



Ethical (mis)use of prehistory

Bert Gordijn¹ · Henk ten Have²

Published online: 9 July 2021

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Since the dawn of civilization, we have fostered notions about the distant human past: narratives about what we now call ‘prehistory’. Obviously, studies of historical events based on empirical data and rational interpretations have been around since Herodotus’ account of the Graeco-Per-sian wars (Herodotus 440 BCE) and Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian war (Thucydides 431 BCE). In contrast, narratives of the human prehistoric past, i.e. before the appearance of any contemporary written sources, have for a long time remained mostly fictional, religious, and/or metaphorical. Only in the last two centuries have accounts of prehistoric humans become more scientific, increasingly sophisticated, and less dogmatic.

Notions of the distant human past

In Graeco-Roman antiquity we find the notion of the Golden Age and the myth of Atlantis. Subsequently, in late antiquity and the European Middle Ages, the biblical narrative about Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, the Fall, and the expulsion from Eden dominated. Early Modern and Enlightenment Europe witnessed the rise of conceptions of the State of Nature. In the 19th century the theory of evolution was developed, which subsequently dominated our thinking about the origin and the prehistoric past of humankind in the 20th and 21st century. These evolutionary conceptions have become increasingly informed by a variety of scientific disciplines such as genetics, archeology, paleontology, physical anthropology, historical and comparative linguistics, and various other natural and social sciences.

Ethical thinking informed by these notions

Ideas about the remote past popped up regularly in ethical thought. In Plato’s work we encounter both the notion of the Golden Age (for example, in the *Statesman* (Plato 360 BCE)) as well as the Atlantis myth (for example, in the *Timaeus* (Plato 360 BCE)). The Church fathers and mediaeval philosophers worked with a biblical understanding of the remote human past, which informed their comprehension of concepts such as original sin, free will, and just war. In the 17th and 18th century, philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1690), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755) explored the idea of the State of Nature as a basis for their political philosophies. In the late 19th and 20th century evolutionary biological ideas became more influential in ethical thinking (see Fitzpatrick (2021) for an overview).

Changing scientific notions of the distant human past

Narratives such as the Atlantis myth, the biblical account in Genesis, and the State of Nature have been influential for a long time (the Atlantis story, for example, in Francis Bacon (1627)) and sometimes still play a role in philosophical works (for example, the State of Nature in Rawls (1971)) and Nozick (1974)). Currently, however, scientific ideas informed by evolutionary theoretical perspectives have come to dominate conceptions of the distant human past. These modern evolutionary notions have increasingly been brought into play by ethicists. The scientific method underlying these biological ideas also means that a solid process of error correction has been put in place whereby notions of the distant human past are subject to continuous criticism informed by new discoveries and hypotheses. Therefore, our notions about prehistory are now more exposed to criticism and change than ever before.

An example of this is the debate about the rise of civilization triggered by the excavations at the archaeological site of Göbeklitepe in Turkey near the border to Syria. For

✉ Bert Gordijn
bert.gordijn@dcu.ie

¹ Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

² Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA

a long time, it was assumed that domestication of plants and animals would normally precede complex megalithic building projects and the concomitant capacity to organize large groups of laborers. However, the Göbeklitepe building complex seems to have been constructed by hunter-gatherers. This discovery suggests there might have been other pathways to civilization as well. This has triggered new questions about the chronological order of appearance of such elements of civilization as agriculture, large building projects and certain sociocultural changes as well as their interdependencies (Bengisu 2020; Curry 2008; Zimmermann 2020).

Another illustration is the shift in our understanding of the Maya civilization resulting from the discoveries with the new LiDAR (light detection and ranging) technology. This remote sensing technology has revealed thousands of previously unknown structures underneath the jungle canopy. This suggests that the Maya civilization had a developmental level which was substantially beyond what was previously assumed (Canuto et al. 2018; Clynes 2018).

A last instance is the discussion prompted by the discovery of the remains of *Homo floresiensis* in a cave on Flores Island in Indonesia. One of the questions being discussed here was whether the discovery represents a new species or not (Argue et al. 2017; Groves 2007; Sutikna et al. 2016).

Prehistoric hunter-gatherer traits

In the last 10 years, some proponents of moral bioenhancement have argued that a gap has emerged between the fast-developing high impact technology around us, triggering new and intricate problems, and our morality. The latter is still characterized by parochial altruism and a focus on the short-term future, such as it was when we still were living in small prehistoric hunter-gatherer bands. These purported prehistoric moral features that had once resulted from processes of natural selection and were largely beneficial are now said to be threatening the long-term future survival of humanity (Persson and Savulescu 2012).

However, as our accounts of the prehistoric human past have become more scientific, they have increasingly been subjected to critical discussion and revision. This also goes for the behavioral and moral traits of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. The first paper in the issue at hand (Segovia-Cuellar and Del Savio 2021) criticizes the above-mentioned one-sided and negative manner of characterizing the moral attitudes of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. It argues that current evolutionary research shows a more nuanced and multifaceted picture of hunter-gatherer behavior and psychological dispositions whereby bigger “multilevel groups”, “human ultrasociality”, “inclusivist, peaceful dispositions”, and “xenophilia, inclusivity and intergroup prosociality” might have played a significant

role (*idem*). This being the case, the paper cautions against simplistic and misleading sketches of prehistory for the sole purpose of making a normative point.

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