, motors, and elements that are set in motion at a given moment, forming an assemblage productive of statements: “I love you” (or whatever) (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 40).

Thus, assemblage-based approaches have, at their theoretical roots, a close connection to human phenomenology.

Interestingly, if unsurprisingly, a similar tendency grants importance to the experiential dimension of humans in other nonhumanist and decentered approaches within the performative idiom. In a recent paper, Jensen (2016) presents a ‘decentred anthropology of infrastructure’ by making his negative target the alleged subject-orientation of phenomenological theories. Paradoxically, however, he finds himself acknowledging that subjective experience plays - and inevitably has to play - a crucial role when decentered infrastructure (e.g. sewage-systems) link human actors with practical ontologies. In this context, he invokes what Adrian Cussins (2003) calls *activity trails*. These trails are synonymous with “forms of guidance through environments of activity” (Cussins 2003, 153). According to Jensen, the concept of ‘activity trails’ acknowledges the performative and decentered manifestations of technology (i.e. the nonhuman) without losing sight of the fact that it also shapes human beings and their societies. Not only does Cussins explicitly introduce these trails in relation to human phenomenology, but Bruun Jensen makes their significance subject-relative. This is clear in statements including the following:

infrastructures shape not only Phnom Penh’s urban arrangements but also the subjects that inhabit the city. Every day, activity trails modulate the bodies of people and things in myriad ways (Jensen 2016, 645).

And since socio-technical issues inevitably impinge both directly and indirectly on the experience of people who live amidst a run-down sewage infrastructure (like that in Phnom Penh), it makes little sense to neglect the fact that practical ontologies entail the existence of an experiential dimension. In fact, Jensen himself explicitly recognizes the link between technology and human experience:

Even if people at [Phnom Penh’s] Kandal market rarely think about pipes, and even if their dreams, interpretations and critiques are about something else (like culture and politics), the capacity for having those dreams is consequent upon infrastructural activity trails (ibid.).

Concepts such as ‘dreams’ and ‘interpretations’ allow Jensen to underline phenomenology within a performative framework. Unsurprisingly, he concludes that the experiential dimension is vital to the unfolding of practical ontologies. In his terms, “it is thus no longer clear where the material ends and the imaginative begins or, indeed, if the distinction makes any sense” (ibid., 645-646).

2. 2 *Off the mark*

Having shown that performative approaches place materiality, technologies and infrastructure in relation to human experience, I now turn to the main criticism raised against classical phenomenology. As noted above, phenomenology is said to be subject-centered and thus to ignore the interrelatedness of humans and their environments or, put differently, subject-object relations. In this section, I argue that the central claim of post-phenomenological and performativist critiques misses its mark.

In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour clarifies the performative, nonhumanist aspirations of ANT by challenging one significant implication of the alleged subject-centeredness of classical phenomenology. By assuming a clear subject-object dichotomy, it seems that technological artifices can be studied in isolation from actual use and the human subjects who use them. As Latour rightly observes, the assumption makes no sense. Human use of technology cannot be explored in its proper element if technical objects are viewed as static and unchanging entities with the permanent traits of 'objects'.² Therefore, Latour takes Heidegger to claim that technological artifices determine our actions and relations - they do not mediate them. For Heidegger, it is alleged, technology is superior to human beings in that its objects are cut off from the level of human activity which they nevertheless determine. Latour holds what he takes to be the converse view:

techniques do not exist as such [...] [T]here is nothing that we can define philosophically or sociologically as an object, as an artifact or a piece of technology (Latour 1999, 190-191).

Latour seems to recognize that phenomenologists acknowledge the interrelation of nonhuman entities and human subjects. In fact, he even criticizes Heidegger for treating humans and technology as inseparable such that he creates the illusion that social collectives have an "ultimate symmetry" (cf. Riis 2008, 288-289). However, as Søren Riis points out, Latour goes on to argue that a socio-material "'collective' folds together humans and non-humans" (ibid., 294). In other words, Latour's view comes very *close* to Heidegger's; at least with regards to the idea that human-nonhuman actors interconnect.

What makes Latour's criticism interesting is that Heidegger is highly skeptical of classical epistemology and, thus, at any attempt at delimiting subject from object. In fact, Husserl (1970, 61-63) and Merleau-Ponty (cf. Bullington 2013, 24) are equally critical of subject-object dichotomies. The post-phenomenological and performativist targeting of 'subject-centeredness' only makes sense when applied to Rene Descartes' metaphysics. On a Cartesian view, experience entails a disembodied mind or, a *cogito* (or: I think). The *cogito*, Descartes argues, is able to experience the world as it really is (cf. Desroches 2003, 392). But this is only thanks to God who, according to Descartes, has no interest in deceiving human subjects. In the absence of a God, however, an ontological doubt follows. The phenomenological tradition which was founded by Husserl in 1901 (with his *Logical Investigations*) ought to be considered as a secular way of thinking that presents different attempts at refuting Cartesian doubt (and, thus, a distinct subject-object divide). In the absence of a God, Husserl (2001), mirroring Franz Brentano, suggests that the conscious subject is always connected to its environment through an intentional attitude. So, although Husserl takes the Cartesian *cogito* as his focal point, he nevertheless acknowledges that the single individual exists, not in isolation from, but as intrinsically related to its surroundings. Husserl also recognizes that, first and foremost, human subjects are not surrounded by "pure material things bereft of significance" (Overgaard 2004, 10). For this reason, he agrees with Heidegger that humans in their natural attitude relate to things in their surroundings which are immediately given to them.³ Søren Overgaard summarizes:

Both thinkers readily agree that the kinds of "things" we humans mostly encounter are things for some kind of *use*, be it practical, esthetic, or whatever. Husserl even admits that it is an abstraction to talk of "value free" things that are simply "there," since everything means something to us; everything has its role to play, even if it is just the negative role of "uselessness" (ibid.).

But whereas Husserl and Schutz - and to some extent Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre - tend to refer to the human subject by means of a Cartesian terminology (i.e. the notion of 'cogito' or 'I'), Heidegger takes a slightly different path. He also challenges Descartes' disembodied position and overt mentalism but in a more radical manner as he introduces the concept of 'Dasein' to designate "the being of human being" and, thus, human subjectivity and existence more generally. The importance of this concept - which literally translated means 'being there' - is underlined by invoking how, in contemporary terms, human subjects couple with aspects of the world. Thus, Heidegger considers the relation between subject and thing as a basic constituent of human existence (cf. BLINDED). In so doing, human actors become inseparable from their surroundings meaning that Heidegger treats a thing as having certain aspects for the subject who exists with the thing. Far from existing in isolation, humans draw on particular things at hand in which we are experientially absorbed as we engage with them. Heidegger's 'Dasein' is thus closer to the Latourian 'actor' than, for instance, the theoretical notion of 'subject' (or the Cartesian 'cogito'). This is because Dasein basically entails an enmeshing of human-nonhuman relations. Heidegger thus anticipates how Latour's 'actor' sets aside the classical subject-object distinction. Further, Heidegger aligns with performative positions in STS that embrace practical ontologies such as, say, those of Christopher Gad and colleagues who, using Isabelle Stenger's (2005) 'practical identities', challenge ontological realism and essentialism (Gad et al. 2015, 76). Further, in emphasizing that individuals are always-already caught up in material relations with the surroundings, Heidegger's phenomenological project comes strikingly close to that of pragmatism (cf. Okrent 1988; 2011; Rorty 2005) and, thus, the performative idiom characteristic of practical ontologies in STS (cf. Pickering 2017).

On the surface, the Heideggerian notion of 'Dasein' resembles the Cartesian 'cogito', not in that it focuses on a disembodied subject, but because it seems to designate a particular subject in the sense that Dasein is "determined by always being-mine" (Heidegger 2010, 42). However, Heidegger's focus is fundamentally different for at least two reasons: First, he explicitly points out that Dasein is not a category but that it precedes all ontologies and categorizations (Heidegger 2010, 12). Second, despite emphasizing the being-mineness of Dasein, he also states that "we ourselves *are* it, each of us" (Heidegger 2010, 15). In fact, as John Haugeland emphasizes, Dasein is irreducible to an actor or a collection of actors since

the anyone, the (every day) world, and language are different coherent "subpatterns" within the grand pattern that is *Dasein*; they have *Dasein*'s kind of being because each of them *is Dasein* (though none of them is all of *Dasein*) (Haugeland 1982, 9).

Thus, 'Dasein' designates the being of humans in both their individuality and generality. The latter is evident from the various existential modes, sights, object-categories etcetera introduced by Heidegger in *Being and Time* which all express general human-world engagements.

3 ... and rephrased

Classical approaches to phenomenology challenge the subject-object dichotomy and, as argued above, Heidegger's phenomenology not only rejects Cartesian concepts but also focuses on the generality of human existence. Nonetheless, classical phenomenology faces another major shortcoming that, at first sight, suggests that it is incompatible with the performative idiom in STS.

Phenomenological research apparently focuses on humans in particular, local situations. In the literature, we find many examples: Husserl's (2001) visit to the wax-museum, Sartre's (2010) meeting with his friend Pierre in a café, Heidegger's (1995) account of experiencing boredom at a train station. Accordingly, it is crucial to clarify the link between, on the one hand, the phenomenological characteristics of subjects in immediate and local situations and, on the other, relations that exceed their locality into what proponents of STS denote as 'networks' or 'assemblages'. Given a focus on particular situations, proponents of classical phenomenology adopt assumptions like those of classical micro-sociology as espoused by Erwin Goffman who famously argues that the "essence" of social phenomena lies in localized interactions (Goffman 1983). On this view, sociological research should center on embodied situations where two or more subjects interact face-to-face and, in so doing, avoid macro-level description. More specifically, he writes that, in its most basic sense, social interaction

can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence (Goffman 1983, 2).

But as Karin Knorr Cetina reminds us, Goffman's theory has a major failing.⁴ It offers no framework for describing present-day social phenomena that unfold in "global domains" which "span all major time zones" but nevertheless "run on microsocial principles illuminated by interactionist ideas" (Knorr Cetina 2009, 62). Indeed, classical sociology and phenomenology both seem ill-suited in dealing with global phenomena that exceed the boundaries of embodied situations. For this reason, the real challenge to phenomenology, in Heideggerian and other guises, seems to lie in whether it has the potential for disclosing the link between particular subjects (with general phenomenological traits!) and practical ontologies that, in a performative idiom, transcend the spatiotemporal constraints of embodied situations. Indeed, as Latour notes, ANT which is the theoretical basis of the performative idiom of STS (cf. Pickering 1994) has already shown itself capable of overcoming this challenge:

The first advantage of thinking in terms of networks is that we get rid of "the tyranny of distance" or proximity; elements which are close when disconnected may be infinitely remote if their connections are analyzed (Latour 1996a, 4).

Clearly, it acknowledges that human-nonhuman relations are potentially situation transcending. In another context, therefore, Latour explicitly acknowledges that social engagements entail a "dislocation in time and space" (Latour 1996b, 239) and, for this reason, are irreducible to the particularities of localized situations and interactions.

4 Phenomenological distance and de-distancing

Having shown that phenomenological theories seem to overplay the immediacy of embodied situations, I argue that phenomenology has the potential for acknowledging global phenomena. Specifically, Heidegger's phenomenology is plainly compatible with - and, thus, relevant to - the practical ontologies of the performative idiom. Accordingly, I turn to how Heidegger's Dasein-phenomenology serves to explore the connection between, on the one hand, the phenomenology of localized human subjects (in their generality!) and, on the other, global phenomena that enact relations within a network or an

assemblage. Although Heidegger did not pursue such matters, he saw that Dasein involves global events. In fact, this insight is central to the phenomenon of ‘phenomenological distance’ in Heidegger’s opus. I will now present the case that this kind of distance plays a crucial role in co-experiencing the local and the global.

For human subjects, phenomenological distance is of vital importance. As noted, appeal to ‘being there’ underlines how Dasein inevitably entails subject-environment relations. Dasein is always localized in a situation in the sense that human subjects are always-already preoccupied with nearby things, people etc. which contribute to the ‘there’ of their Dasein. The exposition in *Being and Time* shows that spatiality is not to be considered in objective terms (e.g. metric units). For Heidegger, distance is experiential or, in other terms, human phenomenology scaffolds ‘existential spatiality’ which, on his view, implies engagement with what is ‘there’. For Heidegger, a phenomenological ‘there’ is quite unlike a ‘here’ in the sense that the phenomenological notions of

“[h]ere” and “over there” are possible only in a “there,” that is, when there is a being which as the being of the “there” has disclosed spatiality (Heidegger 2010, 129).

It thus makes sense when Heidegger states that Dasein always “brings its there along with it” (ibid.). This observation is important to phenomenology in that it allows experiential nearness (what Heidegger calls ‘the there’) to disclose things, people, material structures etcetera. This disclosure of the world, as John Haugeland rightly emphasizes, is “the condition of the possibility for discovering intrawordly entities” (Haugeland 1989, 51). However, the disclosedness of the ‘there’ highlights localized presence and situated interactions. Like Goffman, Heidegger appears to neglect phenomena and relations that, in Knorr Cetina’s (2009) or Latour’s (1996b) terms, are ‘global’.

To avoid such a restricted focus, Heidegger introduces the concept of *de-distancing* [Ent-fernung]. This “key aspect of the Heideggerian oeuvre”, Peter Sloterdijk notes, “has mostly been overlooked by commentators” (Sloterdijk 2012, 36). As a phenomenological process, de-distancing implies that subjects enact a “bringing near”. They act to engage with what is not yet constituted as a ‘there’ (a potential presence). In so doing, de-distancing allows Dasein to make “distance disappear” (Heidegger 2010, 103). Human subjects thus have the potential for letting “beings be encountered in nearness” (ibid.). We can identify at least one obvious point of contact with Knorr Cetina’s (2009) global view of ‘synthetic situations’. This is because de-distancing happens as subjects orient beyond immediate experience towards, above all, events and situations that lie outside immediate embodied space (e.g. the financial markets). Our capacity for bringing near thus showcases how human cognitive life reaches beyond instincts and/or embodied habits. In Kantian terms, it depends on our “will” to experience different things and, accordingly, define our own wants and needs (e.g. socially, materially, politically, sexually etcetera). So, even if Heidegger stresses that spatiality is anchored in the corporeality of human subjects (cf. Heidegger 2010, 106), his notion of de-distancing is not to be understood as merely connecting subjects with things and people in their surroundings. Rather, the capacity for bringing something near allows subjects to orient themselves to events, situations and phenomena with a global aspect (one shared, of course, by people and things). One means of so doing is through communication technologies. As Heidegger writes:

All that which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man—all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than

the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world (Heidegger 2006, 90).

The point here is not the well-known fact that Heidegger targets modern technology by identifying it as an existential threat to Dasein (cf. Ihde 2009) and, thus, argues in favor of a “localized way of dwelling” (cf. Dreyfus and Wrathall 2005, 14). Rather, it is that global events and trends impinge on human phenomenology. Further, he allows that subjects can actively engage with these by de-distancing. Modern technologies such as television and radio thus enable global phenomena to transcend an immediately given situation by allowing Dasein to connect with things and people that lie beyond the immediate spatiotemporal realm. De-distancing is a phenomenological attitude which pre-reflectively and non-theoretically brings certain parts of the world close to the subject. As the following quote underlines, de-distancing is vital for the enactment of this relation between subject and world:⁵

All kinds of increasing speeds which we are more or less compelled to go along with today push for overcoming distance. With the “radio,” for example, Dasein is bringing about today a de-distancing of the “world,” [...] by way of expanding and destroying the everyday surrounding world (Heidegger 2010, 103).

The same goes for film in that it, according to Heidegger, carries us “off into uncommon, but often merely common, realms of the imagination” (Heidegger 2006, 90). In short, certain technologies grant experience of remote parts of the world or, indeed, fictitious worlds. In recognizing that global trends affect experience, Heidegger’s account is entirely in accord with practical ontologies. Indeed, ‘de-distancing’ enables phenomenologists to overcome what Latour (2006a) calls the “tyranny of distance”. It offers a phenomenological basis for clarifying how infrastructures such as Phnom Penh’s run-down sewage system can stir imagination and pipedreams.

At first sight, de-distancing seems to be strictly individual in that it depends on an individual actor’s potential for - and willingness to - bring something near. For this reason, it remains unclear to what extent de-distancing is applicable to socio-material practices which unfold as collective phenomena. Nonetheless, Heidegger explicitly treats de-distancing as a practical attitude pertaining to Dasein. He states that “for the most part, de-distancing is a circumspect approaching, a bringing near as supplying, preparing, having at hand” (Heidegger 2010, 103). In stressing its practical aspect, he calls it a “circumspect approaching”. For as Paul Gibbs points out, on a Heideggerian view,

circumspection is what distinguishes practical activity from theoretical, in the sense that practical activities gave a particular orientation mode: circumspection (Gibbs 2011, 150).

The notion of de-distancing is powerful enough to apply on an individual level both with and without practical significance. In his examples, moreover, Heidegger does not focus on a particular subject. Rather, de-distancing happens on a collective level for a group of subjects (e.g. “the peasants of the Black Forrest”, “people nowadays”, “people living in the big cities” etcetera). This once again underlines that his phenomenology can be connected up with practical ontologies which are also concerned with the generality of actor-world relations as parts of social networks and assemblages or, simply, Dasein.

There is one remaining shortcoming in Heidegger’s phenomenology. No account is offered on how specific technologies affect human living and mediate practices that transcend localized settings.

Accordingly, there is a need to enrich his phenomenology with insights from recent research that includes the performative idiom in STS and postphenomenology. In the terms of Hans Achterhuis (2001), Heidegger's works are clearly classical rather than modern. Correctly, Ihde traces this to Heidegger's skepticism of modern technology and how he approaches it with a high level of abstraction based on an interest in how machine-based technologies exploit the ecology, challenge Dasein, and render experiences and social relations inauthentic (cf. Thomson 2005, 63).⁶ Consequently, Heidegger says little about actual technologies which, at best, he treats unsystematically. For this reason, much can be gained from empirically-based approaches that do not take technologies for given but, in Achterhuis's terms, explore "their concrete development and formation" (quote in Ihde 2009, 22).

5 Conclusion

Phenomenological research is potentially compatible with the performative idiom in STS. I base this conclusion on the following three observations: First, performativists clearly acknowledge the interconnectedness of, on the one hand, subjective experience and, on the other, nonhuman entities and socio-material practices. When describing networks, assemblages or activity trails, scholars explicitly presuppose a link to human embodiment and phenomenology. This makes sense in that STS explores how technology influences society and, consequently, human living. Second, Heidegger supersedes the classical subject-object distinction in unambiguous terms by introducing 'Dasein' as an alternative to 'subject', 'ego', 'cogito' and similar categorical notions. In fact, this move is not surprising given that much phenomenological research explicitly critiques Cartesian-inspired ontologies. The notion of 'Dasein' is particularly suitable in an STS-context given that it denotes the generality of human existence. Third, individual and collective phenomenology interrelate with global practices. In fact, Heidegger's phenomenology is open for exploring how networks and assemblages influence human actors in their local situations. In this connection, the phenomenological capacity for 'de-distancing' is important because it entails that subjects engage with things, events, people etcetera by drawing them near. Rather than depending on pre-determined instincts or habits, human actors, willingly or unwillingly, relate to global phenomena such as infrastructures, ideologies etcetera. The human ability to make distance disappear (to paraphrase Heidegger) is what allows our societies to be global in the sense used by Latour, Knorr Cetina and others in favor of practical ontologies. Specifically, de-distancing enables us to partake in socio-material relations that are fundamentally different from those of other big apes.

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¹ This apparent shortcoming is also recognized by STS-scholars who explore human-computer interactions (HCI) from a performative perspective. As Jan Rod and Denisa Kera observe, the "interpretations of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology in HCI take almost exclusively the subject (user) as the point of departure for further thinking about the interaction". Consequently, they argue, "[w]e need to rethink this starting point in order to approach the design of large techno-social systems that are more complex in this respect" (Rod and Kera 2010, 73).

² There are also those who push a ‘Object Oriented Ontology’ (OOO) in an explicit attempt to avoid subject-centeredness (e.g. Harman 2011). Proponents of OOO seek to embrace a flat ontology by dismissing consciousness studies (cf. Morton 2011). Specifically, they do so by focusing on “objects in-themselves”. As Lemke (2017) shows, however, this move entails a tacit commitment to subjectivism.

³ A similar assumption grounds Alfred Schutz’s social phenomenology which presents an in-depth analysis of the connection between the classical phenomenological notion of *lifeworld* and socio-cultural reality (Costelloe 1996). Schutz thus showcases how ‘lifeworld’ which is a concept used by many classical phenomenologists (cf. Kockelmans 1986) is compatible with sociological concepts.

⁴ Here I find it useful to draw on Goffman for the following two reasons: First, Knorr Cetina’s criticism of Goffman’s restricted focus on the locally situated is analogous to the criticism that proponents of the performative idiom in STS could direct at classical phenomenology. Second, Knorr Cetina uses this criticism to explore global interactions. By limiting her focus to social ontologies, however, she abstains from clarifying the experiential basis of such interactions.

⁵ According to Hubert Dreyfus, Heidegger takes “the real danger” of machine-powered technology to be that technology has imposed “a restriction in our way of thinking” and, specifically, our understanding of being (Dreyfus 1995, 55). Consequently, humans need to break free of modern technology. That said, however, Dreyfus does not discuss whether Heideggerian phenomenology provides useful concepts for exploring human-nonhuman relations that are constitutive of STS-style practical ontologies.

⁶ Some scholars including Robert Scharff would disagree. Scharff argues that Heidegger’s view on technology is neither abstract nor dystopian (Scharff 2010, 106). Nevertheless, he recognizes that “Heidegger does not share the happy, unreflective complacency that usually accompanies the developed-world idea” (ibid.). Thus, Scharff seems to tacitly agree that questions relating to the constitution of global practices fall outside of Heidegger’s scope.