Virtue Ethics in Archaeological Study
By Christopher Fuchs

Telling the Story of Humanity

Archaeology is a scientific profession critical to understanding the story humans have written on the world over the course of our history. However, unlike many areas of scientific study, the “subjects” of that inquiry are, ultimately, people, leading to a complex question of ethics surrounding the treatment of remains and its place in the archaeological story. Telling that story is not only the archaeologist’s job but it is what they must consider when deciding how the data is gathered, what is done with it, and how we interact with living communities. These values, already present in archaeological practices, could provide comprehensive moral grounding as we tell the story of the past. Whether we gather enough resources to tell as much of the story as possible contributes to our history as we preserve, improve, and share our society and ensuring that legacy remains preserved and guaranteed. Integrity is a key component to telling the story of the past with authenticity. A reverence for the knowledge of history is needed to tell the story of the past. Through the lens of this ethical perspective, integrity is not just about discovering the truth, but also about protecting the integrity of the process.

Archaeological Excellence

Archaeology as a scientific study has come a long way from the cabinets of curiosities that once populated the collections of the elite. Methodologies, legislation, cultural sensitivity, and humane ideals have pushed archaeologists to consider many ethical elements underlying the general scientific pursuit.

Virtue and the Future

Excavation methods, scientific inquiry, recording and preservation of materials, all lead to us living out the integrity inherent within modern archaeology, while encouraging us to make the most of the resources we have, both in the ground and out.

Archaeology with Integrity

Working to accurately understand and represent the evidence, ensuring that the people whose cultures, achievements, and ideas we study through the materials and places that they left behind are not stripped of the creative and technological praise they earned.

Archaeology with Justice

Morality with a commitment to cooperation does not seem to be contradicted in any fundamental way by the morality staked by advisors of the Pythagorean O’odham, Xaviera Amuic or Zun tribes, respectively, allowing for more discourse between Western archaeologists and those who have valuable cultural insights.

Archaeology with Cooperation

Living the virtues, the archaeologists could change the face of ethical archaeology and be a powerful force for change and education, scientific study and humanitarian collaboration.

Archaeology with a Bright, Ethical and Most Importantly, Human Future Through Ethics of Virtue

Integrity

- The virtue of integrity is present in the improved field methods of today
- Scientific processes and discipline
- Not the haphazard collection of “curiosities”
- Rigorous approaches, legislation, and pursuit of first bring integrity to archaeological study
- Mortimer Wheeler’s “True Stratification,” a contribution to methodology and integrity

Justice

- The ideas of lost Biblical tribes and extra-territorial intervention have not distracted archaeologists in some time
- The people of the past present are not so different, with dreams and values, success and failure, but we are left wondering
- We are often on our own to extrapolate from an incomplete source
- Justice in Archaeology is and must continue to be about how archaeology and its sources are presented to the larger world

Cooperation

- The future of archaeology rests on the ability of the archaeologist to work with both the community currently surrounding field sites and with descendant communities.
- Compromise, consideration and empathy all have roots in cooperation, and this is what sets Virtue Theory apart in archaeological practice.
- A belief in the ability of a person to cooperate is easily communicated across cultures.
- A common belief in the charitable abilities of people provides a common starting point for cooperation in the future.

Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)

- Virtue: excellence
- Ethics based on character and relationships
- By acting ethically, we improve ourselves
- Relies on principles like Justice, Integrity, and Cooperation
- Fell out of style in favor of more religious theories
- Returned to study in mid-nineteenth century

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

- Deontology: study of duty
- Ethics based on rules and obligatory actions
- By acting ethically, we fulfill our obligations
- Relies on principles like Respect, Dignity and Obligation
- Gained popularity through religious teachings
- Became more secular in eighteenth century

John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873)

- Utility: useful or beneficial
- Ethics based on benevolent actions
- By acting ethically, we benefit the majority
- Relies on principles like Happiness, Safety and Immaterial
- Gained popularity as an alternative to Deontology
- First fully articulated in nineteenth century