

## No more ancient; no more human: the future past of archaeology and anthropology

*Tim Ingold*

### *Introduction*

The year is 2053, and the Association of Social Anthropologists is celebrating its centennial with a big conference.<sup>1</sup> As scholars are wont to do on such occasions, a number of contributors to the conference have been dwelling on the past century of the discipline with a mixture of wistfulness, curiosity and hubris, wondering why their predecessors hung on with such tenacity to forms of argumentation that now seem rather quaint. Everyone recognises that the title of the Association is a relic of past times. Social Anthropology is not what it was, for it is distinguished neither by a preoccupation with social phenomena, nor by the axiom that such phenomena are the exclusive preserve of a categorical humanity. The discipline has become, rather, a principled inquiry into the conditions and potentials of life in a world peopled by beings whose identities are established not by species membership but by relational accomplishment.

By this year of 2053, the term 'Archaeology', too, has become an anachronism, for the subject that still goes by that name has long since lost its association with antiquity. It is not that archaeologists have ceased to dig down for evidence of past lives, any more than ethnographers have ceased to participate in the lives that are going on around them, in what we call the present. But they have dropped the pretence that what is past is any older, or more ancient, than the present, recognising that the occurrences of the past are not deposited at successive moments while time moves on, but are themselves constitutive of that very movement. Between Archaeology and Social Anthropology, then, there is no longer any difference of principle. They have, in effect, converged upon a science of life whose overriding concern is to *follow what is going on*, within dynamic fields of relationships wherein the forms of beings and things are generated and held in place.

### *No more ancient*

In short, both the *archaeo-* of archaeology and the *anthropo-* of anthropology have lost their former appeal. To show why this has come about, I shall examine these disciplinary

prefixes in more depth. Starting with *archaeo-*, we could pose the following question. What does it mean to ask how old something is? Or to put it another way, what kinds of assumptions do we make about a thing for such a question even to make sense? How old is a mountain, a river, a stone? How old is the wind, a cloud, a raindrop, or an ocean wave? How old is a tree, a person, a building, a pot, a piece of furniture? 'Ah, that writing desk', you exclaim with some relief, 'I can tell you *exactly* how old it is'. For you are a specialist in antiques, and an expert in such matters. A little bit of detective work allows you to deduce when it was made. Let us say that it dates from 1653. Remembering that we are now in the year 2053, you conclude that the desk is exactly four hundred years old.

But if we judge the age of a thing by the elapsed time from the moment it was made to the present, does this mean that for us to ask how old it is, the thing must at some time have been *manufactured*? Is 'how old is that?' a question that can only be asked of artefacts? Even if we answer, perhaps with some unease, in the affirmative, this only begs a host of further questions. The desk is made of oak, which was once hewn from a living tree and well seasoned before being cut into planks. Why should we not say that the desk is as old as the oak? After all, in substance if not in form, there is no more, and no less to the desk than the wood of which it is made. Then how old is the oak? The tree was not manufactured; it grew. Is it as old, then, as the acorn from which it sprang? Is the oak, in other words, older than the wood from which the desk was made? Then again, the desk has not remained unaltered by use. Generations of writers have worn and scratched its surface. Here and there, the wood has cracked and split, due to fluctuations of temperature and humidity, or been restored with filler and glue. How can we distinguish those alterations that result from use and repair, from those that are intrinsic to the process of manufacture?

The answer, of course, is that something is deemed to have been made at the point when its form matches a conception that is supposed to have pre-existed in the mind of a maker. The notion that making entails the bringing together of a conceptual form (*morphe*) and material substance (*hyle*) has, ever since Aristotle, been one of the mainstays of the western intellectual tradition. What goes for the writing desk also goes for the pot: when we ask how old it is, we count its age from the moment when form and substance were united in the allegedly finished thing. The clay, we suppose, is shaped in the potter's hands to a final form which, once hardened and fired, it retains in perpetuity. Even if the pot is now smashed, we identify its 'finishing' with the instant of original formation, not of fragmentation and discard.

So it is with the building, though at this point we might feel rather less sure of ourselves. What a difference, in English, the article makes! Building is an activity; it is what builders do. But as soon as we add the article and speak of *a* building, or even of *the* building, the activity is abruptly brought to a close. Movement is stilled, and where people had once laboured with tools and materials, there now stands a monument to human endeavour, solid and complete. Yet as all inhabitants know, buildings are never

really finished. 'A "building"', observes the inventor and designer Stewart Brand, 'is always building and rebuilding' (Brand 1994: 2). The work of building goes on, in the day-to-day activities of repair and maintenance, and in the face of the inundations of animals, plants and fungi, and the corrosive effects of wind, rain and sunshine.

If, for this reason, it is difficult to state with conviction how old a building is, how much more difficult it must be once we turn from buildings to people! Of course, if you ask me how old I am, I can tell you right away. I was born in 1948, which means that since the year is 2053, I am presently 105 years old. But wait. In all probability, I died a few years ago, though I cannot tell you exactly when. Why, then, did you not start counting from the day I died? Why do we always count how old people are from their date of birth rather than death? Surely, at least for as long as people are still alive, they are not yet finished. Just as buildings are always building and rebuilding, and trees always budding and shooting, are not people always peopling, throughout their lives and even thereafter?

I think there is a reason why we count the years from a person's birth rather than from his or her death. It is the same reason why we count the age of the writing desk from when it was made, and the age of the oak from the germination of the acorn. There is a sense in which we believe that the person is finished even before his or her life in the world has begun. Though we conventionally date this finishing moment to birth, it would be more accurate to date it to that of conception. Indeed it is no accident that the inauguration of a new life should be known as a moment when the child is *conceived*, since it conforms to a logic identical to that of the Aristotelian model of making. According to this logic, a person is created in advance – or, as we say, *procreated* – through the unification of a set of ideal attributes with bodily substance. And if we ask where these attributes come from, the answer that social anthropologists would have provided, up to and even following the first decades of the twenty-first century, would have been: *by descent*. That is, each generation receives the rudiments of person-composition from their ancestors and passes them on, with greater or lesser fidelity, to their descendants. But the life of every person is expended *within* each generation, in being the person he or she is. For as we have seen, all the creative work has been done in advance, through the mutation and recombination of transmitted attributes.

What I have described is the essence of the *genealogical model*, namely that persons and things are virtually constituted, independently and in advance of their material instantiation in the lifeworld, by way of the transmission of ready-made but mutable attributes in an ancestor-descendant sequence (Ingold 2000: 136). I hope to have shown how closely this model is linked both to the idea that constitution involves the unification of form and substance, and to the possibility of asking – of both persons and things – how old they are. Returning to my original list, which ran from mountains, rivers and stones, through winds, clouds, raindrops and waves, to trees, people, buildings, pots and furniture, the tendency in thinking about antiquity has always been to start at the end and to push back as far as one can go. It is to think

of things early in the list, like raindrops and clouds, as though they were part of the furniture.<sup>2</sup> Yet already with people and buildings, we run into the problem that this way of thinking cannot countenance how people build buildings, and buildings people, throughout their lives. Once we move on to things placed earlier in the list, such problems become insurmountable.

We are talking here of things that grow and wither, swell and abate, flow and ebb, whose forms emerge from the movements and circulations of earth, air and water. Yet these things are as much a part of the inhabited world as people and artefacts. One of the oddities of archaeology, as late as the first decade of the twenty-first century, was that it imagined the entire material world, barring the people themselves, as furnished accommodation. It was as though people, buildings and the artefacts to be found in them comprised *all there is*. In such a world, however, there would be no air to breathe, no sunlight to fuel organic growth, no moisture or soil to support it. Without these things, life would be impossible. And it was at the very moment when it began to dawn on archaeologists that the world they had imagined was crippled by inertia, but when they were still prisoners of the idea that things are constituted through the unification of form and substance (as in the classic concept of 'material culture'), that they came up with the notion of *agency*. The word was introduced to fix an insoluble conundrum: how could anything happen in a world of solid and immutable forms? The answer was to endow them with an intrinsic, but ultimately mysterious, capacity to act. Huge efforts and millions of words were expended in the futile search for this capacity. Fortunately, we can now put all that behind us.

For what has taken place, during the first half of the twenty-first century, has been a genuine sea-change in our thinking. One way of putting it would be to say that where before, the tendency was to start from the end of our list and work backwards, we would now – in 2053 – be more inclined to start from the beginning and work forwards. This is to think of a world not of finished entities, each of which can be attributed to a novel conception, but of processes that are *continually carrying on*, and of forms as the more or less durable envelopes or crystallisations of these processes. The shape of the mountain or the banks of the stream attest to processes of erosion that are still going on now, as they have done in the past. The rounded forms of pebbles on a shingle beach arise from their abrasion under the constant pounding of the waves, which are still breaking on the shore, even as sea-levels have risen and fallen. Ocean waves have the same basic forms now that they did hundreds, thousands or even millions of years ago, as do storm clouds and raindrops. We may say of these forms that they *persist*. Of a pot, however, or even of a body buried in a peat bog, we would say that it is *preserved*. It is the focus on persistence rather than preservation that distinguishes current archaeology from that of earlier times.

It would be fair to say that traditional archaeology was more interested in pots and bog bodies than in mountains or clouds. For only such things as were deemed to have been preserved qualified for entry in what was called the 'archaeological record'. It is

a record comprised of fragments that, having once broken off from the flow of time, recede ever further from the horizon of the present. They become older and older, held fast to the moment, while the rest of the world moves on. But by the same token, the things of the archaeological record do not persist. For whatever persists carries on, advancing on the cusp of time. Waves continue to break, raindrops to form and to fall upon the mountainside, filling streams that continue to flow. In focusing on such things – persistent but not preserved, experientially ever-present yet ever absent from the record – current archaeology is interested not in their antiquity, not in how old they are, but in what we could call their ‘pastness’,<sup>3</sup> recognising them as carryings on along temporal trajectories that continue in the present. From the fixed standpoint of antiquity, what carries on also passes, and is thus ephemeral. If our interest is with pastness, however, it is the things that carry on that last, whereas the enduring constituents of the archaeological record, comprising the cast-offs of time and history, are ephemeral.

Persistent things have no point of origin. Rather, they seem to be originating all the time. For contemporary archaeologists, this is fundamentally the way things are. The world we inhabit, they say, *is* originating all the time, or undergoing what we might call ‘continuous birth’ (Ingold 2006: 3–4). And if that is true of mountains, rivers and clouds, then why should it not also be true of persons? Instead of comparing persons to buildings, pots and writing desks, and concluding that all are endowed with agency, we could compare them to mountains, rivers and clouds, recognising that all are immersed in the continuous birth of the world. This is to think of the life of the person, too, as a process without beginning or end, punctuated but not originated or terminated by key events such as birth and death, and all the other things that happen in between. And it is to find the locus of creativity not in the novelty of conception, to be unified with substance, but in the form-generating potentials of the life process, or in a word, in *growth*. And pushing this way of thinking as far as we can, we could wonder whether it might not give us a better understanding of things like buildings, pots and furniture. In so far as their forms, too, emerge within processes of material flow and transformation, cannot they also be said to grow? Even our writing desk could be considered as a phase in the pastness of oak!

### *No more human*

This is the point at which to return from the *archaeo-* of archaeology to the *anthropo-* of anthropology. I have already connected the time-honoured archaeological concern with antiquity, with how old things are, to the genealogical model of classical social anthropology. Of course the genealogical model was never *confined* to social anthropology, but was rather characteristic of thought across a range of disciplines. One of these was biology, reconfigured in the wake of the Darwinian revolution as

the study of genealogically related life-forms, and concerned above all with tracing the phylogenetic pathways along which populations were understood to adapt through variation under natural selection. In the neo-Darwinian revival of the late twentieth century, the commitment to the genealogical model became ever more hard-line and explicit as living organisms came to be seen as the recipients and vehicles of digital information, their lives dedicated to the project of transmitting this information to progeny. Axiomatically, every organism was understood as the product of an interaction between genes and environment: the former introducing a character specification in the form of a suite of attributes or traits; the latter supplying the material conditions for their realisation. So far, so Aristotle.

Yet it is worth remembering that the one work widely credited with having launched modern biology had virtually nothing to say about human beings. This was of course *The Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin. As he laid out the argument of his book, Darwin imagined himself as a spectator, watching the panorama of nature unfold before his eyes. Bringing the book to a close, he famously observed that 'there is grandeur in this view of life' (Darwin 1872: 403). But it is not a view available to non-humans. How was it, then, that human beings – or at least the more civilised among them – could reach such a transcendent position that they could hold the entirety of nature in their sights? How could they *know* nature in a way denied to other creatures, which could only *be* in it? Granted that Darwin could explain natural selection, could natural selection explain Darwin? It was in a later book, *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, that Darwin set out to answer this question (Darwin 1874). Where *The Origin of Species* was a view, as it were, from the summit, *The Descent of Man* was an account of the climb (Ingold 1986: 49). And as everyone knows, his conclusion was that however great the gulf between the summiteers and the denizens of the lower slopes, the difference was one of degree rather than kind, and could be filled by countless gradations. The very notion of differences of degree, however, implies a common scale. By what measure, then, are some creatures high and others low?

It was a scale, in effect, of the balance of reason over instinct. Flying in the face of all that he had argued in the *Origin* about the ways in which species adapt along ever diverging lines and in manifold fashions to their particular conditions of life, Darwin now maintained that the relentless pressure of natural selection would drive an increase of 'mental power' across the board. Even in such lowly creatures as earthworms and fish one could observe a glimmer of reason, while at the other end of the scale, the residues of instinct could be detected in the most exalted of men (and still more so in women and savages of various descriptions). Contrary to the thinking of many but by no means all of his predecessors, Darwin insisted that the possession of reason – or the lack of it – was not an all or nothing affair distinguishing all humans from all non-humans. In evolutionary terms, he thought, reason advanced by a gradual, if accelerating ascent, and not by a quantum leap. Yet he never wavered from the mainstream view that it was man's possession of the faculty of reason that allowed him to rise above, and to

exercise dominion over, the world of nature. In short, for Darwin and for his many followers, the evolution of species *in* nature was also an evolution *out* of it, in so far as it progressively liberated the mind from the promptings of innate disposition.

After a shaky start, Darwin's stock grew throughout the twentieth century to the point at which he had become a virtual saint among scientists. The celebration, in 2009, of the bicentenary of his birth spawned a glut of hagiography. We could not, it seemed, have enough of it. Yet the history of anthropology's flirtation with Darwinism had been far from glorious. Up until the outbreak of the Second World War, prominent physical anthropologists, drawing chapter and verse from *The Descent of Man*, were continuing to maintain that what were known as civilised and savage races of man differed in hereditary powers of reason in just the same way that the latter differed from apes, and that interracial conflict would inevitably drive up intelligence by weeding out the less well endowed groups. In 1931 Sir Arthur Keith, distinguished physical anthropologist and erstwhile President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, delivered a Rectorial address at my own institution, the University of Aberdeen, in which he maintained that interracial xenophobia was to be encouraged as a way of selecting out the weaker varieties. The war of races, Keith declared, is Nature's pruning hook (Keith 1931).<sup>4</sup>

But the second war in a century to break out among the supposedly civilised races of Europe, itself fuelled by xenophobic hatred, put paid to such ideas. In the wake of the Holocaust, what was self-evident to Darwin and most of his contemporaries – namely, that human populations differed in their intellectual capacities on a scale from the primitive to the civilised – was no longer acceptable. Darwin's view that the difference between the savage and the civilised man was one of brain-power gave way in mainstream science to a strong moral and ethical commitment to the idea that *all* humans – past, present and future – are equally endowed, at least so far as their moral and intellectual capacities were concerned. 'All human beings', as Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, 'are endowed with reason and conscience'. To emphasise this unity, scientists reclassified extant human beings as members not just of the same species but of the same sub-species, designated *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Yet if these beings are alike in their possession of reason and conscience – if, in other words, they are the kinds of beings who, according to orthodox juridical precepts, can exercise rights and responsibilities – then they must differ in kind from all other beings that cannot. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, then, was no ordinary sub-species. Doubly sapient, the first attribution of wisdom, the outcome of a process of encephalisation, marked it out within the world of living things. But the second, far from marking a further subdivision, registered a decisive break from that world. In what many late twentieth century commentators took to calling the 'human revolution' (Mellars and Stringer 1989), the earliest representatives of the new sub-species were alleged to have achieved a breakthrough without parallel in the history of life, setting them on the path of ever-increasing discovery and self-knowledge otherwise known as culture or civilisation. Human beings by nature, it was in the historical endeavour of reaching

beyond that very nature that they progressively realised the essence of their humanity. Half in nature, half out, pulled in sometimes contrary directions by the imperatives of genetic inheritance and cultural tradition, their double-barrelled sub-specific appellation perfectly epitomised the hybrid constitution of these creatures.

It was with this cast of unlikely characters, known to science as 'modern humans' (as opposed to the 'archaic' variety, so-called Neanderthals, who had not made it through to the second grade of sapientisation), that the evolutionary anthropology of the late twentieth century populated the planet. The first such humans were portrayed as archetypal hunter-gatherers, people whom history had left behind. *Biologically* modern, they were supposed to have remained *culturally* at the starting block, fated to enact a script perfected through millennia of adaptation under natural selection. It was a script, however, that only science could read. Between the hunter-gatherer and the scientist, respectively pre- and post-historic, was supposed to lie all the difference between being and knowing, between the adaptive surrender to nature and its subjugation in the light of reason. In this scenario, it was the achievement of *cultural* modernity that provided science with the platform of supremacy from which, with no little hubris and profound contradiction, it asserted that human beings were part and parcel of the natural world.

Indeed by the late twentieth century it had become apparent that in this contradiction lay the very meaning of 'the human'. Referring neither to a species of nature nor to a condition of being that transcends nature, but rather to both simultaneously, it is a word that points to the existential dilemma of a creature that can know itself and the world of which it is a part only through the renunciation of its being in that world. Writing at the turn of our present century, the philosopher Agamben argued that the recognition of the human is the product of an 'anthropological machine' that relentlessly drives us apart, in our capacity for self-knowledge, from the continuum of organic life within which our very existence is encompassed (Agamben 2004: 27). To resolve the contradiction – that is, to comprehend knowing as being, and being as knowing – calls for nothing less than a dismantling of the machine. Far from tacking on a second *sapiens* to mark the onset of fully fledged humanity, it was necessary to move in a direction opposite to that of twentieth century science, and to attend to the generic *Homo* itself. And that was the direction anthropology took. By the first decades of the twenty-first century, it had become obvious that the concept of the human would have to go.

How come that anthropology was brought to such a pass that it had to relinquish the very *anthropos* from which the discipline had taken its name? The answer is that it came from thinking with, and about, children. In fact, children had always posed a problem for anthropology. Apparently delivered into the world as natural beings, devoid of culture and civilisation, they had somehow to be provided with the rudiments of identity that would make them into proper social persons. Childhood, wrote Goldschmidt sixty years ago, is characterised by 'the process of transformation of the infant from a purely biological being into a culture-bearing one' (Goldschmidt 1993:

351). As the offspring of human parents, the new-born baby was acknowledged as a human being from the start, but as one that had still to reach the condition of being human. On their way from infancy to adulthood, children appeared to be biologically complete but culturally half-baked. Indeed their status came closely to resemble that of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, likewise suspended in a liminal phase in the transition from a natural to a fully cultural life.

The resemblance is no accident. For in both instances the anthropological machine was at work, producing the human by regarding as not yet fully human an already human being (Agamben 2004: 37). Some humans, it transpired, were more human than others: grown-ups more than children; scientists more than hunter-gatherers. Moreover this same machine, dividing body and soul, generated a point of origin as the moment when these components were conjoined in the definition of a historical project, whether for the individual human being or for humankind as a whole. We used to speak, without batting an eyelid, of 'early man', and of the child's 'early years'. It was as though the antiquity of prehistoric hunter-gatherers could be judged, like the ages of pre-school children, by their proximity to their respective origins. Just as the child was deemed to be closer to its origin than the adult, so likewise, early humans were thought to be closer than later ones to that mighty moment when humanity began. Yet despite their best efforts, prehistorians failed to find this moment. And this was for the simple reason that it never existed. Nor indeed is there any such moment in the life of the child.

In reality, as we all know, children are not half-baked hybrids of biology and culture but beings who make their way in the world with as much facility and hindrance, as much fluency and awkwardness, as grown-ups. They are in the process not of becoming human, but of becoming the people they are. In a word, they are *growing*, in stature, knowledge and wisdom. But the child's life does not start from a point of origin, nor is his or her 'early' life closer to such a point than later life. Rather than being literally descended from ancestors, as posited by the genealogical model, children follow in the ways of their predecessors. They carry on. Of course there are key moments in life, but these are more akin to handovers in a relay than points of origin. And so it is with the history of the world. It, too, carries on, or persists, without beginning or end. Its inhabitants may follow where others have passed before, but none are more ancient than any other, nor others more modern. Or to put it another way, the world we inhabit is originating all the time. Yet the anthropological machine, as it drives the recognition of the human, also splits conception from materialisation, form from substance, and in so doing establishes the idea of their hylomorphic reunification in an original moment of procreation. Whenever we ask how old things are, the machine is operating in the background. To take it apart is thus to do away not only with the concept of the human but also with the question of antiquity. Abandon the concept, and the question disappears with it. No more human; no more ancient.

*Afterword*

In 2009, the system of international finance that had fuelled the unprecedented prosperity of the preceding decades abruptly collapsed. It had always rested on shaky foundations, dealing as it did in a world of virtual assets, visible only on computer screens, which were ever more tenuously related to the material transformations wrought by real working lives. Once the pretence on which it rested was finally exposed, the whole apparatus fell like a house of cards. The fall was followed, in the immediately ensuing years, by the equally precipitous collapse of big science. For this, too, was found to rest on the pedestal of illusion and conceit. The particle physicists who believed that with one final throw of their collider, in the biggest and most expensive machine ever built, they would finally explain the structure of the universe, were pilloried as reckless and arrogant fools, like the bankers before them. And the bioscientists, who had abandoned the real world of living organisms for the computer-based modelling of large genetic data-sets, went the same way. It was a messy, bitter and contested implosion that cost many once distinguished careers. The funders of research were left in disarray.

Amidst the wreckage, however, a handful of small and adaptable disciplines that had never lost their footing began to thrive. Like tiny mammals in the dying days of the dinosaurs, they were ready to seize the opportunities opened up by the extinction of the megafauna that had once ruled the scientific world. They had a different strategy of reproduction. It was not to lay as many eggs as possible in the hopes that a tiny minority might survive in a fiercely competitive environment, but to treat the germs of knowledge with the same reverence as life itself, to be grown, nurtured and cared for. These mammalian disciplines recognised, as their reptilian predecessors had not, that knowing is itself a practice of habitation, of dwelling in a world undergoing continual birth. For them, knowledge grows from the ground of our engagement with the world. They saw that to be is to know, and that to know is to be. And among these disciplines, I am pleased to say, were anthropology and archaeology. That is why, in this year of 2053, we are still here to celebrate their success.

*Notes*

- 1 This is the (somewhat revised) text of a plenary address presented to the 2009 Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, on *Anthropological and Archaeological Imaginations: Past, Present and Future*, held at the University of Bristol, April 6–9.
- 2 In a famous painting, René Magritte highlighted the surreal consequences of this way of thinking about things by depicting a cloud making its entrance through the door of a room.
- 3 For this term, I am indebted to Cornelius Holtorf. In his presentation to the 2009 ASA Conference on *Anthropological and Archaeological Imaginations*, Holtorf argued that the ‘pastness’ of things depended not on the determination of a date of origin but on our being able to tell trustworthy stories linking them to the present. Of things preserved in the archaeological record, these would be stories of preservation, or perhaps of recovery.
- 4 Elsewhere (Ingold 2004) I have told the story of this lamentable episode in the history of anthropology at Aberdeen.

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