

# The predicament of social sciences in the 20th century: a dialogue with Clifford Geertz's essay "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture" (Part I)



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## Abstract

The theorization of social sciences in the 20th century walked forward with difficulty. Clifford Geertz's essay, "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture", which comprehensively explored the fundamental problems in the process, is an essential document in the history of thoughts in the social sciences in the twentieth century. In response to Geertz's reflection, this paper tries to reveal the predicament of interpretive anthropology and the entire social sciences and its methodological roots through an epistemological analysis of social science.

**Keywords** Clifford Geertz · Culture · Ethnography · Social science · Interpretive anthropology · Theory of Belief

## 1 Introduction

Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (hereinafter referred to as "Thick Description" below) (Geertz 2000), published in 1973, records Geertz's reflections on the primary predicament facing the social sciences in the twentieth century. Any advance in cultural anthropology and social sciences can only actually occur by addressing these questions. What intellectual process did Geertz pass through in this part of his academic activities? What puzzles does he leave us? What lessons can we draw from his legacy?

In 2001, Geertz published "The Visit" (Geertz 2001), a lengthy review of the author's book *A Society without Fathers or Husbands* (Cai 1997), in *The New York*

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*Review of Books*. Later, on February 7th, 2002, he emailed me saying he hoped to see the author's further research. His words were keen and challenging. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to see the author's *L'homme pensé par l'homme* (Human Pondered by Human) (Cai 2008), which was published in 2008. Geertz's departure left a vacuum in one of the fields of anthropology, leaving us with a sense of loneliness. I should have responded to "The Visit" earlier. Now, in this paper, I will assess "Thick Description" and, in the meanwhile, discuss several epistemological issues concerning ethnography in "The Visit."

## 2 The black hole of culture

Geertz traveled to Indonesia three times to conduct fieldwork: twice in the 1950s and again in 1971. He subsequently made four trips to Morocco, beginning in the 1960s and again in 1972, where he developed a new site for fieldwork. Geertz wrote a series of essays in the 1960s based on his fieldwork among exotic ethnic groups, each of which resonated strongly with academics. In 1970, he became the first professor of social sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and founded the School of Social Science. Following work by Clyde Kluckhohn and A.L. Kroeber, anthropological studies in the U.S. focused on such minute details that they came across as lifeless. Geertz's inspiring essays restored vitality to anthropology and other social science disciplines.

### 2.1 A slogan

In the preface to *The Interpretation of Cultures* compiled from all these disquisitions, republished in 2000, Geertz was deeply moved by the editor's academic sophistication and initiative (Geertz 2000):

When, at the beginning of the seventies, I undertook to collect these essays, all of them written the decade before, during the fabled sixties, I was far from clear as to what it was that interconnected them aside from the fact that I had written them ...Did they add up to anything: a theory? A standpoint? An approach?

I did not even have a title for the thing, much less a rationale. I had thought to call it *Meaning and Culture*. However, the lamented Marvin Kessler, who was the author's editor at Basic Books and whose idea it was in the first place to collect the essays, rightly did not think much of that — the evasion was too obvious, and the phrasing uninspired — and he urged the author to write an extended analytical introduction stating his general position. The author said he didn't know that he had one. He said (there were *editors* in those days): "You'll find one." Thus the author produced "Chapter I. Thick Description:

Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” and discovered both a position and a slogan the author have been living with since.<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that it was 27 years after the publication of Geertz’s “Thick Description” in 1973 that the author declared “Toward An Interpretive Theory of Culture” as a slogan, still representing his position. In other words, he was still unshaken in his viewpoint when his book was republished as one of the 100 most influential books in the United States in 2000. That means, against all queries, Geertz believed his essential points still held true.

We can see that “thick description” describes the manner of writing advocated by the author; “culture” is the object of research that he focuses on; “interpretation” is his selected position and method; “toward” “theory” is his wish. Since Geertz regards culture as his aim and advocates “thick description,” looking forward to creating “an interpretive theory of culture” he has to clearly state: What is “culture”? What is “thick description”? What is “interpretive”? What is “theory”? Moreover, what is “interpretive theory”?

## 2.2 Old “culture”

Now let us analyze in depth how Geertz answers these questions. What methodology does he adopt toward an interpretive theory of culture? Can the route he pursued lead to the desired destination?

“Culture,” as a notion, has always been ambiguous since it entered the anthropological vocabulary. Geertz strongly advocates “for a narrowed, specialized, and, so I imagine, theoretically more powerful concept of culture to replace E. B. Tylor’s famous ‘most complex whole’” (Geertz 2000), arguing that Tylor’s “most complex whole” is not helpful: He believes that although the originality of the “most complex whole” cannot be denied, in his view, this concept seems to have reached a point where “it obscures a good deal more than it reveals.” (Geertz 2000).

As is known, before any basic concept in a field is newly defined, previously proposed, but not yet abandoned, definitions must be reviewed thoroughly, with mistakes and flaws identified. Geertz still remembers Kluckhohn’s efforts. He regards Kluckhohn’s eleven different definitions of culture as redundant and impractical and sees it as necessary to choose among them. He surmises Kluckhohn is “turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix (to compare culture)” (Geertz 2000).

Using a simile as a definition is indeed a last resort when a researcher is repeatedly thwarted and can find no better way. We know that a simile does not reveal the essential traits of the research object, so it cannot be used as a qualitative analytical tool and should be abandoned. Using a simile is a pitfall for those who overlook the fatal flaws of this rhetoric. However, when a scholar clearly knows about this but still uses a simile instead of a definition, the purpose has to be an academic

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<sup>1</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.v. “Thick Description” has become such an important document in the history of thought that I adopt direct quotations to stick closely to the author’s meaning.

counterfeit employed to prevaricate and deceive. Geertz makes a choice after careful evaluation of earlier solutions (Geertz 2000):

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

This claim is most alluring. Nevertheless how can the analysis of culture without seeking laws be related to science? We will come back to this issue later. Moreover, we can see Geertz compares culture to webs of meaning and tries his best to “constru[e] social expressions on their surface enigmatical.” However, apart from the suspect simile of a web, what does it mean to say “social expressions on their surface enigmatical”? It does not seem equivalent to “meaning.” What on earth does Geertz want to interpret?

“Thick Description” refers to the nature of culture five times. Let us see how Geertz describes nature and the function of culture beyond the above passage (Geertz 2000):

Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking. That’s all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and *voilà!* — a gesture.

Here Geertz provides a specific example of culture. He asserts that gesture *is* culture. So is culture “meaning” or “gesture” after all in Geertz’s eyes? How can culture be both? (Geertz 2000).

Though [culture is] ideational, it does not exist in someone’s head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity.

It is so mysterious as to be astounding. If culture is ideational but does not exist in someone’s head, where else does it reside? Can it be both unphysical and not an occult entity?

In addition, Geertz says (Geertz 2000):

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.

Geertz returns to Weber in citing the concept of “social action.” This time he makes a clear description that various cultural forms are articulated through social action.

Later in the essay, Geertz thoroughly pushes his qualitative analysis of culture into synthesis (Geertz 2000):

As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described.

Besides the apparent contradictory, fishy, and mysterious points in Geertz's arguments, analysis of the text reveals that the propositions we thought he had already confirmed are once again inverted in this claim. Geertz asserts that it is through social action that various cultural forms express themselves. If so, culture should at least be part of the reason for social events and behaviors. More notably, he gives a third statement that culture is “a context, something within which the events and behaviors can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described”. But what is the “something” here? It is indefinable. Geertz thinks hard about the nature and function of culture.

Since Geertz believes such a web of meaning or context is unphysical and does not exist in someone's head, it cannot possibly exist anywhere in any other form (beyond conceptual and material existence, there is not a third one). Therefore, the abstract “culture” or culture as “interworked systems of construable signs” Geertz tries to capture sinks and finally fades out due to its many internally inconsistent arguments, as seen from an ontological perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Looking back, Geertz once criticized Tylor's definition of culture as the “most complex whole” and aimed to search “for a narrowed, specialized, and, so I imagine, theoretically more powerful concept of culture” (Geertz 2000). The author was at once enormously curious and looking forward to his new concept. However, now it seems that the author is lost and readers are in danger of getting lost in the charm of his beautiful writing and roundabout reasoning about critical concepts. We may become entangled by the empty “something” if we just follow him. How shall we interpret “something” that does not exist anywhere? Here, it is necessary to point out that Geertz apposes social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes in the last statement of culture. By doing this, Geertz returns to Tylor's viewpoint: mixing up all the phenomena that natural vocabulary can refer to as the “most complex whole.”

If regarding culture as a web of meaning is a suspect simile, it is a distinct simile in his discursive situation to regard culture as “context.” It is the same problem that we saw with Kluckhohn's “turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix (to compare culture)” (Geertz 2000). It is sure to be worse to define culture as “something”: “culture” disappears. Is rhetorical Geertz implying he is desperate when he turns to a simile and the empty “something” himself?

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<sup>2</sup> I have discussed Geertz's view of science in “Several theories competing with each other before the Theory of Belief”, see the author's paper “Several theories competing with each other before the Theory of Belief: Another consideration on the research objective entity of social sciences” in *Academic Research*, No.7, 2012.

### 2.3 Ethnographic activities

From the perspective of scientific activities, Geertz claims that if you want to understand what a science discipline is, you should first examine what practitioners do rather than its theories and discoveries. Geertz wrote (Geertz 2000):

In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly *what doing ethnography is*, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge.

No description can be more concise than this! The author agrees entirely in the most general sense. Before becoming an ethnologist or anthropologist, one must pass the necessary but rigorous test of experiencing more than a whole year of fieldwork and complete the writing of ethnography. Only through this process can one develop expertise as an ethnographer. If not, one may hardly even be able to understand ethnography written by others and the concepts and theories abstracted from it. It will also be difficult for him or her to judge whether the ethnographic assessment made by others is fair and to the point, not to mention offering a contribution to existing theory. Clifford's essay "On the Ethnographic Authority" (Clifford 1983) illustrated such situations very effectively and set a good example.

Geertz believed the key section of doing ethnography is not methodology. "What defines it (doing ethnography) is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, 'thick description'" (Geertz 2000). Thus, it can be seen that Geertz put "thick description" in an extraordinary place.

Then what is the definition of ethnography for Geertz? What kind of description deserves to be called "thick description"? "Thick Description" provided two samples.

Sample 1. Physiologists in Oxford seek to reveal laws through delicate stories, being renowned for high talent and being good at talking about abstruseness. It seems that all real ethnographers tend to feel comfortable faced with the phrase "thick description," which is simple, subtle, and quite charming. Driven by such experiences, with exquisite sense, Geertz borrowed the phrase "thick description" and the winking story as an analytical sample from the British ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle. In brief, the sample shows us five ways of winking: (1) an involuntary twitch, (2) winking to send a conspiratorial signal to a friend, (3) fake-winking to mislead outsiders into imagining there was a conspiracy afoot when there, in fact, was not (4) burlesque-fake-winking (5) rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking. Through imagination and progressive deduction, Ryle constructed a logically possible story that is not needed in the present or future.

According to Geertz, the difference between Ryle's thin and thick description is that descriptions of an individual's identity are thin, while those of the individual's behaviors are thick. However, such differentiation has problems in that whether a description is about an individual's identity or behaviors, neither description alone constitutes a complete description. How can we discuss whether it is thin or thick if it is incomplete? The difference between thin and thick descriptions is just like that between sketches and delicate drawings: We must not omit an arm or leg, which is

necessary whether the image is rough or delicate. Identity and behaviors must both be included in a description. Therefore this definition of thick description does not make sense.

Geertz tells us through this case that a gesture is a fleck of culture. Then we can infer that countless gestures make a whole culture. Now, Geertz brings us to specific and practical matters. Nevertheless, everybody can see this argument contradicts his previous one since he regards gesture as another name for social action. Culture cannot be both the meanings of symbols and social action. Culture is either the meanings of symbols or the meanings of social action. What makes Geertz confuse the meanings of symbols and social action?

Sample 2. Though Geertz himself admitted the winking story constructed by the Oxford professor is didactic, he still affirmed the value of the stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures contained in it. So, he brings the stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures into a practical example — his own field journal.

Geertz's journal records a story that happened in central Morocco in 1912, which he learned about in 1968 while doing fieldwork. At that time the French had just begun their colonial rule and local places were under overlapping rules. The main characters of the story belonged to three ethnic groups that were totally heterogeneous in the cultural dimension: Jewish, two Berber groups subject to different authorities and French. Describing a case of killing and robbing, the story depicts different perspectives and actions taken by the three parties. Cohen, who was Jewish, shuttled between the French and the two opposing Berberan systems and ultimately became a victim of the resultant force.

The characteristics of this case are so marked that professional anthropologists immediately recognize that it is inappropriate as a model of ethnographic description. Geertz realized it himself since he admitted right after the story was told that this journal is like a note in a bottle without any context (Geertz 2000). However, this is not the most fatal problem. The primary objects of study in the main contents of an ethnography should be the indigenous social life during the fieldwork of the anthropologist. This story occurred in 1912 but was reported to the author in 1968. Oral history is obviously not concerned with participant observation or the in-depth interview required by anthropology. Needless to say, neither participant observation nor an in-depth interview is possible for such an incident that occurred half a century before. Anthropology does not exclude drawing data from the perspective of any discipline, and this kind of story itself is one type of data that might be included in an in-depth interview, but in ethnography, anthropology distinguishes between primary and secondary data. Using such a story to illustrate the basic characteristics of ethnographic description is inadequate. There must be a good number of excellent examples of stories in Geertz's field journals if he wants to "add a more empirical note" after Ryle's "thick description," so why did he purposefully select such an atypical passage?

Contrary to our judgments, Geertz believes "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—how extraordinarily 'thick' it is." (Geertz 2000). We find that Geertz's so-called "thick description" actually refers to the density of information provided within a certain

length (like a page). It does not concern integrity in the depiction of a theme (Geertz says this will never be achieved) nor its delicacy. Putting aside the big difference between Geertz's and Ryle's "thick descriptions" (Geertz's journal does not have a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures), an incomplete depiction can hardly reveal the basic features of an ethnic group. It thus cannot permit a practical analysis, no matter how "thick" it is. Besides, scholars' writing habits differ broadly: some are concise and limpid (although this is not often observed because of its difficulty). In contrast, others are clear but long and redundant (not to mention obscure). Furthermore, no quantitative standard can be given for thick description since indistinguishable variations exist between the two poles.

Evidently, Geertz's thick description is unlikely to suit the great task of forms of knowledge that anthropologists pursue.

## 2.4 Ethnography

Geertz's definition of ethnography finally makes its debut after introducing and analyzing the above two ethnographic samples: "Ethnography is thick description" (Geertz 2000). In his work, this is the only answer to the question "What is ethnography?". However, this statement does not constitute a definition; it is even irrelevant. A real answer (or real definition), facing the question "What is ethnography?" should tell us what an ethnography depicts instead of whether it is a thin or thick description. A thin ethnography, containing what an ethnography should include, is still an ethnography; in comparison, a thick one containing contents that should be excluded from an ethnography is not an ethnography, no matter how thick it is. What gives Geertz the courage to write down this statement when it can be identified as false just using common sense?

Concerning what the study object of the ethnographer is, Geertz affirms (Geertz 2000):

What the ethnographer is in fact faced with — except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection — is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render... Doing 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, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.

Concepts, structures, and the systems they underpin exclusive to any exotic ethnic group are indeed complicated, and it seems reasonable that they would be strange for an ethnographer who has just started doing fieldwork. However, concepts, structures, and systems in any society cannot overlap and become entangled with one another, especially cannot be irregular and unclear. The author's field experiences and everyone's experiences in his or her own social life demonstrate that people



would not know how to behave in a society with a system that's neither clear nor regular. Thus, such a society should not exist because it would not function.

Moreover, from the author's point of view, in the process of reading the manuscript of social life, we should stop and probe where the manuscripts are "faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries," and not only listen to what the indigenous say but also observe what they do to confirm the social life. However, in Geertz's eyes, it is impossible since "the manuscript is written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior." The author believes that the phrases "shaped behavior" and "transient examples" are the key factors contributing to Geertz's dilemma. As shown in field experiences, when a group determines a "shaped behavior," this shaping implies that this kind of behavior constantly repeats. Therefore, since social life is written by "shaped behavior," it cannot be a transient event.

Besides, why is the manuscript so faded? Geertz leisurely gives another firm argument (Geertz 2000):

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... There is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable.

The fact that the knowledge we need to comprehend the issues is insinuated as background information does not mean the facts are incomprehensible. The key is what we try to comprehend about them. However, Geertz believes such facts are incomprehensible, and we can do nothing in such situations. Then what is the meaning of the author mentioning it?

This story about Cohen concerns another dimension — the historical dimension. Faced with a shaped behavior, i.e., institutionalized behavior, it may be impossible (even most of the time) to determine historical causes, especially in societies without written historical records. It is completely normal in societies to have an oral language but no written form of the language.

However every life "shaped behavior" is underpinned by a set of institutions, and institutions are underpinned by a set of systems of beliefs. The set of institutions and belief systems are practiced by the ethnic group every day, so they can offer sufficient explanations to the anthropologist about them. For example, if Cohen's story had happened during Geertz's fieldwork, we would need to know neither the historical reasons nor the process of Berber's *mezrag* as a trade-pact system, but we could know that they had such an institution and could explain the rules underpinning it. Otherwise, Cohen wouldn't be able to get his *ar* paid. For the same reason, we do not need to know the historical sources of the standards by which someone can be convicted of rebellion or spying in the French colonial system. However, we can understand through fieldwork and the historical literature that Frenchmen followed this system. This literature should be able to tell us the basic principles around which the system was built.

Up to now, the tableau appearing from our analysis is surprising. In citing historical issues as atypical ethnographic samples, Geertz's method hides a big mistake: confusing different concepts. The above arguments by Geertz confuse a

cross-section of social life (for example, the cultural and social facts in a one-year observation of an ethnographer, i.e., synchronous facts with his or her fieldwork) and the historical causes and process of the institution in the society observed by the ethnographer when he or she was there (that is, the diachronic facts). In short, Geertz replaces synchronous facts with diachronic facts. No profound insights can result from wrong premises. Starting from here, Geertz's analysis and inference led to a wrong path.

Based on such confusion, Geertz concludes (Geertz 2000):

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.

Now, Geertz determinedly lifts the lid on ethnography and lets the public see its surprising "real feature" — fake knowledge (Geertz 2000):

In finished anthropological writings, including those collected here, this fact — that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to — is obscured.

Ethnography turns out to be just a tree without roots. Following such logic, Geertz goes further (Geertz 2000):

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 is *his* culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made," "something fashioned" — the original meaning of *fictiō* not that they are false, unfactual, or merely "as if" thought experiments.

Here are two problems. Firstly, Geertz offers no example to explain second and third-order interpretations. Secondly, we must probe how Geertz understands anthropological knowledge. Geertz asserts (Geertz 2000):

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 artifice.

Finally, the most fatal problem, and what makes anthropology awkward, is Geertz's assertion (Geertz 2000):

The situation is even more delicate, because, as already noted, what we inscribe (or try to) is not raw social discourse, to which, because, save very marginally or very specially, we are not actors, we do not have direct access, but only that small part of it which our informants can lead us into understanding.

Are ethnographers really unable to understand the panorama of natives' social discourse? Let us set the question aside for the moment.

To sum up, for Geertz, the flow of any indigenous member's social discourse (social behavior) is "said" transiently and just once; ethnography is merely an explication of the incomplete fragments of such unfamiliar linear discourses flow, a construction of a construction, a making, a fiction. In short, ethnography is a "fictional thing" or "something fashioned," with no guarantee of objectivity. Furthermore, it can be logically inferred from Geertz's discourse that the source of anthropological knowledge is no more than scholarly artifice, and ethnographers cannot understand the panorama of natives' social discourse. Step by step, Geertz's conclusion results in the complete and ultimate negation of the possibility of ethnographic objectivity. It is surprising to researchers outside anthropology, and to the anthropologist, is rather hard to swallow and brings more disappointment than surprise that these "warnings to awaken the world," published in the form of general judgement and disclosure (including the author's self-disclosure) should come from an anthropologist with fieldwork experiences in two ethnic groups. If that were the case, anthropology should not be able to find its place.

The story does not end here. The fact that Geertz uses this selected field journal raises a serious question. The fundamental part of ethnography should be synchronous instead of diachronic facts, and this distinction has decisive significance for the nature of ethnography. However, it is precisely between this distinction (and its significance) and the purpose of Geertz's citation of this case that a deep paradox lies. Does Geertz really have no apparent awareness of the paradox?

This question is disturbing to us: if the answer is negative, that is, Geertz is unaware of this distinction and its significance, then the quality of anthropology in that epoch would fall short of its promise. On the contrary, if the answer is affirmative, the whole essay "Thick Description," taking this field journal as an example, is like a joke or a hoax, leaving the author's rationality and sincerity as a scientist in doubt.

At the end of examining "Thick Description," we find Geertz has never offered any definition of ethnography. Ten years later, in 1983, Geertz admitted: "What it [ethnography] is instead, however, is less clear" (Geertz 1989).

This conclusion seems horrible at first sight. However, if we open *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie* (Izard 1991) written and compiled by French anthropologists in 1991, and *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Barfield 2001) by anglophone anthropologists in 2001 (both of them were published after "Thick Description"), our astonishment may be somewhat diminished. In these two dictionaries, the writers of the entry for "ethnography" only review explorations around "ethnography" as a theme put forward by previous scholars, in which we see no one (including the entry writer) has ever put forward a clear definition.

However, professional anthropologists began walking out of their study and conducting fieldwork at the end of the nineteenth century, producing a large number of ethnography from different countries, including great exemplary works of ethnography. However, why have they not been able to reach a universally accepted definition of "ethnography" since then? Anthropologists are doing ethnography, but no one knows precisely what it is. What exactly is the problem? Answering this question is

one of the main motivations for this study. The following text will clarify the questions from “Thick Description,” tackling them one by one.

## 2.5 The scientific standpoint

Before examining Geertz’s viewpoint of science, let us review the conception of science when people were talking about science before 2008 (Cai 2009). *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines science as (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2023):

Science, any system of knowledge that is concerned with the physical world and its phenomena and that entails unbiased observations and systematic experimentation. In general, a science involves a pursuit of knowledge covering general truths or the operations of fundamental laws.

Since the Enlightenment till 2008, this definition of science has generally been accepted within academia. It prescribes objects of study and enunciates the only ontological position. In other words, anyone who aims to undertake scientific research must study the material world, whether he or she is a researcher of natural science or social science. Accepting such a definition of science means obeying such a conception of science, i.e., any research activities focusing on objects outside of the material world are not scientific activities, so the outcomes they generate are not scientific knowledge. If we accept the vision of science represented in this definition, the so-called social sciences are unrelated to science.

Now let us return to “Thick Description.” Since Geertz claims he adopts Weber’s viewpoint, let us review Weber’s position. Weber declares clearly (Weber 2005):

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences.

We have taken for granted that sociology seeks to formulate type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical processes.

Compared with Weber’s scientific position, we can see that Geertz gives up pursuing causes and effects, formulating concepts, and generalizing the uniformities of empirical processes. Strictly, he only kept to “interpretation.” Moreover, as is shown in the above analysis, after his challenging exploration, he still cannot determine the essence of culture, and, therefore, is not sure what to interpret. In an interview in 2002, he said bluntly that he did not know whether Weber really fixed his mind on science which pursues law, or interpretation (Micheelsen 2002).

Unfortunately, Weber’s social action theory failed because he gave up the cause and pursued results in proposing his theory. The main reason for this failure is that Weber is fettered by the above conception of science (Cai 2012).

Scientism has been criticized as the research has deepened. Since the middle of the 20th century, almost no scholars have argued that social science may eventually become a science under the above definition. Even those who regard their research as this kind of science are timid about saying so. Anthropologists are careful about saying “science,” and Lévi-Strauss declares openly that the idea of “social sciences”

is simply a blandishment: In fact, it is just a fake “science” (Droit 1991). Under such historical circumstances, we can understand why Geertz writes such a sentence: “For a field of study which, however timidly (though I, myself, am not timid about the matter at all), asserts itself to be a science...” (Geertz 2000) —. Geertz persistently names “science” the activities not seeking laws, and his air of anger is vivid on the paper.

Geertz strived for years but ultimately failed to find laws. Though he claims to have given up seeking laws, he still cares about laws from the bottom of his heart (Geertz 2000):

The great natural variation of cultural forms is, of course, not only anthropology’s great (and wasting) resource but the ground of its most profound theoretical dilemma: how is such variation to be squared with the biological unity of the human species?

Till now, facts recorded in “Thick Description” have demonstrated that Geertz placed one foot on “culture” and the other on the material, seeking a harmonious explanation between the variety of human cultures and the universality of human biology) so that he can assert with ease that he is undertaking scientific activities per the traditional view of science. However, despite all this, he can still not negotiate the unavoidable contradiction between “interpretive science seeking meaning” and “experimental science exploring laws.” The two are not compatible and one can only choose one or the other. Scientific activity has its purposes and methodology, and one must soberly make a choice. Science is not a badge or a flamboyant overcoat. Activities that do not seek laws have nothing to do with science. No scholar can confidently claim his or her research to be scientific and make others believe it simply by taking the pose.

## 2.6 Research methods

After adopting his viewpoint of natural science, Geertz hurriedly writes only two sentences about research methods in “Thick Description” (Geertz 2000):

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.

And this is true at the most down-to-earth, jungle field work levels of his activity: interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, tracing property lines, censusing households...writing his journal.

In order to improve one’s work, one should perfect his tools in advance. As an academic giant of his generation, Geertz naturally understands this well. However, why does he cherish his words so much and not intensely discuss methodology? Traced to the source, Geertz thinks the enterprise of ethnography is dominated by the cleverly designed pursuit of thick description rather than technology and procedures (i.e., methods) of fieldwork. In other words, in Geertz’s eyes, the above

procedures as methods are unimportant; the important thing is to foster “thick description”. Geertz continues (Geertz 2000):

But it (anthropologists’ constructions of people’s constructions as obscured facts, noted by me) 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.

Despite this, he still does not tell readers what anthropological research “really is” in his eyes. Instead, “Thick Description” discusses “interpretation” at great length. In the author’s opinion, “a view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational [...] activity” seems to point to the heart of the main problems in various ethnographies that preceded Geertz’s “Thick Description.” So what on earth is Geertz’s “interpretation”? What does he actually “interpret”? And how does he interpret it?

## 2.7 Interpretation and interpretive theory

We know that “interpretation” aims to clarify the meaning of a text, either probing deeply and uncovering minute details or decoding. Moreover, different scholars may give different interpretations of the same religion or historical text, in which hardly any verification is possible. “Explanation” is quite different. In natural science activities the aim of “explanation” is to reveal the causal relationship between two or more things. In such activities, different scholars can arrive at the same explanation based on empirical evidence through verification. Therefore in this essay “interpretation” and “explanation” are strictly used only in the above sense. Geertz uses “interpret,” “interpretation,” and “interpretative” in this sense too.

Now let us return to Geertz. “Thick Description” refers to “interpretation” in the passages below (Geertz 2000):

So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the “said” of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms...But there is, in addition, a fourth characteristic of such description, at least as I practice it: it is microscopic.

It is merely to say that the anthropologist characteristically approaches such broader interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with tiny matters.

The important thing about the anthropologist’s findings is their complex specificity and their circumstantiality.

Geertz’s statement (below) refers to the predicament of the “interpretive theory of culture” (Geertz 2000):

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.

The terms in which such formulations (the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation) 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. It is not its own master...What generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions.

If we read “Thick Description” carefully, we will see the author lists the characteristics, defects, and difficulties ahead: Ethnographic description is “interpretive” and “microscopic,” “the important thing about the anthropologist’s findings is their complex specificity, their circumstantiality,” and “interpretive approaches [...] tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation.” That is to say, Geertz is clearly aware of the functions of interpretive approaches.

There is no generality if there is no identity. Thus, This article argues that the key defect of this method is not that interpretive approaches [...] tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation (in fact, no one besides Geertz makes this claim), but rather because it simply cannot generate any academic concepts. Geertz’s “generality” in “what generality it contrives to achieve grows from the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions” has no source. Nothing can be gained except for the differences themselves if we only distinguish the complex specificity and their circumstantiality from different cultures.

Further, Geertz declares (Geertz 2000):

It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers.

Whatever kind of science (seeking laws or interpretation) the “scientific imagination” here belongs to, it is inevitable that the stronger one’s “scientific imagination” is, the more unreliable the interpretation is (i.e., farther from reality) when the primary materials used by one are constructions of constructions (i.e., not facts). In the author’s view, cultural analysis is not guesses about the meaning of symbols because we do not have a pivot point or path for this kind of speculation, unless indigenous people can tell us the meaning of their symbol systems (Cai 2014).

“Thick Description” also discusses several themes: the necessary source of interpretive theory, the relationship between theory and interpretation, the use and techniques of interpretive theory, and the difficulties it faces. However, it is silent about what “interpretive theory” is. Geertz never puts forward a so-called “interpretive theory” in any form. As we all know, a theory’s primary characteristic must reveal the laws of a particular fact — generality. Geertz certainly knows what theory is: “If they [theoretical formulations] are not general, they are not theoretical” (Geertz 2000). Here, we see that in the discussions concerning research methods and theory formulation, “Thick Description” is self-contradictory as usual: Since this method can only interpret differences and has nothing to do with generalities, how can it be used “toward an interpretive theory of culture”?

Geertz’s roundabout way is indeed a distorted way of doing research. This seemingly weird work method reveals Geertz’s straitened situation and reflects the embarrassment, predicament, and deep confusion faced by the whole of social sciences.

As researchers in social science cannot even abstract the most basic concepts from phenomena existing in every ethnic group, anthropologists affirm diversity but have not found unity. In such situations, people often evade the subject under discussion, looking right and left and talking about other affairs. Geertz is not the only one to undergo such suffering and setbacks in theorizing anthropology.

In the end, Geertz cites the famous story about the earth's pivot point a little sadly: The world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant, resting in turn on the back of one turtle after another, making an endless tower of turtles. Geertz's purpose of such an analogy is to show that the study object of social science has no roots, i.e., no ultimate base. Then he says bravely and candidly (Geertz 2000):

Nor have I ever gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about, either in the essays below or elsewhere. Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based...

Till now, Geertz's vision described at the beginning of the essay "Thick Description" seems to be on the edge of evanescence. "Thick Description," written in the form of prose, is beautiful, extensive, obscure, paradoxical, and sad. It is written in a graceful and abstruse style and delicately records the scenes during which the author's mind and arguments fall into multiple conflicts along the path of exploration. The examination of "Thick Description" leaves us with a serious question: Whether critiquing Geertz's works in a negative or positive way, people all admit that he is one of the extraordinary talents among international social scientists in the latter half of the 20th century. Then what exactly might have restrained such a giant scholar?

## 2.8 Philosophical resources

Now let us examine within the themes of "Thick Description" the unshakable axioms inherited from Western thought and common sense by intelligentsia until Geertz was active.

As the history of science shows, efforts to establish the social sciences have always been under the rule of Western philosophy. To date, everyone who wants to set up a theory has turned to different kinds of ontology to find a foundation. As axioms of Western knowledge, naturalism, restricted rationalism, scientism, restricted ontology, "subject," and "subjectivity" constitute the essential components of Western scholars' spiritual shackles (Cai 2009).

As for whether Geertz adopts the perspective of naturalism and scientism, the wording in "Thick Description" gives a clue (Geertz 2000):

The danger that cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying turtles, 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 aestheticism, is to train such analysis on such realities and necessities in the first place.



Besides, Geertz confesses on the issue of subjectivity (Geertz 2000):

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.

Thus, Geertz accepts the absolute existence of "subjectivity" and sees this as axiomatic.

Regarding understanding the other, Kant believes those being researched will always conceal their true selves (Kant 2006). Geertz cites Wittgenstein directly in terms of understanding the other: Researchers cannot find their feet with strange ethnic groups (Geertz 2000). As for constating facts, the famous quote, Nietzsche says, "There is no fact but only interpretation." This judgment means that all descriptions are subjective. Therefore, no objective facts exist. All writings are just opinions on previous opinions. From Kant and Nietzsche to Wittgenstein, all three eminent wise men deny, from three different angles, the possibility of understanding the other. Their opinions are seen as the indisputable truth.

However, every thoughtful traveler can describe similar impressions of the other. This fact proves that these opinions are simple and naive. As the saying goes, even Homer nods. Not every observer from every time is the same. Since the 20th century, real ethnographers have no longer been hasty travelers but faithful disciples and persistent and delicate observers of foreign cultures.

In addition to these simple and pessimistic remarks, Wilhelm Dilthey's role is particularly noteworthy when we trace the influences on Geertz's thought. Among philosophers, Dilthey first advocates establishing the human sciences in a way that is independent of and opposed to the natural sciences. He considers the natural sciences to reveal cause and effect, whereas the human sciences aim to understand different people and histories interpretively. He proposes that "we *explain* nature whereas *understanding* psychological life" (Dilthey 1947). For the above reasons he is called the father of "the methodology of understanding." In Dilthey's view, human beings have three dimensions, i.e., biological, sociological, and historical; spiritual phenomena are particular, but some of such phenomena belong to the nature category (Dilthey 1942). He asserts that we should understand the particularity and individuality of inner experiences through deduction and interpretation based on metaphilosophy and physics (Zarader 2002). Furthermore, researchers are expected to re-experience the experiences of others (Dilthey 1942).

Concerning the choice of research direction, Imre Lakatos claims when talking about natural sciences that "the direction of science is determined primarily by human creative imagination and not by the universe of facts which surrounds us. Creative imagination is likely to find corroborating novel evidence even for the most 'absurd' program if the search has sufficient drive" (Lakatos 1999).

Geertz follows in those philosophers' steps. After his tentativeness, his scientific practices have never found universality but only diversity in different cultures of ethnic groups. Meanwhile, he was convinced of the above axioms. That is why Geertz claims his research seeks no laws but only "meanings" on the one hand and sticks to targeting creatures and materials, exploring why the massive diversity of cultures is in harmony with human biological universality (i.e., laws). Now we can see it is

a knowledge ecology that causes Geertz's complex to keep contradicting himself in following or letting go of natural science.

Neither should the influence of traditional knowledge on anthropology be overlooked. "Words are but wind, but seeing is believing" is a traditional belief found among most ethnic groups. Geertz states plainly, "As in any discourse, code does not determine conduct, and what was actually said need not have been" (Geertz 2000). The reliance on the old idea that we can only trust what we can see is highly harmful to the fieldwork method. The direct effect is that ethnographers may rely more on participant observation but less on deep interviews (indeed, the latter requires more consolidated comprehensive knowledge). Therefore, the seemingly plain daily life of others in the field moves silently out of sight, while the exciting scenes remain in writings like police officers raiding a cockfight shrine. Thus, "events" dominate ethnography, but institutions run away. The most typical case is Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (Mead 1961). We seldom see any trace of deep interviews in this book. Therefore, it is not ethnography in the strict sense but travel notes.

### 3 Conclusion

The glamorous word "culture," referring to ideas and behavior, comes to the world with born flaws and generates a terrible black hole in social scientific ideas. For this reason, Geertz's analysis of the word "culture" with confused meanings ends up falling into nihilism. Thus the whole analysis in "Thick Description" is based on no empirical facts and its basic concepts are incoherent in logic. Seeing that Geertz does not know what culture is, i.e., the essence of the study object of social sciences, he has already lost his object of interpretation. Due to the lack of qualitative analysis of human activities' classification and its various components and the exploration of cause and effect, deep interviews lost their direction and basic characteristics of ethnography cannot be captured.

For this reason, it is necessary to restate that ethnography is a form of representation particular to anthropological knowledge, with synchronic cultural and social facts gained by anthropologists during fieldwork as its essential part. This primary characteristic reveals the fundamental difference between anthropology and disciplines such as history, economy, law, psychology, and literature studies. Any concept and theory in social sciences must be rooted in comparing various ethnic groups' different types of cultural and social facts. Given that, ethnography is the cornerstone of the social sciences.

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## Comments

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