In her book, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer remarks that certain ideas burst upon the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force. They resolve so many fundamental problems at once that they seem also to promise that they will resolve all fundamental problems, clarify all obscure issues. Everyone snaps them up as the open sesame of some new positive science, the conceptual center-point around which a comprehensive system of analysis can be built. The sudden vogue of such grande idées, crowding out almost everything else for a while, is like, she says, "to the fact that all sensitive and active minds turn at once to exploiting it. We try it in every connection, for every purpose, experiment with pensive stretches of its strict meaning, with generalizations and derivatives."

"After we have become familiar with the new idea, however, after it becomes part of our general stock of theoretical concepts, our expen-"
The interpretation of cultures is brought more into balance with its actual was, and its excessive popularity is ended. A few zealots persist in the old key-to-the-universe view of it; but less driven thinkers settle down after a while to the problem the idea has really generated. They try to apply it and extend it where it applies and where it is capable of extension; and they about where it does not apply or cannot be extended. It becomes, if it was, in truth, a seminal idea in the first place, a permanent and enduring part of our intellectual armory. But it no longer has the grandness, all-promising scope, the infinite versatility of apparent application, it once had.

The second law of thermodynamics, or the principle of natural selection, or the motion of unconscious motivation, or the organization of the means of production does not explain everything, not even everything human, but it still explains something; and one attention shifts to isolating just what that something is, to disentangling ourselves from a lot of pseudoscience to which, in the first flush of its celebrity, it has also given rise.

Whether or not this is, in fact, the way all centrally important scientific concepts develop, I don’t know. But certainly this pattern fits the concept of culture, around which the whole discipline of anthropology stands, and whose domination that discipline has been increasingly concerned to limit, specify, focus, and contain. It is to this cutting of the culture concept down to size, therefore actually insuring its continued importance rather than undermining it, that the essays below are all, in their several ways and from their several directions, dedicated. They all argue, sometimes explicitly, more often merely through the particular analysis they develop, for a narrowed, specialized, and, so I imagine, theoretically more powerful concept of culture to replace E. B. Tylor’s famous “most complex whole,” which, its originality power notwithstanding, seems to me to have reached the point where it obscures a good deal more than it reveals.

The concept’s morass into which the Tylorean kind of post-critique theorizing above culture can lead, is evident in what is still one of the better general introductions to anthropology, Clyde Kluckhohn’s Mirror for Man. In some twenty-seven pages of his chapter on the concept, Kluckhohn managed to define culture in turn as: (1) “the total way of life of a people”; (2) “the social legacy the individual acquires from his group”; (3) “a way of thinking, feeling, and believing”; (4) “an abstraction from behavior”; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a “resource for knowledge."

Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

...house of pooled learning”; (7) “a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems”; (8) “learned behavior”; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) “a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men”; (11) “a precipitate of hierarchy”; and turning, perhaps in desperation, to symbols, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix. In the face of this sort of theoretical diffusion, even a somewhat constricted and not entirely standard concept of culture, which is at least internally coherent and, more important, which has a definable argument to make it is, to be fair, Kluckhohn himself keenly realized an improvement. Ethnogenesis is self-defeating not because they is only one direction in which it is useful to move, but because there are so many: it is necessary to choose.

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 explanation I am after, containing social expressions on their surface enigmatic. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some explication.

II

Operationism as a methodological dogma never made much sense to me in the social sciences are concerned, and except for a few rather too well-worn 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 may feel about trying to define change in the 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 practitioners 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 to...
ward 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 Prisme” 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, “phenomenalist” 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 wink 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 wink 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 spick of behavior, a fleck of culture, and—wink!—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 amorous, clumsy, obviously, 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, oxymoronously, perhaps adding a grimace—the vocal artifices of the clown), and so also does a message. Only now it is
One night, when Cohen (who speaks fluent Berber), was up there, at Mar-
musha, two other Jews who were traders to a neighboring tribe came by to
purchase some goods from him. Some Berbers, from yet another neighbor-
ring tribe, tried to break into Cohen’s place, but he fired his rifle in the air.
(Traditionally, Jews were not allowed to carry weapons; but at this period
things were so unsettled many did so anyway.) This attracted the attention
of the French and the marabout’s friend.

The next night, however, they came back, one of them disguised as a
woman who knocked on the door with some sort of a story. Cohen was sus-
picious and didn’t want to let her in, but the other Jews said, “Oh, it’s all
right, it’s only a woman.” So they opened the door and the whole lot came
pouring in. They killed the two visiting Jews, but Cohen managed to barri-
cade himself in an adjoining room. He heard the robbers planning to burn
him alive in the shop after they removed his goods, and so he opened the
door and, lying about him wildly with a club, managed to escape through a
window.

He went up to the fort, then, to have his wounds dressed, and complained
to the local commandant, one Captain Dumari, saying he wanted his—
i.e., four or five times the value of the merchandize stolen from him. The
robbers were from a tribe which had not yet submitted to French authority
and were in open rebellion against it, and he wanted authorization to go
with his marabout, the Marimusha tribal sheik, to collect the indemnity
that, under traditional swt, he had coming to him. Captain Dumari
couldn’t officially give him permission to do this, because of the French pro-
hibition of the swt relationship, but he gave him verbal authorization,
saying, “If you get killed, it’s your problem.”

So the sheik, the Jew, and a small company of armed Marimusha men
set off two or fifteen kilometers up into the rebellious area, where there were
certainly no French, and, sneaking up, captured the chief’s shepheard and
stole his herd. The other tribe soon came riding out on horses after them,
armed with rifles and ready to attack. But when they saw who the “sheep
thieves” were, they thought better of it and said, “all right, we’ll talk.”
They couldn’t really deny what had happened—just some of their men had
robbed Cohen and killed the two visitors—and they weren’t prepared to
start the serious feud with the Marimusha a sull with the invading party
would mean. So the two groups talked, and talked, and talked, there on
the plain amid the thousands of sheep, and decided finally on five-hundred
sheep damages. The two tribes then settled on their host, at opposite ends of the plain, with the sheep herded between them, and
Cohen, in his black gown, pillow hat, and flapping slippers, went out alone
among the sheep, picking out, one by one and at his own good speed, the
best one for his payment.

So Cohen got his sheep and drove them back to Marimusha. The French,
up in their fort, heard them coming from some distance (“ba, ba” said
Cohen, happily, recalling the image) and said, “What the hell is that?” And
Cohen said, “This is my ort. The French couldn’t believe he had actually

**Thick Description:** Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

The description above shows how much goes into ethnographic description of even the most elemental sort—how extraordinarily “thick” it is. In finished anthropological writings, including those collected here, this fact—that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their companions are up to—is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is intimated as background information before the thing itself is directly ex-
amined. (Even to reveal that this little drama took place in the high-
lands of central Morocco in 1912—and was recounted there in 1968—is to determine much of our understanding of it.) There is nothing
particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable. But it
don lead to a view of anthropological research as rather more of an ob-
terspectral and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is.
Right down at the factual base, the hard rock. Insofar as there is any, of
the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating
explications. Whence upon wanks upon winks.

Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification—what Kline
called established codes, a somewhat misleading expression, for it
makes the enterprise sound too much like that of the cipher clerk when
it is much more like that of the literary critic—and determining their
social ground and import. Here, in our text, such sorting would begin
by distinguishing the three unlike frames of interpretation ingredient
in the situation, Jewish, Berber, and French, and would then move on
to show how (and why) at that time, in that place, their copresent pre-
duced a situation in which systematic misunderstanding reduced tradi-
tional form to social force. What tripped Cohen up, and with him the
whole, ancient pattern of social and economic relationships within
which he functioned, was a confusion of tongues.

I shall come back to this too-compact aphorism later, as well as to
the details of the text itself. The point for now is only that ethnography
Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

to obscure it. One is to imagine that culture is a self-contained "super-organicism" 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 dogmatists will be always with us, the main source of theoretical malaise 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."

Variously called ethnomusicology, compositional analysis, or cognitive anthropology (a terminological wartering 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 passage 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 assertive, of what describing it is—the writing out of systematic rules, an ethnographic algorithm, which, if followed, would make it possible to operate, to pass (physical appearance aside) for a native. In such a way, extreme subjectivism is married to extreme formalism, with the expected result: an explosion of debate as to whether particular analyses (which come in the form of taxonomies, paradigms, tables, trees, and other ingensities) reflect what the natives "really" think or are merely clever simulations, 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 moment, we take, say, a Beethoven quartet as an admittedly 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 possessed by its performers or auditors, not, to take care, en passant, of the reductionists and relativists, with a particular performance of it or with some mysterious entity transcending material existence. The "no one" is perhaps too strong here, for there are always incorrigibles. But that a Beethoven quartet is a temporally developed tonal structure, a coherent sequence of modeled
sound—in a word, music—and not anybody's knowledge of or belief about anything, including 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 causation" apparently embrace) the violin. To make a trade pact in Morocco, you have to do certain things in certain ways (among others, cut, while chanting Quranic Arabic, the throat of a lamb before the assembled, undeformed, adult male members of your tribe) and to be possessed of certain psychological characteristics (among others, a desire for distant things). But a trade pact is neither the throat cutting nor the desire, though it is real enough, as seven kinsmen of our Marmusha sheikh discovered when, on an earlier occasion, 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 confound 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 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 wooly animals out of pastures. The cognitivist fallacy—that culture consists (to quote another spokesman for the movement, Stephen Tyler) of "mental phenomena which can (be 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 correction. Perhaps, as in errors are more sophisticated and its distortions subtler, it is even more so.

The generalized attack on privacy theories of meaning is, since each Husserl and late Wittgenstein, so much a part of modern thought that need not be developed once more here. What is necessary is to see that the news of it reaches anthropology; and in particular that it is made clear that to say that culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal

"Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture and join them or perceive insults and answer them, is no more to say that it is a psychological phenomenon, a characteristic of someone's mind, personality, cognitive structure, or whatever, than to say that Tautist, the genetic, the progressive form of the verb, the classification of wines, the Common Law, or the notion of "a conditional curse" (as Westermarck defined the concept of "or in terms of which Cohen prefixed his claim to damages) is. What, in a place like Morocco, most prevents those of us who grew up winking other winks or attending other sheep from grasping what people are up to is not ignorance as to how cognition works (though, especially, as one assumes, it works the same among them as it does among us, it would greatly help to have less of that too) as a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs. As Wittgenstein has been invoked, he may as well be quoted:

'Ves... say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important to regard this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find out all about them.'

IV

Finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience; trying to formulate the basis on which one imagines, always excessively, one has found them is what anthropological writing consists of a scientific endeavor. We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that. We are looking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them. A matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized. "If speaking to someone else seems to be a mysterious process," Stanley Diamond has remarked, "that may be because speaking to someone else seems mysterious enough."
The interpretation of cultures

Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse. That is not, of course, its only aim—

instruction, amusement, practical counsel, moral advance, and the discovery of natural order in human behavior are others; nor is anthropology the only discipline which pursues it. But it is an aim to which a semiotic concept of culture is peculiarly well adapted. As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligently—that is, thickly—described.

The famous anthropological absorption with the (to us) exotic—Berber horsemen, Jewish peddlers, French Legionnaires—is, thus, essentially a device for displacing the dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us. Looking at the ordinary in place where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has so often been claimed, the arbitrariess of human behavior (there is nothing especially arbitrary about taking sheep theft for insolence in Morocco), but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. (The more I manage to follow what the Moroccans are up to, the more logical, and the more angular, they seem.) It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity.

It is this manner, usually too closely referred to as “seeing things from the actor’s point of view,” too bookishly as “the verstehen approach,” or too technically as “emic analysis,” that so often leads to the notion that anthropology is a variety of either long-distance mind reading or cannibal-isle fantasizing, and which, for someone anxious to navigate past the wrecks of a dozen sunken philosophies, must therefore be executed with a great deal of care. Nothing is more necessary to comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, and the degree to which it is interpretation, than an exact understanding of what it means—and what it does not mean—to say that our formulations of other peoples’ symbol systems must be actor-oriented.

1 Not only other peoples’ anthropologies can be trained on the culture of what it is itself a part, and it increasingly is:—fact of profound importance, but which so it raised a few tricky and rather special second order problems, I shall put the side for the moment.

Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French cultures must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulates such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish, or French—that is, part of the reality they are ostensibly describing; they are anthropological—that is, part of a developing system of scientific analysis. They must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons what they profess to be descriptions of; they are anthropological because to point out quite so laboriously that the object of study is one thing and the study of it another. It is clear enough that the physical world is not physics and A Skeptic’s Key to Pinedeg’s Wake not donnegal’s Wake. But, as, in the study of culture, analysis penetrates into the very body of the object—that is, we begin with our own interpretations and then systematize these—the line between (Moroccan) culture and a blurred. All the more so, as the latter is presented in the form of ad hoc, experience, honor, divinity, and justice, to tribe, property, patronage, and chivalry.

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a “native” takes first order ones: it’s his culture.) They are, thus, fictitious, fictional, in the sense that they are “something made,” “something fancied, or merely “as if” thought experiments. To construct actor-oriented descriptions of the involvements of a Berber chieftain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is likely an imaginative act, not all that different from constructing similar descriptions of, say, the involvements with one another of a provincial French doctor, his silly, adulterous wife, and her feckless lover in

anthropological works (Lévi-Strauss, for example) may, of course, be fourth order—what we have come to know as “native models.” In literate cultures, all the Magdich, one has only to think of the Khaddas; with the United States, regard Mead—these matters become intricate indeed.
The interpretation of cultures

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In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and first and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a “native” makes first order ones: it’s his culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are “something made,” “something fashioned” — the original meaning of fictus — that they are false, un factual, or merely “as if” thought experiments. To construct actor-oriented descriptions of the involvements of a Berber chieflain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is clearly an imaginative act, not all that different from constructing similar descriptions of, say, the involvements with one another of a provincial French doctor, his sixty, adulterous wife, and her faceless lover in

1 Not only other people’s anthropology may be trained on the culture of what it itself a part, and it increasingly is; a fact of reound importance, but which as it raises a few tricky and rather special second order problems, I shall put the side for the moment.

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Theck Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture

That is not, of course, its only aim — instruction, amusement, practical counsel, moral advance, and the discovery of natural order in human behavior are others; nor is anthropolo
gy the only discipline which pursues it. But it is an aim to which a semiotic concept of culture is peculiarly well adapted. As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described.

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1 The order problem is, again, complex. Anthropological words based on other interpretive words (‘verstehen’; for example) may, of course, be fourth order — what have come to be known as "native models." In literate cultures, where ‘native’ interpretation can proceed to higher levels — in connection with the United States, Margaret Mead — these matters become intricate indeed.
nineteenth century France. In the latter case, the actors are represented as not having existed and the events as not having happened, while in the former they are represented as actual, or as having been so. This is a difference of no mean importance; indeed, precisely the one Madame Bovary had difficulty grasping. But the importance does not lie in the fact that her story was created while Cocteau's was only noted. The conditions of their creation, and the point of it (to say nothing of the manner and the quality) differ. But the one is as much a fiction—"a making"—as the other.

Anthropologists have not always been as aware as they might be of this fact, that although culture exists in the trading post, the hill fort, or the sheep run, anthropology exists in the book, the article, the lecture, the museum display, or, sometimes nowadays, the film. To become aware of it is to realize that the line between mode of representation and substantive content is as indistinguishable in cultural analysis as it is in painting; and that fact in turn seems to threaten the objective status of anthropological knowledge by suggesting that its source is not social reality but scholarly artifact.

It does threaten it, but the threat is hollow. The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these?—to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. This raises some serious problems of verification, as right—or, if "verification" is too strong a word for so soft a science (I myself, would prefer "appraisal"), of how you can tell a better account from a worse one. But that is precisely the virtue of it. If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any given example of it, whether a field journal squib or a Malinowskian monograph, is whether sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is as against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned description, that we must measure the cogency of our explication, but against the post of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world and count the rats in Zanzibar.

V

Now, this proposition, that it is not in our interest to bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it, is only those properties that interest us, we need not attend, save current goes, purely as a symbiotic system (the catch phrase is, "in its own terms"), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships of some general way—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, the ideological principles upon which it is based. Though a distinct notion of what culture is, and the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology, the hermeneutical approach to the data that has been undertaken by it of looking culture analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life. There is little profit in elucidating a concept of the defects of psychologism only to pigeon it immediately into those of schematism.

Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because K is the flow of behavior—over, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various states of consciousness; but these

are against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned description, that we must measure the cogency of our explication, but against the post of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world and count the rats in Zanzibar.

V

Now, this proposition, that it is not in our interest to bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it, is only those properties that interest us, we need not attend, save current goes, purely as a symbiotic system (the catch phrase is, "in its own terms"), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships of some general way—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, the ideological principles upon which it is based. Though a distinct notion of what culture is, and the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology, the hermeneutical approach to the data that has been undertaken by it of looking culture analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life. There is little profit in elucidating a concept of the defects of psychologism only to pigeon it immediately into those of schematism.

Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because K is the flow of behavior—over, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various states of consciousness; but these

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might have attempted not just to clamp down on Cohen but to bring the sheikh himself more clearly to heel; and Cohen might have concluded that between renegade Berbers and Boze Geste soldiers, driving trade in the Atlas highlands was no longer worth the candle and retired to the better-governed confines of the town. This, indeed, is more or less what happened, somewhat further along, as the Protectorate moved toward genuine sovereignty. But the point here is not to describe what did or did not take place in Morocco. (From this simple incident one can wade out into enormous complexities of social experience.) It is to demarcate what a piece of anthropological interpretation consists in: tracing the curve of a social discourse, fixing it into an inexplicable form.

The ethnographer "scribes" social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be consulted. The sheikh is long dead, killed in the process of being, as the French called it, "pacified"; "Captain Domari," his pacifier, lives, visited to his souvenirs, in the south of France; and Cohen went last year, part refugee, part pilgrim, part dying patriarch, "home" to Israel. But what they, in my extended prose, "said" to one another on an Atlas plateau sixty years ago is—very far from perfectly—preserved for study. "While," Paul Ricoeur, from whom this whole idea of the inscription of action is borrowed and somewhat twisted, asks, "what does writing in?"

Not the event of speaking, but the "said" of speaking, where we understand by the "said" or speaking that intentional exteriorization constitutive of the act of discourse thanks to which the event—the saying—wants to become discourse—the enunciation, the enunciated. In short, what we write is the same ['thought', 'content', 'gift'] of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event.

This is not itself so very "moral"—if Oxford philosophers run to little ethics, phenomenological ones run to large sentences; but it brings us down to a more precise answer to our generative question. "What can the ethnographer do?"—he writes. This, too, may seem a less startling discovery, and to someone familiar with the current "literary" arts, more exactly, "acrobatics." But ethnography is in fact to be found in texts and articles, rather than in films, records, museum displays, or what are left over in them there are, of course, photographs, drawings, diagrams, ta-bleaux, to be. Self-consciousness about modes of representation (so to speak of accidents with them) has been very lacking in anthropology.
VI

So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in persurable terms. Nukula is gone or altered; but, for better or worse, The Argument of Nukula.

So far as it has reinforced the anthropologist's impulse to engage him with his informants as persons rather than objects, the notion of "participating observation" has been a valuable one. But, to the degree it has led the anthropologist to block from his view the very special, culturally bracketed nature of his own role and to imagine himself something more than an interested (in the senses of that word) sojourner, it has been our most powerful source of bad faith.
large) fallacy is so obviously one that the only thing that needs explanation is how people have managed to believe it and expected others to believe it. The notion that one can find the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever summed up and simplified in so-called "typical" small towns and villages is palpably鼻子. What one finds in small towns and villages is (also) small-town or village life. If localized, microscopic studies were really dependent for their greater relevance upon such a premise—that they captured the great world in its little—they wouldn't have any relevance.

But, of course, they are not. The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...); they study in villages. You can study different things in different places, and some things—for example, what colonial domination does to established frames of moral perception—you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn't make the place what it is you are studying. In the remoter provinces of Morocco and Indonesia, I have wrestled with the same questions other social scientists have wrestled with in more central locations—for example, how comes it that men's most important claims to humanity are cast in the accents of group pride?—and with about the same conclusiveness. One can add a dimension—one much needed in the present climate of size-up-and-solve social science; but that is all. There is a certain value, if you are going to run on about the exploitation of the masses, in having seen a Javanese sharecropper toiling earth in a tropical downslope or a Moroccan tailor embroidering kaftans by the light of a twenty-watt bulb. But the notion that this gives you the thing entire (and elevates you to some moral vantage ground from which you can look down upon the ethically less privileged) is an idea which only someone too long in the bush could possibly entertain.

The "natural laboratory" notion has been equally pernicious, not only because the analogy is false—what kind of a laboratory is it when none of the parameters are manipulable?—but because it leads to a notion that the data derived from ethnographic studies are purer, or more fundamental, or more solid, or less conditioned (the most favored word is "elementary") than those derived from other sorts of social inquiry. The great natural variation of cultural forms is, of course, not only a theoretical dilemma: how is such variation to be squared with the biological unity of the human species? But it is not, even metaphorically, experimental variation, because the context in which it occurs varies along with it, and it is not possible (though there are those who try) to isolate the y's from x's to write a proper function.

The famous studies purporting to show that the Oedipus complex was backward in the Trobriand, sex roles were upside down in Tchambuli, and the Pueblo Indians lacked aggression (it is characteristic that they were all negative—but not in the South), are, whatever their empirical validity may or may not be, not scientifically tested and approved hypotheses. They are interpretations, or misinterpretations, like any others, arrived at in the same way as any others, and as inherently inconclusive as any others, and the attempt to invest them with the authority of physical experimentation is but methodological drift of hand. Ethnographic findings are not privileged, just particular: another country heard from. To regard them as anything more (or anything less) than that distorts both them and their implications, which are far broader than mere primitivism, for social theory.

Another country heard from: the reason that protracted description of distant sheep raids (and a really good ethnographer would have gone into what kind of sheep they were) have general relevance is that they present the sociological mood with bodily stuff on which to feed. The important thing about the anthropologist's findings is their complex specificity, their circumscription. It is with the kind of material produced by long-term, mainly (though not exclusively) qualitative, highly participative, and almost obessively fine-tuned field study in confined contexts that the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted—legitimacy, modernization, integration, conflict, charisma, structure, . . . meaning—can be given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically but concretely about them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively with them.

The methodological problem which the microscopic nature of ethnography presents is both real and critical. But it is not to be resolved by importing a remote locality as the world in a touppe or as the sociological equivalent of a cloud chamber. It is to be resolved—or, anyway, definitely kept at bay—by realizing that social actions are comments on themselves; that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues; winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to.
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VII

Which brings us, finally, to theory. The hesitancy in the interpretive approach to anything—experience, dreams, symptoms, culture—is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, and the point of it or you do not accept it or you do not interpret in the immediacy of its own detail, it is presented as self-validating, or, worse, as validated by the supposedly developed sensitivities of the person who possesses it; any attempt to ask what it says in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty—i.e., the anthropologist’s severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric.

For a field of study which, however timidly (though I, myself, am not timid about the matter at all), asserts itself to be a science, this just will not do. There is no reason why the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation should be any less formulable, and thus less susceptible to explicit criteria of appraisal, than that of, say, a biological observation or a physical experiment—no reason except that the terms in which such formulations can be cast are, if not wholly nonexistent, very nearly so. We are reduced to insinuating theories because we lack the power to state them.

At the same time, it must be admitted that there are a number of characteristics of cultural interpretation which make the theoretical development of it more than usually difficult. The first is the need for theory to stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in the sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction. Only short flights of rationalization tend to be effective in anthropology; longer ones tend to drift off into logical dreams, academic hortensia, with formal symmetry. The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, to add us to gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended use of the term, converse with them. The tension between the pull of need to penetrate an unfamiliar universe of symbolic action and the requirements of technical advance in the theory of culture, however need to grip and the need to analyze, is, as a result, both necessary and essentially irremovable. Indeed, the further theoretical development goes, the deeper the tension gets. This is the first condition

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... cultural theory; it is not its own master. As it is insurable from the immediacies thick description presents, its freedom to shape itself in terms of its internal logic is rather limited. What generalizes it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions.

... From this follows a peculiarity in the way, as a simple master of empirical fact, our knowledge of culture... cultures... cultures... grows in proportions. Rather than following a rising curve of cumulative findings, cultural analysis breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder efforts. Studies do build on other studies, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things. Every serious cultural analysis starts from either beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting or intellectual impasse. Previously discovered facts are mobilized, previously developed concepts used, previously formulated hypotheses tried; but the movement is not from already proved theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed it. A study is an advance if it is more inclusive—whenever that may mean—than those that preceded it, but it less stands on their shoulders than challenged and challenged, runs by their side.

It is for this reason, among others, that the essay, whether of thirty or three hundred, has seemed the natural genre in which to present looks for systematic treatises in the field, one is so soon disappointed, the more so if one finds any. Even inventory articles are rare and anyway of hardly more than bibliographical interest. The net is almost any field—but they are very difficult to abstract from studies and integrate into anything one might call "culture theory" which theoretical formulations however low over the interpretations is given that they don't make much sense or hold much interest. And generally, they are not general (if they are theoretical), but because, stated indiscernibly (if their application, they seem either commonplace or vacant). One theoretical attack developed in connection with one exercise in symbolic interpretation and employ it in another; pushing is for-
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ward to greater precision and broader relevance; but one cannot write a "General Theory of Cultural Interpretation." Or, rather, one can, but there appears to be little profit in it, because the essential task of theory building here is too to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them.

To generalize within cases is usually called, at least in medicine and deep psychology, clinical inference. Rather than beginning with a set of observations or attempting to subsume them under a governing law, this inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. Measures are matched to theoretical predictions, but symptoms (even when they are measured) are screened for theoretical peculiarities—that is, they are diagnosed. In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse. But the way in which theory is used—to ferret out the unapparent import of things—is the same.

Thus we are lead to the second condition of cultural theory: it is not, at least in the strict meaning of the term, predictive. The diagnostician doesn't predict tweeds; he declares that someone has them, or at most, very modestly anticipates that someone is rather likely shortly to get them. But this limitation, which is real enough, has commonly been both misunderstood and exaggerated, because it has been taken to mean that cultural interpretation is merely post facto: that, like the peasant in the old story, we first shoot the holes in the fence and then paint the bull's-eye around them. It is hardly to be denied that there is a good deal of that sort of thing around, some of it in prominent places. It is to be denied, however, that it is the inevitable outcome of a clinical approach to the use of theory.

It is true that in the clinical style of theoretical formulation, conceptualization is directed toward the task of generating interpretations of matters already in hand, not toward projecting outcomes of experimental manipulations or deducing future states of a determined system. It does not mean that theory has only to fit (or, more carefully, generate congruent interpretations of) realities past; it has also to serve—intelligently survive—realities to come. Although we formulate an interpretation of an outburst of winking or an instance of self-righteousness after its occurrence, sometimes long after, the theoretical framework

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essays collected here. A repertoire of very general, made-in-the-academy concepts and systems of concepts—"integration," "rationalization," "symbol," "ideology," "ethos," "revolution," "identity," "metaphor," "structure," "cultural," "total world view," "actor," "function," "stereotyped," and, of course, "culture" itself—is woven into the body of thick-description ethnography in the hope of rendering mere occurrences scientifically eloquent. The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.

Thus it is not only interpretation that goes all the way down to the most immediate observational level: the theory upon which such interpretative recapitulativity depends does so also. My interest in Cohen's story, like Rob's in winds, grew out of some very general notions dead. The "confusion of tongues" model—the view that social conflict is not something that happens when, out of weakness, indolence, self-sufficiency, or neglect, cultural forms cease to operate, but rather something which happens when, like butler's ex-winds, such forms are pressed by unusual situations or unusual intentions to operate in unusual ways—is not an idea I got from Cohen's story. It is one, it's stroked by colleagues, students, and predecessors, I brought to it.

Our innocent-looking "note is a bottle" is more than a portrayal of the frames of meaning of Jewish peddlers, Irish warriors, and Federal processions, or even of their mutual interrelation. It is an argument that to rework the pattern of social relationships is to rearrange the vocal nates of the experienced world. Society's forms are culture's substances.

VIII

There is an Indian story—at least I heard it as an Indian story—an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle?

"Such, indeed, is the condition of things. I do not know how long it would be probable to meditate on the encounter of Cohen, the shiek, and "Dumai" (the period has perhaps already been exceeded); but I do know that however long I did do I would not get anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about, either is the essays below or else that, the more deeply I go the less complete it is. It is a strange science. It is a strange science to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting what you are getting, that it is not what it is, that the expression, the expression, the expression, the expression, is not what it is, that it is a strange science to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion that you are not quite getting the truth. What gets better is the precision with which we see each other.

It is very difficult to see when one's attention is being monopolized by a single party to the argument. Monologues are of little value here, because there are no conclusions to be sustained. There is merely a disturbance of the essays here and there. Insofar as the essays here and there have any instant, it is less in what they say about what we are witnesses to: an apparent increase in interest, not only in anthropology, but in social studies generally, in the role of symbolic forms in human life. Meaning, as elusive and ill-defined as reality and as ephemeral as the image, as the image of the discipline. Even Marxists are quoting each other, the Drawing positive, keen, honest Burke.
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jevisim on the one hand and cabbalism on the other, to try to keep the analysis of symbolic forms as closely tied as possible to concrete social events and occasions, the public world of common life, and to organize it in such a way that the connections between theoretical formulations and descriptive interpretations were unobscured by appeals to dark sciences. I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer. Nor, on the other hand, have I been impressed with claims that structural linguistics, computer engineering, or some other advanced form of thought is going to enable us to understand men without knowing them. Nothing will discredit a semiotic approach to culture more quickly than allowing it to drift into a combination of intuitionism and alchemy, no matter how elegantly the intuitions are expressed or how modern the alchemy is made to look.

The danger that cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying truths, will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, and ideological realities within which men are everywhere contained—and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest, is an ever-present one. The only defense against it, and against, thus, turning cultural analysis into a kind of sociological aestheticism, is to train such analysis on such realities and such necessities in the first place. It is thus that I have written about nationalism, about violence, about identity, about human nature, about legitimacy, about revolution, about ethnicity, about urbanization, about slang, about death, about time, and most of all about particular attempts by particular peoples to place these things in some sort of comprehensible meaningful frame.

To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn one's back on the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of pure emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The entire vocation of interpretive anthropologists is not to answer our deepest questions but to make them available to us. Answers that others, guarding their lives and homes, have found, and thus to include them in the ceaseless stream of knowledge and experience.