Phenomenology and Archaeology

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Abstract

This chapter examines the integration of phenomenology within archaeology, tracing its historical development and contemporary significance. Early influences emerged through hermeneutic archaeology, which emphasized the historical situatedness of the scientist in interpreting material culture. The so-called landscape archaeology of the 1990s introduced phenomenology as a methodological framework, focusing on the archaeologist's sensory and bodily engagement with landscapes. While influential, it faced criticism for methodological subjectivism and presentism. More recent developments have integrated Heideggerian phenomenology, particularly through concepts of dwelling and mortality, and the recent rise of 4E cognition has brought enactive and extended perspectives on cognition into accounts of prehistoric material engagements. In recent years, phenomenology has also contributed to debates on the emergence of symbolic culture in the Stone Age. The chapter concludes by assessing phenomenology's future relevance for archaeology.

Keywords phenomenology – archaeology – cognitive archaeology – Palaeolithic – prehistory – 4E cognition – symbolic cognition – evolutionary psychology – human evolution – material engagement

Introduction

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of lived experience. It focuses on how the world appears to consciousness, rather than reducing it to objective facts. Originating with Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), it became one of the most influential philosophical movements of the 20th century, with Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) as two of its best-known representatives. By investigating intentionality (the mind's directedness), embodiment, and the structures of meaning-making, phenomenology has had a notable influence on virtually all fields of scientific inquiry.

Archaeology, on the other hand, studies human societies through their material remains, artifacts, and environmental contexts, seeking to understand ways of life, cultural practices, and societal transformations. Cognitive archaeology, a subdiscipline, extends this inquiry by investigating the cognitive capacities of humans, both past and present, through their engagement with material culture, tools, and symbolic systems.[1] Evolutionary cognitive archaeology further refines this approach by tracing the gradual development of cognition in relation to both biological evolution and material culture, reaching back to the earliest known stone tools, dated to around 3.4 million years ago.

Despite their different starting points, phenomenology and archaeology converge in their shared interest in how humans experience, structure, and make sense of their world. Past lived experience is therefore inevitably implicated in archaeology. Phenomenological ideas began to appear in archaeological discourse in the early 20th century and gained traction in the

second half of the century, initially mainly in hermeneutical contexts. This chapter focuses primarily on more recent and substantial applications of phenomenology within archaeology, particularly those from the 1990s onward, with a special emphasis on developments in evolutionary cognitive archaeology.

We consider phenomenological approaches to archaeology to be loosely characterized by a cluster of methodological commitments. These include, first, a focus on consciousness, minds, or first-person dimensions of experience; second, an emphasis on embodiment, intersubjectivity, and situated existence; third, the use of core phenomenological concepts such as intentionality, horizon, sense-constitution, or Dasein; and fourth, an interest in how tools, signs, and social interactions co-constitute cognition.

It is further useful to distinguish several ways in which phenomenology can be applied within archaeological research, depending on one's primary interest. At a conceptual level, phenomenology can be used to clarify key archaeological and cognitive notions—for example, what counts as a tool or a symbol, and whether material forms can be considered part of the mind. At an epistemic level, it can contribute to questions concerning the object of archaeological study, the possibility of reconstructing past experience, and the role of material forms in cognition. A third line of application concerns the analysis of (pre)historic minds, using phenomenological concepts to interpret the cognition and lived experience of past individuals. Closely related, but distinct, is the analysis of the archaeologist, which focuses on the sensory and bodily experience of archaeological practice itself, especially in landscape and experimental archaeology. Finally, phenomenology can have practical applications, informing fieldwork, heritage management, and the public presentation of archaeological sites.

As noted, phenomenology is a wide-ranging discipline, and its applications within archaeology are often implicit, and moreover still evolving and expanding. A comprehensive overview is therefore beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, we begin with a concise historical survey of late 20th-century developments, before turning to more recent uses in evolutionary cognitive archaeology, particularly in its focus on 4E cognition.

Early Phenomenological Currents in Archaeology (1950s–1980s)

While phenomenological ideas have long been present in archaeological discourse, they remained largely implicit until the so-called landscape turn in the 1990s. Before then, phenomenology influenced archaeology in more diffuse ways, particularly through hermeneutical approaches in interpretative archaeology and through post-structuralist critiques of meaning and representation, including Derridean perspectives.

Processual archaeology, a movement that emerged in the 1960s, had emphasized the need to adopt a strict and rigorously scientific approach to the material record, with the goal of achieving objective and factual interpretations of past human behavior. In reaction, the post-processual archaeology that arose during the 1980s favored a more subjective approach, emphasizing sociocultural contexts and the role of human agency. Drawing on thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), post-processualist archaeologists rejected the idea that the past could be objectively reconstructed through rigid scientific methodologies. Instead, they viewed interpretation as a "creative process," wherein archaeologists actively constructed "knowledge and narratives from the material traces of the past," rather than uncovering a single definitive historical truth.[2] As such, interpretive approaches emphasize historical situatedness, the role of the researcher, and the inherently partial nature of archaeological knowledge.

Closely related movements introduced post-structuralist critiques of meaning and representation, drawing among others on Jacques Derrida's (1930–2004) deconstruction method and Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) analyses of discourse and power. Some scholars applied structuralist and semiotic frameworks to material culture, seeing artifacts as embedded within larger systems of meaning, while others destabilized fixed categories of archaeological interpretation, questioning assumptions about gender, identity, and function in past societies. This shift encouraged archaeologists to consider the contingency of interpretations and the constructed nature of archaeological narratives, though it also led to criticisms of relativism and excessive speculation.

While none of the post-processualist approaches were strictly phenomenological, they played an important role in broadening archaeological theory beyond empirical classification and an insistence on scientific objectivity. The influential work of Ian Hodder, for example, emphasized the researcher's perspective, cultural background, and theoretical stance in archaeological interpretation,[3] while the post-structuralist approach of Michael Shanks was instrumental in the shift toward symbolism and lived experience.[4] By challenging objectivist reconstructions of the past, post-processualists helped create the intellectual space for later phenomenological approaches, particularly those that emphasized experience, embodiment, and lived engagement with materiality.

The 1990s Landscape Turn

Although phenomenological ideas appeared in archaeological discourse throughout the 20th century, phenomenology became a particularly influential approach in archaeology during the 1990s, initially in the context of landscape archaeology. Like post-processualist archaeology, landscape archaeology arose as a response to the processual archaeology that had dominated the discipline in the 1960s and which had insisted on quantitative and scientific reconstructions of past human behavior. In contrast, the phenomenological landscape archaeologists of the 1990s argued that archaeological sites should not be understood merely as spatial configurations of objects and structures, but rather, as meaningful places shaped by bodily movements, perception, sociality, and lived experience. By drawing on phenomenology—particularly the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty—landscape archaeologists sought to recapture the experiential dimensions of prehistoric landscapes, emphasizing how perception and bodily movement would have shaped the experience of place for past peoples.

One influential proponent of this approach was Christopher Tilley, who introduced explicit phenomenological concepts into landscape archaeology. Tilley argued that prehistoric people did not engage with their landscapes as detached observers, but instead experienced them through movement, perception, and habitual engagement.[5] He drew on Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment, emphasizing that perception is not a passive act of receiving environmental stimuli, but is instead an active process of being-in-the-world. In this view, the landscape is not simply a backdrop to human activity; instead, it is constitutive of human experience. This perspective aligns with Heidegger's concept of dwelling—the idea that humans do not simply occupy spaces, but actively create meaning through their engagement with places. This view also inspired some landscape archaeologists to adopt experiential methods, such as walking routes through prehistoric landscapes. Such phenomenological perspectives have encouraged archaeologists to move beyond static site descriptions, instead analyzing acoustic properties or movement pathways to infer how past people oriented themselves and interacted within their environments. These methods shift operationalization from cataloguing spatial data to interpreting how bodily engagement structured perception and social life.

Building on Tilley's work, Julian Thomas and others integrated post-structuralist and Heideggerian ideas into archaeological thought.[6] Thomas critiqued the Cartesian separation of subject and object in traditional archaeological methodologies, which he claimed strips the world of its lived significance, reducing it to ontic facts.[7] Like Tilley, he suggested that past humans did not experience the landscape as an object, but rather, as an intrinsic part of their being-in-the-world. Thomas's approach thus challenged the traditional archaeological tendency to treat landscapes as mere spaces to be analyzed and categorized, rather than as places imbued with existential and social meaning. He suggested that "social life is lived out through the material world,"[8] and that "the material and the symbolic cannot be disentangled"[9] because "the world which surrounds us is not composed of distinct and separate processual entities or systems [which can] be prised apart."[10]

Another influential movement that emerged at about the same time is called sensory archaeology, which is sometimes referred to as archaeology of the body.[11] While not typically grounded in explicit phenomenology, it shares several thematic concerns, particularly its rejection of detached, objective methodologies (mirroring Heideggerian and other post-Husserlian phenomenology) in favor of embodied approaches. However, unlike traditional phenomenology, which explores the full spectrum of intentional acts and dimensions of being-in-the-world, sensory archaeology tends to focus more narrowly on bodily and sensory engagements.

Yannis Hamilakis, a key proponent of sensory archaeology, has argued—in much the same way as Julian Thomas and others have—that archaeology is trapped in "a sanitized and impoverished version of Cartesianism, devoid of affectivity."[12] He has critiqued traditional archaeology for its "evidential obsession," claiming its adherence to scientific verification prevents it from recognizing the sensory and affective dimensions of past experiences.[13] Furthermore, he has explicitly rejected naturalistic approaches, asserting that "meaningful understanding of sensorial modalities and interactions are context-specific." That is, sensory experiences cannot be reduced to physiological responses, but must be interpreted within their historical and cultural frameworks.[14]

Beyond the landscape-focused phenomenological approaches of the 1990s, other Heidegger-inspired perspectives emerged, some of which engaged more explicitly with existential concerns, instead of just sensation, perception, and movement. Philip Tonner applied Heideggerian existential phenomenology to archaeology. Drawing partially on Tim Ingold's phenomenology-influenced interpretative archaeology, Tonner examined not only how people experienced and moved through landscapes, but also how they embedded existential concerns—particularly mortality—into their material worlds.[15]

This dwelling-based approach, derived from Heidegger's philosophy, moves beyond the sensory and experiential focus of landscape archaeology and engages with deeper ontological questions about how past humans made sense of their place in the world, particularly through their relationship with death—a familiar Heideggerian theme. Tonner followed Chris Gosden[16] to assert that dwelling is an "archaeological perspective that seeks to give full credence to life as it is lived by social agents," and that it thematizes the "full sensuous experience of living in the world."[17] More specifically, he argued that prehistoric burial sites are not merely practical engagements with space, but materialize existential structures of being-toward-death. For example, Tonner interpreted the material record from Sima de los Huesos, a Middle Pleistocene site associated with *Homo heidelbergensis*, as evidence that these hominins were "dealing with the dead" in a way that aligns with dwelling in a broadly Heideggerian sense.[18] He thus suggested their treatment of the dead reflected a deep-seated existential self-awareness, rather than mere functional disposal.

While Tonner's argument is conceptually compelling, it faces several challenges. One key issue is that it relies on specific interpretations of the archaeological record, matters that remain open to debate. Without further empirical validation, interpretations of prehistoric mortuary practices as existential reflections on death can be contested. Another challenge concerns whether Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* provides conceptually precise tools for understanding archaic hominin cognition. Even if we accept that early hominins grappled with mortality in existential terms, they may not have done so in the ways that Heidegger would have deemed essential, such as through his familiar notions of "fallenness" (*Verfallen*) and "the They" (*das Man*), which seem more applicable to the complexities of modern life than to Palaeolithic existence. At least from an evolutionary viewpoint, the real phenomenological challenge may be to explore the varied modes of being-toward-death, by considering how archaic hominins may have progressively appropriated an understanding of death through material and social engagements.

The landscape and phenomenological archaeologies just discussed have also faced criticism. Some have questioned the claims of landscape archaeology, arguing that it relies on modern, present-day phenomenological experience as a proxy for prehistoric cognition.[19] Moreover, approaches sometimes lacked methodological rigor, relying on impressionistic descriptions rather than testable hypotheses. This has raised an ongoing tension within the discipline: how to balance the richness of lived experience with the need for empirical rigor. The future of phenomenology in archaeology may depend on integrating it more systematically with cognitive science, experimental archaeology, and other empirical research.

The 4E Turn and Material Engagement (Post-2000s)

Taking a 4E approach to the mind means seeing cognition as embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive.[20] *Embodiment* sees cognition as influenced or constituted by the resources and processes of the physical body,[21] while *embeddedness* sees it as influenced by the physical world, both natural and sociomaterial.[22] *Extension* considers material forms to be an integral component of cognition, along with the brain and body,[23] and *enaction* holds that cognition *is* the interaction between brain, body, and world.[24] Under the umbrella of 4E constructs, the mind can also be *distributed*, part of a network of interacting agents;[25] *dynamical* and self-organizing through the continuous interplay of internal states and external stimuli over time[26]; and *situated*, affected by both body and world.[27]

Within the cognitive sciences, embodiment and embeddedness have become fairly uncontentious, though their exact nature, capacity for influence, and mechanisms continue to be a matter of some debate.[28] Extension and enaction, while once seen as more radical, have steadily gained traction in recent years, influencing theoretical developments, even when not yet fully integrated into mainstream methodologies. In cognitive archaeology, 4E perspectives have opened up new avenues for interpreting the archaeological record by reconceiving cognition as not merely brain-bound but fundamentally shaped by interaction with material and social environments. For example, once the mind is considered extended and enactive, the material record is no longer simply a passive witness to its evolutionary change. Instead, material forms become an integral part of thinking itself, which means the cognitive inferences drawn from them are better grounded and more parsimonious in terms of the assumptions that must be made.[29]

Within cognitive archaeology, the Material Engagement Theory (MET) developed by Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew (1937–2024) is an influential 4E approach to understanding the ancient mind.[30] MET has three central tenets. First, the mind is viewed as extended and enacted. This tenet challenges researchers to redraw the boundaries of cognition

to include more than just the brain to see what new insights this perspective might generate.[31] Second, materiality is held to have *agency*, in recognition of its ability to influence human behavior and consciousness. Outcomes are determined not solely by human intentions, but also by what material forms are in their substance, properties, and potential.[32] Third, materiality is seen as *bringing forth* meaning as it is used, an interaction called *enactive signification*. Meaning emerges not through representing that takes place inside the brain, but rather, through engaging with the physical world.

With these tenets serving as its foundation, MET is also a vocal critic of the Cartesian distinction between internal mental activity and an external physical world. Instead, thinking is effected *with* and *through* things: a *thinging* that recognizes material objects as an essential and inseparable component of cognition.[33] This anti-Cartesian stance has occasionally led MET's proponents to critique phenomenological approaches, which are seen as remaining entangled in forms of dualism and internalism. For example, Malafouris argues that traditional phenomenology is incompatible with the enactive perspective. He contends that the phenomenological concept of *intentionality* assumes "material stuff … is ontologically separate from the 'mental' world",[34] and that it "presents a significant obstacle for any discussion of material agency in the proper sense."[35] In contrast, MET views intention as co-arising with action and through engaging with material forms. That is, intention does not invariably *precede* action, meaning there is no clear distinction between an internal intentional state and the external physical conditions that participate in its emergence as a conscious state.

Leaving aside how accurate these readings are as interpretations of phenomenological method,[36] MET also clearly adopts phenomenological ideas to illustrate its own commitments. For example, the first-person perspective is frequently used to illustrate the nature of embodiment, extension, and enaction. Here, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of how we live through our bodies and tools—such as the blind man's cane—form a recurrent motif.[37] On Merleau-Ponty's account, the cane that is used to navigate by a visually impaired individual becomes an integral part of that person's perceptual system. The man does not perceive the cane itself, but the ground through the cane, and so the cane is effectively integrated into the user's body schema. This example illustrates how, according to Merleau-Ponty and MET, brain, body, and world are continuous rather than distinct entities.

The what-it-is-likeness of engaging clay in pottery-making is another often-used example to illustrate the significance of material engagement. Descriptions of what the potter sees, feels, and hears while pounding and shaping the clay highlight the complex ways in which brains and bodies interact with clay, water, and the spinning of the potter's wheel to produce an ultimate form.[38] Rather than form being the result of prior mental planning, it becomes the outcome of an interaction in which the potter continuously responds to what the clay does as they work with it, just as the clay responds to the potter's movements. While the potter may have the sense that they direct the action as the hands move, in fact, these movements respond to what the clay is doing, such that outcomes are influenced as much by what the clay does as what the potter intends.

In this context, MET ascribes *agency* not only to human actors, but rather considers it "a relational and emergent product of situated activity."[39] Things have agency in changing human behavior, as for example a speed bump when it makes drivers slow down. Things also have agency in influencing and co-creating human relations, as revealed, for example, by gifting. In many traditional societies, giving a gift initiates a social relationship: receiving it means accepting the social bond, and reciprocating with a counter-gift enters the participants into a system of mutual obligations.[40] The objects used as gifts thus become agents that govern social relations.

MET's ascription of agency to external things helps to draw out and elucidate the potential that things have to influence human behaviors and brains. At the same time, it might be objected that these remain strictly metaphors, rather than phenomenologically accurate descriptions—insofar as pots, speed bumps, and gifts do not have agency in the phenomenological or ordinary personal sense.

As a final illustration of MET's role in archaeology, Karenleigh Overmann's work discusses the evolution of numeracy and literacy by considering material engagements. For numeracy, she demonstrates that our concept of number evolved not as an abstract, innate capacity, but rather, through the sustained interaction of material forms such as body parts, tokens, tallies, and later writing systems.[41] Numerical cognition as humans have it today developed through successive layers: from *subitization* (the immediate, unambiguous perceptual appreciation of small quantities up to about three or four: an innate capacity found not just in mammals but also in birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and perhaps even insects, which are invertebrates), to *counting* with material supports like fingers or clay tokens, and only much later to *mental manipulations* of numbers. This gradual change in the conceptualization of numbers is seen in anthropological studies of contemporary peoples, as well as in the pictographic clay tablets of the ancient Near East (the earliest unambiguous numbers found in the archaeological record), where numerals began to function more in terms of their relations to one another than to the items they initially represented.

Similarly, Overmann shows literacy as a phenomenon that has emerged through sustained, collaborative interactions with early writing as a material form.[42] Where her work with numbers shows how material forms occasion and structure concepts, her work with writing systems examines mutual, co-adaptive change in material forms and user behaviors and brains. Ancient behaviors and neuropsychological processing reorganized in response to the interaction, as demonstrated by changes in the material form of writing. For example, handwriting became skilled, efficient, and automatic in producing characters; similarly, recognition processes became proficient at identifying combinations of characters and associating them with the meanings and sounds of language. Today, these same reorganizations are simply known as learning to read and write, the difference being that the material form now consists of modern scripts descended from the initial ancient forms. Changes in user behaviors and brains, in turn, enabled the material form that is writing to change; in response, writing transformed from small pictures that were meaningful in virtue of resembling their referents into modern scripts such as alphabets whose individual elements are increasingly arbitrary and conventional. In this process of gradual transformation, the material form has acted to accumulate and redistribute incremental change in user behaviors and brains, eventually achieving forms (like alphabets) that are highly efficient in eliciting specific behavioral and neurological responses in their users.

Overmann's archaeological analyses illustrate MET's core idea: that cognition is not confined to the head, but co-constituted through engagement with the material world. Cognitive advances such as symbolic numeracy and literacy are not solely the result of internal mental (or genetic) leaps, but were instead scaffolded by material practices that evolved over hundreds or even thousands of generations. This perspective further reveals how the human mind does not just "constitute" the world one-sidedly, but that the mind is itself co-constituted through processes of cultural evolution. This also resonates with phenomenological reflections on generativity: on how subjectivity is itself constituted within historical and communal horizons. As Husserl once put it: "I am a 'child of time', I am in a we-community in the broadest sense … which is once again in community with generative [past] subjects, with the closest and most distant ancestors. And it has 'worked' on me … all that I am is founded, partially by this ancestral tradition."[43]

Recent Developments

In recent years, there has been renewed—though still relatively limited—phenomenological engagement with archaeological literature, alongside a broader shift in archaeological theory away from internalist and representational models of cognition. Beyond Material Engagement Theory (MET) proper, a wider family of post-representational approaches has redirected attention to reconstructing how meaning in the past arose through material practice, perception, and historically situated participation, especially in debates about prehistoric art and so-called "symbolism".

One of the most actively debated questions in archaeology today where this turn is particularly visible concerns the origins and character of *symbolic behavior*. There remains very little agreement on what constitutes a so-called symbolic artifact, or how such items can be reliably identified in the archaeological record.[44] For example, beads and pendants from the Middle Stone Age are often interpreted as indicating behaviorally "modern" symbolism.[45] Some scholars approach them through a semiotic lens as symbolic messages,[46] while others describe them in different terms, including as non-utilitarian objects.[47]

In work on prehistoric symbolic imagery, Andrew Meirion Jones has argued that art and images are better approached as material processes, events, and affective practices than as static sign-vehicles, while April Nowell's "visual cultures" approach similarly shifts focus from iconography alone to the biological, cognitive, and social conditions under which images are experienced, learned, and transmitted within communities of practice.[48] Ran Barkai's work on Lower Palaeolithic ontologies belongs to a related shift, interpreting handaxes and animal remains not simply as products of technical problem-solving, but as elements within relational ontologies linking tools, prey, and ways of life.[49] At the same time, Hussain and Will have argued that Palaeolithic archaeology has been slow to incorporate materiality theory, despite its potential to reconceive lithic technologies as active participants in thought and action.[50] What unites these approaches is not a rejection of meaning, but a rejection of the assumption that prehistoric significance is best explained by treating artifacts as externalized symbols of already formed inner representations.

Against this background, a potential limitation of many prevailing archaeological methodologies, including MET, is their predominantly material or object-centered focus. This risks overlooking the social dimensions of human cognition and behavior, which is a well-studied theme in phenomenology. Phenomenological approaches such as Husserl's emphasize that it is precisely through an understanding of others' intentional relations to the world and each other that humans develop the capacity for joint attention, cooperation, and the establishment of institutions.[51]

Growing sensitivity to this lacuna has led some philosophers to engage more directly with phenomenological and psychological theories of empathy and intersubjectivity. Empirical research on the ontogenetic development of humans and other primates increasingly highlights the foundational role of empathy—understanding other minds—in the emergence of language, symbolism, and identity. For example, drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Hayden Kee has explored how the human body evolved in inherently social contexts, developing expressive features that elicit cooperation and mutual understanding.[52] Though less engaged with archaeology, this cooperative body hypothesis crosses disciplines in addressing the role of shared embodiment in early hominin communication and cooperation.

Working instead from a Husserlian perspective, Corijn van Mazijk has argued that Husserl's concepts of *intentionality* and *horizons* can play a role in archaeology and

prehistorical sciences more broadly.[53] Intentionality is central not only to phenomenology, but also to contemporary Theory of Mind (ToM), which conceptualizes the complexities of social understanding in terms of orders of intentionality.[54] In a recent joint effort, Corijn van Mazijk and James Cole draw on these accounts to model the emergence of *identity* and *self-understanding* in prehistory.[55] Their Identity Model links phenomenological layers of identity—embodied, self-for-other, reflective, role-normative, and narrative-institutional identity—to archaeologically visible patterns such as clustering, standardization, ornamentation, and ritual deposition. In doing so, they emphasize that the evolution of identity is not a matter of a purely cognitive ascent, but a culturally and materially scaffolded process.

Questions about our deep past also reactivate a broader line of reflection familiar from philosophical anthropology, where the archaeological record is taken as an invitation to reflect on the conditions and limits of human existence as such. Thinkers in this tradition have long treated material culture, technology, and symbolic practices as sites in which the human is both expressed and co-constituted, often emphasizing the openness or "eccentricity" of the human condition.[56] More recent contributions in continental philosophical anthropology have extended these themes into dialogue with the life sciences and archaeology.[57] While distinct from phenomenology in orientation, these approaches converge with it in foregrounding the co-constitution of subjectivity, world, and practice, and provide a complementary framework for interpreting the current human condition through our understanding of prehistoric existence.

Final reflections

The deep past is a philosophical subject par excellence. Its inaccessibility ensures that our understanding of it remains necessarily incomplete, leaving space for hypothesis formation, conceptual clarification, and the drawing of new connections—all tasks in which philosophers excel. Moreover, the deep past is never merely an "ontic" affair. For besides the objective past, there is also the "original past," that is: "the past as it was as present, namely, as a world correlate of the intentional activity of [past] living consciousness."[58] This past human experience cannot be excluded completely from the equation; any serious attempt to understand prehistory must grapple with the first-person perspective in one way or another.

At the same time, phenomenological reflection on prehistory must be firmly grounded in current empirical research, which means it often extends well beyond the philosopher's original area of training. This is the central challenge. If phenomenology is to contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary science, it cannot remain confined to the armchair; it offers no relevant insights in isolation. The most fruitful advances tend to emerge at the intersections of archaeology, cognitive science, evolutionary anthropology, philosophy, and related disciplines. Phenomenologists undoubtedly have important contributions to make in this space, toward a fuller, more integrated understanding of human origins.

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