

Experiments at Renewal and Reconstruction

Clifford J. Geertz (1926–2006) was born in California, studied at Antioch College, then Harvard where he earned his PhD in the then famous Department of Social Relations in 1956. All three of these background facts hint at his unique contributions to social and cultural theory. As California was, even in the 1920s, the epicenter of American dreaming and popular culture, so Antioch was in his day noted for its devotion to radical thinking and innovation, so too Harvard's now defunct Social Relations program was in the 1950s at once the boldest center of interdisciplinary graduate education in the social sciences and, oddly, the center of the traditional core of social and cultural thought. Geertz was a cultural anthropologist whose theoretical innovations were well founded in years of fieldwork in Southeast Asia and North Africa. He quickly emerged by 1970 as one of the world's best respected students of culture. His achievements led to appointment to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Upon his death in 2006 the Institute's press release described his importance even at an institution noted for work in mathematics and physics: "Dr. Geertz's appointment thirty-six years ago was significant not only for the distinguished leadership it would bring to the Institute, but also because it marked the initiation of the School of Social Science, which in 1973 formally became the fourth School at the Institute." Safe to say that in the first years of his tenure at the Institute few other students of culture would be so warmly embraced by a school long committed to the traditional sciences. Among Geertz's fifty plus books and countless articles *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), the collection from which the selection is drawn, stands still today as

required reading by anyone truly interested in cultural theory. Likewise, thick description, the selection's titular concept is likely the most widely (and erroneously) quoted concept in culture studies. Readers should read the selection closely to determine how thick description is itself an ironic concept meant to identify not the mass of descriptive data but the meaningful solitary clue hidden *among* mass of data.

Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

Clifford Geertz 1973)

The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some explication.

Operationalism as a methodological dogma never made much sense so far as the social sciences are concerned, and except for a few rather too well-swept corners—Skinnerian behaviorism, intelligence testing, and so on—it is largely dead now. But it had, for all that, an important point to make, which, however we

Excerpt from *The Interpretation of Cultures* by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Pp. 5–7

may feel about trying to define in terms of operations, really want to understand what a society is in the first instance not at its operations and certainly not at what it produces, you should look at what the

In anthropology, or any other social science, what the practitioners do is not to understand what ethnography is, but to do what ethnography is, toward grasping what it amounts to as a form of knowledge. Immediately be said, is not a one point of view, that of the ethnographer is establishing rapport, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, keeping a diary, and so on. The techniques and received procedures are the enterprise. What defines it is that it is: an elaborate venture in the words of Gilbert Ryle, "thick description."

Ryle's discussion of "thick description" in two recent essays of his (now in a new volume of his *Collected Papers*) poses the question of what, as he puts it, "Thinking and Reflecting" are. Consider, he says, the contracting the eyelids of their involuntary twitch; in the or to a friend. The two movements are identical; from an I-am-a-cuckoo observation of them alone, the twitch and which was both or either was twitch or wink is vast; as anyone unfamiliar with the first taken for the second, communicating, and indeed in a precise and special way: (1) to indicate in particular, (3) to impart a meaning according to a socially established cognizance of the rest of the world, the winker has not done his eyelids and winked, while only one, contracted his eyelids on purpose when then which so doing counts as winking. That's all there is to the flick of culture, and—*voilà!*

That, however, is just the beginning, there is a third but no amusement to his cronies," p. 6

may feel about trying to define charisma or alienation in terms of operations, retains a certain force: if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.

In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly what doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge. This, it must immediately be said, is not a matter of methods. From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description."

Ryle's discussion of "thick description" appears in two recent essays of his (now reprinted in the second volume of his *Collected Papers*) addressed to the general question of what, as he puts it, "*Le Penseur*" is doing: "Thinking and Reflecting" and "The Thinking of Thoughts." Consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. As Ryle points out, the winker has not done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking. That's all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and—*voilà!*—a gesture.

That, however, is just the beginning. Suppose, he continues, there is a third boy, who, "to give malicious amusement to his cronies," parodies the first boy's wink,

as amateurish, clumsy, obvious, and so on. He, of course, does this in the same way the second boy winked and the first twitched: by contracting his right eyelids. Only this boy is neither winking nor twitching, he is parodying someone else's, as he takes it, laughable, attempt at winking. Here, too, a socially established code exists (he will "wink" laboriously, overobviously, perhaps adding a grimace—the usual artifices of the clown); and so also does a message. Only now it is not conspiracy but ridicule that is in the air. If the others think he is actually winking, his whole project misfires as completely, though with somewhat different results, as if they think he is twitching. One can go further: uncertain of his mimicking abilities, the would-be satirist may practice at home before the mirror, in which case he is not twitching, winking, or parodying, but rehearsing; though so far as what a camera, a radical behaviorist, or a believer in protocol sentences would record he is just rapidly contracting his right eyelids like all the others. Complexities are possible, if not practically without end, at least logically so. The original winker might, for example, actually have been fake-winking, say, to mislead outsiders into imagining there was a conspiracy afoot when there in fact was not, in which case our descriptions of what the parodist is parodying and the rehearser rehearsing of course shift accordingly. But the point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher...) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category, are as much non-winks as winks are nontwitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids.

Like so many of the little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves, all this winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking, may seem a bit artificial. In way of adding a more empirical note, let me give, deliberately unprecedented by any prior explanatory comment at all, a not untypical excerpt from my own field journal to demonstrate that, however evened off for didactic purposes, Ryle's example presents an image only too exact of the sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which an ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way. ...

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Culture, this acted document, thus is public, like a burlesqued wink Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. The interminable, because unterminalable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is "subjective" or "objective," together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults ("idealist!"—"materialist!"; "mentalist!"—"behaviorist!"; "impressionist!"—"positivist!") which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there *are* true twitches) symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.

This may seem like an obvious truth, but there are a number of ways to obscure it. One is to imagine that culture is a self-contained "super-organic" reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it. Another is to claim that it consists in the brute pattern of behavioral events we observe in fact to occur in some identifiable community or other; that is, to reduce it. But though both these confusions still exist, and doubtless will be always with us, the main source of theoretical muddlement in contemporary anthropology is a view which developed in reaction to them and is right now very widely held—namely, that, to quote Ward Goodenough, perhaps its leading proponent, "culture [is located] in the minds and hearts of men."

Variouly called ethnoscience, componential analysis, or cognitive anthropology (a terminological waver- ing which reflects a deeper uncertainty), this school of thought holds that culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior. "A society's culture," to quote Goodenough again, this time in a pas- sage which has become the *locus classicus* of the whole movement, "consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members." And from this view of what culture is follows a view, equally assured, of what describing it is—the writing out of systematic rules, an ethno- graphic algorithm, which, if followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass (physical appearance

aside) for a native. In such a way, extreme subjectivism is married to extreme formalism, with the expected re- sult: an explosion of debate as to whether particular analyses (which come in the form of taxonomies, par- adigms, tables, trees, and other ingenuities) reflect what the natives "really" think or are merely clever simula- tions, logically equivalent but substantively different, of what they think.

As, on first glance, this approach may look close enough to the one being developed here to be mistaken for it, it is useful to be explicit as to what divides them. If, leaving our winks and sheep behind for the mo- ment, we take, say, a Beethoven quartet as an, admit- tedly rather special but, for these purposes, nicely illustrative, sample of culture, no one would, I think, identify it with its score, with the skills and knowledge needed to play it, with the understanding of it pos- sessed by its performers or auditors, nor, to take care, *en passant*, of the reductionists and reifiers, with a par- ticular performance of it or with some mysterious en- tity transcending material existence. The "no one" is perhaps too strong here, for there are always incorrigi- bles. But that a Beethoven quartet is a temporally de- veloped tonal structure, a coherent sequence of modeled sound—in a word, music—and not any- body's knowledge of or belief about anything, includ- ing how to play it, is a proposition to which most people are, upon reflection, likely to assent.

To play the violin it is necessary to possess certain habits, skills, knowledge, and talents, to be in the mood to play, and (as the old joke goes) to have a violin. But violin playing is neither the habits, skills, knowledge, and so on, nor the mood, nor (the notion believers in "material culture" apparently embrace) the violin. To make a trade pact in Morocco, you have to do certain things in certain ways (among others, cut, while chant- ing Quranic Arabic, the throat of a lamb before the as- sembled, undeformed, adult male members of your tribe) and to be possessed of certain psychological char- acteristics (among others, a desire for distant things). But a trade pact is neither the throat cutting nor the de- sire, though it is real enough, as seven kinsmen of our Marmusha sheikh discovered when, on an earlier occa- sion, they were executed by him following the theft of one mangy, essentially valueless sheepskin from Cohen.

Culture, is public because meaning is. You can't wink (or burlesque one) without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids, and you can't conduct a sheep raid (or mimic one) without knowing what it is to steal a sheep and how practically to go about it. But to draw from such truths the conclusion that knowing how to wink is winking

and knowing how to st- betray as deep a confus for thick, to identify w or sheep raiding with pastures. The cognitivi (to quote another sp Stephen Tyler) of "mei means "should"] be ana to those of mathematic of an effective use of th and idealist fallacies to tion. Perhaps, as its err its distortions subtler, i

Peter Berger (1929–) cated, after WW II in i reer he taught both eventually settling at B course he founded and on Culture, Religion a to authoring numerous *An Invitation to Sociolog* theologian, as in *A Fan an Age of Credulity* (19'

Thomas Luckmann town in Slovenia outsc in Austria, after which New School for Social Frankfurt before movir ment in 1994. He has w and is the editor and co: *ture of the Life-world*, a a phenomenological po mann remains active t mountaineering.

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and knowing how to steal a sheep is sheep raiding is to
betray as deep a confusion as, taking thin descriptions
for thick, to identify winking with eyelid contractions
or sheep raiding with chasing woolly animals out of
pastures. The cognitivist fallacy—that culture consists
(to quote another spokesman for the movement,
Stephen Tyler) of "mental phenomena which can [he
means "should"] be analyzed by formal methods similar
to those of mathematics and logic"—is as destructive
of an effective use of the concept as are the behaviorist
and idealist fallacies to which it is a misdrawn correc-
tion. Perhaps, as its errors are more sophisticated and
its distortions subtler, it is even more so.