
Chapter 7

Art, rationality and nature: human origins beyond the unity of knowledge

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Southern Africa holds a special place in the study of the deep past of humanity. From the 1950s onwards, it has become increasingly clear that the deepest roots of the human lineage can be found in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the situation certainly became more complicated after roughly 2 million years ago and the appearance of hominins in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa remains at the centre of attention regarding the origins of both the genus *Homo* and *Homo sapiens*. While the search for one origin region for humanity is increasingly rejected as a valuable research goal, Southern Africa remains a key region for archaeological evidence that is regarded by many authors as the earliest to reflect fully modern human cognition and capacities (Scerri *et al.* 2018; Marean 2015). This situation is partly a consequence of the intense long-term research that has been conducted in the rich Middle Stone Age deposits of a number of key archaeological sites. The latter include complex sites with deep stratigraphies such as Klasies River, Blombos, Diepkloof, Pinnacle Point, Sibudu or Apollo 11 (see overview in Will *et al.* 2019).

These sites produced some spectacular and widely known artefacts, including the famous incised ochre pieces, an ochre ‘painting kit’ and an abstract drawing from Blombos Cave (Henshilwood *et al.* 2004; 2009; 2011; 2018). Research during recent decades, however, has also produced an impressive wealth of contextual information on different levels and scales. Most of the sites mentioned above contain finely stratified occupation levels that allow unprecedented high-resolution insights into past lifeways and behaviours. At the same time, long-term research in Southern Africa has generated a crucial amount of regional data that allow insights into large-scale and long-term trends and their relationships with landscape and environmental changes (see overviews in Lombard 2012; Will *et al.* 2019). The importance of Southern Africa in the context of research into the deep human past

is located not simply in its potential to be unravelled as the cradle of humanity or the origin location for all living humans. The richness and complexity of the known archaeological evidence rather creates a situation that enables a critical assessment of long-standing ideas about human origins and the processes of human cultural and biological evolution. Relevant aspects include the ability to observe the dynamics of cultural change at different scales and within different classes of objects (lithics, organic technology, personal ornaments, organization of spatial behaviours etc.) as well as their interrelationships with environmental conditions. These latter aspects have important relevance on a conceptual level because they relate to fundamental ideas about the causalities of human behaviours and their material expressions.

As mentioned above, some of the most well-known objects from the Middle Stone Age of Southern Africa are decorated ochre objects, personal ornaments (shell beads) as well as the ochre painting kit. These items are regularly described as ‘art objects’ and they are equally often related to the unique human ability for symbolic communication. In this paper, I want to discuss some general issues related to the understanding of ‘art’ in the context of human origins and deep time archaeology. I believe that this approach is not only relevant in relation to general epistemological aspects, but – as I hope to demonstrate – as a contribution towards a recalibration of the study of human evolution and origins as a global, theoretically informed and reflective endeavour. Such an orientation appears to be very much in the spirit of this edited volume, which is bringing together deep time archaeological issues with approaches and perspectives from more recent time periods. I want to draw attention here to some links between the current view of modern human origins, the dominant frameworks in this field and some deeply engrained and mostly unacknowledged views about



Figure 7.1. Map showing the sites mentioned in this chapter.

culture, nature and the nature of reality. Furthermore, I want to argue that this situation is reflective of an implicit oppressive ideology. As such, this is deeply problematic and if human origins are constructed in this way it will continue to naturalize a historically situated way of being. To emphasize the deep historical and epistemological structure of these aspects I intend to discuss some convergences between the current most widely accepted narratives of modern human origins and Plato's ideology of the ideal state with its respective consequences, contradictions and instabilities. After discussing these issues on a more general level, I will relate them back to a case study from Southern Africa and discuss their wider significance.

The paradox of modern human origins, art and culture

So-called 'art' or symbolic artefacts apparently continue to play a central role in recent discussions about modern human origins (i.e. 'people like us'). In a recent survey of the respective debate, Nowell (2010, 441) found that 'for the majority of researchers [...] it is symbolic behaviour including language and codified social relationships that defines modern behaviour'. A key aspect within this vast field has been

the conceptual and widely accepted 'decoupling of modern anatomy and modern behaviour', which was a reaction to the perceived 'lag' between the emergence of modern anatomy and modern behaviour (Caspari & Wolpoff 2013; Nowell 2010, 438). This development was seminaly influenced by the volume *The Human Revolution* and its editors C. Stringer and P. Mellars (1989). Since the 1990s, the discussion has shifted foremost towards 'cognitive archaeology', with a heavy emphasis on behavioural aspects and archaeological signifiers, at the expense of anatomical and biological-taxonomic aspects. A wide range of authors have summarized the relevant aspects of these discussions and it is not necessary to repeat them here (Hoffecker 2011; Iliopoulos & Garofoli 2016; Mellars *et al.* 2007). Overall, most researchers explicitly or implicitly equate behavioural modernity with the presence of a biological capacity or potential for modern or symbolically mediated thought/thinking (Porr 2014). Following Deacon (quoted in Henshilwood & Marean 2003, 635), symbols are 'representative of social conventions, tacit agreements, or explicit codes that link one thing to another and are mediated by some formal or merely agreed-upon link irrespective of any physical characteristics of either sign or object'. Therefore, following this definition, objects are of symbolic

significance when they are purposely formed, but do not have a functional dimension beyond an assumed reference to an immaterial meaning. This definition explains the significance that is being attached to the presence of patches of pigment in Middle Stone Age sites and engraved pieces of ochre or ostrich eggs as well as pierced molluscs or beads (Henshilwood & Marean 2003; Henshilwood *et al.* 2011; Wadley 2001). One could consequently expect that a concern with symbolic forms and processes would be at the centre of attention and the variability and mechanisms of cultural expressions would form the focus of models and analogies in Palaeolithic archaeology and palaeoanthropology. However, looking at the dominant approaches and research strategies within Palaeolithic archaeology and human evolutionary studies this is clearly not the case. In fact, the treatment of symbolic items within those fields is patchy, unstable and contradictory. Rather than being at the centre of attention, they tend to disappear in myriad studies about adaptations, raw material procurement and resource exploitation strategies, etc. (Porr 2013; 2014; Porr & Matthews 2017).

This orientation relates to the deep Western tradition that identifies humanity with the presence of reason, rational thought and syntactic/symbolic language (Corbey & Roebroeks 2001; Stoczkowski 2002). Furthermore, I want to argue here that this kind of structure is related to deeply held convictions about the structure of nature, or even reality, and the respective human relationships with it. In turn, these convictions largely determine the role of human language or culture. As I will argue below, in a quite paradoxical fashion, the current orientation effectively devalues 'culture' or language as an independent causal factor. This configuration appears to have no alternative. The status of nature and the status of rationality remain non-negotiable to such an extent that they are not even included in the negotiation (Porr & Matthews 2017). These foundations are certainly related to a modernist orientation, but they also have a long history. It seems to me that these aspects have been undertheorized within the field of human evolutionary studies. To start a conversation along these lines and to make a very long and complex story very short I want to present a brief discussion of Plato's understanding of the epistemological status and value of images. This is a small but significant aspect of Bredekamp's (2010) 'theory of image agency', *Theorie des Bildakts*.

Art, nature and humanity

I want to begin my exploration with the pre-Socratics' view of nature, rationality and Plato's attitude towards

images, which leads to the latter's ideas about an ideal state. The so-called pre-Socratics were an assorted group of thinkers from different parts of the Greek speaking world, who were active over a period of more than 150 years from the sixth to the fifth centuries BC. Although they never formed a unified movement, most of them were interested in finding new material explanations of nature and in replacing traditional ideas of the cosmos that were dominated by anthropoid deities 'with newer, "scientific" models based on the properties of material substances' (Whitmarsh 2015, 53). Although the pre-Socratics' contributions should not be understood as a victory of rationalism over myth along the steady march toward objective truth about the world, they nevertheless represent a significant shift in the ways of conceptualizing reality and its relationship with the divine. During this time, new types of questions were also being asked. Anthropomorphic gods were increasingly replaced by abstract embodiments of nature and celestial order. Although the sources are incomplete, it is possible to reconstruct a picture of a kind of radical materialism that is compatible with modern atheistic naturalism (see, e.g., Descola 2013). Consequently, the pre-Socratics proposed an understanding of the cosmos that is independent from an individual's perspective and that continues to exist irrespective of the fate of individual elements. In order to understand reality, one has to take a neutral and detached view of it (Whitmarsh 2015, 58–9). In the early fifth century BC, Parmenides argued forcefully that the evidence of the senses cannot be trusted and truth could only be achieved through reason alone. He was succeeded, for example, by Zeno, who is famous for his paradoxical arguments that were designed to deny the possibility of motion. For Zeno, the perception of movement was an illusion and reality was constant and unchanging. Within this philosophical tradition, observation became overall misleading. This emerging distinction between the material cosmos and the realm of abstract reason (*logos*) was to have a fundamental and lasting influence on the development of Western philosophy and theology. In fact, although the original intention was to question the influence of anthropomorphic deities, this overall orientation allowed the re-emergence of a new form of theism. While the material world was downgraded and the value of the senses was denied, reason itself was deified. Parmenides himself saw the discovery of truth as a mystical journey. A hierarchy was thus created between mind and body, the rational and the sensory, divine truth and mortal experience. This hierarchy would ultimately shape the development of early Christianity and Christian theology. The evangelist John's opening of the gospels is in fact

very Parmenidian in spirit: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. "Word" is *logos*, which could also be translated as "reason"' (Whitmarsh 2015, 62).

Plato developed exactly those pre-Socratic writings and ideas further and promoted an ever more powerful metaphysical agenda that proves to be highly influential into the present day. To illustrate the relevance of this thinking in the context of the questions of this paper, I want to briefly present art historian Horst Bredekamp's discussion of Plato's understanding of the epistemological status and value of images. This is a small but significant aspect of Bredekamp's 'theory of image agency', *Theorie des Bildakts* (Bredekamp 2010). In contrast to theology, images have never gained a central position in philosophy. One of the main reasons for this situation is usually related to Plato's alleged attitude towards images, which he saw as an expression of minor importance or as having a negative influence. It is Plato's well-known cave allegory that is given central importance. In this, Plato imagines a subterranean space in which people experience the shadows that are cast against the cave wall as reality whereas they are only secondary reflections of objects that are not directly perceived. According to this allegory, the people in the cave take the experience of the shadows for granted and they do not realize that they are only reflections of a world that is far removed from the truth. The people are consequently not aware of their delusional condition and only wise men, who are near the cave's entrance, are aware of the full situation. The significance of this allegory for the theme of this paper and an assessment of the role of images in human evolution is related to the relationship it constructs to notions of truth and rationality.

Following the ideas mentioned above, Plato argued that the whole world that is accessible to the senses are just epiphenomena of a true hidden reality. Images and, indeed, any artefacts consequently either obstruct or misrepresent reality. This thinking was enhanced in relation to the evaluation of images and sculptures, because art itself was seen as having originated from the act of shadow play (in the sense of the cave allegory). Consequently, Plato is known for his hostility towards images as a tool for knowledge representation or acquisition. This was foremost directed at images that supposedly replicate reality and are produced as its imitations. In *Politeia* he develops the argument that artists can only ever achieve the status of manufacturers of shadows (following the logic of the cave allegory) and consequently are guilty of perpetuating an illusionary and wrong perception of reality. It is because of this orientation that Bredekamp (2010, 42–3) argues that Plato's ideal state would in

fact be a totalitarian and oppressive system that would strictly censure individual, creative and artistic expressions. In short, it would suppress individual voices. The assumption of one universal nature leads here ultimately to oppression and violence, because the universal and objective nature is logically accessible only through one rational method of epistemology.

However, while Plato is widely known for his hostility to creativity and images, Bredekamp has further argued that this hostility is in fact very much fuelled by a recognition of the *power* of images. This power is related to images' ability to tap into childish, sensuous and ordinary desires, which are removed from the more developed mental abilities. Bredekamp makes clear that Plato's cave allegory presents *ex negativo* a strong acceptance of the power of images. However, this power is related to deception and in their ability to hide and distort reality. The power of images is clearly constructed as being in their power to seduce. They are related to their ability to create strong emotional reactions. Not surprisingly, there is clearly a hierarchy of human experiences involved and an evaluation of how knowledge and insight can be achieved. According to Plato, images are powerful, but deceptive devices. Although Plato himself has not developed a 'theory of art' in explicit form, all of his statements make clear that he was convinced about the active power that is inherent in images (Bredekamp 2010, 38).

It is because of this mostly implicit acceptance that Plato's attitude towards images is deeply ambiguous. Because of the power of images, they can also act as educational devices – as long as they represent true or desirable features or aspects. Despite his general hostility towards images Plato nevertheless used them to illustrate the central features of his ideal state and in their ability to selectively represent, which allows the artist to draw attention to important and crucial features of reality. One can therefore say that Plato is almost cynically aware of the power of images to manipulate, which makes his vision of the ideal state even more problematic.

Behind this understanding, nevertheless, stands a view of human beings as being partly outside of nature themselves. This is the product of the dualism that was proposed by Plato according to which human beings have the ability (due to their soul) to know reality through rationality. In Plato's case, clearly his idea of the value of art and images is related to a conscious and rational human being, who is actively interpreting the world and makes inferences based on his or her situation or perspective. This position is inherently unstable and open to manipulation or insight. There is no mechanistic 'information transfer' here between people and (art) objects. This is further

elaborated in Plato's line allegory in which he sees graphical representations and images as secondary to higher thoughts and ideas, but at the same time necessary to develop and understand them. It seems that they serve as mental scaffolds or launch pads for more complex, higher and purely mental rational elaborations (Bredekamp 2010, 41). Bredekamp therefore argues that according to Plato, images are seen simultaneously as the foundations of human thought and successful actions and as obstructing knowledge of the truth. Between those two poles, his understanding of the world took place. Plato was only hostile to those images that he regarded as a threat to the community, whereas he welcomed, defended and supported those images that he saw as support to the civilizing process. Behind both extremes lies a deeply held fear of encountering within images a sphere that the philosopher cannot control (Bredekamp 2010, 42).

I believe that this thinking has been preserved until the present day and can be seen in the equally ambiguous treatment of so-called art objects within Palaeolithic archaeology and human evolution. On the one hand, images and art are the ultimate markers of humanity, the origins of symbolism and modern symbolic thought. But at the same time, they are viewed with deep suspicion and are excluded from the actual explanations of human behaviour. It is ultimately the underlying rational structure of reality that is significant and not the dissenting voices that contradict it, which will ultimately be brought back in line by the secret police of natural selection. It is in these general aspects that the convergences emerge between the logic of Plato's ideal state which rests on a universal structure of nature and the current most widely accepted narratives of modern human origins and the accompanying evolutionary explanatory framework. To explore these links further, one can engage with an aspect that has not received any attention so far in this paper. This is the question how both of these perspectives conceptualize human beings themselves and their relationship to reality and perception.

In his writings of the middle period, Plato develops his most famous theories that depend on a series of parallel oppositions: body/soul, matter/spirit, this world/the next, senses/mind, particulars/forms. The so-called 'forms' that are mentioned here are 'otherworldly, abstract distillations of all of the things what we witness with our senses in the world around us' (Whitmarsh 2015, 133–5). His dialogue *Phaedo*, set on Socrates's last day, argues for a kinship between the soul and the forms. On death, the souls of the virtuous are permanently released from the confines of the body, whereas those that are beholden to bodily

pleasures are condemned to reincarnation. Plato had by this stage begun to correlate this distinction between particular instance and abstract form with a distinction between the mundane and the supernatural. The forms exist not in this world, but in a higher plane, accessible only to the mind. For Plato, consequently, human beings are ultimately characterized by an immortal soul that is separated from the mundane and physical world. But at the same time, this soul is primed for understanding the actual and true characteristics of the world, because the soul is in touch with the forms that lies beyond the world as perceived through the senses. Because of these qualities, human beings can become those wise men, who are able to understand the whole arrangement described in the cave allegory.

This understanding sounds far too mystical to have any relevance for today's evolutionary understanding of modern human origins. However, this is not the case. Within archaeology there has been a lot of discussion about the exact processes and the character of the origins of modern humans. Apart from arguments about the dating of evidence and events, the discussion has been divided into an argument between a gradual and a sudden appearance of fully modern behaviour as well as the existence of a clearly identifiable package of modern human behaviour and so on (Henshilwood & Marean 2003; McBrearty & Brooks 2000; Mellars & Stringer 1989; Nowell 2010). However, it seems to me that it is often overlooked that despite the differences that are expressed by the researchers involved, modern humanity is currently understood implicitly and explicitly as a genetic capacity for modern human thought or symbolism. This idea of a capacity appears to move under the radar of critical engagement. As it is required by Darwinian principles, it is assumed to be present as a genetic endowment that is shared by all members of the modern human species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This capacity is assumed to be present even if it is not expressed. As such, it really is something immaterial (Ingold 1995; Porr 2014). At the same time, it is also regarded as something that has very specific characteristics because it is seen as incredibly powerful in that it allows modern human beings to *efficiently adapt* to all kinds of environments. In this respect it does not reflect one kind of environment, but basic and fundamental aspects of reality itself. As *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the most successful species on the planet, one could argue that *Homo sapiens sapiens*' cognition also most comprehensively reflects nature. In fact, this idea is virtually a necessity if it is assumed that organisms ultimately reflect a process of adaptation to a material environment. The most modern and

recent version comes in the form of a ‘capacity’ for modern human behaviour, which is constructed as a genetic and biological endowment, and which is supposedly shared by all members of the modern human species. This immaterial capacity (that is different from anatomical/physical modernity) is constructed in a fashion that is surprisingly like Plato’s idea of an eternal soul. Furthermore, according to modern human evolutionary thinking, this cognitive capacity is also a reflection of adaptive processes and therefore, in a sense, a reflection of ‘real’ and universal physical pressures over time.

In this context, even more similarities can be observed, which can again be illustrated by the treatment of so-called artistic or non-utilitarian objects. The modern evolutionary framework is as suspicious towards images as Plato was. The reason for this similarity can again be found in the understanding of the relationship between nature and human beings and their products. Images and artistic objects seem to establish a realm that the philosopher/scientist cannot control. Their relationship to precise mathematical calculations is questionable and they are also tied to an individual’s perception and perspective. They can therefore confuse others. Because of these reasons, Plato wanted to ban images from his ideal state and only wanted to allow those that enable access to the truth (even if *per definitionem* they can never truly represent the reality of the ‘forms’).

Interestingly, a very similar situation exists in the narratives about modern human origins. In this literature, we find two solutions to the problem of how to deal with the strange issue of artistic objects and their evaluation in the context of the origins of humanity. The first is to exclude them from the ideal state – that is, from full modern humanity. This is exactly what is currently being done with those unfortunate individuals, who only produced art items but not Upper Palaeolithic/Late Stone Age technology in Africa and the Near East. They might look like modern humans, but they were not fully modern (Klein & Edgar 2002; Mellars 2006). Similar processes can also be observed in the context of Eurasian Neanderthals (Nowell 2010; Villa & Roebroeks 2014). The status of these human beings remains unclear, but there is certainly widespread reluctance to allow them inclusion in the ideal state of modern humanity. The second solution is represented by the widely known analyses of art items as actually functional or utilitarian. Only those items are deemed relevant that have an underlying function. An example would be Gamble’s (1991) seminal explanation of the distribution and function of the well-known Gravettian female statuettes where the actual form, context, materiality and

sensual experience, etc., is unimportant for their role in information exchange and social insurance policy networks. The current framework consequently tends towards the same ambiguous and contradictory attitude towards images or art objects as Plato’s vision of an ideal state.

Art, nature and the unity of knowledge?

From the considerations above, one can deduce that the ideal human being who fulfils humanity’s capacity is a rational *Übermensch*, who cannot be confused by false imagery or expressions (Ingold 2000). In fact, these *Übermenschen* are very much the same as Plato’s wise men (and, indeed, they are mostly men). They can understand the whole situation that was illustrated in the cave allegory. As was mentioned above, according to Plato, people can do this, because it is already a metaphysical and divine characteristic of the human immortal soul. In the modern version of human origins, this is presented in the end very much in the same way. The justification is no longer metaphysical and divine, but rather because of adaptive processes and the supposed fit that the Darwinian mechanism provided for human beings between their cognition and the physical world or nature. Modern wise men are then also able to judge the status of other people’s knowledge and the realism and value of other people’s images and other cultural expressions. This evaluation is done not in relation to their own view or perspective, but effectively in relation to the relationship between reality/nature and the Other’s statements and material expressions. The wise man himself is outside and beyond these relationships. Consequently, and paradoxically, culture and language – those elements that ultimately made humans human – are devalued and taken out of the equation as irrelevant. Statements of the Other are indeed not important in these contexts. These are ultimately treated as false ways of knowing and perceiving. I have drawn attention to this aspect elsewhere in the context of Palaeolithic archaeology, human evolution and hunter-gatherer research (Porr 2001; Porr & Matthews 2016). However, they are also regularly expressed in claims for the possibility and necessity of unifying knowledge (cf. Kuper & Marks 2011):

Without the instruments and accumulated knowledge of the natural sciences – physics, chemistry, and biology – humans are trapped in a cognitive prison. They are like intelligent fish born in a deep, shadowed pool. Wondering and restless, longing to reach out, they think about the world outside. They invent ingenious speculations and myths about the origin of the

confining waters, of the sun and the sky and the stars above, and the meaning of their own existence. But they are wrong, always wrong (Wilson 1999, 49).

This almost completely reflects a Platonic attitude towards knowledge and the differential access to universal nature. It is not those people in the cave that have access to true knowledge. They are deceived by the primitive power of cave wall images. The illusions of those people cannot be taken seriously. They are misguided and based on a false understanding of nature and reality, as well as false inferences about those relationships. They do not realize that they live in an illusionary world. They do not realize that they do not understand the universal characteristics of nature. It is this configuration that provides the implicit or explicit justification for excluding statements by Others from explanations of human evolution. In human evolutionary publications, statements from research subjects, i.e. ethnographic partners, are usually completely absent. They are cleaned and silenced. Both in narratives of human evolution and in Plato's ideal state, these aberrations of the individual are excluded. Only clean rationality counts and remains. Surely, those strange and weird statements, those expressions of alterity, cannot be taken seriously. Of course, science can still reflect on these curiosities and can establish their value in functional, economic terms, so that they still might have some value for the community. We can also respect these on ethical and moral grounds, but we surely cannot take them seriously epistemologically or ontologically.

These considerations, questions about cultural universalism and relativism, have been recurring themes within social and cultural anthropology for the last 150 years (see e.g. Engelke 2017 for a recent overview). How do language and culture relate to external reality and people's thought processes? Recently, these aspects have been discussed more extensively in the context of the so-called 'ontological turn' in which basic categories of anthropological research have received extensive and critical attention (Alberti *et al.* 2011; Holbraad & Pedersen 2017). Should we take anthropological research statements by Indigenous people seriously, how and under which conditions? For example, Viveiros de Castro (2015, 77) has discussed an argument by Rorty in which he asserts that 'Western liberal intellectuals' have to accept the fact 'that there are lots of visions which simply cannot be taken seriously'. This statement was made in the context of the validity of different perspectives and views in the intercultural encounter and the choice that must be made between 'solidarity'

and 'objectivity'. Viveiros de Castro argues that Rorty's distinction rests on the idea of a universal nature that is opposed to a multitude of different cultures. These differences between cultures can possibly be accepted on moral or ethical grounds. However, in comparison to Western science, the multitude of cultures is nothing but Pandora's box, 'full to the brim with fantasies, delusions, and hallucinations – world worthy of "the Nazis or the Amazonians"' (Viveiros de Castro 2015, 79). Consequently, Viveiros de Castro's solution is a radical break from these foundations. To arrive at a deep and serious appreciation and understanding of cultural variability, he proposed the adoption of 'multi-naturalism' and perspectivism. One needs to question the idea of the world as being composed of one universal nature and many cultures. If this understanding prevails, there is no escape from an ultimately violent and exclusive ideology (see also Viveiros de Castro 2014).

Graeber (2015) has criticized Viveiros de Castro's arguments as exclusive themselves and essentializing the Other's ontology and worldview. A related point has been made by Willerslev (2013), who has argued further that it is very important to take the Other's perspective seriously, but not too seriously. Those critiques are both related to the acknowledgment of the actual ongoing processes of the creation of social and human life. Both argue that what we are aiming for in terms of understanding past (and even present) behaviour are not abstract structures and patterns, but the means that people use to make sense of the world. As such, they are inherently unstable, dynamic and possibly contradictory. The same applies consequently to the material remains that are visible, which are themselves ways to make sense of and shape and reshape the world, with all possible contradictions and inconsistencies that are inherent in dynamic life. The tension that has been identified by Bredekamp (2010), the agency of the relationally established object, will not go away and it will not be silenced.

Bredekamp (2010) argues in his book that it is the artefact, the art work, that establishes humanity and human thinking. As such, it very much precedes so-called modern human origins. I would add that such an approach effectively undermines the idea of a human existence that is mainly driven by rational considerations. As was mentioned above, the introduction of so-called symbolic thought seems to have virtually no impact on human behaviour within current evolutionary studies (because the latter is still mostly explained in terms of efficiency criteria). Culture and art seem to only get in the way and only become useful as tools to further enhance the adaptability and fitness in terms of those deeper rational

algorithms that drive organic evolution. In contrast, with a rejection of a universal understanding of nature, rationality, in the modern western sense, is a possibility, an option, not a necessity. Such an understanding also means that culture does not just become a noise at the edge of the stream of human evolution. As a fundamental possibility and problem, it should move to the centre of attention.

Back to South Africa

In the light of these considerations, I want to draw attention to a recent paper on the Middle Stone Age of Southern Africa (Kandel *et al.* 2016). The authors examined contexts, which are roughly dated between 190,000 to 30,000 years ago, which appears to be highly significant, because for most researchers it was during this time in Southern Africa that the characteristics of modern human behaviour evolved (see recent overview in Hoffecker 2017). The authors conducted a comparative analysis of a range of sites from the chronological contexts mentioned above and concentrated on assessing cultural complexity. They also related their findings to a sophisticated analysis of the respective environmental conditions through time. The summary of their findings is as follows:

*The geographical analyses show only minor differences in landscape selection for localities among the four analytical classes, while the ecological analyses indicate no dramatic shifts in habitat preference overall. These factors suggest that MSA people were not specific in their habitat choice, and that cultural adaptation functions independent of environmental change. Since climate is not the driving force, we propose that cultural performance steers the expansions and contractions of populations. While the range of cultural capacities gradually increases over time, the process is discontinuous; as fashions come and go, innovations are not necessarily maintained. These data suggest that flexibility in behaviour represents the single most successful adaptation of MSA people (Kandel *et al.* 2016, 659).*

Because of the failure to establish correlations between environmental conditions and cultural practices, the authors concluded that ‘cultural adaptation functions independently of environmental change’ and that ‘cultural performance steers the expansions and contractions of populations’. This is a curious set of conclusions because it seemingly contradicts the most basic assumptions about the supposed and generally

accepted causalities of human evolution and modern human origins. They seem to question the dominant explanatory framework that views culture and cultural practices primarily as adaptations to an external natural environment. It rather seems that there is independent cultural variability all the way down. Of course, these insights would not be at all unusual in social anthropology, sociology, in the wider field of the social sciences or within the humanities (Ingold 2007). In the study of the deep human past, however, such a reorientation has significant consequences.

These considerations call for a new engagement with the characteristics of ‘culture’, how it relates to human cognition and how it relates to the natural environment. If we cannot refer to rationality, efficiency and adaptive mechanisms, what are the processes that cause cultural traditions and practices to emerge, persist and disappear? Does this imply that culture effectively adapts to itself? Does this mean that culture constructs nature? These are significant and important questions that free our vision of the deep human past from the tyranny of mono-causal explanatory schemes that allow only one frame of reference. So-called art objects are not means of adaptation to an independent nature, they are rather the means through which people socially construct their reality. These processes are fundamentally and ontologically variable. This insight draws attention to the undertheorized fact that a unified view of nature has played and continues to play a crucial role in suppressing cultural variability and viewpoints.

The modern narrative of the origins of modern humans is an imagination of what happened in the deep past. But this origin event is still understood to be encapsulated in the present, within the universal capacity for modern human behaviour that arose thousands of years ago in our deep time ancestors. Both views are projections and imaginations. They are both fantasies that mirror each other, because they are products of the same logic of a timeless nature and reality. Because of this uniting structure, the future becomes the fulfilment of the origin. Origin and future are nothing but reflections of an eternal and universal understanding of nature and humanity’s relationship to it. In that sense, the origin, present and the future are ideal reflections of each other, and both are ideal reflections of supposedly universal characteristics of nature (see also Ingold 2000, 2004). As outlined above, this understanding has a very long tradition within Western thought. In contrast, as I have argued in this paper, archaeology must be about integrating voices and perspectives beyond the Western academy and rationality (Rizvi 2015). It is about taking local cultural variability fundamentally seriously. It argues against

universal explanations and the imposition of totalizing schemes. It argues for bringing back those many voices and perspectives that have always been there.

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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Published by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research,
University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3ER, UK.

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.

ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

