Further Clarifications of Geertz’s Account of Culture as a Resource for Theology

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Abstract: This article builds on a previous article in Pacifica on Clifford Geertz’s understanding of culture. It continues the articulation of Geertz’s views by way of an examination of various criticisms both of the details of his work and of his approach. It shows that many of these criticisms have misunderstood Geertz’s work or are otherwise unfounded. In particular the author examines the objection that any hermeneutic approach to culture cannot be empirical, and looks at what “empirical” might mean in relation to a discipline in which “meaning” is a key category. The work of Bernard Lonergan is used throughout as a major resource for clarifying both Geertz’s own thought and that of his critics.

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE, I outlined the basic elements of Clifford Geertz’s approach to culture, noted his influence within theology, and suggested reasons for this influence. 1 My account there was largely sympathetic, involving a systematising of what remained unsystematic in his various writings. In the present article, I continue my treatment of Geertz and my clarification of his approach by examining and responding to various critiques that have been levelled against his work. In this analysis of Geertz through the criticisms he has drawn, I make use of the thought of Bernard Lonergan more fully than in my earlier work, particularly in the later sections of this article. Lonergan offers rich resources for such an analysis, especially in his account of scientific method, of meaning, and of the potential for collaboration between disciplines on the basis of what he calls “generalized empirical method”.

In the end, while I show many of these criticisms to be unfounded or ill-conceived, they do point to the care with which general

categories like culture should be used within theology, especially categories drawn from the human and social sciences, and how much effort may need to go into clarifying what understanding of these categories will be adequate to theology. Geertz’s work and the critiques it has drawn point to the ongoing problem of finding a way of addressing culture which is both interpretive (as it needs to be to serve theology well) and in some meaningful sense empirical (as is necessary if our theology is to be critical).

CULTURE AS TEXT REVISITED

A number of critics of Geertz agree with him insofar as they see the importance of interpretation as at least one aspect of what anthropology is about. At the same time, they see his work as limited, especially in his ethnographic practice, by an over-emphasis on the textual analogy for culture. There are a number of angles to this argument.

Firstly, there is the concern that treating culture as a text leads to the avoidance of important questions. For example, Martin would ask what effect the text has on its readers, Gottowik is concerned with the processes of negotiation by which the cultural text came to be formed, and Roseberry questions who is talking, to whom, about what, and with what action being called for. But these sorts of questions themselves presume the metaphor of culture-as-text, so that Geertz’s alleged avoidance of them cannot be put down to his use of that metaphor. Martin would like to raise psychological questions about the Balinese cockfight and claims that such questions are legitimate and important, which they may well be. But he goes on to say that any approach that excludes such questions “has serious limitations.” However, one can prescind from questions, either generally, because they are not the primary focus of one’s discipline, or in particular, because they are not within the scope of a particular research project, without excluding those questions.

A similar point might be made in response to those, like Kathryn Tanner, who see Geertz’s use of the analogy of text, as well as game and drama, as an avoidance of power analyses. Part of the problem is that, in defining his approach in opposition to mechanistic functional analysis, Geertz tends to distance power from meaning. But he does not thereby exclude power dynamics as a factor in social life. Rather, he points to the inadequacy of accounts which see power simply in terms of “might, desire, calculation, and interest” while ignoring the critical role of meaning in the dynamics of power. Tanner herself recognises this role when she notes the possibilities of outright conflict in the realm of meaning, and the way in which meaning has an important power dimension — that power struggles become struggles over meaning, struggles engaged in “that space that poststructuralism opens up between a cultural form and its multiple possible meanings.” This presumes some analysis of the meanings in a culture, which Geertz sees as the anthropologist’s specific task. Other disciplines — sociology, politics, economics — might ask further questions which fill out the full picture, but this does not invalidate the ethnographer’s task. In short, anthropology is not the whole of the human sciences.

Schneider notes a second concern about seeing culture as text — that it muddies the distinction between significance and signification. If social action is to be understood as text, as something carrying public signification, then it requires that the actors use established codes of meaning, and that they intend to bring such codes into play — i.e., they do not use the codes purely accidentally. When it comes to interpreting this social action, Schneider asserts, we need to know two things — what the public codes and conventions are, and whether or not they are being activated. This is all about signification — people deliberately signifying something by what they say and do, using public codes. Significance, on the other hand, is about what Schneider calls “ethno-interpretation” — local people interpreting some event after the fact, trying to understand it by weaving it into a broader fabric, creating, as they do so, what Geertz calls webs of significance. It is not about using established codes, but about the establishment of

2. Bernard Lonergan distinguishes between theological categories which are shared with other disciplines (general categories) and those which are peculiar to theology (special categories), such as grace, sin, and Incarnation. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Method in Theology (London: Darion, Longman & Todd, 1972), 282.


5. Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 47. She makes reference to Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further
new codes — about meaning being imposed on symbols before they can 
be used to impose meaning on reality.

Schneider's distinction is valid, and in fact matches Geertz's own 
distinction between models-of and models-for. But it remains unclear 
to what extent it pertains to a critique of Geertz's use of the metaphor 
of culture as text. Signification, deliberate communication using native 
codes, is of the nature of forethought. Significance, on the other hand, 
the imposition of meaning, is of the nature of afterthought. The only 
example Schneider gives of the latter is a theological interpretation 
proffered subsequent to a natural event, like an earthquake. But this 
is not what Geertz means by "webs of significance which we ourselves 
weave". His concern is with cultural, that is, shared, meanings. 
The interpretation of the earthquake given by the amateur theologian 
was a meaning for him or her, part of his or her personal webs of 
significance, but it is not yet part of the webs of significance woven 
by the culture. If it is successfully communicated and accepted, it 
might become part of those webs, a presumed-upon way of understanding 
an earthquake. Only then would it become part of Geertz's concern.

A third concern, also from Schneider, is that seeing culture as text 
leads to a confusion between interpretive and causal explanation. 
An informant says that Oglala tipis are round because of the significance 
of the circle in Oglala culture. In all historical likelihood, though, 
Schneider notes, they were shaped that way for eminently practical 
reasons. The latter is contrary to the position of the former. 
All of these reasons, valid in its own right, about historical, cause and effect, 
and there may well be hard evidence to support this answer. But for Geertz, 
culture is not a power 
to which things can be causally attributed, but a context in which they 
can by thickly described. Statements about the significance of the 
tipi's roundness answer a different question from the causal one — how 
the tipi is situated within the context of meaningful symbols which 
shape the culture today, what meaning the circularity of the tipi has 
for the Oglala. That meaning is not some phantasm in a hazy 
of unreality; it has real effects in the real world. Whatever the historical 
causes and the practicality, at the time, of making tipis round, if that 
roundness has taken on major significance in terms of the dominant 
symbol of the circle in that culture, then any attempt to change that 
shape for purely practical reasons — different materials or technology 
now available — would, one imagines, find considerable resistance 
precisely because of the meaning that has come to be invested in the 
circularity of the tipi.

Fourthly, Schneider voices a concern that seeing culture as text 
can lead to the ascription of greater and deeper levels of meaning to 
everyday cultural practices than they indeed warrant. He sees Geertz 
as succumbing to this temptation when he compares the cockfight to 
Macbeth. Could such classic drama, no matter how enthralling, be 
watched with such repetitive frequency as the cockfight is by the 
Balinese? Certainly one might want to ask about the possibility of an 
adoption to cockfights within the culture, beyond the addiction 
to gambling Geertz hints at in relation to problem gamblers. There 
would seem to be some evidence for this, as in Geertz's note about 
local people admitting that they are all cock crazy. But again, this 
does not do away with the question of meaning, no more than 
acknowledging that one is an alcoholic closes the question of what 
meanings are associated with drinking in one's own mind. Moreover, 
Schneider's issue is more with Geertz's particular analysis in this case 
than with the analogy of culture as text in itself. Geertz does not claim 
that cultural texts need be viewed as texts of "high culture".

Finally, Gulick suggests three ways in which the textual metaphor 
is too narrow for the task of interpretation. He points, first of all, to 
the wide diversity of sorts of writing, and of sorts of speech acts, and the 
difficulty of embracing them under the one rubric. But when Geertz, 
following Ricoeur, focuses on the way in which writing inscribes the 
"said" of a speech act, he does not deny such diversity on the side

11. On models of and for, see Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected 
14. This relates to what Lonergan calls the communicative function of meaning 
(Lonergan, Method, 78-79).
15. Bakker argues that at times Geertz does examine particular individuals and their 
behaviours, and that his chief example of thick description, the story of the raid on 
Cohon's house, can give the impression that thick description focuses on the lives of 
individuals; see Jan Willem Alexander Bakker, Enough Preliminaries Already! A 
Reconstruction of Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology (Utrecht: Interdisziplinair Social-
Wetenschappelijk Onderzoeksinstituut Rijksuniversiteit, 1988), 145 n.16. The whole point 
of the example, though, is Geertz's claim that we cannot understand what is going on in 
these individual lives except by placing them in the context of the cultural meanings 
which shape them.
17. IC, 14.
18. Lonergan challenges the division of the world into real things and "mere 
meaning". He notes that the proper distinction is the division of the real into the natural 
and the intentional. "Our conscious living and the meaning that it carries...do not belong 
to some shadowy world that really does not count. One mistakes the whole significance 
of meaning if one does not get that point correct: 'intentional' is not opposed to 'real'; it 
is opposed to 'natural'" (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Time and Meaning", in Philosophical 
and Theological Papers 1956-1966, Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. 
Doran (eds.), Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 6 [Toronto University of 
Toronto Press, 1996], 105). Chapter 3 of Lonergan, Method, gives a fuller account of 
his treatment of meaning.
20. IC, 450.
22. IC, 419.
23. Walter B. Gulick, "Reconnecting Geertz's Middle World", Sounds: An Inter-
either of the speech or of the writing. He simply affirms the possibility of fixing meaning beyond the original event. Then again, Gulick points out that "the course of social action has a greater richness than can be captured by writing." Of course it does. But Geertz does not claim that any single interpretation, or even the combined total of all possible interpretations, will necessarily capture the depth and fullness of meaning which a social action or cultural symbol might carry. This would be, he says, like trying to encapsulate poetry into a network of propositions. But the point is that poetry, and symbols in general, do confer meanings that can be reformulated in propositions, however insufficient these might be to the full meaning of the symbol. Unless we are going to give up on the task of studying culture altogether and rest content with "fascinated wonderment", it is to an understanding of meaning that we must turn, even if our findings will never exhaust the whole of that meaning. Gulick's other concern for narrowness is that the focus on inscribing the meaning of social action in writing runs the risk of ignoring all the features, such as body language or the possibility of inquiring into motivations, that accompany speech or action - what Ricoeur calls illocutionary and perlocutionary features. Yet Geertz makes clear, both in his theory and in his practice, that this is not necessarily the case. In theory, we find "Thick Description" insisting precisely on paying attention to the intentions and contextual issues which enable us to discern a wink from a twitch. In practice, "Deep Play" shows that treating the cockfight as a text, and inscribing its meanings in the text of his essay, does not stop Geertz from paying attention to such extra-locutionary factors as the body language of those around the pit.

Perhaps we might make these final and general points about these concerns with Geertz's metaphor of culture as a text. Doubtless there are elements of culture pertinent to the cockfight, for example, that Geertz ignores; no ethnography could attend to every cultural facet of such a complex social action. But nothing in these critiques suggests that this oversight of peculiarly cultural elements - as distinct from sociological, psychological or causal questions - derives from Geertz's use of the textual analogy for culture. For there are numerous other possibilities as to why he may have failed to account for some significant cultural element in the cockfight. He might have been unaware of the data, either through his own inadvertence or that of his informants. He might have been aware of the data, but failed to have an insight into its significance. Or he may have been aware of it, had some insight into its meaning, but judged in the end that it was not really relevant to the cockpit. All of these are possible, and would show up as lacunae in his analysis. But these critiques of Geertz's work do not show that a failed metaphor for culture is responsible for such lacunae.

A final point has to do with the overall significance of the metaphor of culture-as-text in the Geertzian corpus. I would question Bakker's assessment that this is the central analogy in Geertz's theoretical orientation. Geertz's strongest articulation of this analogy occurs in his essay "Deep Play" and "Thick Description", as I have detailed in my previous article. Yet in both these essays, he is happy to use other metaphors as well, such as game/play, art, story, and drama/actors, while in the latter essay, most of the references to text are to the ethnographic text itself - what the anthropologist writes - rather than to culture being understood as a text. By the time we get to Geertz's second collection of essays, culture as text hardly appears. In the one essay in which it is mentioned, it is set alongside two other analogies for interpretive anthropology, namely drama and game, with the assessment that all three have strengths and weaknesses; in fact, the text metaphor remains "the least well developed" of these three.

It would seem, therefore, that culture-as-text is just one way that Geertz reflects on the task of interpretation. While it held his attention in the early 1970s and rarely rates a mention afterwards, even at that time it is hardly the dominantly restrictive metaphor that the commentators we have studied make it out to be. The analogical character of the phrase is to be taken seriously, and not over-extended. What lies at the heart of Geertz's enterprise is not a particular analogy but "placing the systematic study of meaning, the vehicles of meaning, and the understanding of meaning at the very center of research and analysis."

24. Gulick, "Reconnecting", 139.
27. IC, 423, 451 n. 40.
29. Art (IC, 443, 451); drama (IC, 14-15, 17, 416-17, 420-21, 433, 437); story (IC, 446).
31. IC, 33. This echoes his comment of eight years earlier that the text metaphor is "theoretically undeveloped" (IC, 449).
32. There is some corroborative evidence for this evaluation in Geertz's reflections on his career. Construing a text is described as just one among a number of possible answers to anthropology's self-questioning about its aims (Geertz, After the Fact, 130). What has remained constant for him are his own "abiding interests - in meaning, in understanding, and in forms of life" (IC, 133). Geertz also claims that it was during his second stint of fieldwork in Bali (1957-1958) that he began to try to show that cultural systems could be read as texts (Clifford Geertz, "Passage and Accident: A Life of Learning", in An Atherton Light Antithetical Reflections on Philosophical Topics [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000], 17). When one looks at the works deriving from this period, though, one finds that, except for the study of the cockfight and the naga, they do not refer to culture as text as the operational analogy. What is clear, however, is that in all of them Geertz is seeking to interpret the meanings of social situations and symbols, and insomuch as he is doing this, he is reading them as texts.
33. IC, 114.
CRITIQUES OF INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AS UNEMPIRICAL

The General Issue of Validation

Other critics pose a more substantial critique of Geertz. They question the very idea that anthropology should or can be interpretive in nature if it is to continue to be a science. In particular, they raise the question of validation — how can one decide between two different interpretations of the same culture or cultural symbol? Certainly, Geertz believes that an interpretive approach can be empirical, and a number of commentators have noted the empirical commitment in his work. Sewell commends the strongly materialist, evolutionary grounding Geertz provides for his theory of culture. Marcus suggests that it is Geertz’s commitment to some sort of objectivism which accounts for his hesitancy to make the reflexive critique which would characterise a later generation of social scientists. Ortner claims that Geertz is “very much committed to the reality of the world, however much he insists...on its symbolic mediation”. All of these point to some measure of grounding in an empirical concern which leads Geertz to distance himself from views of interpretation which would see its only validation as self-validation — you either get it or you don’t.

For all Geertz’s intentions, strong concerns have been raised about his success in ensuring that his interpretive approach is truly scientific. Some critics are more concerned with his actual practice than his ethnographic theory. Mark Schneider, for example, says that Geertz overspecialises the evidence that he presents in favour of his interpretations. He fills out this claim with an analysis of the cockfight essay, working through its details, questioning various elements of the data Geertz presents and whether his insights stand up to those data or provide their simplest explanation. But Schneider does not question the possibility of valid interpretation itself. Rather, he has in mind stronger criteria of judgment than Geertz had. He also points out that the task of interpreting native communication and codes is very difficult, especially if they are being used unconsciously. But once again, this is not a denial of the possibility of such interpretation.

Other theorists, though, are concerned with the very methodology of interpretive anthropology. Without some adherence to standard scientific criteria, they see extreme subjectivism as the only prospect. These fears are fuelled by some of Geertz’s stronger comments, as when he speaks of ethnographies as fictions, akin to novels in some respects.

These sorts of statements drew the attention of Paul Shankman, an early and influential proponent of this critique. He points out the vague generality of the claims Geertz makes in “Thick Description” about how one might judge one hypothetical interpretation over another. The worth of an analysis is measured by the degree to which the author “is able to clarify what goes on, to reduce the puzzlement”, to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. A good interpretation “takes us into the heart” of what is to be interpreted, helping us figure out what it is about. A study is an advance if it is “more incisive”. Progress is made if there is “a refinement of debate”. Shankman is correct in his assessment that none of these statements offers any real criteria for appraisal. Rather, they simply reiterate in different ways that the point of interpretation is to understand meanings correctly. That is what we mean by clarifying, reducing puzzlement, getting to the heart of something, figuring out what it is about, cutting more incisively into its meaning. They present no criteria for judging if the clarity is genuine or is the clarity of an illusion, if the reduced puzzlement is a true account, if we have really reached the heart of the matter, if we have worked out what’s about, if our analytical incisions have found their goal. This problem is not confined to Geertz’s theory; it is also a characteristic of his ethnographic practice. We do not see him actually showing us how one might go about distinguishing a better from a worse interpretation.
since he spends little time engaging with alternative interpretations. And he is notorious for not responding to criticisms of his own interpretations, so that once again, little light is shed on this issue.

In his defence, though, we should point out that Geertz is not oblivious to this lack of criteria, or to the need for canons for a critical interpretive science. Shankman misreads Geertz as saying that it is a virtue that there are no criteria for telling a better from a worse account. A careful reading of the context of this statement makes clear that what Geertz considers a virtue is the condition of having no criteria, but the fact that his suggested approach forces us to face the question of verification. The virtue is that the terms of verification in anthropology are broadened beyond thin descriptions or the counting “of cats in Zanzibar” to embrace what it is that enables us to sort winks from twitches. Geertz sees it as a matter of time, though, before such terms of verification can be properly formulated in the ways the canons of appraisal are formulated for biological observation or physical experiment. At the time he was writing, anthropologists did not have the power to properly state anthropological theories, and so were “reduced to insinuating” them. Some would say it is not surprising that there should have been such a delay, given Geertz’s role as an early advocate of a newly-developing approach; the next generation would be the ones to pay greater attention to such lacunae. Still others point out that, if still not fully critically grounded, Geertanian interpretivism was better-grounded critically than the structuralist interpretivism which was its main challenger.

Others have recognised this need for criteria for verification in interpretations of meanings in various hermeneutic disciplines. Ricoeur begins to name principles of verification, in broad strokes at least, in one of the essays Geertz drew upon. He points to the process of debate within a community of scholars in which interpretations are confronted with other interpretations, argued for and against, and assigned, perhaps, some measure of probability in this process. In this interplay, agreement is sought, even if it may remain beyond our

reach. Bakker points to the ways anthropologists interact with the work of their colleagues, signalling aspects they have ignored, comparing it with other assessments of the same subject, noting unmerited conclusions and poor arguments, offering alternative interpretations. He suggests that this is what Geertz means when he speaks of the refinement of debate. Through such debate, concepts can be clarified, elaborated, extended, honed, restricted, or refuted. Mark Schneider also highlights communal scrutiny as a key element in the verification of interpretations. This process is perhaps most clearly visible when anthropologists re-examine the work of their colleagues of earlier generations and strongly challenge their findings. Moreover, in post-colonial times, this communal scrutiny has been enhanced as once illiterate informants have increasingly become critical readers of ethnographies about themselves, a reality highlighted by Gottowik. All these are different ways of describing the communal dimension of what Lonergan refers to as the self-correctional process of learning.

With these points Geertz would have no argument. He eschews views, such as that of Charles Taylor, which allow for no possibility of verification of interpretations except perhaps in a superior intuition which is able to understand a particular interpretation to be true. He also puts his own challenge to those social scientists who shy away from some areas of research, especially in relation to religion, by claiming; a priori, that such research cannot be empirical. He accepts the difficulty of such an enterprise — for example, the difficulty of describing the way in which belief appears to the religious believer — but notes that such difficulty does not of itself make the task unempirical. Mistakes might be made in the process, but for Geertz, “legitimate questions...are not invalidated by misconceived


51. See, for example, Shankman’s comment about Geertz’s “Enigma of silence” in this regard (Shankman, ”The Thick and the Thin”, 276.)

52. Shankman, “The Thick and the Thin”, 263, quoting IC 16.

53. IC 24. For further statements by Geertz as to his awareness of the critical problem and the need for work to be done in this area, see “Introduction”, in Clifford Geertz (ed.), Myth, Symbol, and Culture (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), xxi; IC 195-96, 364.


57. Bakker, Enough Profundities Already, 113. Geertz suggests that what gets better is “the precision with which we work each other” (IC 29).


59. Schneider, “Culture-as-text”, 831-832. Schneider also mentions the need for adequate evidence in favour of the interpretation and such philosophical basics as the principle of non-contradiction.

60. Gottowik, Konstruktionen Des Anderen, 13. Perhaps the best known example is the serious challenge put by Derek Freeman to Margaret Mead’s account of adolescent sexual permissiveness in Samoa, in Derek Freeman, Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmasking of an Anthropological Myth (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983).


63. Taylor is quoted in Shankman, “The Thick and the Thin”, 265. Shankman has Geertz agreeing with this sort of position, quoting Geertz’s remark that you “either grasp an interpretation or you do not”. But the context of this quotation shows that Geertz is in fact denying this position, seeing it as an element of what he calls the “setting sin” of interpretive approaches, which is to escape systematic assessment (IC 24).
answers".\textsuperscript{64} Certainly, he disagrees with those who see no point in striving for an empirical methodology:

I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one’s sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer.\textsuperscript{65}

Criteria from the Natural Sciences

In searching for canons of verifiability and validation for interpretive anthropology, people like Shankman turn to the standard criteria of the natural sciences, such as replicability, predictability, capacity to generate laws and theory, and the cumulative progress of results.\textsuperscript{66} We shall see later that this approach is not entirely adequate. But let us first note the ways in which these criteria might in fact apply to Geertz’s account of interpretive anthropology.

(a) Replicability

Replicability in the natural sciences means that an experiment performed by different researchers in different places under circumstances which are the same in all relevant aspects should yield the same results as the original. The more one moves away from physics, to chemistry, biology and psychology, the more replicability needs to be looked at in terms of probabilities and statistical law, rather than the tighter determinations of classical law.\textsuperscript{67} A fortiori for interpretive anthropology, for its concern is human actions, intentions, motivations, creations, meanings, and these are never fully determined. Moreover, it is concerned with concrete realities of the cultural setting of a particular time and place, which are unlikely to be matched again. We cannot set up a sociocultural situation in a laboratory and determine which variables will be in play and which not, in the way a physicist can in replicating a colleague’s experiment. Cultural analyses seek to offer an understanding of why things happen the way they do, without suggesting that cultural codes fully determine the conduct. Few cultural codes offer only one way of approaching often complex social situations, so that the actors are usually choosing from a range of culturally-appropriate responses (to say nothing of their freedom to initiate new responses, or do

\textsuperscript{64} IC, 61.
\textsuperscript{65} IC, 30.
\textsuperscript{66} Shankman, "The Thick and the Thin", 263, 264.
\textsuperscript{67} On classical and statistical approaches in science, see Lomongan, Insight, 76-77.

something considered inappropriate).\textsuperscript{68} And the more actors and variables there are, the more complex the variety of possibilities.

Having said this, though, we should also note that replicability in a suitably modified sense is possible in a hermeneutic ethnography. For Geertz, one measure of the validity of interpretations is their effectiveness in “making sense of data from which they were neither derived nor for which they were originally designed”.\textsuperscript{69} This would seem to be the essence of replicability — the utility of a theory or hypothesis beyond the understanding of the original data. Geertz hopes, for example, that his interpretation of the Balinese state in the nineteenth century will be found useful for the study of Bali in other periods, and of Indic Asia outside Bali.\textsuperscript{70} His interpretation, therefore, would receive some measure of confirmation if it was found to shed light on these broader concerns. By the same token, by the nature of ethnography’s concern for particulars, lack of such agreement would not invalidate his interpretation in the way one contrary instance invalidates a law of physics.

(b) Predictability

The same sort of analysis applies to predictability. In physical science, predictability means that, having set certain parameters and then applied our law, we can predict a range of future events or discoveries, from the results of simple experiments in a high school science class, to significant discoveries like the existence of Pluto, the curving of light around the sun, or the reality of the sub-atomic particles to whose existence our theory points. Again, the precision of such predictability varies the further removed one is from the “ideal case” of physics — when one gets to biology and the behaviour of animals, we are well into the realm of probabilities. But the basic principle remains the same.

When it comes to anthropology, Geertz is aware of the problems with predictability, akin to those with replicability. He admits that cultural theory is not strictly predictive. In a manner similar to clinical inference in medicine or psychology, ethnography looks at a social situation, examines the symbolic acts within the situation, and “attempts to place them within an intelligible frame”.\textsuperscript{71} It does not deal with projected outcomes of an experiment or the deduction of future states of some system, but with “matters already in hand”.\textsuperscript{72} Still, as with replicability, there is room for a modified predictability to offer some confirmation of interpretations. While it will not expect a precise
determination of events beforehand, modified predictability in anthropology means that interpretations must be able to “survive”, intellectually, subsequent events and situations\(^{73}\) by “continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view.”\(^{74}\)

An example is found in Geertz’s study of the cockfight. In the final footnote, he adds the brutal massacres of Balinese mainly by other Balinese after the failed coup attempt in Djakarta in 1965 as evidence for the validity of his interpretation of the Balinese cockfight. The deep tensions in the Balinese soul, as evidenced in the cockfight, help us to understand this, without implying that “the killings were caused by the cockfight, could have been preceded on the basis of it, or were some sort of enlarged version of it with real people in the place of the cocks – all of which is nonsense”.\(^{75}\) Geertz also notes that, while he believes his analysis of the theft of Cohen’s sheep offers understanding of what was going on in the subsequent events, there could have been a variety of different responses, any of which would have led to a different scenario to be interpreted.\(^{76}\)

Repliability and predictability, therefore, intersect with Bakker’s notion of fruitfulness as a criterion for the scientific value of an anthropological interpretation. It is a criterion to which Geertz himself points when he speaks of interpretations being recommended by “the further figures that issue from them: their capacity to lead on to extended accounts which, intersecting other accounts of other matters, widen their implications and deepen their hold”.\(^{77}\) One measure of fruitfulness is the extent to which a particular interpretation has influenced ongoing research and debate.\(^{78}\) By this measure, Geertz’s work rates highly. Bakker notes a number of examples: how the interpretation of the cockfight as a text has inspired the use of hermeneutic approaches in other ethnographies; how the marginal concept of involution came into the mainstream through Geertz’s \textit{Agricultural Involution} and how this work inspired ongoing study and debate about Indonesia; how his study of the Moroccan bazaar contributed to a focus on the role of culture in economic and other social matters, while his treatment of the \textit{negara} inspired ongoing debate about the role of ceremony in Balinese polity.\(^{79}\)

\(^{73}\) IC, 325.
\(^{74}\) IC, 27.
\(^{75}\) IC, 452 n.43.
\(^{76}\) IC, 18-19.
\(^{77}\) LK, 19.
\(^{78}\) Bakker, \textit{Enough Profundities Already}, 91.
\(^{79}\) Bakker, \textit{Enough Profundities Already}, 115-117.
\(^{80}\) LK, 57.
\(^{81}\) IC, 27.
couple of orienting pieces concerned with more foundational matters.\textsuperscript{82} (To this class of orienting pieces should be added, of course, the essay, "Thick Description", in which he makes this claim.) The same structure pertains in \textit{Local Knowledge}, where the first three papers are more foundational and methodological, while the rest look at particular conceptual structures and interpretations, such as charisma or art as a cultural system.

The initial foundational papers in each volume, though, do not exhaust his statements on methodological theory. The analysis of the Balinese cockfight, for example, certainly invokes theory at the second level when it applies Bentham's concept of deep play.\textsuperscript{83} At the same time, as we have seen, it contains more general reflections on the metaphor of culture as text and how one is to interpret such a text, reflections which operate at the level of methodological theory. In many of his writings, Geertz works in this same way - both at the level of theoretical concepts which help make sense of particular situations, and also at the more foundational level of methodology. The latter, rather than the former, is what makes his work so seminal and has given it such impact. Few scholars make use of his analysis of deep play, or of agricultural involution, for example, but there are many who refer to thick description or to culture seen as text.

Still, our basic point is not that Geertz operates at two levels of theory, but that he does not always clearly distinguish them. This leads him at times to attack what he himself is attempting to do. For example, he claims that one cannot write a "\textit{General Theory of Cultural Interpretation}", because "the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible."\textsuperscript{84} Now this is the essential task of theory building at the second level. And if he means by a \textit{General Theory} a set of concepts which will be taken a priori to be applicable to all cultures, past, present and future, then his statement is correct - there can be no generally applicable theory at this level. But there is another kind of \textit{General Theory} possible, one which elaborates such methodological elements as he himself would consider applicable to any interpretation - thick description, for example. There may well be some who would argue against the possibility of \textit{General Theory} even at this meta-level. But Geertz's correct claim that such general theory is not possible at the second level does not provide grounds in support of that further claim about third level theory.

Further confusion is caused by Geertz's failure to distinguish clearly or consistently enough between the first two levels - actual analyses, including the concepts, definitions and hypotheses which might be used therein, and those concepts, definitions and hypotheses themselves. It is this failure which concerns those who point to a certain conflation of description and explanation in his theory.\textsuperscript{85} Geertz says that this distinction is relative,\textsuperscript{86} that there can be no strict separation of theory and data,\textsuperscript{87} and that cultural theory is "unseverable from the immediacies thick description presents".\textsuperscript{88} In fact, of course, it is not, even in Geertz's own theory and practice. As he says, we do need theoretical notions.\textsuperscript{89} Whether or not I clearly articulate them, I bring to my field work understandings of charisma, of symbol, ideology, ritual, actor, function, to use some of Geertz's own examples.\textsuperscript{90} Geertz calls these concepts "made-in-the-academy",\textsuperscript{91} showing that, even to his mind, they are indeed severable from the particular interpretations in which they are used. This he owns, too, when he reflects on his actual practice of ethnography:

The 'confusion of tongues' - the view that social conflict is not something that happens when, out of weakness, indefiniteness, obsolescence, or neglect, cultural forms cease to operate, but rather something which happens when, like burlesque winks, such forms are pressed by unusual situations to operate in unusual ways - is not an idea I got from Cohen's story. It is one, instructed by colleagues, students, and predecessors, I brought to it.\textsuperscript{92}

Here Geertz offers a conceptual formulation of a theoretical model, independent of any reference to particular interpretive situations. (Even the reference to the burlesque winks of Ryle's thought-experiment serve as an example to aid understanding and not an essential part of the formulation). By so doing, he shows that the conceptual model, which he has found helpful in analysing at least one situation, preceded his analysis of the particularities to which it was applied and can in fact be "severed" from them. This would seem to tell against his claim that theoretical contributions are difficult to abstract from particular studies in which they occur, or that if they are

\textsuperscript{82} IC, 27. The orienting pieces are "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind" and "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man".

\textsuperscript{83} IC, 432-433.

\textsuperscript{84} IC, 26.

\textsuperscript{85} Shankman, "The Thick and the Thin", 263. This point was touched upon in my initial article in relation to the dual meanings Geertz gives to the term "thick description" (Koning, "Clifford Geertz's Account of Culture", 45-49).

\textsuperscript{86} IC, 27.

\textsuperscript{87} LK, 34.

\textsuperscript{88} IC, 25.

\textsuperscript{89} Clifford Geertz, "The World in Pieces: Culture and Politics at the End of the Century", in \textit{Available Light}, 223.

\textsuperscript{90} IC, 25, 28.

\textsuperscript{91} IC, 28. Geertz speaks elsewhere of moving from experience to ethnography "by way of summary figures somehow assembled along the way: worked-up images of how matters connect" (LK, 16). He also speaks of the value of definitions, which belong to this second level of theory, in enabling the development and control of a line of inquiry (IC, 90).

\textsuperscript{92} IC, 28.
so abstracted, they appear “commonplace or vacant”. The above abstract statement of the confusion of tongues model does not appear, to me at least, to be commonplace or vacant, no more than other theoretical contributions Geertz makes. It certainly can help us to understand these concepts and models if we see examples of how they might be applied to particular situations, but this is a separate issue from whether the concepts and models themselves are severable from the data to which they are applied or from which they were originally derived. Geertz makes this same point in his own theory when he discusses the use of models he borrows from Karl Polanyi to explain aspects of the Balinese negara. These models were not initially derived in relation to that cultural situation, but have been presented in conceptual form by Polanyi. The critical point, and what seems to be at the heart of Geertz’s concern, is not the derivation of the concepts or keeping them conjoined to their initial empirical base, but that the conceptual model be shown, rather than simply presumed, to be pertinent to the empirical conditions, the data, to which they are subsequently applied. As Geertz puts it, Polanyi’s models, and, I would add, all models, “can have enormous explanatory power where the conditions for their application obtain, but can be powerfully misleading when applied to situations where such conditions do not obtain”.

Thus, according to Geertz’s own practice and his reflection on his practice, there is no reason why theory on this second level should not be free to shape itself in terms of its own internal logic, despite the limitations he seeks to put on this freedom. I can create further definitions, hypotheses, and concepts and can work them into a coherent system of thought to my mind’s content. None of this affects what appears to be Geertz’s real concern in his statements about the need for theoretical formulations to hover low over the applications they govern—that these concepts and other elements at the level of theory have little cash-value in cultural anthropology if they do not continue to be found useful in explaining and reflecting the meanings of actual cultural situations. Geertz continually and correctly calls us back to the level of data and interaction with the particular as the touchstone of authentic ethnography. Watson comments Geertz for what he calls his realist ontology—his sense that there is a reality existing prior to and independent of his descriptions of it, that there are facts that are ascertainable on the basis of data, that wayward phenomena can challenge theories. While recognising that it is not a sufficient condition for a good interpretation, Geertz notes that accountability to the data is a necessary condition: “Footnotes help, verbatim texts help even more, detail impresses, numbers normally carry the day.” In his zeal in the direction of the particularity of anthropological data, and his continued concern about structuralism, he sometimes goes too far in his theorising about the relation between interpretations and the concepts used in them—that is, between our first two levels. But in his calmer moments, he gets the relation of these two levels right, as in the following passage:

[The theoretical framework in terms of which...an interpretation is made must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view.... One does not start [any effort at thick description] intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; as I have said, they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. If they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop being used and are more or less abandoned. If they continue being useful, throwing up new understandings, they are further elaborated and go on being used.]

Geertz’s failure consistently to make some key distinctions is one aspect of a lack in his work with regard to what Bakker portrays as another criterion relating to the role of theory in genuine scientific work, i.e., precision of conceptual apparatus. In my initial article, I noted a number of instances of confusion in the meaning of important theoretical terms, such as thick description, inscription, and culture-as-text. It is an issue of which Geertz on occasion signals his awareness, as when he admits that his terms “ethos” and “worldview” “are vague and imprecise; they are a kind of prototheory, forerunners, it is to be hoped, of a more adequate analytical framework”. Also, the

93. IC, 25.
94. Geertz, Negara, 198. See also Geertz’s discussion of his own use of models in this study of the negara (Negara, 9-10). Here again, he makes clear that while a model might be devised in relation to one cultural and historical setting, it can be severed from that setting and used in the study of other related settings, always, of course, with suitable care and attention to the particular data of the new setting.
95. IC, 25.
96. IC, 24-25.
98. IC, 17-18. Later in the same work, Geertz refers to “The Field” — i.e., the site of the ethnographer’s fieldwork — as “a powerful disciplinary force: assertive, demanding, even coercive” (119).
99. IC, 26-27. Geertz notes wryly in a footnote that this is “something of an idealization”, since a few people can passionately continue with an old idea when most have lost interest in it. “[I]t is almost more of a problem to get exhausted ideas out of the literature than to get productive ones in.... [F]or the moment, it remains true that old theories tend less to die than to go into second editions” (27 n5). This is reminiscent of the comment by Max Planck which apparently was often quoted by Longman, concerning paradigm shifts — they occur not when intellectuals understand how powerful the new paradigm is but when the old professors retire their chairs.
100. Koning, “Clifford Geertz’s Account of Culture”, in particular, for thick description, see pp. 45-49, and for inscription and culture-as-text, see pp. 49-54.
emphasis Geertz gives to some concepts in particular papers suggests that they are absolutely central to his approach, and yet we find them very quickly dropping from view.\textsuperscript{102} Thick description itself barely rates a mention by Geertz beyond the paper of that name, despite its considerable impact on other scholars in a range of disciplines. As Bakker points out, while descriptions of ethnographic data might necessarily be somewhat imprecise, there seems no reason why major conceptual principles should not be stated explicitly, systematically, consistently, and precisely, without hindering the interpretive program.\textsuperscript{103} This greater clarity of articulation would serve to enhance the verifiability of interpretive hypotheses.\textsuperscript{104}

(d) Cumulative Results

Positivists like Shankman are also concerned that Geertz's resistance to generalising theories disallows another key element of any genuine science – the possibility of the systematic accumulation of knowledge.\textsuperscript{105} His concern is sparked by this Geertzian passage:

[A]s a simple matter of fact, our knowledge of culture... cultures... a culture... grows: in spurts. Rather than following a rising curve of cumulative findings, cultural analysis breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder sorts. Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things. Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting its intellectual impulse. Previously discovered facts are mobilized, previously developed concepts used, previously formulated hypotheses tried out; but the movement is not from already proven theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed it.\textsuperscript{106}

This well-crafted paragraph is a good example of the danger of Geertz's brilliant rhetoric substituting for the humber skills of logic. For example, he tells us that every "serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning", before going on to say that it mobilises previously discovered facts, previously developed concepts and previously formulated hypotheses – suggesting the beginning is not so

sheer after all. In fact, Geertz has set up a paper tiger here.\textsuperscript{107} He challenges a naive understanding of "cumulative" as meaning a steadily and continually "rising curve" in which new studies "take up where others leave off" or where the move is a simple one "from already proved theorems to newly proved ones". However, even the most positivist of positivists, in a post-Kuhnian age, would not understand cumulative to mean a simple, ever-rising curve. In no empirical science, as we have just noted, do we have "proved theorems". Still, by allowing that our knowledge of cultures does grow, that we are able to "plunge more deeply into the same thing", or move from an "elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed it", Geertz does, in fact, allow for cumulative gains in cultural knowledge. This is not to say that this process is a purely linear one, and it certainly does not involve the following of a neat algorithm. Rather it involves all the hit-and-miss creativity of human learning, which, as previously noted, is a self-correcting process.

Similarities and Differences between Natural and Interpretive Sciences

In the light of this discussion of the scientific criteria of replicability, predictability, fruitfulness, the use of theories and concepts, precision, and the cumulative nature of the knowledge involved, we can see the validity of Schneider's warning about the danger of exaggerating the differences between the semiotic approach and that modelled on the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{108} Certainly there are differences, but there are also similarities, and it can help to delineate both the differences and the similarities more clearly.

Firstly, some views hold that natural science provides a certainty of knowledge which hermeneutic disciplines can never attain. This assertion is based on a false view of the natural sciences into which both Geertz and his critic Shankman fall on occasion. Shankman expresses concern about the genuinely empirical nature of an enterprise whose findings are seen as "inextricably incomplete",\textsuperscript{109} while Geertz notes that the classic ethnographic studies, whatever their empirical warrant, are "not scientifically tested and approved" hypotheses.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{102} Bakker, \textit{Enough Profundities Already!}, 37, 111. Bakker sees this continual shifting of concepts as counting against the coherence of Geertz's presentation of his methodology.

\textsuperscript{103} Bakker, \textit{Enough Profundities Already!}, 112.

\textsuperscript{104} Shankman, "The Thick and the Thin", 263.

\textsuperscript{105} IC, 25.

\textsuperscript{106} IC, 25.

\textsuperscript{107} Geertz makes the same false dichotomy when he writes: "I have always thought that understanding social life entails not an advance toward an omega point, 'Truth,' 'Reality,' 'Being,' or 'the World,' but the restless making and unmaking of facts and ideas" (LK, 33). As in the natural sciences, it is that very making and unmaking that leads us closer towards knowledge of truth and reality.

\textsuperscript{108} Schneider, "Culture-as-Text", 831.

\textsuperscript{109} Shankman, "The Thick and the Thin", 264, quoting IC, 29. In the same context, Geertz says that ethnographic assertion is "essentially contestable".
They are interpretations, or misinterpretations, like any others, arrived at in the same way as any others, and as inherently inconclusive as any others, and the attempt to invest them with the authority of physical experimentation is but methodological sleight of hand.\textsuperscript{110}

Both anthropologists show a misunderstanding of the function of theory in the hard sciences, and of what comprises the authority of physical experimentation. For there, too, theories and accepted understandings are the best available hypotheses at the time, to be used as far as they are helpful in explaining the data, until they are superseded or sublated by superior theories.\textsuperscript{111} Science does not produce absolute truth, but chooses between theories in terms of their continued usefulness and effectiveness.\textsuperscript{112} Each theory gains stature the more it is verified, replicated, and found to have predictive value. But at best, each advance represents an asymptotic approach to the truth, and never arrival at that goal. This does not quite make it the "nearest amenable and illuminating lie" which Geertz suggests.\textsuperscript{113}

Secondly, a clearer distinction between anthropology and social sciences such as economics, political science or sociology, might prove helpful. In fact, I will suggest that anthropology may well be better aligned with history than with the social sciences, so that where I use the term "social sciences" in the remainder of this section, I am excluding anthropology from its meaning. Geertz himself is not always clear whether the paradigms he is offering are intended to be for anthropology alone or for social sciences as well. At the same time, he suggests at least two significant similarities between history and anthropology - their common concern for particularities and the circumstantial, and their attempts to understand the worldview of people different from ourselves. For history, such understanding requires effort because the people studied lived in another time and perhaps another place; for anthropology, it is needed because they share a different cultural outlook and perhaps live far away. Geertz himself has touched on the analogy between anthropology and history in at least one place.\textsuperscript{114}

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\textsuperscript{110} IC 23.
\textsuperscript{111} Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Isomorphism of Thomist and Scientific Thought", in Collection, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 156. Geertz further points out that social analysis which claims a strong empiricism - "laws-and-causes social physics" - was seen, by the early 1980s, not to be productive of that had been promised in terms of the scientific values of prediction, control, and testability. He suggests that this is one reason that interpretive theory had taken off so readily in the preceding ten years (JK, 3).
\textsuperscript{112} Michael Carrithers, "Is Anthropology Art or Science?", Current Anthropology 31, no. 3 (1990), 264-66.
\textsuperscript{113} LJ, 184, quoting Nelson Goodman.
\textsuperscript{114} Clifford Geertz, "The State of the Art", in Available Light, 118-133.
represents the heuristic anticipation of the structures of the data. Thus, in physics, the lower blade takes in such things as measurements and curve-fitting which may lead to hypotheses about particular laws; the upper blade involves differential equations, requiring specific determinations. The way Lonergan speaks in the last quotation sees history (the lower blade) as providing evidence for sociology and psychology (the upper blade) while these disciplines provide greater interpretative power to the historian.

This image of the scissors might suggest a similar division of labour between anthropology and the social sciences. Anthropologists like Geertz would be left free to do what they do best – pursue their particular understandings of particular cultures and cultural systems without feeling the need to apologise for (or, in Geertz’s case, polemicise about) not producing generalisations and universal laws. At the same time, particular anthropological studies would provide an ever growing field of evidence for the social sciences, whose proper function is to be concerned with routines and laws and generalisations. Moreover, the concern for validation in anthropology can then move away from slavish devotion to the canons of the natural sciences and focus where it needs to, on canons appropriate to dealing with meaning and the control of meaning.

Objectivity

In all this discussion, the real issue, of course, is objectivity. In particular, it is the need to have a critical understanding of objectivity which does not take the methods of the natural sciences as the paradigm for all true knowledge. Here, too, Lonergan offers a way forward in his treatment of objectivity, though we cannot set out more than the broad outlines of what he offers.

To understand what objectivity is for Lonergan, we need to be aware of his distinction between two different ways of understanding what knowing is. The naïve realist approach sees the real as what is already out there now, just waiting for us to bump into it or see it so that its objective status is forced upon us. The second is Lonergan’s own approach, which he does not ask us to accept on his word but which he invites each person to confirm in his or her own experience.

This he calls a critical realist approach, which sees knowing not as a single operation but as a dynamically integrated complex of operations on different “levels” – experiencing, understanding, judging – between which one moves by asking questions. This set of operations terminates in a judgment, an affirmation of what is the case. It is in such a judgment that we attain the real.

Because knowing is a complex of operations, objectivity has a number of dimensions for Lonergan. The principal or complete notion of objectivity pertains not to any single judgment but “is contained in a patterned context of judgments” in which I, the subject, am able to affirm that I am a knower, to affirm the existence of other objects in the universe of being, and to affirm that I am not those objects. Besides this principal or complete notion, Lonergan distinguishes three other senses of objectivity. Absolute objectivity is not concerned with the whole context of judgments, but “pertains to single judgments as single”. Each correct judgment refers to a virtually unconditioned – that which has conditions but whose conditions have, in fact, been fulfilled. Because of this, while the virtually unconditioned is not “intrinsically absolute”, it is “de facto absolute”, and so enters the public realm and “is withdrawn from relativity to its source”. Normative objectivity comes perhaps closest to common sense understandings of objectivity. It is objectivity “as opposed to the subjectivity of wishful thinking, of rash or excessively cautious judgments, of allowing joy or sadness, hope or fear, love or disgust, to interfere with the proper march of the cognitive process”. It is grounded in the authentic unfolding of the human desire to know. Finally, Lonergan speaks of experiential objectivity. This is “the given as given” – “prior to questioning and independent of any answers”. It is everything about which I enquire, what is presupposed in my questioning. And being prior to my questioning, the given as given is “unquestionable and indubitable”.

Much more could be said about Lonergan’s rich and nuanced account of objectivity. The key point for our purposes is to note the deeper issues at stake in the questions raised by both Geertz and his critics about how meaning can be treated in an empirical way, and to suggest that Lonergan offers an approach which avoids both the fallacy that only the natural sciences can provide critical grounding for their discoveries and the trap of seeing any discipline which takes meaning seriously as necessarily relativist or subjectivist.
CONCLUSION

In this article, we have clarified aspects of Geertz's account of culture and its study in the light of criticisms which have been raised against it. We began with criticisms from those who are open to an interpretive approach but who disagree with the kind of interpretivism to which Geertz subscribes, and particularly what they see as his over-emphasis on the metaphor of culture as text. This enabled us to more clearly delineate his use of this metaphor, and to evaluate to what extent it is in fact dominant for him. Secondly, we examined those who are sceptical about any sort of interpretive approach, particularly because of the vagueness around issues of validation. We saw how some of the criteria of scientific method can apply, in modified form, to interpretive anthropology, though Geertz's lack of precision and systematisation can hide this from view. We concluded that Geertz's understanding of anthropology is more closely allied to history than to the sciences, and that issues of validation need to look to an account of meaning and its grounding in human knowing.

These clarifications have both direct and indirect import for theology. My previous article noted the significance of culture as a theological category, and the particular influence of Geertz's account on theology. Any light shed on his account will help us evaluate how advised such usage is. Less directly, the account above of how a discipline like anthropology, if it takes its object - culture - hermeneutically and not simply in a functionalist fashion, might aspire to being empirical and critical sheds light on similar claims for other disciplines, including theology, in which meaning is also central. The critical exigence will be formulated differently than it would in the natural sciences, but remains nonetheless important for sciences which deal with the world mediated by meaning.