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Aesthetics explanation and the archaeology of symbols¹

Philosophers of science have worried about how ‘theoretical entities’ such as forces, fields and electrons could play a respectable role in the explanation of observable events and processes; some of them concluded that we have no reason to believe in such things. There are archaeologists who show signs of treating the aesthetic in the same way: as a suspicious postulate of theory, far removed from experience. While I’m content to believe in some entities which, by any reasonable test, would count as theoretical I don’t put the aesthetic in that category. Nor do I worry about its capacity to pay its keep by contributing to explanations. Here I argue for the reality, and the explanatory power of the aesthetic. I illustrate the latter claim by considering the role of aesthetic attributions in explaining the emergence of symbolism.

1. Two concepts of the aesthetic

Appeals to aesthetics in archaeology are often seen as recourse to something defined by a theory devised in the eighteenth century and tuned to the cultural history of modern Western Europe, with its self-conscious roots in Greco-Roman culture and the Renaissance.² The theory postulates acts of uncontaminated perception, demanding attention to the pure form of objects isolated from their contexts.³ It’s

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were read at a conference on philosophy and archaeology organized by Elisabeth Schellekens at the Institute of Philosophy, London, November 2013, and at a conference in the same place on interpretation organized by Stephen Neale, June 2015. My thanks go to those who commented on those occasions or who read drafts. They include Noel Carroll, Peter Kivy, Peter Lamarque, Derek Matravers, Stephen Neale, Rania Papavisilou-Ballis, Colin Renfrew, Elisabeth Schellekens. I am particularly grateful to Maria Forsberg for discussions on the work of Bloom and colleagues (see text to note 29).

² Terms like “the aesthetic” are “highly culture specific” (Colin Renfrew, ‘Hypocrite voyant, mon semblable . . .’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (1994) 4: 265). For more on the claim that aesthetics is culture-bound see my ‘Art and the anthropologists’, in A. Shimamura & S. Palmer (eds) *Aesthetic Science*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

³ “...the aesthetic: an isolable and universal human experience” (Shanks & Tilly, *Re-constructing the Past*, 1992, p.73).

hardly controversial that approaching artefacts of the very distant past (or even those of classical Greece and Rome) from this perspective will result in distortion and misunderstanding.

We might question the extent to which western aesthetic thinking in the modern era is committed to the narrow and austere picture archaeologists conjure up. Take paleoanthropologist Randall White's characterization: "contemporary western concept of art" conjoins a number of "culturally defined assumptions" that lead up "blind alleys". Among them are these:

Art is thought to be a uniquely human activity that fulfills an innate need in people to comprehend themselves and the universe...; Works of art are thought to require an audience, primarily made up of people with special knowledge of art...; Art may also be appreciated for its purely visual elements: form, composition, colour and the like...; The effects of these on the viewer are thought to be virtually universal, based on natural visual sensitivities that allow even an untrained eye to appreciate them....⁴

It's a stretch to include innateness as part of an official "western" view given the opposition in western cultural circles to innateness, and the idea that other species don't produce art is not confined to the modern west. The expectation of an audience is also common outside the west and within western culture has its own exceptions: we find detailing on church carving that is just about impossible to see. When it comes to the role of experts, White wants it both ways. Hoping to convict the western view of elitism, he tells us that audiences are expected to be made up of people with special knowledge; hoping to convict it of philistine imperialism, he says that we assume our natural visual sensitivities are enough to give us everything we want. White is unlikely to describe as elitist the view that one cannot appreciate the art of other societies unless you know something about those societies, their conventions, practices and techniques of making, and the idea that the untrained, uninformed eye is the eye you want when looking at pictures is the opposite of western orthodoxy, with its emphasis on connoisseurship and the cultivation of discriminatory looking.

⁴*Prehistoric Art*, Abrams, 2003.

When it comes to characterizing aesthetic theory archaeologists are apt to get it wrong. But there is something that divides us beyond getting the theory right. Instead of seeing aesthetic concepts as theoretical constructions imposed on the world I see the aesthetic as an aspect of the world itself—something we find in artefacts, and in the minds of their makers and users. There is, of course, aesthetic theorizing, but it is theorizing about something given as part of ordinary experience. Theorizing about language and kinship does not make these things into “theoretical” entities about which we ought to be suspicious and no one reacts to the failure of a theory of language by concluding that language does not exist. The same goes, on this account, for the aesthetic. Properly understood, an aesthetically informed archaeology is an attempt—not always successful and always subject to critical scrutiny—to see, within the archaeological record of a community, the manifestation of aesthetic interests on the part of its members, and to use that evidence to account for aspects of their lives that need explaining.

What sort of thing, then, is an aesthetic interest? As with so many philosophical questions, it is not easy to find a definition, and no reason to abandon our project if we don’t find one. But very roughly and for present purposes I say it is a tendency to engage in and attend to acts of making which display care and skill in the organization of appearances beyond practical need, and to the results of such acts. We find this tendency in just about every period, place and community of the human world.

This rough characterization does not correspond to what all or most archaeologists mean by “aesthetics” when they complain about the imperialist ambitions of aesthetics and aestheticians. Am I embarked on a merely verbal dispute, dissipated by the discovery that we are not, after all, talking about the same thing? No. We should not understand the issue to be whether the aesthetic, defined precisely as the archaeologists choose to understand it, has explanatory power. We should understand it thus: is there some reasonable way of characterizing aesthetic phenomena on which it turns out that the aesthetic does have explanatory power? I say there is, and that much of the opposition to the aesthetic in archaeology (and not every archaeologist is opposed to it) derives from a failure to consider that characterization. If that’s right it will be worth spending a moment elaborating the proposal.

2. Aesthetics for archaeology

The first thing to be said is that, while aesthetic responses are responses to the appearances of things they are not, on this account, the result of attention merely to surfaces, as might be the case with our interest in pleasing patterns of frosting on a window. We admire the shape of the vase for the skillful act of shaping it discloses. What is delicate for an object made in one way won't be delicate for something made in another, whatever the shape, for only the first way of making exhibits delicacy in the handling.⁵ I'm not sure that anyone would seriously dispute this point if put directly, but when archaeologists speak slightly of the aesthetic, as they sometimes do, it seems to drop out of the picture. The Greco-Romanist Bert Smith takes aesthetics to be concerned only with the question whether something is beautiful—a question he says the Romans would not have asked:

One might, like an ancient viewer, find a particular Roman portrait exceptionally fine, that is, finely made, of very high quality — for example, the Ostia Trajan or the Bloomington Septimus Severus.... In informal private conversation, subjective hyperbolic phrases ('fantastic piece') might even be used as convenient shorthand terms that sum up quickly those qualities of fine execution and expressive impact. But these are not, properly speaking, questions of aesthetics”⁶

In what sense are *fine execution* and *expressive impact* not aesthetic categories? Both suggest a relation to the maker; the first in terms of action and the second in terms of emotion. If one excludes such relations from the domain of the aesthetic one will sympathise with the exclusion of these two concepts from the same domain. But such

⁵ This approach to the aesthetic is well expressed in Kendal Walton's 'Style and the products and processes of art' (in Leonard B. Meyer & Berel Lang (eds.), *The Concept of Style*. University of Pennsylvania Press 45--66 (1979); much in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon Press; 6th edition) is illustrative of the idea. See also Jerry Levinson, 'What a musical work is', *Journal of Philosophy* 77:5-28 (1980) and my *An Ontology of Art*, London, Macmillan, 1989.

⁶ 'A Greek and Roman Point of View', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (1994) 4: 260.

narrowness makes our attitude to art and to aesthetically crafted things inexplicable. The aesthetics of photography is not the aesthetics of painting, even when the painting and the photograph are visually indistinguishable, because of the very different ways of making that go with these two kinds of objects. Knowing that a musical performance has been speeded up in the recording studio or that the picture we thought was by Giotto was actually painted last week make a difference to our aesthetic reaction to these object. Current aesthetic theorising recognises that “beauty” is too general a category to be of much critical or interpretive help. We need to hear that the work’s appearance is balanced, intriguingly unbalanced, teetering between balance and unbalance, amusingly ugly, deceptively simple, captivatingly complex.⁷

Aesthetics, understood this way, is at home far beyond the art world, finds application in everyday objects as easily as in galleries and museums, and lines up (as we will see) with concepts from biological and cultural evolution such as reliable signals and prestige goods.⁸ Because of its emphasis on making it is distant from what we call “the aesthetics of nature”, unless one choses to found that study on the idea of a creator whose qualities are made manifest to us in landscape.⁹

The second thing to be said is that just as aesthetic responses are not attempts to isolate things from their contexts of making, aesthetic explanations easily conjoin with, and sometimes require, other sorts of explanations. Why was the artefact made to look like this rather than like that? Part of any such explanation is likely to be functional: spear throwers are visibly distinct from fish hooks for functional reasons. But spear throwers do not all look alike and some are

⁷ The best account of the specificity and detail characteristic of aesthetic concepts is Frank Sibley, ‘Aesthetic concepts’, in *Approach to Aesthetics*, eds J. Benson, E. Redfern & J. Roxbee Cox, Oxford University Press, 2001. In earlier work (*An Ontology of Art*, Macmillan, 1989) I argued that art works actually are the actions performed by makers; see also David Davies, 2004, *Art as Performance*, Malden, MA: Blackwell. But the view outlined above is not dependent on the truth of this admittedly extreme formulation.

⁸ See e.g. Plourde, A. M. (2008). ‘The evolution of prestige goods as honest signals of skill and knowledge’, *Human Nature*, 19, 374-388.

⁹ An issue briefly but illuminatingly discussed by Malcolm Budd (*The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.4-5). See also Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982), Chapter 8.

fashioned in ways that go beyond making them good for throwing spears and may occasionally make them worse. Indeed functional considerations often form the background against which aesthetic attributions are possible; change your assumptions about an object's function and a new range of aesthetic attributions may come into focus.¹⁰

When we explain an object's appearance in aesthetic and functional terms we conjoin the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic *horizontally*, in a joint explanatory enterprise. There are also *vertical* associations. We may seek to explain aesthetic sensibilities in non-aesthetic terms, and non-aesthetic phenomena in partly aesthetic terms. It would be a simplification to say that aesthetic responses derive from sensory biases driven by sexual selection. But even if it were no simplification, it would not make the aesthetic a redundant category; that which can be explained in other terms may still be real. And the fact, if it is one, that cave art fostered social relations may be explained in partly aesthetic terms; the promotion of shared aesthetic responses to things may be a partially mediating variable between the depiction and the social solidarity.

All this would be of little use to the archaeologist who wants to pack some aesthetic concepts along with all their other equipment if we did not also think that the aesthetic artefacts of very distant communities could be intelligible to us. All the evidence suggests that they can be. We are often struck by artefacts from culturally distant communities, artefacts we initially know little of beyond their appearance, though that appearance attracts our attention and our admiration. As we learn more about these artefacts and their communities, their modes of making, their beliefs and institutions, we start to understand them and to appreciate them better, correcting errors in our earliest and spontaneous judgements; it is rare for those earliest responses to be

¹⁰ Views hospitable to this perspective include those of Howard Morphy: "The separating out of aesthetics from meaning and function is precisely the product of applying a particularly narrow contemporary art world concept of aesthetics to archaeological analysis rather than seeking to define aesthetics in relation to the culture in question." ('Aesthetics across Time and Place: An Anthropological Perspective', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (1994) 4: 259).

wholly overthrown by the learning process.¹¹ The aesthetic is a universal of human experience in one way unlike that other universal, language. Present a monolingual English person with a bit of text or speech in Chinese and they will understand nothing at all. Languages, except where historically closely related to our own, are opaque to us. The aesthetic is not transparent—we don't see immediately and without instruction all there is to see in an alien aesthetic object. But it is translucent rather than opaque: from the beginning we are generally able to see something of value in the artefacts of cultures very distant from our own.

As long as aesthetics is understood in the formalist and culturally circumscribed terms I have urged us to abandon, it will struggle for a place in debates about the development of language or symbolic culture, and inquiries into the aesthetics of Middle and Upper Paleolithic artefacts will be lampooned as attempts to treat deep caves as hard-to-access art galleries. If, on the other hand, we see human aesthetic concerns as sensitivities to the visible manifestation of skills and qualities in our conspecifics, aesthetic concepts take on a potentially explanatory role in the enterprise of finding and interpreting the evidence of social and cognitive evolution and their interactions. Aesthetic attention and sensitivity are forms of social cognition, presenting objects as expressive of characteristics of the maker. Aesthetic perception carries information—often vital information—about what people are like. I will illustrate this claim by offering an admittedly abstract characterization of how a community might arrive at symbols of social status, starting with behaviours, which are culturally and cognitively much less sophisticated.

3. Meaning and manifestation

Adopting the vocabulary of current archaeological theory, it is tempting to frame this approach to aesthetics as telling us about the *meaning* of an aesthetic artifact. But an undifferentiated category of the meaningful is something I wish to get away from. Ian Hodder has said that a garlic crusher *means* social class,¹² that refuse *means* dirt or impurity, that archaeological evidence and its layout is “text.”¹³ He

¹¹ See again my ‘Art and the anthropologists’.

¹² Ian Hodder, ‘The interpretation of Documents and Material Culture’, in Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (eds), (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (pp. 393-402). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

¹³ Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 1.

gives us a taxonomy of meaning-kinds, based on a distinction between “the effect [an object] has on the world”, its place in a code, and “the historical content of the changing ideas and associations of the object itself”.¹⁴ Thus conceived, meaning is co-extensive with any kind of significance anything might have for anyone.¹⁵ I join the post-processualists in seeing the personal, the subjective and the qualitative as legitimate areas for archaeological inquiry.¹⁶ But not every act of mind is an act of meaning, not every interaction between persons is a trading of meanings, and the things agents intentionally make or alter are not always things with meaning. Archaeology is deeply concerned with mind, with interpreting artefacts in terms of the states of mind that created or altered them and with using those artefacts to understand the minds of their makers; it need not resort to the principle that the features that we cite in these interpretive projects are always meaning-conferring features.

What might we add to our explanatory tools to avoid using meaning for every conceivable job? I start with the idea of *behaviour that manifests a mental state or trait*. The defeated sports fan’s drooping posture on emerging from the stadium manifests her disappointment. Does it mean anything? It is an instance of what Grice called natural meaning, underpinned here by a reliable correlation between two things, as when we say that smoke means fire.¹⁷ But that does not make it a case of conventional or intended meaning; the behavior manifests the state without the agent herself manifesting it, as would happen if the fan deliberately adopted, displayed, exaggerated, sustained or failed to repress the posture.¹⁸ In those latter cases we

¹⁴ Ian Hodder, ‘The contextual analysis of symbolic meanings’, in Hodder (ed) *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.1. (p.81).

¹⁵ Having just side stepped one verbal dispute let’s avoid another; “meaning” has no settled meaning to which I am insisting we conform, and if someone insists on using it to cover all the kinds of significance an object or event may have the most sensible response is to ask them to make some careful distinctions within that class. I am going to use “meaning” more narrowly but what matters are the distinctions, not the labels for them.

¹⁶ “...it is ideas, beliefs and meanings which interpose themselves between people and things” (Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past*, 3).

¹⁷ See H. P. Grice, *Meaning*, *Philosophical Review*, 66 (1957): 377-88.

¹⁸ The possibility of suppressing a response yet refraining from doing so is emphasised by Mitchell Green (*Self Expression*, Oxford University Press,

can speak of the agent manifesting the state, and if she does so in a way that intentionally makes clear that she is doing these things we can say that she means something by the behaviour: the agent then has, in relevance theoretic terms, both an informative and a communicative intention.¹⁹ But behavior can manifest a state or trait without any person manifesting it.

I take it that *manifesting state or trait S* is a narrower notion than, say, *carrying information about S*. Your posture may, for me at least, manifest your depressed state but not manifest some little-known psychopathology which nonetheless is nomically correlated with that posture. I'm inclined to say that I "see" the sadness in the person's posture, but not to say this about the psychopathology, though, having learned about the connection, I might be able to conclude that the person does suffer from the disorder. The same contextual dependence holds when we consider acts of manifestation; what states or traits you manage to manifest depends on the receptiveness of your audience.

I don't put much weight on the idea of perception here. I am unsure that we literally see such things as sadness or compositional skill, and if this is perception it is perception of a very malleable kind; we have seen that what counts as manifested is to a considerable degree audience relative.²⁰ Perhaps the best test we have of whether something is manifested in behavior is the aptness of the metaphor of seeing, not the truth-value of the claim that we literally see the state or trait.

Granted the notion, we can distinguish three cases:

2007) who claims that the possibility of suppression makes a behavior voluntary.

¹⁹ See Dan Sperber & Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Second edition, Blackwell 1995.

²⁰ This has implications for how we understand aesthetic expertise. Knowing more about a culture's artefacts is not just a matter of gaining propositional knowledge about materials, styles and techniques; it is partly a matter of retuning and refinement that enables one to respond with feeling as one comes to (as we say) see the skills and capacities that one's propositional knowledge reveals. And this retuning applies not only to the objects of another culture; art-historical training helps to refine one's capacity to see the qualities expressed in already familiar artefacts.

- a) where the behaviour *merely manifests* the state or trait S (there being no intention on the agent's part to inform anyone about the state);
- b) where the behavior *broadcasts* S (there being an intention to inform);
- c) where the behavior *communicates* S (there being, additionally, an intention to get the audience to recognize the intention to inform).

In all three cases the behaviour manifests S, but only in the first case is S merely manifested.

We find states and traits manifested in the result of behaviour as well as in the behavior that creates them. It is at least as appropriate to say that I see the compositional skills, the care, attention and sensibility in the painting that results from the artistic behavior as it is to say that I see it in the behavior itself, should I be lucky enough to witness the act of composition. Achuelean handaxes, about which I will say more, are notable for their capacity to manifest the skillfulness of their makers, their shapes and the marks on their surfaces carrying a visible record of their construction. And makers were able, it seems, to impose further constraints on their own acts of making through choice of materials and iterations of making, thereby manifesting other or more refined skills, or manifesting those same skills more vividly. A spectacular set of five handaxes dated at about 600kya was found at Oldovai Gorge in Northern Tanzania. They are impractically large, notably symmetric, and made from hard-to-work quartzite; outline drawings of their shapes, superposed, are highly coincident. This and their positions at discovery make it likely that they were the work of a single individual.²¹ Objects as distinctive as these are often found in this later period of handaxe production, about one million years into the long history of that industry.

There has been much talk of handaxes as instruments of sexual selection, signaling manual dexterity and strength, the capacities to plan a complex task and to locate the appropriate materials: all things of potential relevance for mate-choice. Further suggestions in this

²¹ See Mary Leaky, *Oldovai Gorge*, volume 5, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp118-9. See also my 'Handaxes, art, and the minds of early humans', in E. Schellekens and P. Goldie (eds) *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

region include the display of emotional regulation, commitment to a task and possession of a socially secure position.²² These claims have met with some skepticism.²³ But the view that handaxes functioned on occasion as signals takes other forms as well. A recent suggestion is that axe production was a complex process requiring organization and planning that amounted to an instance of what evolutionary theorists now call “niche construction”, a process whereby the inter-generational landscape of adaptation for a species is altered by the species’ own modification of its environment. The thus modified environment favoured those with hard-to-gain stone knapping skills and attendant abilities in resource location, quality assessment and caching, thus promoting an apprentice system for learning. In such an environment displays of knapping and related skills served as signals from teachers of their relevant capacities; skilled teachers would then benefit through displays of reciprocity from the learners they enrolled.²⁴

²² The idea that handaxes were reliable signals was first developed in Kohn, M. and Mithen, S. 1999. ‘Handaxes: products of sexual selection?’ *Antiquity* 73: 518–526. Penny Spikens develops the argument further in ‘Goodwill hunting? Debates over the ‘meaning’ of Lower Palaeolithic handaxe form revisited’, *World Archaeology*, 44 (2012): 378–392.

²³ For criticism see Nowell, A. and Chang, M. 2008, ‘The Case against Sexual Selection as an explanation for Handaxe Morphology’, *PaleoAnthropology* 2009: 77–88. See also the somewhat rhetorical exchange of letters with Mithen in *PaleoAnthropology* 10 (2012). While there are evidential weaknesses in Mithen’s argument Nowell and Chang’s emphasis on the lack of evidence for a sexual selection explanation for human preferences for symmetry seems beside the point when they admit that such a preference exists, which is all that Mithen’s argument needs. The claim need only be that, for whatever reason, potential mates were attracted by symmetrical artefacts and that this attraction was adaptive because it signaled the possession of capacities such as strength and dexterity. It is irrelevant whether *bodily* symmetry signals good genes or good health.

²⁴ “Transmission of lithic skills depended on apprentices distinguishing more skilled knappers, and since various rewards presumably attached to that excellence a context emerged in which there was benefit to be gained by master knappers who developed more ornate and technically difficult artifact production strategies” (Peter Hiscock, Learning in Lithic Landscapes: A Reconsideration of the Hominid “Toolmaking” Niche, *Biological Theory*, (2014) 9:27–41, p.40).

For present purposes I'll simply assume that the career of the Acheulean handaxe is in part a story of signaling traits of their makers. I invite those skeptical even of this claim to indulge me for a moment; it will provide a concrete illustration of an abstract scheme of development. It is then a substantive question for archaeology where, if at all, this pattern is exemplified. The interest of the pattern is that it shows how it is possible to get from a system of signaling no more cognitively demanding or complex than we find operating between peacocks and peahens to a fully symbolic artefact.

If hand axes served partly as signals of socially relevant qualities, they did not automatically do so by manifesting those qualities, that is, by making them manifest to an audience. In other words, signals are prior to episodes of manifestation, even to episodes of mere manifestation. Peacock's tails may signal a healthy immune system but they need not be thought of as making the bearer's health manifest to the peahens, who presumably never think about health or immune systems. All that needs to happen for effective signaling is that peahens be attracted to peacocks in proportion to the luxuriousness of their tails. Let us call this *bare signaling*. But in the one and a half million years that handaxes were in production our ancestors' cognition changed remarkably; it is likely that at some stage community members would have seen handaxe making as indicative of personal qualities, while axe makers in the same position would then be able to make of their actions deliberate displays of those qualities. A timetable for this development is hard to fix given the uncertainties about the origins of language and other crucial milestones, but something can be said about an ordering of stages in which each stage presupposes the previous one. I present this in terms of abstractly characterized stages, not to be thought of as discrete historical episodes:

1. Bare signaling: At the first stage hand axes and their making function as bare signals of desirable social traits; conspecifics respond to the signals by being more likely to defer to, learn from, form alliances with, or mate with those whose axe making

practices signal these traits; they need not be made aware, by the signal, of the qualities signaled.

2. Behavior which manifests certain qualities: At the next stage subjects, makers and audiences are conscious that certain qualities are signaled by the behaviour, though signalers do not intend the signal to manifest those qualities. Receivers need not have a very clear idea about what exactly these qualities are; they may think of them, at some stage in the process, as “qualities, whatever they are, which make this relationship promising”.
3. Intending to manifest: Makers, aware that their acts of making manifest qualities, use their acts of making as ways of manifesting their qualities, deliberately modulating their creative behavior so as to turn up the volume of the signal; we see the large, overworked axes in easily fractured materials sometimes displaying twisted symmetries and occasionally shaped to reveal variations in composition of the stone or embedded fossils.
4. Communication: It is common knowledge between makers and observers that these acts of making sometimes function, and are sometimes intended to function, as efficient signals of personal quality.

By stage 4 acts of making are sometimes recognized as intended to inform observers of the personal qualities of makers. In Relevance theoretic terms, observers sometimes recognize an informative intention on the makers’ part, though at this stage the maker need not intend that this intention be recognized; they need not have a communicative intention.²⁵ I don’t have enough grip on what precisely symbols are supposed to be to say at what exact point in the process we start to find genuinely symbolic behavior but I think we can say this: Stage 1 is definitely pre-symbolic whereas Stage 4 definitely is symbolic²⁶.

²⁵ This is what Sperber and Wilson describe as unintended ostensive communication; see Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, pp.63-4.

²⁶ “Stone tools were material symbols long before the ochre and jewelry of behavioral modernity,” (Kim Sterelny & Peter Hiscock, Signals, Symbols and the archaeological record, Biol Theory (2014) 9:1–3.

5. Special symbols

There is a part of this ideal history we have not yet characterised, one which helps us account for the important difference between ordinary, utilitarian symbols (modern examples would be words and road signs) and symbols invested with a special significance which certain hand axes may have acquired and which later artefacts, some of them morphologically related to hand axes, certainly did and do enjoy.

Symbols can be special in many ways and I am not offering a comprehensive theory of specialness for symbols. I simply note that two distinct factors are relevant to the present case. One is already implicit in the development of stages 1-4 just outlined: objects which manifest the qualities of a person may be seen as valuable because they create a significant link between that person and you. The second idea, not always distinguished from the first, is that expressive objects can be thought of as repositories of the very qualities they express. Here the idea of *contagion* enters the picture: “the belief that a person’s immaterial qualities or “essence” can be transferred to an object through physical contact”²⁷

This characterization is due to the psychologist Paul Bloom and colleagues who, with acknowledgement to Fraser and others, argue that we can explain the value that people place on authenticity in art by appeal to contagion.²⁸ In a number of experimental conditions they claim to find that contagion is a factor in determining people’s valuation of artefacts associated with agents who have notably admirable or deplorable traits. Applying this idea to the evolution of special symbols, we may conjecture that some symbols become special by being seen as literally possessing the valuable traits of which they are expressive²⁹.

²⁷ Newman, G., Diesendruck, & Bloom, P., ‘Celebrity Contagion and the Value of Objects’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2011. The idea of contagion goes back to early anthropological work of Fraser, Mauss and Taylor and has been redeployed in current cognitive psychology by Paul Rosin.

²⁸ Newman, G. E., & Bloom, P. (2011) ‘Art and Authenticity: The Importance of Originals in Judgments of Value’. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0026035.

²⁹ In her doctoral dissertation (University of Stockholm, in progress) Maria Forsberg discusses Bloom’s work and other aspects of the contagion

Contagion, as Bloom and others understand it, is a suggestive notion but it is not quite what I need. For a start, talk of “essence” here sounds odd, at least to a philosopher: the claim of contagion should not be that essential properties are transferrable.³⁰ The essential properties—the ones you have in every possible world—are the boring properties like being the person you are or perhaps (a bit more interesting) being the product of certain gametes. The properties we might see people as transferring are *important* but inessential properties like being a wonderful painter, being a mass murderer. Even Hitler isn’t a mass murderer in every world.

The second point is that contagion is said to depend heavily on the amount and intensity of physical contact between agent and artifact. “An original Picasso may be valuable because Picasso actually touched it” they say.³¹ For my purposes what is important is not touching but making, which can be done without literally touching an object and coming no closer to it than the length of a paintbrush. Compare your attitudes to the following two paintings: one produced by Picasso but barely touched by him directly with virtually all contact mediated by the brush, and one painted by a minor artist, given to Picasso and worn by him as an eccentric form of insulation one Paris winter. From the point of view of physical contact the minor artist’s picture ought to have more value, being the object with the more sustained and more intimate physical connection to Picasso, a bearer of many art-relevant qualities. But this is not at all a plausible prediction; what matters to anyone interested is what Picasso did to the painting, not how close he was to it and for how long. The one he wore but did not paint will be valued relatively low; it does not manifest Picasso’s qualities as a painter, though it might manifest those of the minor artist. The picture Picasso painted will surely be

hypothesis, including whether it is plausible to think that subjects believe in contagion or merely imagine it.

³⁰ See also Paul Rosin and Carol Nemeroff (‘Sympathetic magical thinking: the contagion and similarity “heuristics”’, in: Gilovich, T., Griffin, D., & Kahneman, D. *Heuristics and biases. The psychology of intuitive judgment*. (Pp. 201-216). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): “...when objects make physical contact, essences may be permanently transferred”

³¹ ‘Art and Authenticity’, p.3.

valued high, with few questions asked about the duration or directness of his physical contact with it.³²

My final reservation concerns the idea of transference, and is hinted at in talk just now of “quality-containment”. Though Bloom and colleagues do not say more about what transference is, a natural way to understand transference of properties is as a process by which something which has a certain property confers that very property on another thing; in familiar cases of contagion a person who has a disease gives that disease to another. I have the property *suffering from a cold*, which I then cause you to have as well. But that is surely not what is thought to happen in cases we are now considering; a painter possesses an excellent skill, but no one thinks of the painting as having an excellent skill.³³ A more plausible characterization of the process is this: that we have a tendency to think of artefacts which manifest personal qualities (hand axes, sculptures, paintings, drawings) not as possessing those qualities but as *containing* them, as being in some way magical repositories of those qualities; a box can contain water without itself being water or watery³⁴. In fact it is easy to see how a not clearly articulated sense that an object manifests certain personal properties (a claim which may be literally true) gives rise to the thought that somehow the qualities reside within the object. None of this, I grant, makes rational sense, but we are not in a region where ideas are expected to meet this condition.

³² The “making” theory on offer here does predict some correlation between valuing and assumed closeness of contact, on the grounds that the exercise of artistic skills and capacities generally requires such closeness. But it is the exercise of skill which, according to the theory, is the decisive factor, not the closeness.

³³ One tempting proposal here is to think of contagion not as something people literally believe in but as an idea capable of exerting the kind of pressure on cognition and action described by Gendler in introducing the idea of alief (see Tamar Szabó Gendler, ‘Alief and Belief’, *Journal of Philosophy* (2008), 105:634-663). Aliefs are said to be states which may control action without being subject to constraints of rationality and of which the subject is often unaware. If aliefs constitute an explanatory category this will not help to make sense of contagion as literal transference of properties; ordinary subjects show no tendency in behavior to treat paintings as if they were skillful.

³⁴ This analogy is of limited usefulness since people need not think of objects as having spatial parts which contain qualities; since we are in the realm of magical thinking here it is not easy—and probably not helpful—to give a fully articulated and coherent account of what is thought.

So my suggestion is that the specialness of some symbols is accounted for by this extra step from something's manifesting personal qualities to it's being a container of those properties—without, though, possessing them in the way that a person possesses personhood or a box possesses boxness. I am not sure what label we should use for this supposed process but it is sufficiently different from the idea of contagion for us to avoid that term.

We are now at the point where a handaxe may be thought valuable because it is a repository of valuable personal qualities. This immediately raises issues of possession; if an object contains valuable things, it is likely to be thought worthwhile to possess it, for then one possesses the valuable things. One could ask awkward questions here about the possessor's capacity to make use of the valuable things—how does one extract the valuable qualities from the thing one possesses? But we don't have to find rational answers to such questions to understand the intuitive attraction of possessing quality-containers.

The desirability of possessing a quality-container now means that an object may become associated with someone other than the maker, and for different reasons. It is associated with the maker because it is an indicator of the maker's qualities; it is associated with the possessor because it is a signal of that person's possession of the qualities that enable them to possess it. And here again, aided perhaps by the use of ceremonies and other theatrical devices, the contagion effect can again be triggered; this time the artefact comes to be seen as containing those possession-enabling qualities, and the artifact shifts from being a symbol of the maker's qualities to being a symbol of those of the possessor.

6. Explanation vs interpretation

I have tried to show how aesthetic ideas—understood in a certain way—can mesh with others to form an explanatory chain that takes us from artefacts as mere signals to artefacts as symbols of social status. The idea is not that all such symbols go through this trajectory: once the idea is embedded in culture such symbols can be made to order. Rather, the story serves two purposes. First, and to repeat an earlier point: it indicates one way that a practice of using such symbols *could* emerge without being designed; it is then an empirical question whether and in what circumstances symbols actually have emerged in this way. Secondly, it illustrates a variety of

ways one creature can influence the behavior of another. Starting with a form of signaling common in nonhuman animals, we move then to the idea of behavior which merely manifests personal properties, thence to acts of manifestation and finally to instances of a relatively unsophisticated kind of communication. Notice how early in the process aesthetic sensibility turns out to be crucial; by making salient to observers the ways in which an object's appearance manifests qualities in the act of making, it enables the transition from mere signals to acts of manifestation.

I have called this an explanatory project. One of the fault lines in current archaeology concerns the merits of explanation as compared with something many want to contrast with explanation: interpretation. Processualist archaeologists from the 1960s on sought the status of an explanatory science for their subject, understood as marked by inference to observed phenomena from general statements of relations between variables of social and cultural change.³⁵ There is a dispute about how much in archaeology has been achieved by using these methods, and the post-processualists, whose answer is "very little" argue that the goal should be interpretation, not explanation.³⁶ However, it is far from clear what is served by this opposition, once we get away from the highly unrealistic insistence that explanation must involve derivation of the particular from the general. What we do need to keep in focus is the idea that explanation is an inquiry into the causes of things. Agreed, there may be domains that are explanation-involving without appeal to causation: in mathematics and, perhaps, in what are called geometrical explanation. But the events studied by archaeologists have causes if anything does, and there does not seem to be anything very sinister in wanting to know what those causes are. Does taking an interest in those causes set us against the idea of interpretation? No. There may be interpretive endeavors that are non-causal, as when we ask whether interpreting the Fourteenth Amendment this way would lead to the normatively best outcome

³⁵Binford is credited with articulating this explanatory goal, first in his 'Archaeology as anthropology', *American Antiquity*, 28 (1962): 217-225, and in later publications, sometimes citing Hempel on explanation. While Hempel treated explanatory principles as Humean regularities Binford seems to have wanted archaeological explanations to cite intelligible mechanisms of causation; on some of the tensions in the processualist theory of explanation see Alison Wylie, *The conceptual core of the new archaeology*, in her *Thinking from Things: Essays in the philosophy of archaeology*. University of California Press, 2002.

³⁶Post-processualists are sometimes called interpretive archaeologists.

rather than to something in line with Framer's intentions.³⁷ But a good deal that one would point to as paradigmatically interpretive is causal without needing the support of general relations between variables. Interpreting your utterance of "I've had breakfast" as meaning that you had breakfast *today* involves seeing the utterance as having, as part of its causal history, your intention to communicate to me that you had breakfast today. Interpreting your slow walk and drooping shoulders as manifesting your sadness involves seeing your sadness as part of the causal history of your posture. Interpreting an artifact as manifesting the beliefs and values of an agent or group of agents involves seeing those beliefs and motivations as part of its causal history. These interpretive projects look very much like causal-explanatory ones as well. Why, then, are explanation and interpretation pitted against one another?

For some Post-Processualists the distinction between explanation and interpretation is one of attitude: interpretation is a less dogmatic activity than explanation. Shanks and Hodder say "The interpretive practice that is archaeology is an ongoing process: there is no final and definitive account of the past as it was".³⁸ But the rejection of dogmatism is available to all parties in this dispute. I may dogmatically insist that my explanation is right, or that my interpretation is right, or I might be undogmatically open minded on both questions. One may think that there is not one uniquely correct interpretation of something. If we think of causal explanation as inquiry into the causal history of an event or object, we find just as

³⁷ In practice it is unlikely that any interpretation of the Constitution will be entirely free from causal assumptions; at most the Warren Court, deciding in *Brown vs Board of Education* could have asked was "what could a contemporary reasonably be thought to mean by the Fourteenth Amendment?" To ask this question one needs the idea of intentional action, which is causal through and through.

³⁸ Michael Shanks and Ian Hodder, 'Processual, post-processual and interpretive archaeologies', in *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past* edited by Alexandra Alexandri, Victor Buchli, John Carman, Ian Hodder, Jonathan Last, Gavin Lucas, Michael Shanks, Routledge, 1995. The highly tendentious "Glossary" to this volume offers this on "explanation and understanding": "The essential openness of interpretation, which aims at understanding, may be contrasted with the aim of closure... between explanans and explanandum, which is usually considered the aim of explanation" (237). For deflation of the ambitions of interpretive archaeology see Ernest Gellner, 'Interpretive Archaeology', in the same volume.

much reason to be skeptical of that task being completed.³⁹ An event's causal history is vast, and we only ever pick out bits from it, guided by relevance to the task in hand. What to focus on and at what level of description are pragmatic affairs. We certainly should not say that all explanations are equally good; some are worse than others and some are hopeless. But no explanation we are likely to come up with will ever be best, irrespective of context. The same goes for interpretation; the post-processualists won't say, I hope, that all interpretations are equally acceptable and that this is what distinguishes the appeal to interpretation from the appeal to explanation. Interpreting handaxes circa 1mya as items in a system of monetary exchange is (much) less acceptable than interpreting them as tools for butchery, because the former is much less likely, given total evidence, than the latter which may in turn be less acceptable than some other interpretation yet to be thought of.

It would be an absurdly arrogant version of explanationism to insist that wholly satisfactory explanations of archaeological phenomenon are easily found or that particular explanatory projects are easily and quickly completed, with no danger of revision. We cannot be certain that our explanations, however good they seem, are correct; we must always stand ready to revise them in the light of incoming evidence or new explanatory options which may be rivals, threatening to supersede our previous best endeavours. There is always more to say about a causal history. Epistemic humility is a sensible, even a required attitude, whatever our approach to the relation between explanation and interpretation.

Explanation and interpretation may not be the same thing, and may not even be co-extensive. But the choice between them, when it is sensible to make it, should not be made by claiming that one and not the other is implicated in causality, or that one and not the other can be undertaken only in a dogmatic spirit.

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³⁹ On explanation as the telling of causal history see David Lewis, 'Causal explanation', in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol II, Oxford University Press, 1986.