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

After we have become familiar with the new idea, however, after it has become part of our general stock of theoretical concepts, our expec-
The interpretation of cultures are brought more into balance with its actual uses, and its excessive popularity is ended. A few zealots persist in the old key-to-the-universe view of it; but less driven thinkers settle down after a while to the problem the idea has really generated. They try to apply it and extend it where it applies and where it is capable of extension; and they desert where it does not apply or cannot be extended. It becomes, if it was, in truth, a seminal idea in the first place, a permanent and enduring part of our intellectual armor. But it is no longer has the grandiose, all-promising scope; the infinite versatility of apparent application, it once had. The second law of thermodynamics, or the principle of natural selection, or the notion of unconscious motivation, or the organization of the means of production does not explain everything, not even everything human, but it still explains something; and our attention shifts to isolating just what that something is, to disentangling ourselves from a lot of pseudoscience to which, in the first flush of its celebrity, it has also given rise.

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

The conceptual morass into which the Tolnayan kind of post-structural theorizing about culture can lead, is evident in what is still one of the better general introductions to anthropology. Clyde Kluckhohn's Mirror for Man. In some twenty-seven pages of his chapter on the concept, Kluckhohn managed to define culture in turn as: (1) "the total way of life of a people"; (2) "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"; (3) "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"; (4) "an abstraction from behavior"; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a "sieve of pools of learning"; (7) "a set of standardized orientations to current problems"; (8) "learned behavior"; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"; (11) "a precipitate of history"; and turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix in the face of this sort of confusion, even a somewhat confused and not entirely standard concept of culture, which at least internally coherent and, more important, which has a definable argument to make is (as, to be fair, Kluckhohn himself keenly realized) an improvement. Eclecticism is self-defeating not because there is only one direction in which it is useful to move, but because there are so many; it is necessary to choose.

The concept of culture is, as I have tried to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. But I have also argued, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in the search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explained after construing social expressions on their surface enigmatic. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some clarification.

II

Operationalism as a methodological dogma never made much sense so far as the social sciences are concerned, and except for a few rather too well-swept corners—Skinnerian behaviorism, intelligence testing, and so on—it is largely dead now. But it had, for all that, an important point to make, which, however, we may feel about trying to define charismo or allocation in terms of operations, retains a certain force: if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings but at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.

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

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

That, however, is just the beginning. Suppose, he continues, there is a third boy who, "to give malicious amusement to his cronies," parodies the first boy's wink, as amateurish, clumsy, obvious, and so on. He, of course, does this in the same way the second boy winked and the first twitched: by contracting his right eyelids. Only this boy is neither winking nor twitching; he is parroting someone else's, as he takes it, laughable, attempt at winking. Here, too, a socially established code exists (he will "wink" laboriously, overobviously, perhaps adding a grimace—the usual artifices of the clown); and so also does a message. Only now it is not conspiracy but ridicule that is in the air. If the others think he is actually winking, his whole project misfires as completely, though with somewhat different results, as if they think he is twitching. One can go further: uncertain of his mimicking abilities, the would-be satyr may practice at home before the mirror, in which case he is not winking, twicking, or parodying, but rehearsing; though so far as what a camera, a radical behaviorist, or a believer in protocol sentences would record he is just rapidly contracting his right eyelids like all the others. Complexes are possible, if not practically without end, at least logically so. The original wink might, for example, actually have been fake-winking, say, to mislead outsiders into imagining there was a conspiracy afoot where there in fact was not, in which case our descriptions of what the parodist is parodying and the rehearer rehearsing of course still hold accordingly. But the point is that between what Ryle calls the thin description of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twicker) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the thick description of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a French Taking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and integrated, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form switches, which, as a cultural category, are as much nonwinks as winks are nonwinks) exist in fact, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. Like so many of the little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves, all this winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking, may seem a bit artificial. In way of adding a more empirical note, let me give, deliberately unprecedented by any prior explanatory comment at all, a not untypical excerpt from my own field journal to demonstrate that, however evaded off for didactic purposes, Ryle's example presents an image only too exact of the sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which an ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way:

The French [the informant said] had only just arrived. They set up twenty or so small tents between here, the town, and the Marmons area up in the middle of the mountains, placing them on promontories so they could survey the countryside. But for all this they couldn't guarantee safety, especially at night, so although the messag Trade-pact, system was supposed to be legally abolished it in fact continued as before.
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One night, when Cohen (who speaks fluent Berber), was up there, at Marransha, two other Jews who were traders to a neighboring tribe came by to purchase some goods from him. Some Berbers, from yet another neighboring tribe, tried to break into Cohen's place, but he fired his rifle in the air. (Traditionally, Jews were not allowed to carry weapons; but at this period things were so unsettled many did so anyway.) This attracted the attention of the French and the marabouts fled.

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

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

So the sheik, the Jew, and a small company of armed Marransha went off ten or fifteen kilometers up into the rebel region, where there were of course no French, and, sneaking up, captured the thief-tribe's shepherd and stole its herd. The other tribe soon came riding out on horses after them, armed with rifles and ready to attack. But when they saw who the "sheep thieves" were, they thought better of it and said, "all right, we'll talk." They couldn't really deny what had happened—that some of their men had robbed Cohen and killed the two visitors—and they weren't prepared to start the serious feud with the Marransha a scuffle with the invading party would bring on. So the two groups talked, and talked, and talked, there on the plain amid the thousands of sheep, and decided finally on a five-hundred-sheep damages. The two armed Berber groups then lined up on their horses at opposite ends of the plain, with the sheep herded between them, and Cohen, in his black gowns, plisse hat, and flapping slippers, went out alone among the sheep, picking out, one by one and at his own good speed, the best ones for his payment.

So Cohen got his sheep and drove them back to Marransha. The French, up in their fort, heard them coming from some distance ("Ba, ba, ba," said Cohen, happily, recalling the image) and said, "What the hell is that?" And Cohen said, "That is my or." The French couldn't believe he had actually

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Quoted raw, a note in a bottle, this passage conveys, as any similar one similarly presented would do, a fair sense of how much goes into ethnographic description of even the most elemental sort—"pretzal-like, thick" it is. In finished anthropological writings, including those concerned here, this fact—that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other peoples' constructions of what they and their companions are up to—is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined. (Even to reveal that this little drama took place in the highlands of central Morocco in 1912—and was recounted there in 1968—is to determine much of our understanding of it.) There is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable. But it does lead to a view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is. Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating and worse, explicating explications. Works upon works upon works.

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

I shall come back to this too-compact aphorism later, as well as to the details of the text itself. The point for now is only that ethnography
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Culture, this acted document, thus is public, like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid. Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. The interminable, because determinable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is "subjective" or "objective," together with the mutual exchange of intellec-tual insults ("idealism"—"materialism"); "intellectualism"—"behavioralist"; "impressionism"—"positivism") which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there are true twitchy) symbolic action — action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned context or a frame of mind, or even the two somewhat mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snubbing or pride, that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.

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

Variously called ethnocentrism, componential analysis, or cognitive anthropology (a terminological wavering which reflects a deeper uncertainty), this school of thought holds that culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior. "A society's culture," to quote Goodenough again, this time in a passage which has become the focus classicus of the whole movement, "consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members." And from this view of what culture is follows a view, equally assured, of what describing it is—the writing out of systematic rules, an ethnographic algorithm, which, if followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass (physical appearance aside) for a native. In such a way, extreme subjectivism is married to extreme formalism, with the expected result: an explosion of debate as to whether particular analyses (which come in the form of taxonomies, paradigms, tables, trees, and other ingenuities) reflect what the natives "really" think or are merely clever simulations, logically equivalent but substantially different, of what they think.

As, on first glance, this approach may look close enough to the one being developed here to be mistaken for it, it is useful to be explicit as to what divides them. If, leaving our winks and sheep behind for the moment, we take, say, a Beethoven quartet as an admittedly rather special but, for these purposes, nicely illustrative, sample of culture, no one would, I think, identify it with its score, with the skills and knowledge needed to play it, with the underscoring of it possessed by its performers or auditors, nor, to take care on parsley, of the reductionists and refiners, with a particular performance of it or with some mysterious entity transcending material existence. The "no one" is perhaps too strong here, for there are always incorrigibles. But that a Beethoven quartet is a temporally developed total structure, a coherent sequence of modeled
sound—in a word, music—and not anybody’s knowledge of or belief about anything, including how to play it, is a proposition to which most people are, upon reflection, likely to assent.

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

Culture is public because meaning is. You can’t wink (or burlesque one) without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids, and you can’t conduct a sheep raid (or mimic one) without knowing what it is to steal a sheep and how practically to go about it. But to draw from such truths the conclusion that knowing how to wink is winking and knowing how to steal a sheep is sheep raiding is to betray as deep a confusion as, taking thin descriptions for thick, to identify winking with eyelid contractions or sheep raiding with chasing woolly animals out of pastures. The cognitivist fallacy—that culture consists (to quote another spokesman for the movement, Stephen Tyler) of “mental phenomena which can [be means “should”] be analyzed by formal methods similar to those of mathematics and logic”—is as destructive of an effective use of the concept as are the behaviorist and idealist fallacies to which it is a misdrawn correcion. Perhaps, so its errors are more sophisticated and its distortions subtler, it is even more so.

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

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

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

IV

Finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience; trying to formulate the basis on which one imagines, always excessively, one has found them is what anthropological writing consists of as a scientific endeavor. We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that. We are seeking, in the widest sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a master’s great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized. “It’s speaking for someone else seems to be a mysterious process,” Stanley Cavell has remarked, “that may be because speaking to someone does not seem mysterious enough.”
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Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse. That is not, of course, its only aim—
instruction, amusement, practical counsel, moral advance, and the dis-
covegy of natural order in human behavior are others; nor is anthropol-
ogy the only discipline which pursues it. But it is an aim to which a
semiotic concept of culture is peculiarly well adapted. As interworked
systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would
call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events,
behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a
correlation, something within which they can be intelligently—that is,
thickly—described.

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

It is this maneuver, usually too casually referred to as "seeing things
from the actor's point of view," too bookishly as "the verstehen ap-
proach," or too technically as "emic analysis," that so often leads to the
notion that anthropology is a variety of either long-distance mind read-
ing or cannibalistic fantasizing, and which, for someone anxious to navi-
gate past the wrecks of a dozen sunken philosophies, must therefore be
executed with a great deal of care. Nothing is more necessary to
comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, and the degree to
which it is interpretation, than an exact understanding of what it means
—and what it does not mean—to say that our formulations of other
peoples' symbol systems must be actor-oriented.1

1 Not only other peoples' anthropology can be trained on the culture of which it is itself a part, and is necessarily, in a fact of profound importance, but which, as it raises a few tricky and rather special second order problems, I shall put to the side for the moment.

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What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French cul-
ture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae
they use to define what happens to them. What it does not mean is that
such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish, or French—that is,
part of the reality they are ostensibly describing; they are anthropological—that is, part of a developing system of scientific anal-
ysis. They must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons
of a particular denomination subject their experience, because that is
what they profess to be descriptions of; they are anthropological be-
cause it is, in fact, anthropologists who profess them. Normally, it is not
necessary to point out quite soaboriously that the object of study is
one thing and the study of it another. It is clear enough that the phys-
ical world is not physics and A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake not
Finnegans Wake. But, as, in the study of culture, analysis penetrates
into the very body of the object—that is, we begin with our own inter-
pretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to,
and then systematize those—the line between (Moroccan) culture as a
natural fact and (Moroccan) culture as a theoretical entity tends to get
blurred. All the more so, as the latter is presented in the form of an ac-
tor's eye description of (Moroccan) conceptions of everything from vio-
ence, honor, divinity, and justice, to tribe, property, patronage, and
chastity.

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and
second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a "native"
makes first order ones: it's his culture.) They are, thus, factions; fic-
tions, in the sense that they are "something made," "something
fashioned"—the original meaning of fiction—not that they are false, un-
factual, or merely "as if" thought experiments. To construct actor-orien-
ted descriptions of the involvements of a Berber chiefman, a Jewish
merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is
clearly an imaginative act, not all that different from constructing simi-
lar descriptions of, say, the involvements with one another of a provin-
cial French doctor, his silly, adulterous wife, and her feckless lover in
2 The order problem is, again, complex. Anthropological works based on other anthropological works (Levi-Strauss, for example) may, of course, be fourth
order or higher, and intermingle, even habitually, make second order interpretations—what have come to be known as "native models." In literate cul-
tures, where "native" interpretation car proceed to higher level—in connexion
with the Maghreb, one has only to think of Ibn Khaldun; with the United States,
Margaret Mead—these matters become intricate indeed.
nineteenth century France. In the latter case, the actors are represented as not having existed and the events as not having happened, while in the former they are represented as actual, or as having been so. This is a difference of no mean importance; indeed, precisely the one Madame Bovary had difficulty grasping. But the importance does not lie in the fact that her story was created while Cohen’s was only noted. The conditions of their creation, and the point of it (to say nothing of the manner and the quality) differ. But the one is as much a fiction—"a making"—as the other.

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

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

Now, this proposition, that it is not in our interest to bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it, has sometimes been escalated into a larger claim: namely, that as it is only those properties that interest us, we need not attend, save curiously, to behavior at all. Culture is most effectively treated, the argument goes, purely 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—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based. Though a distinct improvement over "learned behavior" and "mental phenomena" notions of what culture is, and the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology, this heretical approach to things seems to me to run the danger (and increasingly to have been overtaken by it) of looking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life. There is little profit in extricating a concept from the defects of psychology only to plunge it immediately into those of schematicism.

Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various states of consciousness; but these draw their meaning from the roles they play (Wittgenstein would say their "use") in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relationships they bear to one another. It is what Cohen, the shiek, and "Captain Dumari" were doing when they tripped over one another’s purposes—pursuing开会, defending honor, establishing dominance—that created our pastoral drama, and that is what the drama is, therefore, "about." Whatever, or wherever, symbolic systems in their own terms may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns. A further implication of this is that coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description. Cultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence, else we would not call them systems, and,
by observation, they normally have a great deal more. But there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story. The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued. Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe.

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens—from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world—is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant. A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation. When it does not do that, but leads us instead somewhere else—into an admiration of its own elegance, of its author's cleverness, or of the beauties of Euclidean order—it may have its intrinsic charms; but it is something else than what the task at hand—figuring out what all that rigmarole with the sheep is about—calls for.

The rigmarole with the sheep—the sham theft of them, the reparative transfer of them, the political confiscation of them—is (or was) essentially a social discourse, even if, as I suggested earlier, one conducted in multiple tongues and as much in action as in words.

Claiming his 'or', Cohen invoked the trade pact; recognizing the claim, the sheikh challenged the offenders' tribe; accepting responsibility, the offenders' tribe paid the indemnity; anxious to make clear to sheikhs and peddlers alike who was now in charge here, the French showed the imperial hand. As in any discourse, code does not determine conduct, and what was actually said need not have been. Cohen might not have, given its illegitimacy in Protectorate eyes, chosen to press his claim. The sheikh might, for similar reasons, have rejected it. The offenders' tribe, still resisting French authority, might have decided to regard the raid as 'real' and fight rather than negotiate. The French, were they more habile and less dur (as, under Marshal Lyautey's seigniorial tutelage, they later in fact became), might have permitted Cohen to keep his sheep, winkin'—as we say—at the discontinuance of the trade pattern and its limitation to their authority. And there are other possibilities: the Marmushams might have regarded the French action as too great an insult to bear and gone into disintegration themselves; the French...
VI

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

4 So far as it has reinforced the anthropologist's impulse to engage himself with his informants as persons rather than as objects, the notion of "participant observation" has been a valuable one. But, to the degree it has lead the anthropologist to block from the view the very special, culturally bracketed nature of the other's role and to imagine himself something more than an interested (in both senses of that word) spectator, it has been our most powerful source of bad faith.
The Interpretation of Cultures

The interpretation of cultures often involves the analysis of how people have managed to believe what is expected of them and to believe it. The notion that one can find the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever sum up and simplified in so-called "typical" small towns and villages is pallid nonsense. What one finds in small towns and villages is (also) small-town or village life. If localized, microscopic studies were really dependent for their greater relevance upon such a premise—that they captured the great world in the little—they wouldn't have any relevance.

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

The "natural laboratory" notion has been equally pernicious, not only because the analogy is false—but what kind of a laboratory is it where none of the parameters are manipulable?—but because it leads to a notion that the data derived from ethnographic studies are pure, or more fundamental, or more solid, or less conditioned (the most favored word is "elementary") than those derived from other sorts of social inquiry. The great natural variation of cultural forms is, of course, not only anthropology's great (and wasting) resource, but the ground of its deepest theoretical dilemma: how is such variation to be squared with the biological unity of the human species? But it is not, even metaphorically,

Experimental variation, because the context in which it occurs varies along with it, and it is not possible (though there are those who try) to isolate the y's from x's to write a proper function.

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

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

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

Which brings us, finally, to theory. The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything—literature, dreams, symptoms, culture—is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or you do not. Imprisoned 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 it; any attempt to cast what it says in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty—as, the anthropologist’s severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric.

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

At the same time, it must be admitted that there are a number of characterizations of cultural interpretation which make the theoretical development of it more than usually difficult. The first is the need for theory to stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction. Only short flights of rationalization tend to be effective in anthropology; longer ones tend to drift off into logical dreams, academic bemusements with formal symmetry. The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, 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. The tension between the pull of this need to penetrate an unfamiliar universe of symbolic action and the requirements of technical advance in the theory of culture, between the need to grasp and the need to analyze, is, as a result, both necessarily great and essentially irremovable. Indeed, the further theoretical development goes, the deeper the tension gets. This is the first condition for
ward to greater precision and broader relevance; but one cannot write a "General Theory of Cultural Interpretation." Or, rather, one can, but there appears to be little profit in it, because the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them.

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

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

It is true that in the clinical style of theoretical formulation, conceptualization is directed toward the task of generating interpretations of matters already in hand, not toward projecting outcomes of experimental manipulations or deducing future states of a determined system. But that does not mean that 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. Although we formulate our interpretation of an outbreak of winking or an instance of sheep-riding after its occurrence, sometimes long after, the theoretical framework in terms of which such an interpretation is made must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view. Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going on—trying to find one's feet—one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; as I have said, 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.

Such a view of how theory functions in an interpretive science suggests that the distinction, relative in any case, that appears in the experimental or observational sciences between "description" and "explanation" appears here as one, even more relative, between "description" ("thick description") and "specification" ("diagnosis")—between setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such. Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the "said" of social discourse, and to construct 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 behavior. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed.

Aside from a couple of orienting pieces concerned with more foundational matters, it is in such a manner that theory operates in the
essays collected here. A repertoire of very general, made-in-the-acad-
emy concepts and systems of concepts—"integration," "rationali-
ization," "symbol," "ideology," "ethos," "revolution," "identity," "meta-
phor," "structure," "ritual," "world view," "actor," "function," "sacred," and, of course, "culture" itself—is woven into the body of
thick-description ethnography in the hope of rendering mere occur-
rences scientifically eloquent. The aim is to draw large conclusions
from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions
about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engag-
ing them exactly with complex specifics.

Thus it is not only interpretation that goes all the way down to the
most immediate observational level: the theory upon which such inter-
pretation conceptually depends does so also. My interest in Cohen's
story, like Kyle's in winks, grew out of some very general notions in-
deed. The "confusion of tongues" model—the view that social conflict
is not something that happens when, out of weakness, indefiniteness, ob-
solecence, or neglect, cultural forms cease to operate, but rather some-
thing which happens when, like burlesqued winks, such forms are press-
ured by unusual situations or unusual intentions to operate in un-
usual ways—is not an idea I got from Cohen's story. It is one, in-
structed by colleagues, students, and predecessors, I brought to it.

Our innocent-looking "hote in a bottle" is more than a portrayal of
the frames of meaning of Jewish peddlers, Berber warriors, and French
proconsuls, or even of their mutual interference. It is an argument that
the network of social relationships is to rearrange the coordi-
nates of the experienced world. Society's forms are culture's substance.

VIII

There is an Indian story—at least I heard it as an Indian story—about
an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a plat-
form which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on

4 The overwhelming bulk of the following chapters concern Indonesia rather
than Morocco, for I have just begun to face up to the demands of my North Af-
ican material which, for the most part, was gathered more recently. Field work
in Indonesia was carried out in 1952–1954, 1957–1958, and 1971; in Morocco in

Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture
jectivism on the one hand and cabbalism on the other, to try to keep the
analysis of symbolic forms as closely tied as I could to concrete social
events and occasions, the public world of common life, and to organize
it in such a way that the connections between theoretical formulations
and descriptive interpretations were unobscured by appeals to dark sci-
ences. I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete
objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might
as well let one’s sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked,
that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible,
one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer. Nor, on the other hand,
have I been impressed with claims that structural linguistics, computer
engineering, or some other advanced form of thought is going to enable
us to understand men without knowing them. Nothing will discredit
a semiotic approach to culture more quickly than allowing it to drift into
a combination of intuitionalism and alchemy, no matter how elegant the
intuitions are expressed or how modern the alchemy is made to look.

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

To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion,
ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn away
from the existential dilemmas of life but some empyrean realm of de-
emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The essential
vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest ques-
tions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other
sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the con-
sultable record of what man has said.