

THINKING FROM THINGS: ESSAYS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In the past twenty years the philosophy of archaeology has taken shape as a vigorous field located at the interface between analytic philosophy of science and philosophically sophisticated archaeology. This book arises from the debates within and about archaeology that have been formative of this interfield. The first two sections consist of new, previously unpublished material that provides an historical and analytic overview of these debates as engaged both by archaeologists assessing the merits of the scientific New Archaeology and by post-positivist philosophers of science interested in the disciplinary practice of a field that is philosophically intriguing but little studied. These sections provide a framework for the more narrowly focused questions I take up in subsequent sections, in a selection of previously published essays. As a whole, then, this collection brings together for the first time all the components of the analysis of archaeological evidence and inference that I have been developing over the last twenty years.

In Section I, “Philosophy from the Ground Up,” I offer a comparative assessment of recent developments within, and interactions between, post-positivist philosophy of science, archaeology, and the interfield that has become analytic philosophy of archaeology. And in Section II, “How New is the New Archaeology,” I develop an analysis of tensions inherent in the New Archaeology, identifying their antecedents in intellectual developments in American archaeology that go back nearly a hundred years. The reprinted essays in subsequent sections have all been revised, some quite substantially. In each of them I develop a different aspect of

the model of archaeological reasoning from evidence that I advocate in the book as a whole. In several I develop the case for a model of archaeological inference that emphasizes the role of background and collateral knowledge in interpreting archaeological data as evidence; in others I argue that realist models of explanation best capture the goals of most archaeological inquiry; and throughout I advocate a mitigated objectivism that requires both epistemic and ethical accountability in practice. I conclude with a section that consists of a single essay: an extended analysis of the urgent demands for attention to ethics issues—accountability to descendant communities, conservation principles, and conflicts with commercial interests in the record—that are rapidly reframing the debate about disciplinary goals and epistemic ideals discussed in earlier sections.

JACKET DESCRIPTION

Despite earthbound appearances, archaeology is a deeply philosophical discipline. Whatever questions archaeologists ask, wherever they work, they confront perplexing questions about how they know what they know. Archaeological data are notoriously fragmentary and ephemeral; they stand as evidence of the cultural past only given rich interpretation. This raises skeptical questions about whether it is ever possible to escape the trap of constructing the past in the image of a familiar present, or in the image of an ‘other’ necessary to our own self-understanding. I argue that, although archaeological evidence is always an interpretive construct, it also has a striking capacity to subvert even our most strongly held convictions about the cultural past. The challenge is to give a systematic account of this perplexing epistemic duality; this is the task I take up, in various forms, in the essays that make up this book. In the process I advocate an amphibious philosophy of science that draws on the resources of the sciences themselves and is motivated by the problems that engage practitioners as much as those that are traditionally of interest to philosophers.

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