A return from madness or a retreat into Cartesianism?

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David Webster’s article is presented as a critique of the interpretive strand of post-processual archaeology. This raises certain problems, for it seems to assume from the start that post-processual archaeology represents a relatively homogeneous entity, characterised by a single point of view, at least as far as interpretation is concerned. For instance, Webster moves swiftly from Ian Hodder to Tim Yates, neglecting that the latter’s point of view is very much informed by post-structuralism, while the former is rather more humanist in outlook. I suspect that this is diagnostic of a degree of parody in what is being presented here: Webster is setting up an ideal of the kind of post-processualism that he would like to argue against. Things may actually be a little more complicated.

Webster cites Heidegger (1996) as authority for his argument that interpretation does not intrude into mundane life. Yet we should remember that Heidegger established a hermeneutic phenomenology as an alternative to the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, which seems to be the ultimate inspiration for Webster’s approach. Husserl attempted to establish a phenomenology in which the ‘natural attitude’ (the way in which we commonly get on with things without standing back and reflecting on what is going on) is attributable to a series of ‘phenomena’ installed in consciousness. It was the ultimate failure of this enterprise that led Heidegger to compose the alternative that he presented in Being and Time, and for that reason I will refer to his (I think superior) perspective here. Heidegger argues that human Being is ‘interpreting Being’. That is to say, interpretation is not just something that we do (alongside other things), it is what we are (Heidegger 1996: 141; Gadamer 1975: 235). This presents a picture which is very different from the one that Webster paints, in which interpretation is very much out of the ordinary (in both senses of the phrase).

Webster’s argument is based on the model of ecological perception proposed by J. J. Gibson: a model that I would like to suggest is deeply problematic (e.g. Gibson 1986). As I understand it, Gibson argues that the organism and its sensory apparatus are co-extensive, so that the organism directly perceives its environment as an array of information. What stops this
information from being just a jumble of sensory impressions is the presence of the organism itself, and its relationship with its environment. So the environment is perceived as a set of affordances. How does the organism know which bits of information represent affordances, and in what way they represent affordances? How are these bits of information organised? This I take to be the role of the ‘natural attitude’ in Webster’s argument. The organism doesn’t have to think about what to do, it just gets on with it, because it is attuned to its environment through its natural attitude. But where does this natural attitude come from? As far as I can work out, the answer seems to be ‘adaptation’. If so, the explanation is so circular and so superficial as to seem to me to be no answer at all.

Now, I’d agree that the Gibson/Webster view is a massive advance on what Charles Taylor would call the ‘atomist-computational’ view of cognitive functioning (Taylor 1993: 321). In this perspective, people wander round collecting ‘bits’ of information, which they then internalise, so that their impressions of the world are ‘re-presented’ in some internal cognitive space (the ‘mind’s eye’). Representation forms a mediation between the interior and the exterior of the person, and the mind becomes utterly remote from the body and the external world. So this is an extreme form of Cartesianism. As he says, the view that Webster proposes removes the representational element, so that there is no longer an internal/external dichotomy or a mind/body split. However, I’d suggest that it remains deeply Cartesian. As far as I can see, the ‘natural attitude’ that Webster is describing is ‘natural’ in the post-Enlightenment sense. It seems to be hard-wired into the organism, presumably as a consequence of the adaptive process. This is very much the kind of argument that Husserl would have proposed. Interpretation, says Webster, doesn’t intervene in everyday life, it’s something over and above the natural attitude. Something mixed up with grammar and deep meaning. Isn’t this precisely the division between nature and culture? Moreover, doesn’t it suggest that human beings have a fundamental, ‘deep’ infrastructure of ‘natural attitude’, to which is added the superstructure of ‘interpretation’, a function of the reflective conscious mind?

This is very much the vision of humanity that Heidegger argued against in his famous ‘Letter on Humanism’: the notion of a ‘natural’ body onto which a mind and a soul had been added (Heidegger 1993: 233). That is, a creature ‘built in layers’. Heidegger’s own answer to the problem that Webster effectively raises is that the ‘natural attitude’ is not natural at all. Certainly, we ‘get on’ with the world without having to constantly reflect on it. But this ability to deal with things in a state of inconspicuous familiarity is actually culturally
installed. That is to say, the ‘natural attitude’ is actually composed of a series of coping mechanisms and ‘background practices’ that we have absorbed by virtue of being born into a particular society at a particular time (Dreyfus 1991: 62; 116). The ‘natural attitude’ isn’t uniform and universal, and it has a history. This is why we should address it with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.

Now, the point of all this is that Heidegger is effectively saying that the natural attitude isn’t outside of, or prior to, interpretation. Interpretation is what human beings are and do, but they don’t have to stand back from things and analyse them in order to understand them. As Heidegger puts it, we have always-already interpreted whatever we are confronted with in the world. That is, we have a pre-understanding of things, a fore-knowledge of the world that we customarily encounter in the course of our circumspection (Heidegger 1996: 141). Moreover, the world that we inhabit is a world of meaning and sense, rather than one of mute Cartesian objects. Webster would have us appropriating the world as an array of ‘information’. Heidegger puts it very differently: anything that we know, we know as something. The world that we know is a structure of intelligibility, not a set of potential information.

This is why I have difficulty with Webster’s account of ‘meaning’. He seems to me to have a very restricted conception of hermeneutics, limited to ‘what it means precisely for me’. So, when he says that ‘the simple making of a pot communicates nothing, stands as its own context, and means nothing beyond itself’, this seems deeply problematic to me. When we encounter a pot, we understand it to be a pot. It is revealed as a pot. That’s a meaning. I don’t see how anything can be meaningless, because we appropriate it in its meaningfulness. I do not agree with the distinction that Ian Hodder makes (and which Webster seems to concur with) between the simple meaning and the symbolic (or interpreted) meaning of a thing (Hodder 1986, 121; 1999, 135). We never simply achieve ‘a pickup of covariation’, we always experience things as something (Heidegger 1996: 139).

For this reason, when Webster asks ‘is there any meaning left in the Swedish rock carvings for Yates or anyone else?’, he seems to me to be in serious difficulty. Does he imagine that anyone thinks that the meaning resides in the rock carvings themselves? Presumably not, but does he equally think that these carvings can only be meaningful for the people who actually made them? Did they only have one legitimate addressee, one legitimate meaning, and one context in which they can be legitimately interpreted? Do they literally become meaningless for anyone else? These are issues that practitioners of hermeneutics, and particularly Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), have paid some attention to.

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The point is that we cannot come across a set of prehistoric rock-carvings (or anything else for that matter) is a state of pure and unsullied ‘meaninglessness’. We always already understand them in some way or other. In effect, Webster seems to be arguing for a kind of objectivity, in which we can stand aside from the remains of the past and see them as mere, meaningless things. Then we simply impose our processual interpretation on top of those things: ‘hypothesis, inference and calculation’. But following Gadamer, we get a very different view of what is going on. We enter into a hermeneutic engagement with the thing, which we have already understood in a certain way through our pre-understanding. Through our engagement with the thing, we attempt to challenge and flesh out our understanding. Of course we never leave the present, and we never enter into the heads of past people, and we never achieve a ‘fusion of horizons’, acquiring an understanding of the material which coincides with that of past people. None the less, we should recognise that those past people themselves would not have had an understanding that was uniform. And of course, the past world that we are addressing was not composed merely of consciousness, and past minds did not precede the material traces that we are engaged with. Past worlds were material worlds, in which thought and action were thoroughly imbricated. What we do as (interpretive) archaeologists is to enter into a relationship with material things, though which we create understanding, just as people in the past engaged with those same material things. The presence of the material, be it a Swedish rock carving or whatever else, means that our understanding is in some sense an analogue for that of past people.

Now, I would not claim that this is what all ‘post-processual’ archaeologists would consider to be an interpretive archaeology, but it is for some of them. Webster seems to be arguing against something rather different. His conflation of different arguments is particularly clear in the way in which he draws upon John Chapman’s (1997) statements about the transformation of space into place. Now, I do not really know whether John Chapman would think of himself as a post-processualist or not, and in a sense it does not particularly matter. The point is that many of the authors whom Webster is addressing would not accept the space/place argument at all. If we return to Heidegger, the sense of his many arguments about ‘dwelling’ is that we never experience geometric, Cartesian space: we always first of all come across places that are already meaningful to us (Heidegger 1971). In order to understand the world as geometrical ‘space’, we have to conduct what Heidegger would call an ‘un-worlding’. We have to sever things from their relational context and render them ‘mere’ things composed of extension and velocity. The point about the so-called ‘humanistic geographers’ is that, just

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as their name would imply, they were too humanistic. Like Sartre, they appropriated Heidegger's ideas and robbed them of much of their force. Human beings do not come across meaningless spaces and render them meaningful through their actions: humans inhabit a world that is meaningful ‘all the way down’.

This is why Webster’s discussion of the ‘out-there-ness’ of landscape is simply a misunderstanding of what is being said in the articles that he quotes. The sacred mountain may be ‘out there’ in the sense that it is the place where the evil spirits dwell. However, it is not first of all a set of arrangements of matter or an assemblage of sensory experiences onto which the presence of evil spirits is latterly mapped. For the aborigines, it is a place of evil spirits, all the way down, because that is how it is encountered and understood.

Webster rounds up his argument by suggesting that ‘one way back is to start to think about how we might chart out what is in fact beneath and thus the ground of any motivated interpretations’. The spatial metaphor that he uses here is revealing, for it demonstrates the same stratified thinking that Heidegger criticised in the Letter on Humanism (1993). For Webster, it seems that the natural attitude is a primordial substructure given by nature, a set of instinctual responses to the environment, onto which interpretation is added as a secondary operation. This is not a return from madness, but a retreat into Cartesianism.

Reply to this paper by David Webster

Bibliography


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