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## Clifford Geertz's Standard for Interpretive Validity: A Pragmatic Theory of Appraisal\*

Konstanze Senge\*\*

### 1 The Question

A crisis of representation challenges qualitative researchers in the human sciences. These researchers are questioning, in a self-analytic metadiscourse, the validity of their own research results. Embedded largely in the poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses, this crisis is coded and associated with terms such as “linguistic turn,” “interpretive turn,” and “literary turn.” The essential challenge concerns the notions and possibility of representation and interpretation of “the Other.” Critics argue that the researcher cannot capture and represent lived experience directly; rather, such an experience is created by the researcher himself – and, as some might say, in the text he<sup>1</sup> writes (see Berg/Fuchs, 1993; Clifford, 1988a and 1986, 6; Crapanzano, 1986; Geertz, 1973b; 1983b; and 1983c; Gottowik, 1997; Hirschauer/Amann, 1997; Kea, 1992; Lüders, 1995; Marcus/Fisher, 1986, 25 ff.; Rabinow, 1986; Tedlock, 1993; Tyler, 1987). Accurate representation and – as a consequence – interpretation of the voices and actions of others are impossible because voices and actions are always collected and presented through the perspective and biases of the researcher.

With the denial to grasp reality objectively, on the one hand, and the emphasis on multiple realities, the negotiation of human social orders and the contextual embedding of all social knowledge on the other hand, the stage is set for interpretive and normative relativism. As a consequence, the traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research have become problematic. Terms such as validity, generalisability, and reliability have to be negotiated anew; therefore, the question arises of how to evaluate and justify qualitative research?

These and related questions are at the centre of the writing culture debate, presently held primarily among social anthropologists and literary critics. With his prominent book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973), and especially

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1 Here and for further references, I use “he” as the pronoun to refer to “the researcher.” By no means does this usage imply that the contributions of female researchers are of minor importance; but rather reflects a more convenient usage.

his paradigmatic essays *Blurred Genres* (1983b) and *Thick Description* (Geertz, 1973b), Clifford Geertz was the first to draw widespread attention to the problems of representation and interpretation. With his assertion that the positivistic, totalizing approaches in the human sciences were giving way to a more pluralistic, interpretive, and open-ended perspective, he offered an epistemological critique and laid the groundwork for the writing culture debate. Stating that the ethnographer has no direct access to what he is studying, Geertz claims that all ethnographic works and writings are *interpretations of interpretations* and are nothing but *constructions* by the ethnographer about the Other (Geertz, 1973b, 15 and 19 f.; see also 1983c and 1991). For him there is no real world of social facts out there that can be observed, recoded, and analysed by the ethnographer. Rather, the ethnographer has to imagine and to evoke what the informants “are up to” (Geertz, 1973b, 15; 1983d, 184). This position, which reveals the necessity for interpretation in all social inquiry, came to be associated with what is called the “interpretive turn” (see Bohman et al., 1991, 1).

Geertz’s hermeneutic interpretive approach implies a relativism while also warranting the capacity of the ethnographer to interpret foreign cultures. His claim for privileging the interpretations the ethnographer constructs seems to be in contradiction with his own insight that fixed, final, or true monological meaning does not exist.

The privileging of the ethnographer, despite the relativistic epistemological standpoint, has triggered profound discontent within the scientific community. Characteristic of this critique was not that it offered a new paradigm, but rather that it opened the arena for new objects and new styles of research and writing.

At this point, the anthropological “tribe” can be divided into two main “wigwams:” (a) a younger generation of anthropologists, such as Clifford, Marcus, Fischer, Crapanzano, Tedlock, and Tyler, representing the *poststructuralist and postmodernist* tradition; and (b) an older generation of anthropologists, such as Geertz, Schneider, and Turner, representing the *hermeneutic interpretive* tradition.

The *postmodernists*, largely influenced by Nietzsche, the late Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and others, call for a radical break in terms of “knowledge” and a corresponding faith in science, as connected with the great thinker Descartes. For them the grounds for judging the validity of ethnographic descriptions have become “flabby.” Categories such as “subjective” and “objective,” “true” and “false,” are rather useless for the evaluation of interpretations. They are troubled by the authorial status the ethnographer’s interpretation has gained so far. Their objective is to minimise the authority of the ethnographer by giving the voices of those being studied more weight and, as some suggest, even equal authority. The means to attain this goal is the idea of dialogic ethnography, in which the ethnographer’s interpretation is juxtaposed with interpretations from the study subjects. The postmodernists, however, do not take one united stand

on the issue: Different scholars employ different forms and degrees of dialogic ethnography. Therefore, the goal of dialogic ethnography is defined in terms of degree rather than paradigmatic rules – as indicated by Fontana's question: "How much must the natives say to move from traditional reporting to narrative dialogue? How much self-reflexivity is needed to be postmodern?" (Fontana, 1994, 220). The [post]modernists do however unite their voices in criticising the interpretive hermeneutic approaches to ethnographic research with specific reference to Clifford Geertz (Clifford, 1988a, 40 ff.; Crapanzano, 1986, 69 ff.; Denzin, 1989, 22 f. and 135 f.; Gottowik, 1997, 286 ff.; Marcus/Fisher, 1986, 14, 29 and 145 f.).

Hermeneutic interpretive anthropologists, in the tradition of Dilthey, Weber, Schutz, and Ricoeur, argue that there are grounds enabling the assessment and justification of interpretations, and that not all interpretations are equally valid. They hold on to criteria that enable an assessment of the "quality" of interpretations. They believe ethnographic descriptions to be actor-oriented and obliged to the subjects of study. In this respect, the works of Clifford Geertz are of special interest. Geertz who claims that there are such interpretive criteria, is not only the most respected proponent of interpretive anthropology but also his works serve as a focal point of much of the critical literature in which the existence of such criteria is denied. As such, Geertz states: "I do not believe that anthropology is not or cannot be a science, that ethnographies are novels, poems, dreams, or visions, that the reliability of anthropological knowledge is of secondary interest, or that the value of anthropological works inheres solely in their persuasiveness" (Geertz, 1990a, 274). To Geertz, the postmodern critique that all ethnographic descriptions are mere personal interpretations and, therefore, lack *any* objectivity must be rejected as a "hollow threat" (Geertz, 1973b, 16). He instead offers an interpretive theoretical "program" which provides a basis for the assessment of anthropological interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

It is to question whether Geertz's interpretive theoretical program provides an acceptable solution to the ethnographic dilemma. More specifically, how does Geertz justify that his interpretations represent cultural realities – realities which are not available to him in any presupposed form, but are expressed by actions, gestures, words, etc., of their respective members, and which become "visible" only through Geertz's interpretations? *The aim of this paper is to discern Geertz's standards for "interpretive validity"* – validity understood as guaranteeing a true, realistic representation of the Other. Of course an analysis of Geertz's standards

2 The postmodern approaches in social anthropology can certainly be regarded as antithetical to hermeneutic interpretive approaches. While the postmodernists's critique of Geertz is rather radical and without compromise, there are also some critiques within the interpretive hermeneutic camp. These scholars, however, are not arguing for a radical break from Geertz's position, but rather, hold on to the possibility of certain assessment criteria while adding or transforming certain ideas (see Asad, 1983; Keesing, 1987; Rabinow, 1986, 242 ff.; Rosaldo, 1993; Shankman, 1984).



for interpretive validity makes sense only when seen in the light of the general context of his program and, most importantly, his epistemological stand. Therefore, it is first necessary to describe *what* Geertz seeks to analyse (object of research, chapter 2, section 2.1), *how* he proceeds in his analysis (method, chapter 2, section 2.2), *why* he proceeds as he does (aim, chapter 2, section 2.3), and *what for* (overall reason, chapter 2, section 2.4). Chapter three (3) provides the answer to the underlying question of this paper. As it will be shown, Geertz's standards for interpretive validity are derived from a specific epistemological position, namely a pragmatic one. In the conclusion (chapter 4), special emphasis will be put on the *practical* consequences that result from different epistemological positions, though the discussion will not centre around the problem of possibility of "Erkenntnis" as such, but how "das Erkannte" (interpretations) can be regarded as a true representation of reality.

Therefore, the question of the standards for interpretive validity which concerns us here can be linked to what Reichenbach called the "Rechtfertigungszusammenhang", according to which researchers must justify that their interpretations represent social reality (Reichenbach, 1938, 3; see also Popper, 1971, 64).

I do *not* want to pursue an analysis of the methodology of *data collection*. What the researcher has to do in the field in order to collect valid and reliable data is of no importance in this study. Questions regarding, e.g., the duration of stay in the field, interview techniques, etc. are not of interest (see Hammersley/Atkinson, 1995; Lincoln/Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979; Strauss/Corbin, 1990). In other words: Reichenbach's "Entdeckungszusammenhang" is not of primary concern here, however important it may be otherwise in issues of sociological investigation (Reichenbach, 1938, 3; see also Popper, 1971, 6).

I also do *not* want to pursue [to use my words, inspired by Goffman] an analysis of the "logic of staging": an analysis *of the narrative* form of scientific texts which exemplify how ethnographers present and persuade others of their findings and arguments, respectively. It must be stated however that a broader understanding of rhetorical practices and stylistic devices among ethnographic writings has certainly served to develop my awareness of the problem of representation and interpretation (for this see Clifford, 1986 and 1988a; Van Maanen, 1988; Marcus/Cushman, 1982, Marcus/Fischer, 1986). An analysis of textual practices is included only as far as it serves to clarify my argument.

Surely, these three analytically differentiated stages of research activity (collection, interpretation, and presentation) empirically flow together. Any interpretation of data must be preceded by the collection of data and becomes meaningful only when publicised to a scientific audience<sup>3</sup> and, thus, inscribed

3 Of course, collegial readers comprise only one possible audience to which an ethnography may be addressed. Van Maanen and Marcus/Cushman discern a number of general readership

into a text, recoded into a movie, or presented as a theatre play (see for ethnographic filming Asch et al., 1973; for ethnographic performative play Turner, 1982). Although the three stages of research are inextricably linked, I will address them separately throughout the paper (with a few exceptions).

## 2 The Argument: The Interpretive Program of Clifford Geertz

### 2.1 Geertz's Object of Research: Culture as Text

As is the case for most thinkers, Clifford Geertz's ideas have developed gradually over the past four decades. Today (2001) his thoughts can be summarised and united into one "program." However, this "program" is not a program in the sense of methodological dogma on how to establish rapport, interview informants, take fieldnotes, etc., nor is it a coherent theoretical account. Rather, Geertz's program refers to a set of ideas explicitly stated throughout his work, although it is not to be found in every work and it is not always consistently presented. One can say, however, that all of Geertz's works centre around the concept of "*culture*" (Geertz, 1973b, 3 ff.).

Geertz's core metaphor to describe the concept of culture is his notion of culture as a text: "The culture of a people is a an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz, 1972b, 452). This understanding of culture as a text is borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, though "somewhat twisted" (Geertz, 1973b, 19).

From Geertz's short explanations, however, one can not comprehend how he comes to conclude that culture is an open text; that this text is visible in an intersubjective world; and that culture is therefore empirically accessible. For a better understanding of Geertz's argument it is necessary to turn to Ricoeur (see Ricoeur, 1973):

Ricoeur, in his essay *The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text* (1973), tries to extend Dilthey's hermeneutics of the interpretation of written texts to all social actions (see Dilthey, 1924, 319 ff.).

Firstly, Ricoeur differentiates between spoken and written language: Spoken language exists only as an ephemeral event which fleetingly appears and disappears. Written language, on the other hand, is a way to capture these temporal instances by means of inscription (93). However, what writing fixes is not the actual event

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groups, each of which is expected to display systematic differences in their perceptions and interpretations of the same ethnography (see Van Maanen, 1988, 25 ff.; Marcus/Cushman, 1982, 51 ff.). Therefore, to write an ethnography requires a decision by the ethnographer as to whom he wants to tell his "story." Depending upon the audience chosen, he most likely will try to address norms specific to that group and to arouse the interest of his potential readers.

of speaking (the saying), but what becomes *said* in this event. The “said” of speaking, to Ricoeur, refers not to the intentions of the speaker. Rather, the said refers to the intentional exteriorization of the saying (the *sagen*), by which the event surpasses itself and becomes the said (*Aussage*). The said of speaking is the *Aussage*, or the noema, of the saying.

The noema of the speech event is what has been fixed in writing. As soon as a speech event is fixed in writing, it becomes dissociated from its author, and open to uncountable interpretations (95). Additionally, this not only frees the text from the “tutelage” of its author (96), it also frees the text from the limiting factors presented by the situation in which the saying took place. In this regard, the text opens up a variety of references and addressees, which are more than those present at the time of the specific and limited situation of spoken discourse (95 ff.).

Secondly, Ricoeur tries to demonstrate that social action, in principle, can be regarded as a written text which can be interpreted and read. This conclusion is based on the observation that both, the speech act and the action-event, are placed between a dialectic occurring between temporal and fixed states, with the fixed states containing their “sense-content.” To Ricoeur, this sense-content of social action becomes objectified – or, similarly to a fixed text, finds its material manifestation – through what becomes *done*; action leaves a mark or an imprint on time. As such, “[a]n action leaves a ‘trace,’ it makes its ‘mark,’ when it contributes to the emergence of such patterns which become the *documents* of human action” (101; italics are mine). In the same way as a text is dissociated from its writer, an action is dissociated from its agent because it transcends its actuality in that it develops consequences of its own which were not originally intended by its agent. Ricoeur refers to this phenomena as the “autonomization of action” (100 f.).

So far we may say that essential to Ricoeur’s theory is the notion of culture as a text. This text, or culture, is visible if it leaves a remaining or lasting effect or if it contributes to remaining aspects of social reality.

Geertz adopts Ricoeur’s metaphor of culture as a text that can be read and interpreted (Geertz, 1973b, 10). The reading of social action, however, must be preceded by inscription, which means, what the ethnographer intends to read (or to analyse) must first be written down. According to Geertz, by means of inscription, the ethnographer turns the passing action event into a fixed account which can subsequently be subjected to scientific inquiry and consulted again and again at any future time (19).

It is at this point, however, that Geertz departs from Ricoeur. While Ricoeur emphasises that the interpreter quasi *returns* to those documents which were important in the sense that they left a remaining effect in history, Geertz, on the other hand, stresses that the ethnographer *creates* this remaining effect by means of fixing the flow of social action in writing. The flow of social action becomes

fixed through fieldnotes, written accounts (the ethnographer's interpretation), etc. Thus, states Geertz: "The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; *he writes it down* ... into an account, which *exists* in its inscriptions ..." (19; first italics in original; second italics are mine).

What Geertz as an ethnographer does is – coinciding once again with Ricoeur – to separate the "doing" from the "done." In writing the account, Geertz fixes the noema of social action, and not the event as an event (19; Geertz, 1983b, 31). Again in accordance with Ricoeur, Geertz is only interested in the actual event as a means to unfold cultural structures which go *beyond* it. While Geertz starts his analysis by analysing particular events, speaking to informants, etc., the object of study is the extrapolation of cultural structures (Geertz, 1973b, 7). Not the ostensive references of social action of the initial situation are at stake but what Geertz calls "social semantics" (Geertz, 1972b, 448). Social semantics refer to the larger frames of reference: the overall culture in which the action event takes place; the historical context in which it occurs; and the collective mental life of the people belonging to the culture (448 ff.). In this respect, Geertz views his contribution to anthropology as a contribution to *cultural theory* (Geertz, 1973a, VIII).

In *Local Knowledge*, for example, Geertz explores different forms of judicial practice in Java, Bali, and Morocco. He tells the story of a native Balinese whose wife ran off with a man from another village, and who then asked the village council for help to bring her back. They refused to support him. A year later he refused to take an office in the village council. A refusal of this office, as Geertz explains, has tremendous consequences: the man was not only ostracised from the village but he was destined to life as "a dog under dogs." He wandered homeless. Community members either threw him scraps to eat or drove him off by throwing stones. In short: He became an outcaste and was excluded from human society (176 ff.).

Important to Geertz is *not* the native's personal destiny, nor *why* he refused so consistently to take an office. Despite the tragic consequences, Geertz, rather casually, informs the reader that "[t]he island is Bali, the village we can leave nameless, and the native (who, as all this happened in 1958, may well be dead) we may call Regreg" (175 f.). What is of interest to Geertz in this terrible story is the ways in which other peoples – and not only the Balinese – evaluate individual behavior in reference to broader cultural tenets, norms, etc., – here: in reference to an understanding of judicial life (180). Although Geertz starts his analysis with microscopic cases – in the example of Regreg, a small village, and the local understanding of "right" and "wrong" –, he does not wish to study those details for their intrinsic value, but for extrapolating broader social generalizations from them. The place of research is not the object of research (Geertz, 1972b, 22). Accordingly, Geertz states that "the test of their worth [of cultural interpretations] lies there, as comparative, historical, macro-sociology" (Geertz, 1968, VIII).

However, “how to get from a collection of ethnographic miniatures ... to wall-sized culturescapes of the nation, the epoch, the continent, or the civilization” is regarded as one of the major problems by Geertz (Geertz, 1972b, 21). It remains to question, therefore, how Geertz derives knowledge about whole cultures, if his research is conducted in rather a small number of small locations.

## 2.2 Geertz’s Method: The Hermeneutic Spiral

Geertz’s suggestion for the solution of this problem involves a dialectical process of intellectual “tacking” that goes back and forth “between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into simultaneous view” (Geertz, 1983c, 69). As such, anthropological understanding is directed, on the one hand, towards particular cases and events and, on the other hand, to far-reaching generalizations (Geertz, 1983b, 22). Consequently, Geertz regards anthropology as “a *hermeneutical* discipline” at the core of which lies “the understanding [*Verstehen*] of meaning” of complexes of cultural symbols (Geertz, 1996a, 114; see also 1973, 5; 1983, 5), and he perceives anthropological inquiry as being:

but the now familiar trajectory of what Dilthey called the hermeneutic circle ...  
In order to follow a baseball game one must understand what a bat, a hit, an  
inning, a left fielder, a squeeze play, a hanging curve, and a tightened infield are,  
*and* what the game in which these “things” are elements is all about.

Geertz, 1983c, 69; italics are mine

According to Geertz, anthropological understanding, be it the understanding of particular instances as e.g. a “hit,” is only attainable if one understands the whole context in which this particular instance takes place. An understanding of the context, in turn, is gained through an understanding of its individual parts. In order to describe this intellectual movement between a whole and its parts, Geertz refers to Dilthey’s – respectively Schleiermacher’s – idea of the hermeneutic circle, while at the same time rejecting their romantic notions of empathy and identification. Schleiermacher and Dilthey, held the notion that an understanding of the original *intentions* of the authors was needed for a valid textual interpretation and that this could be achieved by means of a “transferring” of the consciousness of the interpreter into the cultural and historical time that provided the setting for the object of interpretation (Schleiermacher, 1967, 151 ff.). Geertz, however, explicitly rejects any “unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of trans-cultural identification, with our subjects” (Geertz, 1983c, 57). He likewise rejects the idea of the “chameleon fieldworker, perfectly tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy ...” (Geertz, 1983, 56). Rather, the ethnographer has to move:



back and forth between asking *himself*, "What is the general form of their life?" and "What exactly are the vehicles in which that form is embodied?," emerging in the end of a ... sort of spiral ...

Geertz, 1983c, 69 f.; italics are mine

Geertz advocates a kind of intervalled jumping back and forth between a microscopic and a macroscopic perspective of observation. This procedure allows him to taper off the many empirical details, which are derived from an analysis of particular cases, until he arrives at a general theoretical conclusion, a method which can be depicted in the form of *as spiral*.<sup>4</sup> The hermeneutic spiral, according to Geertz, does not consist of an active dialogical questioning-answering relationship between him and his informants, but of questions which are directed to Geertz's, the observer, himself. This procedure, according to Geertz, is often "the only approach open to a lone ethnographer caught in the middle" of the complexity of empirical reality (Geertz 1972b, 428, fn. 15).

The recent writing culture debate arose from an uncertainty about the appropriate means for ethnographic representation. One of the major concerns was a critique against authorial forms of ethnographic interpretations. Specifically, scientists like Clifford, Crapanzano, Marcus, Tedlock, and other postmodernists criticise the monological presentation of ethnographies as a form of gaining ethnographic authority (Tedlock, 1993; Clifford, 1988a, 40 f.). Instead, they ask for a dialogical form of ethnography which would attribute more authorial status to the subjects studied. The aims are, on the one hand, to include the subjects in the research process (see e.g. Crapanzano, 1980), and, on the other hand, to juxtapose the researcher's privileged interpretive position with first-hand accounts from the subjects (see e.g. Tedlock, 1993). In reference to Geertz, critics claim that his form of interpretation is too monological (Clifford, 1988a, 40 ff.; Crapanzano, 1986, 74; Gottowik, 1997, 286 ff.; Marcus/Cushman, 1982, 42 ff.).

Instead, they ask to "locate ethnography in a process of dialogue where interlocutors actively *negotiate* a shared vision of reality" (Clifford, 1988a, 43; italics are mine). Theoretically, those critics refer to Hans Georg Gadamer's dialectical perspective on dialogue which would imply, on the one hand, a negotiation of interpretations in the immediate fieldwork, and, on the other hand, a negotiation of possible and divergent interpretations among ethnographers (see Gadamer, 1960; Gottowik, 1997, 286 ff.; Marcus/Cushman, 1982, 38 f.; Marcus/Fisher, 1986, 30 f.).<sup>5</sup>

4 Geertz explicitly describes this movement as ending in a spiral as opposed to being caught within a circle.

5 Because Gadamer is primarily concerned with interpreting past historical events and epochs, the application of his historical hermeneutics to cultural hermeneutics is problematic. Gadamer insists on the all-important role played by a shared context of historical and cultural interpretations, most importantly a shared language, as a prerequisite to engaging in dialogue.



For example, Crapanzano's *Tuhami. Portrait of a Moroccan* presents one example of dialogic ethnography. Crapanzano, as an author, is himself visible in the text. The book presents not only Tuhami's life, but also Crapanzano's as he learns about himself when he learns about Tuhami. Crapanzano's experiences become part of the data. This visibility is aimed to reduce the ethnographer's authorial influence. Crapanzano attempts to draw the reader into the interpretive process by asking questions rather than answering them (see Crapanzano, 1980). He argues that dialogical texts represent the dialogical fieldwork situation more accurately and privilege the ethnographer's authority less than monological texts (Crapanzano, 1980). However, it can not be denied that dialogical texts are no mirror-representations of the actual fieldwork encounter with the other, since the actual encounter is presented in a written form, translated, recoded, etc. Therefore, there are no longer dialogues, but written interpretations of dialogues. (see Pool, 1991, 72). They also do not privilege the natives's point of view, because they are not produced by the natives's. This is not to say that there is no difference between monological and dialogical forms of presentation. There is one indeed; they present a different picture of the Other. But the question of authorship and presentation remains unsolved. Therefore we may say, while Crapanzano attempts to draw the reader into the interpretive process by asking questions rather than answering them, he, nevertheless, appears as the knowing interviewer and is not only reporting data. In the end, it is Crapanzano who decides what we, the readers, learn about Tuhami. (see Crapanzano, 1980) Tedlock extends the idea of dialogue to the written account he is presenting to his readership. In this account appear two persons who discuss the idea of dialogic ethnography (Tedlock, 1993). Similar as in Crapanzano's *Tuhami*, Tedlock remains the author who decides what the reader is allowed to learn about dialogic ethnography. While the presented dialogue also stresses the problems brought about by dialogic ethnography, it is evident that this account emphasises the positive aspects. (Tedlock, 1993)

Gottowik criticises Geertz for not adopting Gadamer's dialectical form of dialogue. According to Gottowik, Geertz is not willing to juxtapose his position with those of the subjects studied, nor does he allow "den Anderen selbst zu Wort kommen zu lassen"<sup>6</sup> (Gottowik, 1996, 293).

This critique, however, has to be relativized: It is correct that Geertz does not seek a fusion of horizons [or interpretations] in the Gadamerian sense, and it

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This is rather rarely the case in ethnographic fieldwork, where, as a rule, a shared language is not given. Nevertheless, one may say that in principle, the problem of interpretation remains the same whether an interpretation regards distance in time or distant cultures. Moreover, how can it be determined at what point two parties are regarded as sharing a language, especially before a dialogue has begun – and even more so in a world where language does not necessarily define cultural boundaries, where transcultural borrowing and transcultural diffusion is increasingly occurring (see Gottowik, 1997, 287).

6 Translation, K. S. "... the Others to speak for themselves."

is also correct that he does not negotiate an interpretation with the Other to come to a mutual agreement. In reference to the Balinese Cockfight, in which Geertz emphasises the irrationality of betting seen from the standpoint of someone familiar with probability theory, Geertz states:

Well, the answer to that is [Would the Balinese agree with Geertz interpretation?], if you're referring to traditional Balinese, they wouldn't be able to understand it – not just that they wouldn't know English, but they would not know about such things as probability theory. So in something like the cockfight essay, which really is an attempt to say what Balinese are doing, thinking, and feeling – what this means to them – it's ... important to keep clear that it's you who are saying that this is what they think. They're not writing the text; they're fighting cocks.

Geertz, 1990b, 63

Here, Geertz strongly implies that the ethnographer's analytical reading is inevitably different from the natives's own, because they do not share the same cultural background, knowledge, or "horizon." The attempt to negotiate an interpretation would, consequently, not be reasonable to Geertz.

Although Geertz does not negotiate an interpretation with the Other as suggested by Clifford, nor does he present his interpretation in a dialogical form as demonstrated by Tedlock, his interpretation, nevertheless, is derived from a dialogical encounter with the Other. All field work activity involves social interaction in order to gather information. Although Geertz does not conduct his research by means of a systematic and dialectical questioning-answering procedure, he does propose, in cases of cross-cultural comparison, a juxtaposition of experience-near concepts, which are the local concepts of those being studied, with experience-distant concepts, which are those concepts the ethnographer has in common with his home culture (Geertz, 1983c, 57).<sup>7</sup>

For example, in describing the Balinese concept of personhood, Geertz states that the Balinese show a strong awareness of "lek;" "lek," according to Geertz, denotes the fear that an aesthetic illusion will not be maintained (Geertz, 1983c, 64). "Lek" is an experience-near concept. Geertz, then, compares this concept with an experience-distant concept: "the loss of personality," though he stresses that "the Balinese, of course, [are] not believing in such a thing" (ibid.). This juxtaposition is aimed to bring the unfamiliar versions of cultural reality closer by setting them into a familiar framework. While this juxtaposition may lead to an alteration of the indigenous meaning of experience-near concepts, it helps Geertz to put those con-

7 Experience-near and experience-distant concepts may remind the reader of the distinction between emic and etic categories. Whereas the terms "emic" and "etic" were to be understood absolutely, demanding that there would be purely etic or emic concepts, "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts imply a *relative* distinction. (see Geertz, 1983a, 75)

cepts into a framework useful to him for comprehending the strange and making it familiar. Geertz does *not* so much emphasize the *difference* between experience-near and experience-distant concepts, but focuses more upon their comparability. This approach suggests that it is not so much the strange and exotic cultural world which occupies his interests, but the attempt to *bring* the foreign into a *comprehensible familiarity* by jumping back and forth between different levels of observation as part of the process of arriving at a general conclusion. This general conclusion is comparable, metaphorically, with the tip of a spiral. A spiral, however, has no end, although it gradually tapers off the further one follows it. If we stay with this analogy of Geertz, then we may conclude that his understanding of other cultures is *never complete*, no matter how deeply he investigates (see Geertz, 1973b, 20 and 29). If understanding is never complete, then the questions still arise: How does Geertz know what cultural symbols mean and how is he able to understand cultural patterns?

### 2.3 Geertz's Aim: Verstehen as a Process of Comprehension

Geertz never put forth a definition of what “meaning” actually is or means (in the sense of: “I, Clifford Geertz, define meaning as ...”). As mentioned before, this lack of clarity regarding concepts and definitions marks a weakness throughout his writings. Nevertheless, one can extrapolate Geertz's notion of meaning by going back and forth through his works.

“Meaning,” to Geertz, is embodied in symbols, and denotes a conception of knowledge, attitude, manners, etc., in these symbolic forms (Geertz, 1966b, 89). A symbol serves as a vehicle for a conception if it is “disengaged from its mere actuality” (Geertz, 1966a, 45). Any object, word, or syllable, gesture, sound, etc., in principle, can be called “a symbol.” In this interpretation – the symbol as a carrier of a conception which, in turn, is the symbol's meaning –, the symbol is *differentiated* from, though linked to its meaning.

Geertz gives an example, originally provided by Gilbert Ryle, which illustrates that a symbol and its meaning are not only theoretically differentiated but that there is *no intrinsic* connection between a symbol and its meaning – the example of twitching and winking: Both, twitching and winking, are movements of contracting eyelids, whereas twitching is involuntary and winking is meant to signalize a gesture to another.

The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch and wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast....

Geertz, 1973b, 6

Geertz complicates his example by introducing a fake-winker, a parodying winker, and a winker uncertain about his winking abilities, a “rehearsing winker” who practices at home. Between those unique forms of eyelid contractions, according to Geertz, lies the object of ethnography: To *construct* the socially established code by which an eyelid contraction becomes a voluntary wink signaling something to a friend, a faked wink, a wink practiced in front of a mirror signaling no one, or a mere twitch (Geertz, 1973b, 6 f.).

However, to construct the socially established code is not that simple; since the ethnographer, albeit participating in the life of the natives for a while, has “no direct access” to their discourse. Rather, the ethnographer can only get access to “that small part of it which our informants can lead us into understanding” (Geertz, 1973a, 20). The ethnographer has, in the end, to construct his own constructions of how he thinks his informants live (Geertz, 1972b, 428, Fn. 15).

Although Geertz is not himself participating in the discourse of the natives, he argues for an *extrinsic* theory of thought which enables him to construct this socially established code (see Rice, 1980, 231). To him:

human thought is basically both social and *public* – that its natural habitat is the house yard, the marketplace, and the town square. Thinking consists not of ‘happenings in the head’ (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G. H. Mead and others, significant symbols ...

Geertz, 1966a, 45; italics are mine

To Geertz, human thinking finds its manifestation in *material objects* and in the flow of *social* life, on the *market place*, in the *house yard*, etc. This manifestation renders human thought *observable*, and, therefore, *empirically accessible*. To Geertz, meaning is not a psychological phenomenon, but a social and public one in the sense that the *utilization* of cultural symbols is observable (Geertz, 1973b, 13 and 1966b, 91). Therefore, meaning is always embedded in the *social context* in which symbols, as the vehicles of meaning, are placed (10 ff.). The scientist, who simply focuses on isolated behavioral movements does not know and can not know the context in which such behavior is embedded, and thus, the scientist is not able to understand the meaning of the respective phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Thus, Geertz sets himself apart from cognitive, subjectivistic, and behavioristic approaches in social anthropology. His understanding of meaning is distinguished from cognitive approaches because Geertz rejects the idea that one knows the meaning of, e.g., a wink, if one knows how to wink or which rules to follow to contract one's eyelids. Proponents of cognitive approaches would identify the doing with its meaning (Geertz, 1973b, 11 f.; see Goodenough, 1981, 47 ff.). It is distinguished from subjectivistic approaches, because Geertz equally rejects the idea that the meaning of a wink is understood if one knows that the contractions of eyelids were *intended* to signalize a wink. Meaning, according to Geertz, may not be equated with intentions

Geertz, as an ethnographer, observes the socially available context and the utilization of cultural symbols in which meaning is embedded. This social context, of course, is not an entity in itself with intrinsic qualities; rather, it is what the ethnographer himself, Geertz, focuses on. In this context, some aspects of the social context are relevant to him, others are not. There are no strict rules which determine what has to be included within the context and what not. The context is determined not by what it *is* as brute data, but by “what it is *we* want to know” (Geertz, 1983b, 34; italics are mine). Geertz is not interested to know if the eyelid contractions “are” a wink or if they were *intended* to signify a wink or a twitch. Rather, Geertz applies *his* notions of wink and twitch to the respective situation, and checks if these notions turn out to be useful to “understand” the situation, in the sense of ordering and systematizing it.

Therefore, we may say that, *Verstehen*, to Geertz, does *not* mean to find truth and normative principles of the human mind; nor does it mean to uncover meaning that is *intersubjectively* shared by everybody who is participating in a situation; *Verstehen* also does *not* mean to uncover the *subjective* meaning individuals attribute to their action in the sense of Max Weber (see Weber, 1988, 174 ff. and 208; Weber, 1972, 1 f.; Kalberg, 1994, 24 ff.; and 2000). Rather, *Verstehen*, to Geertz, means, above all, contextual interpretation. It entails the construction of interpretations or concepts which are theoretically realizable, and which can be applied to the empirically given and which thereby *enhance* the capacity to handle specific phenomena. In this regard, Geertz’s notion of *Verstehen* can be described as *his* process of comprehending the empirical world. If his concepts and interpretations prove useful for an *intellectual* and *interactional* comprehension of that specific situation, they are accepted. As such, Geertz’s notion of *Verstehen* is pragmatic and can be defined in terms of the utility of accepting them.<sup>9</sup>

#### 2.4 Geertz’s Reason: Understanding and Mastering of his Own Culture

As has been discussed throughout, Geertz’s major interest lies in larger frames of reference where he analyzes populations, describes cultural patterns, and focuses on transcultural comparative, macrosociological research. His study of individuals, specific events, small villages, and even countries, is not merely intended to show the diversity of social reality, nor is it intended to make silenced voices audible [or readable]. To him, cultural life comments on more than itself (Geertz, 1973b, 22):

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(see Denzin, 1989, 32; Geertz, 1973b, 10 ff.). Lastly, it is distinguished from behavioristic approaches which regard behavior as an identifiable and measurable response to external or internal, recognizable stimuli (Geertz, 1968, 95 f.).

9 Geertz’s notion of meaning has been criticized by several lines of criticism. Whereas, e.g., Denzin criticizes Geertz for not considering the intentions individual actors ascribe to their actions (Denzin, 1989, 114 f.), Rose claims that meaning can only be grasped if we risk assimilation (“going native”) with the subjects and try to live the same life as they do (see Rose, 1990). (For a discussion of the different notions of meaning see Senge, 2000, 59 ff.)



The facts, as facts, are of little immediate interest beyond the confines of ethnography ... But when seen against the background of a general theoretical aim ... [the] data take on a peculiar importance.

Geertz, 1966c, 360

Geertz, in discussing his field work in Java, Bali, and Morocco about different forms of judicial life, explains that the peculiar importance lies in a deeper understanding of his *own culture*:

Confronting our own version ... with other sorts of local knowledge should not only make that mind more aware of forms of ... sensibility other than its own but make it more aware also of the exact quality of its own ... It is ... one that welds the process of *self-knowledge*, *self-perception*, *self-understanding* to those of other-knowledge, other-perception, other-understanding; that identifies, or very nearly, sorting out *who we are* and sorting out whom we are among.

Geertz, 1983d, 181 f.; italics are mine

Here, anthropological inquiry is aimed at comparing different versions of local knowledge by means of cross-cultural comparison in order to gain deeper knowledge of one's own culture. The comparisons between judicial life in Java, Malaysia, and Morocco helps Geertz to recognize the uniqueness of the respective legal systems and, most importantly, the unique features of the legal system of his own culture. Although, as all anthropologists do, he begins his analysis with those details in the discursive fieldwork situation, he does not intend this anthropological inquiry to explore other cultures for their own sake, but, above all, to attain a better understanding of his own culture. Accordingly, Geertz stresses that:

[t]he essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is ... to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep on other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said.

Geertz, 1973b, 30

Geertz seeks to explore certain questions which are given in the social world and to which his own culture has formulated certain answers, thereby implying that other cultures are facing the same sorts of questions. While one might arrive at this conclusion inductively after empirical investigation, Geertz, begins his investigations with this assumption. This order of procedure implies that there exist certain human *universals*, to varying degrees, in every culture. Geertz presupposes not only that legal forms exist in every culture, or "a category like work, which exists just about anywhere one finds human society" (Geertz, 1983d, 168), but also the existence of the concept of person (Geertz, 1983c, 59).



As seen above, the concept of personhood, and definitions in general, are laid down in advance *before* empirical research has started and are *not discovered* within the empirical research setting. This point is important, because it shows that Geertz does not intend to discover foreign indigenous cultural ideas, but to explore concepts and ideas from his own culture which are regarded as human universals (ibid).

However – and this point is decisive – Geertz makes no claim about the ontological status of those universals (Geertz, 1972a, 10). To him, it is not important if those universals truly exist or not. What matters is solely if the application of those universals are *useful* as heuristic tools in the given research situation:

The issue is not whether human beings are biological organisms with intrinsic characteristics ... Nor is it whether they show commonalities in mental functioning wherever we find them ... The issue is, *what are we to make* of these *undisputed facts* as we go about explicating rituals, analyzing ecosystems, interpreting fossil sequences, or comparing languages.

Geertz, 1984, 268; italics are mine

Geertz avoids a discussion about the ontological status of assumed universals. Of importance is only if these “undisputed facts” help him to understand and thereby to solve the mysteries of his own culture brought about by economical maneuvers, changes in the social order, and the everyday life (Geertz, 1996b, 32). If these concepts or ideas help him to “understand” such phenomena, then they have proven to be useful and will be applied in new settings. If they stop being useful, then they will be redefined or exchanged (Geertz, 1972a, 27).

We may conclude that research questions, definitions, and universals are based on Geertz’s knowledge about his own culture and are applied as heuristic tools which lead his investigations. They are not derived inductively from a careful investigation of the empirical case, but laid down in advance before the empirical investigation. Their worth is determined in terms of their *usefulness*; whereby “usefulness” denotes the extent to which those concepts support the intellectual and practical mastery of specific situations.

### 3 The Answer: A Pragmatic Theory of Appraisal

One of the central premises of Geertz’s theoretical position is that ethnographic interpretations can never be *true*, in the sense that the relation between interpretations and the part of reality they represent would *correspond* in a determinate and static sense. Ethnographic analysis is not a mere description of

objective facts. Rather, Geertz wants to *imagine* the real and to *evoke* the idea of a specific part of social reality in the reader (Geertz, 1983d, 184). Geertz denies realism and the assumption that social reality can be represented in a value-neutral manner (Geertz, 1973b, 15). Although Geertz acknowledges that ethnographic descriptions do not correspond to reality, he does not go as far as to say that they are just inventions by the ethnographer. Rather, he positions cultural analysis as lying *somewhere* between realism and relativism:

The truth of the doctrine of cultural (or historical – it is the same thing) relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours[.]

Geertz, 1977, 44

Interpretations, to Geertz, are not arbitrarily made; they are plurivocal but they are not infinite (Geertz, 1973b, 16 f.). Despite the doubtful status of anthropological knowledge, Geertz rejects the position of *relativism* (Geertz, 1984). He holds on to criteria which enable the assessment of anthropological interpretations. Anthropological interpretations, to Geertz, differ in their quality. Their quality can be assessed, not by means of validation or verification, but by means of *appraisal*. "Appraisal," being distinguished from "validity," "verity," and "truth," indicates a "softer" standard for the assessment and justification of interpretation (Geertz, 1972a, 16).

The question that arises is when can we say, according to Geertz, that an interpretation has met the standard of appraisal? If it is not the realist position, which theory of appraisal does Geertz adopt? Can we say that he adopts a probabilistic position, a consensualistic, or a pragmatic theory of appraisal?

One criterion for the appraisal of an interpretation, if we adopt the *probabilistic theory*, would be derived from a logic of probability based on the principle of verification as it has been laid down by Peirce in his *later* writings about pragmatism. According to this theory, interpretations or statements about reality can not mirror reality, though they [will] approach it. The possibilities of interpretations are limited by the knowledge and theories we have. In the light of our knowledge, certain arguments, namely those which have been verified, are more probable than others. Probabilistic theories underline that interpretations are only approximations of reality, never reality itself, though reality, or eternal verities, *can be approached* "in the long run" (Peirce, 1906, Cp. 5, 199 and 5, 589).

Geertz rejects the idea that cultural analysis has to be regarded as "following a rising curve of cumulative findings," which will eventually unfold truth and verities. Rather, Geertz insists that cultural analysis "is intrinsically incomplete" and that it will *remain* incomplete (Geertz, 1972a, 29). Explaining his position,

Geertz tells the story about an Englishman who was told about a Native American world view that the world rests on a platform, the platform on an elephant, and the elephant on a turtle. The Englishman, curious about the end of the story asks what the last turtle rests on. To his surprise, the Englishman is informed that, from the first turtle on, there are turtles all the way down (28 f.). In reference to this story and in reflection upon his own work, Geertz explains:

[B]ut I do know that however long I did so [doing cultural analysis] I would not get anywhere near to the bottom of it. Nor have I ever gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have written about, either in the essays below [The Interpretation of Cultures] or elsewhere. Cultural analysis is essentially incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is.

Geertz, 1972a, 29

Geertz doubts that he will ever reach the bottom. The “bottom” being the “essence of things,” the real. It exists, but can never be apprehended, not even in the long run, after generations and generations, as Peirce suggests. Thus, Geertz does *not* justify his interpretation based on a *probabilistic* theory of truth. However, implicit in this statement is a hidden element of realism: Geertz does not deny the existence of reality, rather, he expects it to be at the “bottom,” though he doubts that he will ever arrive there.

A *consensualistic* theory of appraisal would imply that an interpretation has met the standard of appraisal, if it is *agreed upon* by others – independently of the fact of whether the interpretation is “true” or “false” in an ontological sense. The number of persons who may agree or disagree is infinite, though, in reference to the anthropological research the discussion centers around the scientific community and the subjects studied.

Geertz rejects the criterion of agreement or consensus as a form of appraisal of an anthropological interpretation. To him, progress in anthropological inquiry is marked more by a refinement of debate and “less by a perfection of consensus” among anthropological colleagues (Geertz, 1972a, 29). Thus, agreement by the scientific community would rather indicate stagnation than justification of interpretations.

He likewise rejects the idea that the individuals he studies have to approve of his interpretations. Not only does Geertz not aim for agreement of interpretations, he also explicitly states that it is not possible to achieve consensus with the study subjects. Because he conducts his research following a specific line of inquiry derived from his own cultural knowledge and background, which are not shared by his subjects.<sup>10</sup>

10 Moreover, Geertz’s mode of representation does not allow for an agreement with his subjects, because he (re)presents individuals as types of a group of people. Therefore his interpretation

Instead, Geertz's interpretations are justified through a *pragmatic theory of appraisal*. To him, interpretations are justified not in reference to their adherence to fundamental truths, but in terms of their *use-value* or their consequences (see also James, 1998):

As has been shown in section 2.3, meaning to Geertz is not derived from the intentions actors attribute to their actions, nor is it derived from some intrinsic relationship to an object, action event, etc. Rather, meaning is drawn from the *role* these events play (Geertz, 1972a, 17). What does this connotation of meaning imply? Let me return to the example of winking and twitching: According to Geertz, a number of eye-lid contractions, which are identical movements in terms of a phenomenalist observation, differ in their meanings. While he rejects the notion that these eye-lid contractions simply carry their meanings intrinsically, he argues that they derive their meanings from the social context in which they are embedded. Geertz's views his task as one of reconstructing the social context in order to understand the meanings of social action, symbols, etc., which are placed in this context. The meaning has been understood if his constructions – as with twitching and winking – can be theoretically applied to the situation and turn out to be useful for a practical mastery of this respective situation. Usefulness is determined by the degree of applicability in terms of what Geertz seeks to know (Geertz, 1983b, 34). "Where does it get you?" (Geertz, 1966a, 19) is the guiding question, in juxtaposition to questions regarding the ontological status of assumed universals, concepts, etc.:

Asking whether Pare really is a succession of contestings or Sefrou really is a dissolving shape is a bit like asking whether the sun really is an explosion or the brain really a computer.

Geertz, 1996a, 18 f.

In this respect, Geertz's theory of appraisal refers to a *process* of comprehension and apprehension of the empirical world. His notion of appraisal implies a relationship between a statement and reality which is *to be established* and which does *not exist independently* of Geertz's experience. Accordingly, if Geertz's concept – let's say of winking and twitching – help him to distinguish meaningfully between phenomena and thereby enable him to understand and apprehend those phenomena, they are regarded as useful and will remain in use; if they do not assist him, they will be redefined or rejected.

With this understanding of *Verstehen* and with this notion of truth – or appraisal – Geertz demonstrates an affinity with James's Pragmatism and James's

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can not be recognized by one individual member of the group typed (for a discussion of Geertz's mode of representation see Senge, 2000, 42 ff.).

pragmatic notion of truth. To James and to Geertz, truth – or as Geertz would say: appraisal – is defined as a forthcoming process of comprehension which happens to an idea:

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process ...

James, 1998, 97; PRA lecture 6; italics in original

Geertz approach – like James's – is pragmatic; and Geertz's concern is rather a utilitarian concern than a theoretical one. The study of other cultures is not initiated merely to display the diversity of reality or to dig down to the ground. Geertz regards such a search for fundamental truth more as a danger than as a benefit:

cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying turtles, will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life – with political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained – and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest ...

Geertz, 1973b, 30

Rather, cultural analysis is initiated by Geertz as a means to comprehend his own culture and thereby act more intelligently with regard to it. By casting light upon other cultures, he can come to a more differentiated understanding of his own and thereby gain a more sophisticated understanding of how to approach practical problems at home: problems regarding identity (Geertz, 1983c), nationalism (1971), status (1972b), time (1966c), or in short, social order (Geertz, 1996b, 32 f.).

#### 4 Conclusion

In summary, we may say that Geertz constructs a model or a type. He then explores how other people relate to his model. Thereby he does *not* focus on what people *say* they think they are doing, but he focuses on what people *are doing*. His models fulfill their function<sup>11</sup> if they are *useful* in describing other forms of life and thereby contribute to an intellectual and practical comprehension of Geertz's own life. In this way, Geertz is reflective of a pragmatic epistemology suggesting a plurality of shifting truths grounded in "local" experiences in which truth is appraised in terms of its usefulness.



In the paragraphs which follow, I will discuss Geertz's pragmatic position from a perspective of a realist in order to show that "usefulness" must not be the only criterion on which the justification of interpretations is based:

We can only start seeing the world from where we are. When we start interpreting the world, we recognize that our interpretations shape how the social world, which we interpret, appears to us; but we also recognize that we are dependent on a world – a non-ego – in order to form our interpretations. And while it might be that we would never come to the last "turtle down at the bottom," the absolute truth, this does not mean that we should stop asking who we *are* and what the world around us *is*. The difficulty is not, as Wittgenstein said, "nicht bis auf den Grund zu graben, sondern den Grund, der vor uns liegt, als Grund zu erkennen" (Wittgenstein, 1974, 333; 6:31).<sup>12</sup>

The aim of science should be – and I am convinced that any science implicitly if not explicitly does it – to provide interpretations of reality that are *true* to it. "True" in this sense means that the relation between interpretations and the part of reality they represent have to *correspond*: Scientific constructions about reality, at the same time, have to be a *reconstruction* about the respective part of reality they describe. However, since only a small part of the social world is meaningful to us, the aimed correspondence, or reconstruction, refers only to a limited part of the empirically given. And even that limited part is too complex because the reconstruction of it is always an *idealization* (see Weber, 1988) – which, in its essence, is non-empirical though not fictive. In light of these facts, I support an ontological realist position: There is an objective reality independent of us perceiving it; I hold a realist notion of truth: a representation has to be regarded as true (and valid) if it represents reality; and I hold the view that we, theoretically, can realize reality.

However, it can not be denied that everything we know about reality is mediated through our sense organs and always seen from a specific perspective, and, thus, relative to this perspective. Hence, we do not really know the *nature* of reality, and, consequently, can not know with certainty what our interpretations have to correspond with. Thus, we are caught in a dilemma. Given this view, we can offer only a "pragmatic"<sup>13</sup> response: If we accept the idea that there is a reality independent of us, we can make interpretations about this reality based on our observations; these interpretations can fail to hold vis-a-vis the empirically given

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11 Of course, Geertz would not use the term "function."

12 Translation by K.S.: "... is not to dig down to the ground, but to recognize the ground in front of us as the ground."

13 "Pragmatic" is placed in quotation marks, to emphasize that my position is, in its nature, *not* pragmatic, but realistic. But, as demonstrated above, there is no escape from the realist's dilemma; therefore, a "pragmatic" consequence seems to be the only viable solution. I do not mean to indicate an affinity to the pragmatic tradition as has been supported by William James (see James, 1998).



and thereby be refuted. Although we can never ultimately prove them to be true or false, we have the possibility to falsify our interpretations through its not confirming to experience, either by referring to our collected data or by referring to the scientific discourse.<sup>14</sup>

For Geertz, the test vis-a-vis the empirical world is operationalized in terms of “usefulness,” whereas for the realist it is operationalized in terms of “wahrheits-ähnlicher”<sup>15</sup> (Popper, 1973, 60 ff.). In both cases, concepts, interpretations and hypotheses are redefined or rejected if they do not hold up vis-a-vis empirical reality.

However, my critique of Geertz is that it does make an important difference *in practice* if anthropological inquiry, and science in general, is initiated by reference to a search for objective truth as opposed to a search for usefulness of the findings. “Usefulness,” namely, is determined by the beliefs, values, and interests one highly regards. If interests determine the course of academic life, the knowledge they bring forth are likely to be a reflection of social opinion. Interests and opinions, however, reveal what is recognized in a given community in reference to an already agreed upon consensus. Ultimately, “true” is regarded as what is recognized in a given community in relation to purposes and goals, and “false” is regarded as what is contradictory to what is regarded as true. This might be a suitable protocol at times when a stable, normal discourse exists. However, as history has taught us, these ideal conditions were not always available when they were most needed. A pragmatic theory of “truth,” in the end, would result in a consensus theory of “truth;” and the question of “true” and “false” would easily be answered in terms of interests, values, beliefs and power. It makes a difference if science is regulated by persons who – ideally – strive for practical problem solving, or if science is based on the ideal of objective truth.

However, if we take these thoughts one step further, I have to realize that the ideal of *objective truth* is in itself a value based on an *ethical and moral decision*. My claim to hold on to the ideal of truth, though it may also reflect a need for certainty, primarily reflects my concern to have an *external* vantage point on which scientific inquiry should be based. But it might be that this vantage point is not as external as it seems. It was Rorty who called our attention to the possibility that epistemology, our notions of truth and objectivity, may in themselves be historical events lacking any foundational status (see Rorty, 1979).

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14 Thus, I follow rather Popper’s principle of falsification than Peirce’s principle of verification (Popper, 1971, 14 ff. and 59 ff.; Peirce, 1906, CP 5, 574 ff.; see also Reichertz, 1991, 55 ff.). Of course, the principle of falsification is in itself problematic, and can only be applied to a certain extent only. For a more thorough discussion of the advantages and limits of falsification within scientific discourse see Reichertz (1999), for falsification within data see Senge (2000) and Soeffner (1989).

15 Translation, K. S.: “assumed to be more akin to truth”.

Even if there may not be any ultimate ground, this idea is *beyond* the confines of any particular individual: no one can *live* a relativist epistemology. If we were to do so, we would have no basis to communicate meaningfully; moreover, we would have no reason to try. Each of us lives within his beliefs and assumptions, and absolute distance from them or objectivity is not possible. I am not arguing on behalf of solipsism, since our way of seeing the world and discriminating meaningfully between phenomena presupposes a meaningful understanding of the social world around us in which these phenomena are embedded. However, it still holds that the possession of true knowledge, as Popper fervently advocated, can only be assumed. We can never know with certainty – only through a process of upholding beliefs. “Not to know with certainty” – does not mean not to know at all: it means rather, to also be aware of the provisional or historical character of truth.

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