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The Interpretation of Cultures: Geertz Is Still in Town

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Abstract

Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) is widely regarded as one of the most important contributions to the humanities and social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. On its 50th anniversary, the literature drawing on this monumental work is so vast that it is hard to see how anything of significance may still be added to the wide range of insights gained from the in-depth engagement with its main argument. The noticeable differences in opinion between followers and detractors of Geertz's project notwithstanding, most commentators will agree that *The Interpretation of Cultures*, having dominated the agenda of Anglophone anthropology for at least two decades after its publication, has had a major and lasting impact on neighbouring disciplines and subdisciplines—notably sociology, social psychology, politics, history, philosophy, and cultural studies. This paper aims to demonstrate that the key conceptual components of Geertz's enterprise can be located in his case for an interpretive theory of culture, epitomized in the methodological commitment to providing a 'thick description'. The first half of this paper comprises an inquiry into the core assumptions underlying Geertz's defence of this endeavour, before moving, in the second half, to an assessment of some controversial issues arising from his approach.

Keywords: Anthropology; culture; Geertz (Clifford); interpretation; thick description.

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Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)¹ is widely regarded as one of the most important contributions to the humanities and social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. On its 50th anniversary, the literature drawing on this monumental work is so vast that it is hard to see how anything of significance may still be added to the wide range of insights gained from the in-depth engagement with its main argument. The noticeable differences in opinion between followers and detractors of Geertz's project notwithstanding, most commentators will agree that *The Interpretation of Cultures*, having dominated the agenda of Anglophone anthropology for at least two decades after its publication, has had a major and lasting impact on neighbouring disciplines and subdisciplines—notably sociology, social psychology, politics, history, philosophy, and cultural studies.

The following analysis aims to demonstrate that the key conceptual components of Geertz's enterprise can be located in his case for an interpretive theory of culture, epitomized in the methodological commitment to providing a 'thick description'². The first half of this paper comprises an inquiry into the core assumptions underlying Geertz's defence of this endeavour, before moving, in the second half, to a discussion of some controversial issues arising from his approach.

In relation to the first task, the paper seeks to illustrate that Geertz's account of culture requires a systematic assessment of various crucial relationships: (1) culture and 'thick description', (2) culture and ethnography, (3) culture and anthropology, (4) culture and meaning, (5) culture and (un)familiarity, (6) culture and science, (7) culture and semiotics, (8) culture and coherence, (9) culture and context, and (10) culture and interpretation. The thorough examination of these dimensions indicates that Geertz's account of culture is far more nuanced than a catch-all summary may suggest.

In relation to the second task, the paper seeks to shed light on contentious matters arising from Geertz's perspective, positing that valuable lessons can be learnt from exploring the extent to which a range of analytical oppositions may be better understood as conceptual pairs, which are vital ingredients of critical social inquiry and which, as interdependent and complementary components, contribute to overcoming counterproductive divisions in the humanities and social sciences: (1) interpretation and explanation, (2) the micro and the macro, (3) the particular and the universal, (4) reality and representation, (5) nature and culture, (6) interpretations of culture and cultures of interpretation, (7) cognitive orders and normative orders, (8) the public and the private, (9) common humanity and cultural diversity, (10) ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge, (11) correlation and causation, (12) familiarity and strangeness, (13) ontology and epistemology, (14) functionalism and interpretivism, and (15) *Feldanschauung* and *Weltanschauung*.

The paper concludes by arguing that, having considered both the contributions and the limitations of Geertz's framework, it becomes possible not only to appreciate the theoretical and practical challenges involved in the interpretation of cultures but also to grasp the significance of the conceptual pairs that are essential for pursuing fruitful and imaginative forms of critical social research.

1. See Geertz (1973).

2. See *ibid.*, esp. Part I / Chapter 1: 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' (pp. 3–30).

1 Geertz's Project

1.1 Culture and 'thick description'

According to Geertz, an interpretive theory of culture entails a methodological commitment to providing a 'thick description'³, a term introduced by the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle⁴. An intellectual undertaking of this kind represents 'an elaborate venture'⁵, which obliges us to draw a distinction between two principal types of description: on the one hand, 'thin description', which is founded on surface-level observations of human behaviour; on the other hand, 'thick description', which contextualizes human behaviour and, thus, endeavours to comprehend it by taking into consideration the environment in which it takes place.

Ethnographic work, understood in the classical sense, involves a series of noteworthy activities—such as establishing a rapport between researcher(s) and participant(s), selecting a pool of informants, transcribing texts, developing genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so forth. Ultimately, these methodological tools are employed with the purpose of studying and comprehending a group of actors in their social setting, permitting the ethnographic researcher to produce a (theoretically informed and empirically based) narrative account of cultural practices, structures, and arrangements.

Geertz's reflections on the differences between a twitch and a wink is a case in point⁶. Through the lens of a 'thin description', the act of contracting one's eyelids may be perceived in merely physiological terms and, hence, as a *twitch*. Through the lens of a 'thick description', the same phenomenon may be interpreted as a (psychologically motivated, historically situated, socially contingent, and culturally codified) process whereby a person seeks to communicate something to someone else through a *wink*. If the latter, rather than the former, is the case, then the act of contracting one's eyelids can be regarded as an act of winking, in the sense that something is being communicated (a) intentionally, (b) to another actor or group of actors, (c) with the goal of conveying a message in a secretive manner, and (d) to accomplish this without cognizance of the rest of the company.

Far from aiming to lay bare what anyone actually intends or means, however, Geertz is interested in explicating the larger *system of meanings*—that is, the *semiotic system*—through which people can participate in communicative processes (including winking). In other words, his primary concern is *not* to establish whether, in a given context, actors are trying to convey something in an enigmatic manner, to reveal what their fundamental motives are, and/or to enlighten us about what they are hoping to accomplish by performing a concealed or encrypted communicative act (such as winking). Rather, he is interested in contextualizing and understanding the *semiotic code* within and through which a culturally competent person can engage in communicative acts.

When attempting to provide a 'thick description', one is immersed in the realm of ethnography: its object of study is 'a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures'⁷, practices, and arrangements. This symbolically mediated pecking order sets the parameters for the production, perception, appreciation, and interpretation of actions, or sets of actions, implying that,

3. See *ibid.*, esp. Part I / Chapter 1: 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' (pp. 3–30).

4. See Ryle (2009), Chapter 37: 'The Thinking of Thoughts: What is "Le Penseur" Doing?' (1968).

5. Geertz (1973, p. 6).

6. See *ibid.*, pp. 6–10.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

in principle, anything can be interpreted ‘*as a cultural category*’⁸.

Ethnographic descriptions are ‘extraordinarily thick’⁹ in that data are never simply ‘data’. Rather, they are the researcher’s ‘own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’¹⁰. Just as ordinary actors navigate their everyday lives by virtue of numerous material and symbolic constructions, so do those who seek to study and to comprehend them. Constructions of other people’s constructions are both constructive and reconstructive. They are *constructive* insofar as researchers have to mobilize their cognitive resources, *projecting* their own (perspective-, meaning-, and value-laden) concepts and beliefs upon those whose lives they scrutinize. At the same time, they are *reconstructive* insofar as they are supposed to capture their object of inquiry as accurately as possible, *situating* it in the contexts in which it is embedded and, by implication, in the relationally constituted spaces it inhabits.

To do justice to the complexity of this task, however, it is essential that the ethnographer recognize the challenges arising from identifying the factors that lurk in the background and, therefore, escape our common-sense grasp of the world: ‘most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is *insinuated as background information* before the thing itself is directly examined’¹¹. To put it bluntly, ethnographic research is as much about *observing* what seems obvious to the observer as about *uncovering* what can be found beneath the surface. To be sure, this twofold objective is not predicated on the assumption that crucial information is deliberately or unwittingly hidden by the research participants. Rather, it is based on the insight that, due to its multidimensional constitution and multifactorial determinacy, every social situation is far more complex than it appears to be at first glance.

1.2 Culture and ethnography

According to Geertz, it is erroneous to endorse ‘a view of anthropological research as rather more of an *observational* and rather less of an *interpretive* activity than it really is’¹². Granted, every social science—including anthropology—has a ‘factual base’¹³, which constitutes ‘the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise’¹⁴. This solid ground, however, is the empirical foundation of *symbolically mediated* and *culturally codified* practices, structures, and arrangements.

To accept that ‘ethnography is thick description’¹⁵ requires recognizing that ‘[d]oing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries’¹⁶. Reading—understood in these terms—is not only a technical matter of decoding, deciphering, or decrypting but also an interpretive exercise in looking at the world from the perspective shared and co-constructed by ordinary actors. This co-agential outlook

8. Ibid., p. 7 (italics in original).

9. Ibid., p. 9.

10. Ibid., p. 9.

11. Ibid., p. 9 (italics added).

12. Ibid., p. 9 (italics added).

13. Ibid., p. 9.

14. Ibid., p. 9.

15. Ibid., pp. 9–10 & 16.

16. Ibid., p. 10.

manifests itself in different ways: collective representations, collective consciousness¹⁷, and collective imagination (at the *ideological* level); practices, habits, and conventions (at the *behavioural* level); social structures, arrangements, and organizations (at the *institutional* level).

Doing ethnography requires the ability to ‘construct a reading of’¹⁸ texts written not in ‘conventionalized graphs of sound’¹⁹ but, rather, in ‘transient examples of shaped behaviour’²⁰—and, by extension, of varying degrees of social institutionalization. Given their interest in and engagement with the (often messy and constantly evolving) constitution of social life, ethnographers cannot rely on standardized, routinized, and automatized forms of data collection. Committed to the participatory study of behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of sociality, which are ‘superimposed upon or knotted into one another’²¹, ethnographers are confronted with several interrelated challenges: (a) the *methodological* challenge of examining, (b) the *theoretical* challenge of explaining, (c) the *terminological* challenge of offering a vocabulary for, (d) the *epistemological* challenge of identifying different types of knowledge emerging within, and (e) the *empirical* challenge of absorbing the presence of individual and collective forces, which—as structural and agential variables that are ‘at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit’²²—govern everyday life.

Caught between the scientific tasks of objectification, observation, and explanation, on the one hand, and the hermeneutic tasks of immersion, interpretation, and understanding, on the other, ethnographic descriptions—in the Geertzian sense—contain four characteristics: (a) they are *interpretive*, (b) they are interpretive of the *flow of social discourse*, (c) their processes of interpretation are aimed at *rescuing* ‘the “said” of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms’²³, and (d) they are *microscopic*.

This is not to suggest that ‘there are no large-scale anthropological interpretations of whole societies, civilizations, world events, and so on’²⁴. Indeed, ethnographic descriptions would be shortsighted if they failed to consider the *macro-historical* settings in which *micro-historical* events are situated and the *macro-sociological* factors by which *micro-sociological* dynamics are shaped. Moreover, there is an array of anthropological constants, which—owing to their ineluctable presence in forms of life—ethnographic descriptions cannot ignore. The tension between cross-cultural *universals* and cross-cultural *variations* is as central to anthropology as to any other social-scientific discipline concerned with the constitutive features by which humanity is either united or divided. The question is not whether any ‘all-too-human *constancies*’²⁵ exist. Rather, the question is whether these are outweighed by all-too-human *differences*.

Doing ethnography does *not* mean that those involved in the research should aim ‘either

17. Geertz stresses the (useful) ambiguity of Durkheim’s concept of *conscience collective*, which—arguably—may refer to both *collective conscience* and *collective consciousness*. On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 316.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 10 (spelling modified).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 21 (italics added). On this point, see, for example: Chernilo (2017); Habermas (2003); Honneth & Joas (1988); Pinker (2002); Wilson (2004).

to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them²⁶. On the contrary, it is imperative that ethnographers be capable of maintaining a healthy scientific distance from their object(s) of study. Insofar as they succeed in doing so, they can combine the third-person perspective of the observer(s) with the first-person perspective of the participant(s), instead of claiming that one is epistemically superior to the other.

As Geertz—drawing on Stanley Cavell²⁷—points out, if ‘speaking *for* someone else seems to be a mysterious process²⁸, the main reason for this is that ‘speaking *to* someone does not seem mysterious enough²⁹. Both in everyday life and in everyday research, the third-person perspectives of observers and the first-person perspectives of participants are deeply intertwined:

- As lifeworld-inhabitants, we are both *participants* (contributing to the material and symbolic construction of reality) and *observers* (grappling with and making judgements about the constitution of reality).
- As critical analysts, we are both *participants* (contributing to the production, reception, and circulation of both scientific and non-scientific reflections) and *observers* (mobilizing terminological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and empirical tools for the study of reality).

By comprehending the nature and purpose of ethnography, as well as the orientations and practices of ethnographers, we can grasp ‘what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge’³⁰. In short, doing ethnography reveals a great deal about the project of interpretive anthropology.

1.3 Culture and anthropology

The concept of culture lies at the core of anthropology’s disciplinary identity. It is not self-evident, however, how the concept should be defined from an anthropological perspective. Warning his readers of an inflationary use of anthropology’s most central concept, Geertz makes a case for a clearly defined understanding of culture. On this account, a narrow and specialized conception of culture is both theoretically and empirically more insightful than a broad and elastic one, which is epitomized in E.B. Tylor’s well-known ‘most complex whole’ formulation³¹. It is not uncommon for such forms of ‘cultural holism’—according to which everything is cultural, just as culture is everything—to be implicitly or explicitly invoked in general introductions to anthropology.

A good example of this trend is Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man*³², in which—as pointed out by Geertz—the concept of culture is defined in a dozen ways³³: (a) *civilizational*³⁴;

26. Geertz (1973, p. 13).

27. See Cavell (2002).

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68 (italics in original). See Geertz (1973, p. 13).

29. Cavell (2002, p. 68) (italics in original). See Geertz (1973, p. 13).

30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

31. See Tylor (1920, p. 1). See also Tylor (1881).

32. See Kluckhohn (1949).

33. See Geertz (1973, pp. 4–5).

34. See *ibid.*, p. 4: ‘the total way of life of a people’.

(b) *sociological*³⁵; (c) *mental, emotional, and ideological*³⁶; (d) *symbolic*³⁷; (e) *behavioural*³⁸; (f) *educational and transgenerational*³⁹; (g) *habitual and consequential*⁴⁰; (h) *educational and behavioural*⁴¹; (i) *normative and regulative*⁴²; (j) *technical, instrumental, and social*⁴³; (k) *historical and motivational*⁴⁴; (l) *orientational, representational, and environmental*⁴⁵.

While expressing a degree of sympathy with Kluckhohn's attempt at developing a differentiated account of culture, Geertz warns that an overly eclectic, if not catch-all, approach runs the risk of failing to recognize that 'it is necessary to choose'⁴⁶ and, thus, to provide a workable definition of this central concept. The concept of culture endorsed by Geertz, then, is 'essentially a *semiotic* one'⁴⁷. Similar to Max Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie*, Geertz's interpretive anthropology is predicated on the assumption that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun'⁴⁸. Culture can be regarded as the totality of those webs, which are not only socially constructed but also symbolically mediated by, and materially embedded in, local and global networks of human actions and interactions. On this view, anthropology is 'not an *experimental* science in search of *law* but an *interpretive* one in search of *meaning*'⁴⁹. In brief, interpretive anthropology is a form of cultural analysis, rather than a type of experimental science, let alone scientism.

While advocating an interpretive conception of anthropology, Geertz rejects mentalist, idealist, and occultist approaches to culture—that is, explanatory frameworks that tend to reduce culture to a merely cognitive, conceptual, and/or hidden affair. In a more general sense, he is wary of the dichotomous thinking by which much of anthropology has been marked ever since it came into existence. This mode of reasoning is illustrated in counterproductive divisions, such as subjectivism *vs.* objectivism, idealism *vs.* materialism, mentalism *vs.* behaviourism, impressionism *vs.* positivism—to mention only a few. These (and other) paradigmatic dualisms manifest themselves in varying degrees of academic tribalism and increasingly polarized ways of defining and defending discipline-specific (particularly terminological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and empirical) tools. Ultimately, this trend results in the proliferation of fruitless intellectual divisions, preventing social scientists from combining insights gained from competing traditions of thought.

Different social-scientific approaches offer different perspectives on the 'ontological

35. See *ibid.*, p. 4: 'the social legacy the individual acquires from his group'.

36. See *ibid.*, p. 4: 'a way of thinking, feeling, and believing'.

37. See *ibid.*, p. 4: 'an abstraction from behaviour' (spelling modified).

38. See *ibid.*, p. 4: 'a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave'.

39. See *ibid.*, pp. 4–5: 'a "store house of pooled learning"'.
 40. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems'.

41. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'learned behaviour'.

42. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour'.

43. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men'.

44. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'a precipitate of history'.

45. See *ibid.*, p. 5: 'as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix'.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 5 (italics added).

48. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 5 (italics added).

status⁵⁰ of culture (and, by extension, on the terminological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and empirical tools by which it should be studied). Irrespective of one's interpretation, it would be erroneous to present culture as 'a self-contained "superorganic" reality with forces and purposes of its own'⁵¹, since such a totalizing move would oblige us 'to reify it'⁵². To put it bluntly, a culturalist conception of the social is no less reductive than its economic counterpart. And yet, the idea that culture is located 'in the minds and hearts of men'⁵³—which is central to cognitivist and mentalist approaches to forms of life—is equally problematic. In fact, this notion is common among proponents of ethnoscience, componential analysis, and—crucially—cognitive anthropology⁵⁴. For Geertz, this cognitivist fallacy indicates that 'extreme subjectivism is married to extreme formalism'⁵⁵.

Whether we are dealing with the *cognitivist* reduction of culture to a merely mental or psychological affair, the *subjectivist* reduction of culture to a phenomenon located in and defined by individuals, the *formalist* reduction of culture to an object of study graspable only by mathematics and logic, the *behaviourist* reduction of culture to a sequence of actions and interactions determined by environmental conditioning, or the *idealist* reduction of culture to spatiotemporally contingent sets of concepts and representations—none of these outlooks can do justice to the complexity of culture, notably in terms of its constitution, functioning, and development (both within and across different contexts).

1.4 Culture and meaning

Far from being reducible to 'the conceptual manipulation of discovered facts, a logical reconstruction of a mere reality'⁵⁶, whose inner workings are determined by 'autogenous principles of order'⁵⁷, anthropological inquiry is a mode of *cultural analysis*⁵⁸ that involves 'guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses'⁵⁹. It could not be further removed from the transcendental belief in the possibility of 'discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape'⁶⁰, as if cultural analysis were motivated by the enlightening mission of seeking to *uncover* the underlying mechanisms that govern the material and symbolic construction of reality.

In the spirit of the later Wittgenstein, Geertz insists that '[c]ulture is public because meaning is'⁶¹. Just as, according to the later Wittgenstein, '[t]he meaning of a word is its use in the language'⁶², the value of a culture is its use in a particular context. There is no such thing as an entirely private language and no such thing as an entirely private culture. Language and culture

50. Ibid., p. 10.

51. Ibid., p. 11.

52. Ibid., p. 11.

53. Ibid., p. 11. Cf. Goodenough (2006) and Goodenough (1981). Cf. also Keesing (1974, pp. 85–86).

54. See Geertz (1973, p. 11).

55. Ibid., p. 11.

56. Ibid., p. 20.

57. Ibid., p. 20.

58. See *ibid.*, pp. 16, 17, 18, 20, 25, 29, 30, 222n45, 364, 405, & 407.

59. Ibid., p. 20 (*italics added*).

60. Ibid., p. 20 (*italics added*). Cf. Susen (2007, pp. 158–167).

61. Ibid., p. 12.

62. Wittgenstein (2009, §43). On this point, see also Susen (2023b, esp. section VII).

are products of the symbolically mediated and materially anchored actions and interactions taking place between human subjects.

Since the earlier Husserl⁶³ and the later Wittgenstein⁶⁴, the widespread rejection of ‘privacy theories of meaning’⁶⁵ has been an integral part of the humanities and social sciences—from philosophy and linguistics to sociology and anthropology. As a general trend, it reflects the widely shared conviction that ‘culture consists of *socially established structures of meaning*’⁶⁶, mobilized by human actors navigating the objective, normative, and subjective realms of their existence. Culture has a strong *cognitive* dimension, in that it permeates a person’s dispositional apparatus of perception, appreciation, and interpretation. At the same time, culture has a pronounced *relational* dimension, in that it shapes a person’s way of encountering, engaging with, and working upon the world. Culture is a manifestation, vehicle, and engine of intersubjectivity.

1.5 Culture and (un)familiarity

One of the most striking features of cultural (including inter- and cross-cultural) dynamics is the *relationship between familiarity and unfamiliarity*—or, to be precise, between degrees of familiarity and degrees of unfamiliarity⁶⁷. As pointed out by the later Wittgenstein⁶⁸, given the (in many cases, profound) differences between forms of life, a person from one culture may perceive a person from another culture as ‘a complete enigma’⁶⁹ (and vice versa). When we fail to understand each other due to cultural differences, ‘[w]e cannot find our feet with them’⁷⁰. When this happens, we experience the full force of cultural (and often linguistic) incommensurability, which makes us realize the tangible consequences of interpretive inaccessibility. Put in Kantian terms, such an experience makes the foreign or unfamiliar culture appear like a noumenal realm (that is, ‘culture in itself’), to which we do not have access and whose constitution is only inferable through our superficial decoding of a phenomenal realm (that is, ‘culture as it appears to us’)⁷¹.

Geertz draws attention to a curious paradox: on the one hand, we are confronted with ‘[t]he great natural *variation* of cultural forms’⁷² across the world, indicating the high degree of *contingency* permeating the spatiotemporally conditions that undergird the existence of humanity; on the other hand, we are faced with ‘the biological *unity* of the human species’⁷³, which transcends socially constructed boundaries and provides us with a sense of *universality*, based on a set of anthropological constants, which distinguish us from other sentient beings, irrespective of their role in the construction of reality.

63. See Husserl (2001), Husserl (2012), and Husserl (1970).

64. See Wittgenstein (2009).

65. Geertz (1973, p. 12). Cf. Kripke (1982).

66. Geertz (1973, p. 12) (italics added).

67. Cf. Geertz (1988).

68. See Wittgenstein (2009).

69. Ibid., p. 223. See Geertz (1973, p. 13). Cf. Hunter (1968, esp. p. 242).

70. Wittgenstein (2009, p. 223). See Geertz (1973, p. 13). Cf. Hunter (1968, esp. p. 242).

71. On the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, see Kant (1995). See also Oberst (2015) and Ward (2006), Part I. In addition, see Susen (2021b, esp. p. 44) and Susen (2023b, Part IX, sections 3 & 4).

72. Geertz (1973, p. 22) (italics added).

73. Ibid., p. 22 (italics added).

As members of a species whose members are divided by several sociological variables, one of which is culture, most—if not all—of us are familiar not only with the feeling of familiarity but also with the feeling of unfamiliarity: we may be *in sync with* a cultural environment, especially when we experience it as broadly *aligned with* our personal identity; we may be *out of sync with* a cultural environment, especially when we experience it as largely *misaligned with* our personal identity. Human life is a constant back-and-forth between experiences of familiarity and experiences of unfamiliarity.

1.6 Culture and science

The quest for evidence-based and logically defensible truth claims is central to modernity's attempt to make the world more and more *controllable*⁷⁴ by virtue of a 'new *positive science*'⁷⁵. Narrowly defined versions of this project, however, tend to result in dogmatically pursued variants of scientism, which ignore, or deny, the extent to which human reality is socially constructed⁷⁶—including the extent to which its constitution, functioning, and development⁷⁷ are contingent upon symbolically mediated actions and interactions performed by meaning-seeking beings.

In anthropological terms, symbolism is the 'new key' to understanding how the human mind has transformed the primal need to express oneself⁷⁸. *Understanding the nature of understanding*—and, on a metatheoretical level, *understanding the understanding of the nature of understanding*—can be regarded as a major challenge for the humanities and social sciences, from hermeneutics and phenomenology to social psychology, micro-sociology, interpretive sociology, and interpretive anthropology. These interpretive—if not, interpretivist—endeavours emphasize not only the perspective-, meaning-, and value-laden constitution of social reality but also the degree to which monolithic and monoparadigmatic approaches fail to account for the multilayered composition of the objective, normative, and subjective realms that humans inhabit.

And yet, even if reductive frameworks (whether these be cognitivist, subjectivist, formalist, behaviourist, idealist, or otherwise) do 'not explain everything, not even everything human'⁷⁹, they still explain *something*, albeit in a highly limited and questionable fashion. Two key questions that arise in this context are (a) how to distinguish between *non-reductive and reductive* approaches and (b) how to distinguish between *scientific and non-scientific (including pseudo-scientific)* approaches. The 'demarcation problem'⁸⁰, therefore, poses numerous challenges, notably in relation to (a) the question of where to draw the line between defensible and indefensible explanatory reductions and (b) the question of where to draw the line between what counts as science and what does not count as science.

Albert Einstein's famous dictum that '[e]verything should be made as simple as possible,

74. Cf. Rosa (2020).

75. Geertz (1973, p. 3) (italics added).

76. See Berger & Luckmann (1967).

77. See Susen (2015, pp. 5–6, 239, & 245). See also Susen (2021a, esp. pp. 121–129).

78. See Langer (1942).

79. Geertz (1973, p. 4).

80. On the 'demarcation problem', see, for instance: Lakatos et al. (1999); Laudan (1983); Lloyd (1983); Resnik (2000); Susen (2015, esp. pp. 49 & 56).

but not simpler⁸¹, captures the complexity of this task. Non-reductive and scientific endeavours should make everything (including extremely complicated issues) as simple as possible. Their reductive and non-scientific (comprising pseudo-scientific) counterparts, however, make them simpler than they actually are.

It is no accident that, with the exception of Skinnerian versions of behaviourism and intelligence testing, operationalism ‘as a methodological dogma’⁸² has become increasingly marginalized in the contemporary social sciences. For all its limitations and shortcomings, including its tendency to reduce potentially complex social phenomena to mere ‘operations’⁸³, these approaches have one advantage: they oblige us to acknowledge that, in order ‘*to understand what a science is*’⁸⁴ and, by implication, how it *really* functions, one needs to ‘look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists *say* about it’⁸⁵. Rather, one ‘should look at what the practitioners of it *do*’⁸⁶. In other words, a powerful advantage of operationalist approaches is that—owing to their pragmatist spirit—they require us to challenge and to go beyond what scientists preach. To this end, it is essential to examine what they do when pursuing research, including the strategies they employ when positioning themselves in relation to their collaborators and competitors as well as, more generally, in relation to other actors in their respective fields.

1.7 Culture and semiotics

The principal aim of anthropology may be defined as ‘the enlargement of the universe of human discourse’⁸⁷. While this is not anthropology’s sole objective (and while, in one form or another, it is pursued by various other disciplines), it provides a strong justification for ‘*a semiotic concept of culture*’⁸⁸—that is, for an approach committed to the study of signs and symbols and of their meaning and use. From a semiotic point of view, culture is not reducible to an anonymous power or force, working—paradoxically, both ‘through our bodies’ and ‘behind our backs’—in a causalist fashion and determining every inch of our being. It is not the case that culture is so omnipresent and omnipotent that it is capable of hijacking the physical, social, and personal dimensions of our existence, in such a way that these are not only permeated but also determined by its normative codes and modes of functioning. While human actions and interactions are unavoidably *power-laden*, they are not always *power-driven*⁸⁹. While human actions and interactions are unavoidably *culture-laden*, they are not always *culture-driven*. Put differently, all social practices are *power- and culture-permeated*, but not all of them are *power- and culture-motivated*.

81. Cf. Einstein (1934), p. 165: ‘It can scarcely be denied that the supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience’.

82. Geertz (1973, p. 5).

83. Ibid., p. 5.

84. Ibid., p. 5 (italics added).

85. Ibid., p. 5 (italics added).

86. Ibid., p. 5 (italics added).

87. Geertz (1973, p. 14).

88. Ibid., p. 14 (italics added).

89. See Susen (2014, p. 8). See also Susen (2015, pp. 117–118) and Susen (2018).

Rather than ascribing causal power to culture, an interpretive anthropology conceives of it in *semiotic*—and, by implication, *contextual*—terms. On this account, *culture is a context* within which social phenomena (whether these belong to the micro-, meso-, or macro-spheres of human existence) can ‘be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described’⁹⁰. Obviously, the question of whether such a (cultural) context is familiar or unfamiliar to those experiencing and/or studying it is crucial. The old cliché that anthropology is all about making the familiar strange and the strange familiar persists to this day. This laudable mission, however, is transferable to other academic disciplines. Scientific endeavours that succeed in shedding light on the underlying forces that escape our common-sense perception of reality *make the unfamiliar familiar*. Scientific endeavours that succeed in challenging and breaking free from everyday preconceptions of reality *make the familiar unfamiliar*. Both missions—that is, both one’s familiarization with the unfamiliar and one’s defamiliarization of the familiar—are essential to the pursuit of a *critical* social science.

Addressing this task, interpretive anthropology advocates an action-oriented approach, commonly associated with a strong emphasis on the paradigm of *Verstehen*⁹¹. The interpretive approach proposed by Geertz, however, differs from classical *Verstehen*-focused methods (à la Dilthey and Weber)⁹² in that it is concerned with understanding semiotic codes, rather than with performing an empathetic interpretation of people’s largely unconscious assumptions, intentions, and motives⁹³.

In anthropology (as in any other social science), it is important to draw a distinction between *one’s object of study* and *one’s mode of study*. The former is *ontological* in the sense that it refers to a type of *being* situated in the world. The latter is *methodological* in the sense that it refers to the *means* by which a particular component of the world is examined. Whether they do so as insiders or outsiders, ethnographers seek to gain an understanding of social realms by immersing themselves in them. Their ‘anthropological writings are themselves interpretations’⁹⁴ of their object(s) of inquiry. To be clear, ordinary actors (or ‘natives’) are as interpretive as academic researchers. Yet, whereas the former rely largely on first-order interpretations, the latter generate second-order (or even third-order) interpretations. First-order interpretations permit natives to inhabit ‘their’ culture through the taken-for-granted assumptions of their worldview. Second-order (or even third-order) interpretations, by contrast, enable researchers to convert other cultures into objects of scientific investigation.

For Geertz, the *sociological* differences between ‘natives’ and ‘researchers’ manifest themselves not only in the *epistemological* differences between ‘first-order interpretations’ and ‘second-order/third-order interpretations’, the *methodological* differences between ‘insider involvement’ and ‘outsider observation’, and the *ontological* differences between ‘cultural being’ and ‘cultural analysis’ but also in the *functional* differences between ‘substance’ and

90. Geertz (1973, p. 14).

91. On the paradigm of understanding [*Verstehen*], see, for instance: Apel (1984); Baert (2003, esp. pp. 100–102); Baert (2005); Bourdieu (1993); Celikates (2018); Dallmayr & McCarthy (1977); Dilthey (1883); Habermas (1987); Kögler & Stueber (2000); Outhwaite (1986); Outhwaite (2000, esp. pp. 223–227); Taylor (1977); Weber (1980).

92. On this point, see Geertz (1973, p. 14) (‘the *verstehen* approach’ [*sic*]) and Geertz (1973, p. 88) (‘Weber’s *Verstehenden* methodology’ [*sic*]).

93. See *ibid.*, p. 14 (italics in original): ‘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’.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

‘representation’. Culture is ubiquitous. It exists everywhere, in the sense that it permeates every aspect (including seemingly non-cultural aspects) of human life. By contrast, ‘anthropology exists in the book, the article, the lecture, the museum display, or, sometimes nowadays, the film’⁹⁵. It is present in particular meta-cultural realms—that is, in realms whose main function consists in reflecting upon culture as both a vehicle of human co-existence and a vehicle of a symbolically mediated transcendence of material immanence.

To become aware of culture—as both a problematizable object of study and a constitutive part of human existence—is ‘to realize that the line between *mode of representation* and *substantive content* is as undrawable in cultural analysis as it is in painting’⁹⁶. If anything, the line between its *mode of representation* and its *substantive content* is blurred and constantly being renegotiated, not least because the latter is part of the former, just as the former is part of the latter. Put differently, there are no cultural depictions without cultural existence, just as there is no cultural existence without cultural depictions.

The blurring of the line between *mode of representation* and *substantive content* ‘seems to threaten the objective status of anthropological knowledge by suggesting that its source is not social reality but scholarly artifice’⁹⁷. At the same time, it seems to undermine the ontological status of anthropological existence by promoting the inflationary notion that culture is everywhere and nowhere. If ‘ethnography is thick description and ethnographers [are] those who are doing the describing’⁹⁸, then the key question that arises is whether—in Geertz’s phraseology—‘it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones’⁹⁹ and, thus, whether it succeeds in distinguishing between (merely) physiological and (essentially) motivational acts.

1.8 Culture and coherence

The relationship between culture and coherence is far from straightforward. On the one hand, ‘coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description’¹⁰⁰, since social life is fragile, messy, and unpredictable. On the other hand, ‘[c]ultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence’¹⁰¹, since social life is not viable unless it is relatively stable, organized, and predictable. Cultural systems, however, would implode without the modes of behaviour by which they are produced, reproduced, and potentially transformed. Indeed, the concept of behaviour needs to be taken seriously by anthropologists, ‘because it is through the flow of behaviour—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation’¹⁰². All symbolically mediated actions and interactions—embedded in language, consciousness, culture, artefacts, and so forth—‘draw their meaning from the role they play (Wittgenstein would say their “use”) in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relationships they bear to one another’¹⁰³. Words derive their meanings from the way they are used¹⁰⁴. Language games

95. Ibid., p. 16.

96. Ibid., p. 16 (italics added).

97. Ibid., p. 16.

98. Ibid., p. 16.

99. Ibid., p. 16.

100. Ibid., p. 17.

101. Ibid., p. 17.

102. Ibid., p. 17 (spelling modified).

103. Ibid., p. 17.

104. See Wittgenstein (2009, §43). On this point, see also Susen (2023b, esp. section VII).

obtain their existential significance from the fact that they are—at once—manifestations, vehicles, and engines of forms of life.

Viewed in this (socio-holistic) light, a ‘hermetic’ or ‘isolationist’ conception of culture is untenable. If culture is regarded ‘as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, “in its own terms”), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way’¹⁰⁵, the extent to which it permeates all aspects of social life, while itself being permeated by them, is overlooked. Such a narrow approach runs the risk of ‘locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life’¹⁰⁶, which is irreducible to the self-referential logic of reductive frameworks. Whether these be defended as versions of cognitivism, subjectivism, formalism, behaviourism, or idealism (or, in discipline-parasitic terms, as psychologism, sociologism, or anthropologism), they fall into the trap of schematicism¹⁰⁷.

For Geertz, there is no doubt that ‘[n]othing has done more [...] to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe’¹⁰⁸. When formal orders take precedence over substantive orders, the former end up being increasingly dissociated from the latter. What may make sense on paper may not make sense in real life (and vice versa). More importantly, what may make no sense on paper may make a lot of sense in real life (and vice versa). This insight places an enormous burden on the process (and purpose) of anthropological interpretation: ‘A good interpretation of anything [...] takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation.’¹⁰⁹

Just as all cultures exist on a spectrum between coherence and incoherence, so do the interpretations by which they are sustained (‘from within’) and/or studied (‘from without’).

1.9 Culture and context

For Geertz, all interpretations (and misinterpretations) need to be put in *context*. They are, by definition, perspectival and ‘inherently inconclusive’¹¹⁰. Given the tentative nature of all interpretations, ‘[e]thnographic findings are not privileged, just particular’¹¹¹. Their epistemic value, in other words, needs to be relativized (without therefore subscribing to relativism¹¹²): spatiotemporal contingency pervades the social world—including all interpretations generated, negotiated, and evaluated within it. Contingency permeates not only all ontologies of the social world but also the first- and second-order epistemologies that arise within it. The notion that ethnographic findings can rise above the contingency of the historical settings in which they emerge amounts to a transcendental illusion.

One of the most striking features of ‘the anthropologist’s findings is their complex specificity, their circumstantiality’¹¹³. There is no anthropology without a critical awareness of the situatedness at the core of all forms of sociality. Far from being reducible to an abstract princi-

105. Geertz (1973, p. 17).

106. Ibid., p. 17.

107. See *ibid.*, p. 17.

108. Ibid., p. 18.

109. Ibid., p. 18.

110. Ibid., p. 23.

111. Ibid., p. 23.

112. Cf. Geertz (1984).

113. Geertz (1973, p. 23).

ple of anthropological research, however, the methodological commitment to drawing on ‘material produced by long-term, mainly (though not exclusively) qualitative, highly participative, and almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts’¹¹⁴ is vital to the ethnographic enterprise. In fact, it is a precondition for developing and substantiating ‘the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted’¹¹⁵ and which tend to be associated with macro-theoretical approaches—such as functionalism, systems theory, and complexity theory.

One of the many lessons that such a microscopic¹¹⁶ grassroots approach teaches us is that, unless social-scientific ‘mega-concepts’¹¹⁷ and grand theories are rooted in a fine-grained understanding of cultural dynamics and constellations as they emerge in everyday life, there is no chance of acquiring ‘the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them’¹¹⁸. The methodological challenges raised by the microscopic analysis of ethnography are ‘both real and critical’¹¹⁹.

The point, however, is *not* to focus on micro-sociological settings with the aim of treating each of them as a mini-universe, reducible to a ‘world in a teacup’¹²⁰ or ‘cloud chamber’¹²¹, let alone an autopoietic system. Rather, the point is to acknowledge that ‘social actions are comments on more than themselves’¹²², in the sense that they convey potentially significant meanings about *both* the microcosms (such as social fields, lifeworlds, and communities) *and* the macrocosms (such as social institutions, systems, and societies) in which they are spatiotemporally situated. ‘Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to.’¹²³ It is not simply that small is *beautiful* but, rather, that small is *relevant*. Put differently, small is actually *big* because it is a foundational part of the bigger picture.

1.10 Culture and interpretation

A major limitation of interpretive approaches to different aspects of social life ‘is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment’¹²⁴. This is not the case because—unlike explanation [*Erklären*]—interpretation or understanding [*Verstehen*] may be misconceived as an atheoretical, or even anti-theoretical, endeavour. Rather, this is the case because ‘[y]ou either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or you do not’¹²⁵. Interpretation is not merely a cognitive mechanism (subject to the laws of logic, validity, or rationality) but

114. Ibid., p. 23.

115. Ibid., p. 23.

116. See *ibid.*, pp. 21–23.

117. Ibid., p. 23.

118. Ibid., p. 23 (*italics in original*).

119. Ibid., p. 23.

120. Ibid., p. 23.

121. Ibid., p. 23.

122. Ibid., p. 23.

123. Ibid., p. 23.

124. Ibid., p. 24.

125. Ibid., p. 24.

also an experiential and existential journey (contingent on different degrees of recognition, relevance, and resonance).

If an interpretation, however, is ‘*i*’*mprisoned* 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 presents it¹²⁶. If, by contrast, it is *open* to being challenged by other interpretations and, hence, by access to details from outside its epistemic and/or experiential comfort zone, it stands a chance of being revised (and, ultimately, strengthened) by exposing its own limitations and incorporating insights from alternative perspectives. If anthropology—or any adjacent field of inquiry for that matter—claims to be a science, it should be able to demonstrate that ‘the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation’¹²⁷ is as solid, formulable, and ‘susceptible to explicit canons of appraisal’¹²⁸ as the procedural norms and principles underlying experimental and observational methods in the natural sciences. And yet, the theoretical development of cultural interpretations is difficult for at least two reasons:

a.

There is ‘the need for theory to stay rather *closer to the ground* than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction’¹²⁹. The anthropological imagination is at its best when keeping its ‘flights of ratiocination’¹³⁰ relatively short, thereby avoiding an ivory-tower scenario in which they ‘drift off into logical dreams, academic bemusements with formal symmetry’¹³¹ imposed upon, and essentially misrepresenting, social reality. ‘The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is [...] to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.’¹³²

This interpretive mission requires anthropologists to take the subjects they study seriously and to regard them as knowledge-seeking entities capable of action and reflection. For this to be accomplished, cultural theory needs to recognize that ‘it is not its own master’¹³³ but dependent on the realities whose complexities it is designed to capture. Since ‘it is unseverable from the immediacies thick description presents’¹³⁴, its capacity to determine the course of its direction—and to do so ‘in terms of its internal logic’¹³⁵—is limited, unless it purposively detaches itself from the cultural dynamics and constellations it is intended to comprehend.

Given its reliance on interpretation, cultural analysis is not a cumulative, let alone cumulative, enterprise. ‘Rather than following a rising curve of cumulative findings, cultural analysis breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder sorties.’¹³⁶ Rather than seeking to get closer and closer to ‘*the truth*’, it aims to offer a perceptive account of the

126. Ibid., p. 24 (italics added).

127. Ibid., p. 24.

128. Ibid., p. 24.

129. Ibid., p. 24 (italics added).

130. Ibid., p. 24.

131. Ibid., p. 24.

132. Ibid., p. 24.

133. Ibid., p. 25.

134. Ibid., p. 25.

135. Ibid., p. 25.

136. Ibid., p. 25.

various truths competing within and between different cultural communities. According to this particularist, rather than universalist, understanding of cultural analysis, a ‘study is an advance if it is more incisive—whatever that may mean—than those that preceded it’¹³⁷. It does not stand on the shoulders of previous studies; instead, it ‘runs by their side’¹³⁸, challenging them, while itself being challenged by them.

Its interpretive outlook being antithetical to epistemic cumulativism, cultural analysis is hardly compatible with the modern ideal of conceptual system building. If ‘one looks for systematic treatises in the field, one is so soon disappointed, the more so if one finds any’¹³⁹. To the extent that insightful conceptual frameworks cannot be abstracted from the empirical studies on which they are based, it is misleading to speak of ‘cultural theory’ in a narrow—that is, theoreticist—sense. To put it bluntly, cultural theory needs both *theory* and *culture*: the most sophisticated versions of the former remain empty unless they are empirically grounded in the latter.

‘Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart from them.’¹⁴⁰ While theoretical work and empirical work are deeply intertwined, their relationship is sustained by the mediating power of interpretation. To be clear, there is no theory without a degree of epistemic generalization. If theoretical generalizations are formulated ‘independently of their applications’¹⁴¹, however, ‘they seem either commonplace or vacant’¹⁴². Devoid of a strong connection between theoretical reflections and empirical investigations, interpretive anthropology—understood as an ethnographic undertaking—fails to live up to the standards of rigorous social-scientific research.

There is little point, then, in proposing a ‘General Theory of Cultural Interpretation’¹⁴³, since it is not obvious what may be gained from such an endeavour. In the realm of cultural interpretation, ‘the essential task of theory building [...] is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize *across* cases but to generalize *within* them’¹⁴⁴. Ethnographic modes of generalization are case-specific, both in terms of the contexts from which they are derived and in terms of the claims they make about their applicability to different aspects of the social universe.

b.

At least in the strict meaning of the term, cultural theory is *not predictive*¹⁴⁵. Indeed, the cultural interpretations on which cultural theories are founded are ‘merely post facto’¹⁴⁶. The relationship between past and future is, of course, at stake in any form of theorizing. On the one hand, they build on findings, which—be definition—emanate from past experiences. On the other hand, they may make assertions about possible future developments, whose occur-

137. Ibid., p. 25.

138. Ibid., p. 25.

139. Ibid., p. 25.

140. Ibid., p. 25.

141. Ibid., p. 25.

142. Ibid., p. 25.

143. Ibid., p. 26.

144. Ibid., p. 26 (italics added).

145. See *ibid.*, p. 26.

146. Ibid., p. 26.

rence may be measured by probabilistic models. The former is common across a large variety of disciplinary fields of inquiry. The latter is more common in the natural sciences than in the social sciences and almost absent in the humanities. It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that cultural theory ‘has only to fit (or, more carefully, to generate cogent interpretations of) *realities past*; it has also to survive—intellectually survive—*realities to come*’¹⁴⁷. Cultural dynamics unfold on a continuum between past and future, and so do the interpretations seeking to make sense of them. The longer the shelf life of a particular theory, the more likely it is to have captured something of importance in an insightful and resonant fashion.

If a theory enjoys a long shelf life, this may be a sign not only of its intellectual originality and context-specific relevance but also of its capacity for epistemic refinement and context-transcending applicability¹⁴⁸. Geertz’s reflections on the place of ‘theory’ in an interpretive science serve to illustrate another point: the classical distinction between ‘description’ and ‘explanation’, which plays a pivotal role in the experimental and observational sciences, finds its equivalent in the methodological differentiation between ‘inscription’ (‘thick description’) and ‘specification’ (‘diagnosis’), which is central to his own project. The former is concerned with ‘setting down the *meaning* particular social actions have for the *actors* whose actions they are’¹⁴⁹; the latter is committed to elucidating ‘what the *knowledge* thus attained demonstrates about the *society* in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such’¹⁵⁰. In the context of the former, the *first-person perspective* provides insights into understanding [*verstehen*] social life from the point of view of those immersed in it (thereby contributing to its material and symbolic construction) as *participants*; in the context of the latter, the *third-person perspective* provides insights into explaining [*erklären*] social life from the point of view of those examining it (thereby contributing to its ethnographic objectification) as *observers*.

Thus, we are confronted with a ‘double task’¹⁵¹: on the one hand, there is the task of *uncovering* ‘the conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts, the “said” of social discourse’¹⁵²; on the other hand, there is the task of *constructing* ‘a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behaviour’¹⁵³. The former task relies on the experiential processes and communicative encounters taking place in people’s lifeworlds. The latter task aims to shed light on the extent to which behavioural and ideological patterns emerging from local settings may, or may not, be relevant to understanding cultural forms, including the historical contexts in which they are situated¹⁵⁴.

In short, a key objective of ethnographic research is to ensure that its theoretical contributions are instrumental in providing ‘a vocabulary in which *what symbolic action has to say about*

147. Ibid., p. 26 (italics added).

148. See *ibid.*, p. 27: ‘Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; [...] they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. If they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop being used and are more or less abandoned. If they continue being useful, throwing up new understandings, they are further elaborated and go on being used’. On this point, see also *ibid.*, p. 27n5.

149. Ibid., p. 27 (italics added).

150. Ibid., p. 27 (italics added).

151. Ibid., p. 27.

152. Ibid., p. 27.

153. Ibid., p. 27 (spelling modified).

154. Cf. Geertz (2000).

itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed¹⁵⁵. It is in this ethnographic spirit that theory operates in Geertz's work in general and in the essays collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures* in particular¹⁵⁶.

Geertz's interpretive anthropology seeks to overcome counterproductive divisions—such as micro *vs.* macro, concrete *vs.* abstract, hermeneutic *vs.* systemic, bottom-up *vs.* top-down, and so forth. His semiotic approach demonstrates that social-scientific 'mega-concepts'¹⁵⁷ and grand theories are tenable only if they are grounded in microscopic analyses conducted as part of a 'thick-description ethnography'¹⁵⁸, which, owing to its embeddedness in everyday life, has the potential of 'rendering mere occurrences scientifically eloquent'¹⁵⁹ and, at the same time, widely accessible.

Such a framework makes it possible 'to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts'¹⁶⁰, and to make bold claims about the vital role of cultural dynamics in the emergence of forms of life, by evaluating them against the (often messy and multilayered) background of 'complex specifics'¹⁶¹ permeating ordinary existence. As part of this commitment, interpretation 'goes all the way down to the most immediate observational level'¹⁶²—and, along with it, the theoretical framework upon which it depends and through which it is capable of articulating itself in a conceptually sophisticated, logically coherent, and epistemically valuable manner. Interpretive anthropology, therefore, is both a reconstructive and a phenomenological project: as a *reconstructive* project, it aims 'to rework the pattern of social relationships'¹⁶³; as a *phenomenological* project, it aims 'to rearrange the coordinates of the experienced world'¹⁶⁴. Both components are crucial to understanding that '[s]ociety's forms are culture's substance'¹⁶⁵ and culture's forms are society's substance. There is no society without culture, just as there is no culture without society.

Cultural analysis is marked by a sense of incompleteness. It is not only 'intrinsically incomplete'¹⁶⁶ but also profoundly challenging: 'the more deeply it goes the less complete it is'¹⁶⁷. In a curious way, it is 'a strange science'¹⁶⁸, since it is motivated by a radical degree of scepticism about both the outside world and itself as a critical endeavour refusing to provide conclusive findings. Its most revealing, significant, and original propositions are often its most tentative, speculative, and uncertain reflections. Rather than pretending to have resolved the issue at hand, it is willing—and, indeed, eager—to intensify the suspicion¹⁶⁹ (that is, both its own

155. Geertz (1973, p. 27) (italics added).

156. See *ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

157. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

158. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

159. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

162. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

164. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

169. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

and that of others), conceding that, possibly, it is ‘not quite getting it right’¹⁷⁰ and stressing that this attitude defines the craft of ethnography.

To subscribe to ‘a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it’¹⁷¹ requires acknowledging that every ‘ethnographic assertion’¹⁷² is ‘essentially contestable’¹⁷³. If there is such a thing as ‘progress’ in anthropology (including its interpretive variants), then it ‘is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate’¹⁷⁴. Owing to their discipline’s dialogical, rather than monological, orientation, interpretive anthropologists thrive by communicating not only with other researchers but also with the participants whose lives they are committed to studying. Given the experiential and epistemic value of such a simultaneously interpretive and participatory approach, it is no surprise that ‘the role of symbolic forms in human life’¹⁷⁵ is taken seriously—not only by anthropologists but also by scholars from other disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

To be clear, emphasizing the symbolic dimensions of social life is *not* equivalent to ignoring, much less denying, the existential dilemmas with which meaning-seeking creatures are confronted while navigating the world. On the contrary, it means ‘to plunge into the midst of them’¹⁷⁶ and to recognize that they are part of the human condition. ‘The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions’¹⁷⁷, as is the case with philosophy—notably in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and ethics. Rather, its mission is ‘to make available to us answers that others [...] have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said’¹⁷⁸. Instead of tackling ‘the big questions’¹⁷⁹ from the scholastic position of armchair philosophy, interpretive anthropology is committed to addressing existential (and seemingly trivial) issues by drawing on the experiences gained, and the knowledge generated, by ordinary people, capable of mobilizing their socially relevant (and culturally contingent) resources.

2 Critical Reflections

Having demonstrated that Geertz’s account of culture requires a systematic assessment of various crucial relationships, it makes sense to examine some controversial issues arising from his approach. Such a critical analysis of the limitations and shortcomings of Geertz’s framework is not meant to be a demolition exercise; rather, it aims to show that valuable lessons can be learnt from exploring the extent to which a range of analytical oppositions may be better understood as conceptual pairs, which are vital ingredients of critical social inquiry and which, as

170. Ibid., p. 29.

171. Ibid., p. 29.

172. Ibid., p. 29.

173. Ibid., p. 29. Cf. Gallie (1955). Cf. also Collier et al. (2006).

174. Geertz (1973, p. 29).

175. Ibid., p. 29.

176. Ibid., p. 30.

177. Ibid., p. 30.

178. Ibid., p. 30.

179. On ‘the big questions’, see, for instance: Alcoff (1998); Baggini (2012); Blackburn (2009); Keller (2010); Korsmeyer (1998); Nye (1998); Sherratt & Wilkinson (2009); Solomon & Higgins (2014); Sterba (2009); Stump & Murray (1999); van Inwagen & Zimmerman (2008); Ward (2008).

interdependent and complementary components, contribute to overcoming counterproductive divisions in the humanities and social sciences.

2.1 Between interpretation and explanation

In any ethnography, gathering background information¹⁸⁰ is important for contextualizing one's object of study. The challenge, however, consists in demonstrating the extent to which an interactional background—which comprises a combination of social, cultural, historical, and other dimensions—can be both *interpreted* in hermeneutic-phenomenological terms (in accordance with the paradigm of *Verstehen*) and *explained* in functionalist terms (in accordance with the paradigm of *Erklären*). Just as facts can be explained and meanings can be interpreted, meanings can be explained and facts can be interpreted. Both explanatory interpretations and interpretive explanations are integral parts of social science. Perhaps, the marriage of hermeneutics and functionalism is not so unhappy after all¹⁸¹.

2.2 Between the micro and the macro

Ethnographers face up to the challenge of absorbing the presence of individual and collective forces, which—as structural and agential variables that are ‘at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit’¹⁸²—govern everyday life. A key question arising from this issue, however, is why some societies appear to be better (or worse) than others at reaching an *equilibrium* between their relatively stable, organized, and predictable dimensions, on the one hand, and their fragile, messy, and unpredictable dimensions, on the other. To account for the *multi-level* complexity of these dynamics, it is vital to combine *micro-sociological* (including ethnographic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological) with *macro-sociological* (including functionalist, systems-theoretic, and structuralist) perspectives.

2.3 Between the particular and the universal

It is one thing to draw attention to the tension between the particular and the universal in terms of the relationship between ‘[t]he great natural *variation* of cultural forms’¹⁸³ and ‘the biological *unity* of the human species’¹⁸⁴. It is quite another to resolve this tension—or at least to illustrate how the former can be squared with the latter. Paradoxically, particularity and universality represent two *co-constitutive* elements of the human condition. To be clear, universals may manifest themselves in particular ways, just as particulars may amount to expressions of universal features. Culture is both ‘a particular universal’ and ‘a universal particular’: insofar as it is present in *all* forms of life, culture constitutes ‘a particular universal’ of human existence; insofar as *different* forms of life generate *different* modes of being, culture constitutes ‘a universal particular’ separating human collectives—in terms of their values, habits, conventions, traditions, and codes of conduct—from one another.

180. See Geertz (1973, p. 9).

181. Cf. Joas (1991).

182. Geertz (1973, p. 10).

183. *Ibid.*, p. 22 (italics added).

184. *Ibid.*, p. 22 (italics added).

2.4 Between reality and representation

‘The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse’¹⁸⁵ and, hence, ‘*writes it down*’¹⁸⁶. Thus, the ethnographic engagement with reality is discursive in a twofold manner: it reconstructs the discursive constitution of social life (object of study), and it accomplishes this in a discursive fashion (method of study). Faced with this task, the ethnographer must avoid confusing the reality of representation with the representation of reality¹⁸⁷. If reality is reduced to its textual, discursive, subjective, normative, psychological, and/or ideological construction, then we run the risk of falling into the traps of textualism, discursivism, subjectivism, normativism, psychologism, and/or ideologism. While there is more to the construction of human reality than its material, physical, and empirical dimensions, there is more to it than its nonmaterial, nonphysical, and nonempirical counterparts.

2.5 Between nature and culture

In anthropology, the concept of culture is of paramount importance. Given the pivotal role it plays in the construction of both human and nonhuman realities, it occupies a central place not only in the humanities and social sciences but also in the natural sciences. It is no accident, therefore, that the empirical and conceptual boundaries between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are increasingly blurred. If we accept that human (and some nonhuman) actors exist on a *continuum* between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, we need to ask to what extent this distinction still holds true, on both empirical and conceptual grounds.

2.6 Between interpretations of culture and cultures of interpretation

It is, of course, prudent to reject reductive conceptions of culture (whether these be cognitivist, subjectivist, formalist, behaviourist, idealist, or otherwise). A first step towards overcoming their respective shortcomings is to provide a high-resolution approach capable of differentiating discipline-specific perspectives on culture:

- In *anthropology*, the concept of culture commonly refers to a set of symbolically mediated behaviours and ideas acquired by human beings as members of *forms of life*¹⁸⁸.
- In *philosophy*, the concept of culture is crucial on at least three levels: (a) *ontologically*, as an existential source of *species-constitutive transcendence*; (b) *epistemologically*, as a vehicle allowing for *symbolic meditation and interpretation*; (c) *ethically*, as a locus of *normative regulation*¹⁸⁹.
- In *sociology*, the concept of culture has acquired, and been studied in terms of, several meanings: (a) in *cultural sociology*, as the performative nucleus of *social constructions*; (b) in *economic sociology*, as a *commodity*; (c) in *digital sociology*, as a *hyperreality*; (d) in *critical sociology*, as an interest- and power-laden field of *competition and struggle*; (e) in *political sociology*, as an arena of *ideas, beliefs, norms, and values*¹⁹⁰.

185. Ibid., p. 18.

186. Ibid., p. 18 (italics in original).

187. On this point, see Bourdieu (1980, p. 67) and Bourdieu (1998, p. 9). See also Susen (2013b, pp. 212 & 226).

188. See Susen (2015, pp. 93–94).

189. See *ibid.*, pp. 94–96.

190. See *ibid.*, pp. 96–101.

- In the *arts*, the concept of culture describes a source of *aesthetic experience*¹⁹¹.
- In *politics*, the concept of culture has, especially in recent decades, acquired the meaning of a relationally constructed and power-laden sphere, which has the characteristics of a *social battlefield*¹⁹².

Granted, this is by no means an exhaustive overview of seminal interpretations of culture¹⁹³. It illustrates, however, that a nuanced understanding of culture is needed, if one aims to grasp the principal functions it plays in the construction of reality, including its constitutive (notably social, linguistic, political, ideological, religious, economic, demographic, and other) dimensions¹⁹⁴.

2.7 Between cognitive orders and normative orders

The cognitivist or mentalist notion that culture is located ‘in the minds and hearts of men’¹⁹⁵ is one-sided and flawed in that it fails to account for the multiple factors at play in the construction of codified behaviour, which is indispensable to the emergence of more or less viable and solidified forms of social interaction. Granted, cognitivist and mentalist conceptions of culture have received considerable attention in the contemporary social sciences—including in anthropology¹⁹⁶ and sociology¹⁹⁷. One of the main challenges in this respect concerns the question of the extent to which neuroscientific approaches can be combined with their social-scientific counterparts, especially with regard to explanatory models on culturally variable patterns of socialization¹⁹⁸.

Ultimately, however, every ‘cultural order’ is a ‘normative order’¹⁹⁹—that is, an order within which behaviour is (implicitly or explicitly) codified, in accordance with (implicit or explicit) conventions, standards, values, assumptions, and principles. To be empirically relevant, these need to be imprinted in our bodies in general and our brains in particular. There are no culturally defined modes of being without internalized schemes of perception, interpretation, appreciation, and action (and vice versa). In brief, there are no ‘normative orders’ without ‘cognitive orders’, just as there are no ‘cognitive orders’ without ‘normative orders’.

191. See *ibid.*, pp. 101–108.

192. See *ibid.*, pp. 108–110.

193. Cf. Sewell (1999).

194. On this point, see, for instance: Susen (2011a, esp. pp. 174–175); Susen (2013a, pp. 92–93); Susen (2015, pp. 93–110); Susen (2016a, esp. pp. 5, 15, 24, 28–29, 32–33, 40, 54–57, & 70–73); Triandis (1996, esp. pp. 408–409); Williams (1994, esp. p. 48).

195. Geertz (1973, p. 11). Cf. Goodenough (2006) and Goodenough (1981). Cf. also Keesing (1974, pp. 85–86).

196. On ‘cognitive anthropology’, see, for instance: Beller et al. (2012); Bender & Beller (2015); Bloch (2012); Brown (2006); Carey (2015); D’Andrade (1995); Ingold (2015); Kaufmann & Clément (2015); Regnier & Astuti (2015); Pharos (2007); Strauss (2006).

197. On ‘cognitive sociology’ (and ‘cognitive social theory’), see, for instance: Boltanski & Thévenot (2000); Bouvier (2007); Brekhus & Ignatow (2019); Cerulo (2010); Cicourel (1974); DiMaggio (1997); Eder (2007); Strydom (2007); Strydom (2015); Thévenot (2007); Turner (2007).

198. On ‘neuroscientific approaches’, see, for instance: Cerulo (2010); Hurley & Chater (2005); Roitblat et al. (1993); Turner (2007).

199. On the concept of ‘normative orders’, see Forst & Günther (2011a) and Forst & Günther (2011b). See also, for instance: Forst (2002); Forst (2012); Forst (2013a); Forst (2013b); Forst (2013c); Forst (2014); Forst (2015a); Forst (2015b); Forst (2017); Forst et al. (2009); Susen (2018, pp. 11–14, 26–28, & 31).

2.8 Between the public and the private

While it is true that '[c]ulture is *public* because meaning is'²⁰⁰ (and the same applies to language²⁰¹), it is also true that every culture comprises *private* dimensions (just as every language does), expressed in private meanings. To be sure, the Wittgensteinian critique of 'the private language argument'²⁰² may be as persuasive as the Adornian thesis of 'the preponderance of the object'²⁰³.

A key question is why—to a greater or lesser degree—the *tension between 'public' and 'private'* (and, by implication, *between 'public interests' and 'private interests'*)²⁰⁴ pervades *all* forms of life: 'individualist' or 'collectivist', 'complex' or 'simple', 'loose' or 'tight', 'vertical' or 'horizontal', 'freedom-based' or 'control-based', 'person-centred' or 'community-centred', 'relatively heterogeneous' or 'relatively homogeneous', 'technologically advanced' or 'technologically backward', 'large-scale' or 'small-scale'²⁰⁵.

Another crucial question is where to draw the line between 'public' and 'private', both *analytically* (in anthropological and sociological terms) and *normatively* (in moral and political terms). Different analytical frameworks (from hermeneutics and phenomenology to functionalism and systems theory) and different normative frameworks (from virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics to moral sentimentalism and the ethics of care—from anarchism, communism, and socialism to liberalism, conservatism, and fascism—from feminism to environmentalism) will provide different answers to this question. Both theoretically and practically, the public/private dichotomy means different things to different people (from different cultural backgrounds and with different worldviews).

2.9 Between common humanity and cultural diversity

One need not be a professional anthropologist to comprehend that a person from one culture may perceive a person from another culture as 'a complete enigma'²⁰⁶ (and vice versa). When this happens, they experience the full force of cultural (and often linguistic) incommensurability and face the consequences of interpretive inaccessibility. Casting doubt on the received wisdom of some scholars (notably those pursuing postmodern and/or poststructuralist agendas), it is important to recognize that, even in cases of seemingly insurmountable degrees of cultural incommensurability and/or interpretive inaccessibility, there *are* cross- and transcultural

200. Geertz (1973, p. 12) (italics added).

201. See Wittgenstein (2009, §43). On this point, see also Susen (2023b, esp. section VII).

202. See Wittgenstein (2009, esp. §243–315). On this point, see also, for example: Habermas (2001); Floyd (2020); Hunter (1968); Kripke (1982); Whiting (2010).

203. See Adorno (1973, pp. 183–189). On this point, see also, for example: Morgan (2017); Susen (2007, p. 218); Susen (2011a, pp. 186 & 190); Susen (2022a, p. 10).

204. On this point, see, for instance: Bailey (2000); Butt & Langdridge (2003); Condren (2009); Crouch (2016); Cutler (1997); Geuss (2001); Habermas (1962); Habermas (1989); Marston (1995); Powell & Clemens (1998); Salmerón Castro (2002); Steinberger (1999); Susen (2011b); Susen (2023c); Weintraub & Kumar (1997).

205. See Triandis (1996, esp. pp. 408–409). (According to Triandis's typology, the following main 'cultural syndromes' can be identified: tightness, cultural complexity, active–passive, honour, collectivism, individualism, and vertical and horizontal relationships). On this point, see also, for example: Susen (2007, pp. 63–64, 214, & 290); Susen (2010, pp. 67–68 & 77–78); Susen (2012, p. 309); Susen (2015, p. 140); Susen (2016a, p. 72); Susen (2016d, pp. 132–133); Susen (2022b, p. 65).

206. Wittgenstein (2009, p. 223). See Geertz (1973, p. 13). Cf. Hunter (1968, esp. p. 242).

tural channels of communication between actors, permitting them to engage with, to relate to, and to make sense of each other²⁰⁷. Their common humanity transcends all (real or imagined) obstacles created by cultural (including linguistic) diversity.

2.10 Between ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge

There would be no point in pursuing social science (including interpretive anthropology) if, as researchers, we did not aspire to go beyond the epistemic realm of everyday preconceptions. In order to undertake this ‘epistemological break’²⁰⁸, we need to draw a distinction between *ordinary knowledge* (generated and used by laypersons) and *scientific knowledge* (produced and employed by researchers and experts). Considering the distinction between ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’, we are confronted with three main options²⁰⁹:

- *Option 1*: The former is superior to the latter, because it is based on the ‘genuine’ (individual and/or collective) experiences of human actors in ‘real life’. On this view, the former provides a degree of perspectival authenticity that the latter, due to its socially detached constitution, fails to embrace, let alone to convey.
- *Option 2*: The latter is superior to the former, because it is—at once—empirically substantiated, methodologically rigorous, epistemologically reflexive, terminologically precise, and theoretically informed. On this view, the latter guarantees a degree of epistemic certainty that the former, owing to its inevitable reliance on everyday preconceptions, fails to strive for, let alone to achieve.
- *Option 3*: Little is to be gained from constructing a rigid epistemic hierarchy between the former and the latter. Although ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’ are qualitatively different, they reflect equally legitimate types of epistemic engagement with the world. Rather than opposing ‘ordinary’ and ‘scientific’ ways of attributing meaning to and acting upon reality, we should seek to cross-fertilize these—arguably complementary—modes of relating to the world. As *laypersons*, we can navigate our everyday lives *and*—whether we do so consciously or unconsciously—draw on scientifically established insights. As *experts*, we can study objective, normative, and/or subjective aspects of the world *and* take ordinary people—including their conceptions, as well as their misconceptions, of reality—seriously.

Based on a sound understanding of the relationship between ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’, interpretive anthropology should commit to the third option. Whether we focus on the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of everyday life, the sociology of morality, the sociology of science and technology, or any other relevant area of sociological inquiry, Geertz’s interpretive anthropology serves as a source of critical insight for each of them: in all realms of life—whether these be represented in, shaped by, and/or constructed through ordinary or scientific discourses—humans are caught in webs of significance, which they produce,

207. On this point, see, for instance: Chambers (2022); Dunaj & Mertel (2022); Kögler (1996); Kurasawa (2003); Susen (2022a).

208. On the concept of ‘epistemological break’, see, for instance: Bourdieu (1999, pp. 334–335); Bourdieu & Eagleton (1992, esp. p. 117); Bourdieu et al. (2011); Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992a, p. 150); Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992b, p. 213); Robbins (1998); Susen (2007, pp. 135–137 & 261–262); Susen (2016b, pp. 62–66); Susen (2016c, p. 217).

209. See Susen (2021a, pp. 126–127).

reproduce, and potentially transform through their actions and interactions as well as their classifications and interpretations.

2.11 Between correlation and causation

From a semiotic perspective, culture is not reducible to an anonymous power or force, capable of colonizing both the material and the symbolic dimensions of our existence in a causalist fashion. Given its emphasis on the multi-level and multi-agential constitution of social reality, interpretive anthropology rejects both causalist and determinist explanatory frameworks. In accordance with this view, we must avoid lapsing into the correlation–causation fallacy—that is, we cannot deduce a *cause-and-effect relationship* between two (or more) developments from an observed *correlation* between them. The dictum ‘correlation does not imply causation’, although it has almost become a truism in the social sciences, needs to be defended to prevent us from being seduced by simplistic explanations of multilayered, multifaceted, and multifactorial states of affairs and events. Interpretive anthropology should admit, however, that it is not always clear where to draw the line between causation and correlation—not least because, in some cases, our culture may *cause* us to behave and/or to think in a particular way (and not in another).

2.12 Between familiarity and strangeness

The old cliché that anthropology is all about making the familiar strange and the strange familiar persists to this day. Arguably, this laudable mission is transferable to other academic disciplines. Scientific endeavours that succeed in shedding light on the underlying forces that escape our common-sense perception of reality *make the unfamiliar familiar*. Scientific endeavours that succeed in challenging and breaking free from everyday preconceptions of reality *make the familiar unfamiliar*. Even if we recognize, however, that both tasks are essential to the pursuit of a *critical* social science, we need to concede that, in many cases, the distinction between ‘the familiar’ and ‘the unfamiliar’ is not as straightforward as it may appear at first glance. Social life comprises grey areas, which both ordinary actors and researchers may experience and conceptualize as ‘semi-familiar’ (or ‘semi-unfamiliar’, depending on one’s angle). Arguably, both those immersed in everyday life and those studying everyday life can learn a great deal from these grey areas, not least because they illustrate that interpretive processes—both for ‘insiders’ and for ‘outsiders’—can be marked by high degrees of elasticity, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

2.13 Between ontology and epistemology

In any scientific investigation, it makes sense to draw a distinction between *ontology* and *methodology*, implying that ‘the object of study is one thing and the study of it another’²¹⁰. This insight, however, requires a further consideration, which concerns the realm of *epistemology*, including its role in anthropology: the normativity of the perspective sets the parameters for the descriptibility of the object²¹¹. Ethnographers, even when making a conscious and sustained effort to minimize their implicit biases, carry their preconceptions into their fieldwork. The

210. Geertz (1973, p. 15).

211. On this point, see, for example, Susen (2007, p. 167). See also Susen (2023a, pp. 566 & 571).

most reflexive anthropologists cannot remove the projective power of perspective-, meaning-, and value-laden assumptions from their interpretations²¹².

2.14 Between functionalism and interpretivism

It would be naïve to deny that ‘[c]ultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence’²¹³, since social life is not viable unless it is relatively stable, organized, and predictable. To the extent that interpretive anthropology acknowledges the fact that society is unthinkable without its reliance on cultural *systems*, it is predicated on a *functionalist* understanding of the structural preconditions for the emergence and sustainability of forms of life. Rather than stressing only its ethnographic orientation, however, interpretive anthropology should be upfront about its subjacent functionalist presuppositions. It is no accident that, in the secondary literature, there has been a growing interest in studying the links between functionalist and interpretive approaches. More specifically, there have been promising attempts at examining the theoretical and methodological implications of Geertz’s exposure to, engagement with, and training in functionalist modes of analysis for his interpretive approach²¹⁴.

2.15 Between *Feldanschauung* and *Weltanschauung*

Language games obtain their existential significance from the fact that they are—at once—manifestations, vehicles, and engines of forms of life. Interpretive anthropology would benefit from combining this Wittgensteinian insight into the relationship between ‘forms of life’ and ‘language games’ with Bourdieusian inquiries into the relationship between ‘social fields’ and ‘*illusio*’. Each social microcosm generates a field-specific view of the world [*Feldanschauung*]²¹⁵. The problematic irony of *illusio* consists in its power to convert the subject’s *Feldanschauung* into its *Weltanschauung*.

Be it in the economic field (‘business is business’), the artistic field (‘art for the sake of art’), the judicial field (‘justice for the sake of justice’), or the scientific field (‘truth for the sake of truth’)²¹⁶—every social field generates its own set of competing discourses, mobilized by its participants not only to pursue their strategies and interests but also, in a more fundamental sense, to attach meaning to the world. Their encounter with the world [*Weltbegegnung*] strives for an interpretation of the world [*Weltdeutung*]. *How* they interpret the world is substantially conditioned by the positions they occupy, and the dispositions they acquire, in the world as social actors: their *Weltanschauung* is necessarily a form of *Feldanschauung*²¹⁷. *That* they interpret the world is due to their place in the world as human beings: their *Weltinterpretation*²¹⁸ stems from their *Bedeutungsbedürfnis*²¹⁹. Interpretive anthropology can shed light on both the

212. On this point, see, for instance: Archer (2007); Barnard (1990); Bohman (1997); Bourdieu (2004); Burkitt (1997); Celikates (2018[2009]); Kögler (1996); Susen (2016b); Wacquant (1992).

213. Geertz (1973, p. 17).

214. On this point, see, for instance, Cossu (2021) and Cossu (2022).

215. On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2007, pp. 179, 191, 207, & 265). See also Susen (2013b, pp. 211 & 228).

216. See Bourdieu (1997, pp. 116–117).

217. See Susen (2007, p. 265).

218. Translation from German into English: ‘interpretation of the world’.

219. Translation from German into English: ‘need for meaning’.

species-constitutive and the species-divisive functions of interpretation. Whereas the former are field-transcendent, the latter are field-contingent.

In short, valuable lessons can be learnt from cross-fertilizing Geertz's interpretive anthropology (notably in relation to the meaning-generating functions provided by culturally codified webs of significance) with Habermas's critical theory (notably in relation to the species-constitutive potential inherent in communicative action) and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (notably in relation to the species-divisive power of competing and asymmetrically structured fields)²²⁰.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has aimed to demonstrate that the key conceptual components of Geertz's enterprise can be located in his case for an interpretive theory of culture, epitomized in the methodological commitment to providing a 'thick description'. The first part has examined the core assumptions underlying Geertz's defence of this endeavour, whereas the second part has offered a discussion of some controversial issues arising from his approach.

In relation to the first task, this paper has argued that Geertz's account of culture requires a systematic assessment of various crucial relationships: (1) culture and 'thick description', (2) culture and ethnography, (3) culture and anthropology, (4) culture and meaning, (5) culture and (un)familiarity, (6) culture and science, (7) culture and semiotics, (8) culture and coherence, (9) culture and context, and (10) culture and interpretation. As illustrated above, the thorough examination of these dimensions makes it clear that Geertz's account of culture is far more nuanced than a catch-all summary may suggest.

In relation to the second task, this paper has cast light on contentious matters arising from Geertz's perspective, positing that valuable lessons can be learnt from exploring the extent to which a range of analytical oppositions may be better understood as conceptual pairs, which are vital ingredients of critical social inquiry and which, as interdependent and complementary components, contribute to overcoming counterproductive divisions in the humanities and social sciences: (1) interpretation and explanation, (2) the micro and the macro, (3) the particular and the universal, (4) reality and representation, (5) nature and culture, (6) interpretations of culture and cultures of interpretation, (7) cognitive orders and normative orders, (8) the public and the private, (9) common humanity and cultural diversity, (10) ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge, (11) correlation and causation, (12) familiarity and strangeness, (13) ontology and epistemology, (14) functionalism and interpretivism, and (15) *Feldanschauung* and *Weltanschauung*.

Having considered both the contributions and the limitations of Geertz's framework, it becomes possible not only to appreciate the theoretical and practical challenges involved in the interpretation of cultures but also to grasp the significance of the conceptual pairs that are essential for pursuing fruitful and imaginative forms of critical social research. Irrespective of one's view of Geertz's approach, there can be no doubt that—as shown above—his case for an interpretive anthropology continues to be not only largely persuasive but also highly relevant to the humanities and social sciences in the 21st century.

220. Cf. Susen (2007, esp. Chapter 9).

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