ON DUALISM AND MONISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY:

THE CASE OF CLIFFORD GEERTZ[1]

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Introduction

Clifford Geertz is one of the most celebrated anthropologists in twentieth-century anthropology. Starting his career in the late nineteen-fifties, he represented the American branch of symbolic anthropology, also known as interpretive anthropology. Geertz's work continues to influence present-day authors, even after anthropology shifted to different topics than those lying within the range of Geertz's interests. Even in 2005, almost forty years after the publication of Geertz's influential paper on religion, Kevin Schilbrack argued that Geertz's theory of religion 'continues to be a fruitful way to understand an important aspect of religious beliefs and practices' (Schilbrack 2005: 429–430). This is not really surprising, for Geertz was the fifth most quoted scholar in anthropology between 2005 and 2010, and his book, *The interpretation of cultures*, was his most quoted book, ranking first in the list (see Anthropology Author Citation Rankings, n.d.). Geertz was also well known outside anthropology, being quoted by such influential academics as Richard Rorty, Quentin Skinner and Hans Medick (Kuper 1999: 114, 119; Medick 1987). Daniel Pals wrote in 1996: 'His critics are few; his admirers legion' (quoted from Frankenberry and Penner 1999: 617). To dispel any doubts about Geertz's achievements, one should read Robert Darnton's words: 'As an anthropologist, philosopher, political scientist, literary critic, and all-around, all-star intellectual, Clifford Geertz helped a vast public make sense of the human condition' (2011: 197).

The author of this article does not think that Geertz deserves such admiration. Only if we dislodge Geertz from his pedestal will we be able to discern not only the shortcomings of his theory, but the reality of his contribution to anthropology as well.

The aim of this article is therefore to offer a critique of Clifford Geertz, namely his theory as sketched out in *The interpretation of cultures*, in which Geertz presented himself as a theory builder with high theoretical aspirations. As Paul Rabinow observed, Geertz's aim was to reinvent anthropology (Rabinow 1986: 242). Anthropology in Geertz's sense overlapped with other disciplines: for the purposes of his grandiose task he quoted philosophers, ethologists, psychologists and sociologists. However, it was not that other anthropologists of the time did not quote non-anthropologists: the difference is in how they did so. While Geertz's contemporaries were mainly interested in the problems of anthropology and occasionally quoted non-anthropologists for purposes of solving specifically anthropological problems, anthropology in Geertz's writings spills over into other fields and unites them in a general science of man. And compared to others of his contemporaries, Geertz's writing style represented a breath of fresh air. To summarize, his anthropology represented an ambitious interdisciplinary project.

But regardless of how splendidly written *The interpretation of cultures* is, it contains an unsolved problem. If we focus on some of the ideas in it, sooner or later we will find that the book tries to espouse two incommensurable theories. Despite his pleasant style, this double espousal simultaneously makes the book very hard to understand. More importantly, though, it undermines Geertz's entire anthropological project. Alas, contrary to Schilbrack, I do not think that Geertz's theory is at all fruitful. But why argue with Geertz today? Has there been not enough criticism?

First, my critique differs from earlier critiques in two respects. Other authors have criticised Geertz from different standpoints. Some critics, for example, say that Geertz's framework was not well suited to a political analysis (Kuper 1996: 95). Another criticism comes from Talal Asad, who claimed that Geertz's view did not take into account disciplinary practices and thus presented a distorted view of the phenomenon of religion (Asad 1993: Ch. 1). Another, probably better known critique is that of Rabinow, according to whom Geertz stood midway between anthropology as an objective enterprise and anthropology as a textual enterprise (Rabinow 1986). Geertz was also attacked for being a relativist (Gellner 1992: 49).

I understand the critiques, but I think they are only partly justified. Competing theories usually present different standpoints, either incommensurable (e.g. relativism vs. universalism) or commensurable (e.g. they allow interpretive anthropology to be

merged with a toolbox that is suitable for a different kind of analysis). They are either radically disjunctive, or they can be accommodated to one another.

I am attempting a different kind of critique, a critique from within. It is closer to some points made by Asad and also by Nancy Frankenberry and Hans Penner (1999). My critique strives to uncover the internal contradictions in Geertz's overall project, contradictions that spring from the sources that influenced his anthropological outlook, namely the dualism of social theory and a specific version of monism. Both can be found in Geertz's famous collection *The interpretation of cultures*, a dual allegiance that creates unsolvable tensions within the book, making it difficult to grasp as a whole. Therefore, as Geertz's claims are sometimes unclear or confusing, my study resembles the work of a prosthetist in that I am designing the missing limbs of the bodies of various theories. Thus, I spell out what is implicit in Geertz's account before going on to compare his theory (which is actually two theories) to similar theories of his contemporaries and rivals in order to highlight certain inconsistencies in his approach.

Although I am coming somewhat late to the debate over Geertz's theory, I believe further criticism is justified. I further suggest that theory-building is not a prime task of anthropologists. Conducting armchair research in a library instead of carrying out extensive fieldwork is surely not the proper anthropological method. However, anthropologists should from time to time think about their own approaches and listen to the theorist's point of view. Theoretical thinking may clarify some points in one's approach and dispose of confusions and contradictions. What is also true is that anthropologists do not simply describe cultures and customs; they also interpret data or insert facts into some comprehensible frame, thus going beyond the immediate. Anthropologists always build theories willy-nilly, which in turn supports their interpretations and judgements, although in most cases the theories usually remain hidden and implicit. Since Geertz presented himself as a theory builder, it is legitimate to criticise his work in that regard.

This brings me to another point. We study the histories of our disciplines not because of some antiquarian interest, but because we want to draw some lessons from them – moral, theoretical, practical, and so on. Some crucial debates in anthropology can be enlightening and refreshing even today. The obsolescence of a particular paradigm or an outcome of a bygone discussion does not make the paradigm or the discussion unworthy of our interest – quite the contrary, especially as an obsolete

approach is still considered fruitful by some. Let me thus start with a rather philosophical topic.

Dualism in the social sciences

In *The interpretation of cultures* (henceforward *IC*) there are two recurring motifs. The first goes something like this: when we study a particular society we should discern two levels of reality – a social system and a cultural system. Geertz himself espoused this view in his paper 'Ritual and social change', originally published in 1957, in which he suggested how this particular framework can well explain social change:

> … the inability of functional theory to cope with change lies in its failure to treat sociological and cultural processes on equal terms; almost inevitably one of the two either is ignored or is sacrificed to become but a simple reflex, a 'mirror image,' of the other. (Geertz 1973: 143)

Throughout his book Geertz insisted on discriminating between the two levels of inquiry.[2] They are two independent levels of integration, each having its own particular focus: the social system cannot be reduced to culture and vice versa. It is nonetheless possible that they coincide with each other, resulting in the social stability of a particular society. But when a particular social system does not coincide with its culture, as was the case for the failed Javanese ritual, more or less tumultuous social change occurs (Geertz 1973: 144). But what exactly do the terms mean? How can we tell culture and social system apart? In Geertz's words, we have to

> see the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself. (ibid.: 144)

A few pages later Geertz reformulates the same idea by opposing a 'logico-meaningful' component to a 'causal-functional' component, the former being a synonym for culture, the latter a synonym for social system (Geertz 1973: 146).

Geertz was not the only writer, and certainly not the first, who argued for such a distinction. His analytical framework has its origins in a synthesis of Talcott Parsons's sociology and Clyde Kluckhohn's cultural anthropology (Kuper 1999: 52,

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[2] The same framework can be found Geertz's essay about ideology from 1964 (1973: 203) and three articles from 1966: 'The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man' (especially 1973: 38–42), 'Religion as a cultural system' (1973: 92) and 'Person, time, and conduct in Bali' (especially 1973: 361).

82). A quote from Parsons demonstrates that they were of the same kin:

> A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relation to their situation, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols. (Parsons 1952: 5–6)

However, nor was Parsons the first writer to work with this analytical framework. If we want to see where the roots of his theory are, we should travel back to the seventeenth century, to the philosophy of René Descartes. This requires a brief clarification.

Descartes's philosophy was based on a belief that people have both bodies and minds; this is known as Cartesian dualism. As a theory, it has been subjected to constant reformulations in philosophy ever since. We find that the philosophies of John Locke and Immanuel Kant share the same assumptions about human beings (Rorty 2012; Cf. Asad 1993: 66).

Original Cartesian dualism was conceived on the individual level: there was an individual human being who consisted of two components – a body and a mind. Parsonian sociology rearranged the traditional dualism on the systemic and sociological level. Every individual being is integrated into two independent systems, sharing the collective *res cogitans* (mental substance) or culture, but also being entangled in the collective *res extensa* (corporeal substance) or social system. The two systems of integration are both manifested on the level of the individual human being and both transcend it. The individual human being, as the social sciences teach us, is not an inventor of his or her own social system and culture. Conversely, an individual, or as Parsons says a personality structure, cannot be reduced to either a culture or a social system (Geertz 1973: 145; Kuper 1999: 79; Parsons 1952: 6). As Chris Jenks says, Parsons's theory consists of three subsystems: physical, cultural and personal (Jenks 2005: 80). This threefold division corresponds to the academic division of labour between sociology, anthropology and psychology (Geertz 1973: 125).

This is what I call dualism. We should not be led astray by the fact that the dualism consists of three components – cultural, social and individual. Sometimes, a fourth dimension represented by biology is added to the scheme. While biology has not been much an issue for the social sciences, psychology has rather had the status of an embarrassing residue. Sociologists and anthropologists have for a long time

acknowledged the existence of differences among individuals, but this did not stop them from omitting individuals from their analyses. Individuals were rather a means of accessing distinctive cultures and social structures. The individual residue was something left over for psychology. I argue that this triadic (or quadratic) scheme evolved from dualism, inherited dualism, shares its basic assumptions, and does not alter dualistic tenets at all.

Parsons did not invent dualism, nor did he invent its sociological version. In the social sciences we can find dualism under various guises. It is present in the Marxist notions of structure and superstructure, and it also underlies Weber's polemics with Marxism in *The Protestant ethic* (Bendix 1962: 49, 86). Not surprisingly, it is also present at the core of Émile Durkheim's sociology.

In Parsons's scheme we hear echoes of Durkheim's distinction between social morphology and social physiology, the former being the physical arrangement of a society, the latter being its system of collective representations (Durkheim 1909; cf. Lukes 1972: 9–10). But the individual level is also present in Durkheim's work, in which it contributes to the concept known as *homo duplex*, which expresses the constant tension between what is purely individual and what is not in a concrete human being (Durkheim 1973). Durkheim expressed the same idea as the difference between a set categories of thought per se and the fact that there are differences between how individuals understand the categories they share (ibid.: 152; Durkheim 2010: 19).

Talcott Parsons inherited social Cartesianism from Durkheim and Weber and in turn influenced Clifford Geertz. Dualism represents what Geertz and his anthropological colleagues had in common. To demonstrate the grip of dualism among anthropologists, let us look at some examples.

One of the traditional dualistic differences in anthropology is that between belief and ritual. It is important to stress that this difference delimited the field of anthropology before Durkheim became one of its main sources of inspiration and before the modern British school came to dominate the field. One of the crucial issues for late nineteenth-century anthropology was the question of which came first, the ritual or the belief?

Functionalism, as well as the disciples of Franz Boas in the United States, were heirs to this evolutionary debate (Kluckhohn 1942; Malinowski 1992; Radcliffe-Brown 1952), although the question of the primacy of belief or ritual gradually faded

away. We find dualism in Evans-Pritchard's distinction between mystical *notions* and ritual *behaviour* (1976). Dualism in British anthropology is still persistent many years later: as Raymond Firth said, 'ritual can be directly observed, whereas meaning can only be inferred' (Firth 1959: 139). Earlier twentieth-century anthropology, even though it more or less explicitly espoused the difference between social structure and collective representations, was nonetheless rather suspicious of the latter. As Jarvie trenchantly expressed it: 'At least ritual is an understandable, tangible thing, which is more than you can say for the superstitions behind rituals' (Jarvie 1970: 58; and passim).

Social anthropology in the ninety-sixties shook off its prejudice towards the systematic study of belief and became more interested in collective representations and in what people think. Douglas's terms 'grid' and 'group' (2003), Tambiah's conceptualization of a scientific community (1990: 141) and Asad's proposed framework with which to understand the emergence of anthropology (1993: 19) can all be said to express the same dualism. Perhaps not surprisingly, the writings of Lévi-Strauss are cast in dualistic terms. Lévi-Strauss made a distinction between myth and ritual and was interested in collective representations, in social structure as an ideal form and in the working of the universal human mind (1963, 1983). We can summarize Lévi-Strauss as making a difference between real and ideal, while he was more interested in the latter.

Our list could go on and on. However, I hope I have showed that social Cartesianism has a long and respectable tradition within anthropology. Social Cartesianism approached reality as consisting of two kinds of entity. Terms such as rite, ritual, body, symbol, social structure, group, social organization and social action represent various levels of the corporeal component. Terms as culture, meaning, idea, mental map, cognitive orientation, world view, belief, myth, perspective, grid and frame of reference represent various levels of the ideal component. Although dualism appeared under many guises that differ in terminology, the same dualism is involved. It can be generally described as an opposition between 'out there/material' and 'in head/immaterial'.

The problem with dualism is that it is very close to Western common-sense preconceptions. It is somehow natural for Westerners to think in dualistic terms because it is very closely connected with their cultural heritage. I thus assume that dualism was not a conscious choice for most anthropologists of the time and that

therefore its adoption did not present a serious problem. The notion was only adjusted for the purposes of scientific investigation. But dualism has always had an adversary, which, despite having been less popular, exposes some of its weaknesses and failures. To it, we now turn.

Monism in the social sciences

Not only was Geertz a pupil of Parsonian sociology, he often referred to the Oxonian philosopher Gilbert Ryle, to whom the second motif I mentioned earlier is related. The motif comes from the book *The concept of mind* from 1949, and it is also present in Ryle's article 'The Thinking of Thoughts' from 1968.[3]

Ryle represents what I call monism, which has its modern origins in Spinoza's philosophy (Scruton 2002: 37; Magee 1997: 110). While Descartes claimed that there is a difference between the body and the mind, Spinoza maintained that 'reality and conception *coincide*, so that relations between ideas correspond exactly to relations in reality' (Scruton 2002: 39). The controversy was still alive three hundred years later, represented by Ryle's book. Let me summarize dualism once again, now in Ryle's own words:

> The official doctrine, which hails chiefly from Descartes, is something like this.…
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> Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers. So a man's bodily life is as much a public affair.…
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> But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognisance of the states and processes of my own mind. A person therefore lives through two collateral histories, one consisting of what happens in and to his body, the other consisting of what happens in and to his mind. The first is public, the second private. (2000: 13)

Against this Cartesian doctrine, which is also known as the dogma of the ghost in the machine, Ryle advocated an approach that can be traced back to Spinoza. Though Ryle did not mention Spinoza, there is a direct link that connects the two, namely the

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[3] Adam Kuper said that Geertz started quoting Ryle at a later stage in his career (Kuper 1999: 82). Ryle is not quoted in 'Ritual and Social Change', but his presence started to recur in Geertz's writings from the beginning of the nineteen-sixties Kuper's words are misleading because the sixties can be considered as the beginning of Geertz's career. Geertz quoted Ryle in 1962 in 'The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind' (57–59), twice in 1966 – in 'Religion as a Cultural System' (95) and in 'Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali' (362). And Ryle is present also in 'Ideology as a Cultural System' from 1964 (214). Finally, Ryle is present in opening essay 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' (6–7) written for *IC*. The fact that Ryle's anthropological contemporaries (even in Oxford) did not reflect his work poses an interesting problem.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is not mentioned in Ryle's book either, but we know that Schopenhauer held Spinoza in high regard especially because of his critique of Cartesian dualism (Magee 1997: 110). And not only was Ryle's philosophy close to Schopenhauer because of the similarity of arguments (ibid.: 124, 135). As Bryan Magee noted, Ryle unconsciously recycled Schopenhauer's central thesis (Magee 1999: 298).

There is a tradition of reasoning connecting Spinoza through Schopenhauer with Ryle and subsequently with Geertz. Geertz quoted Ryle to support the thesis that culture has a public character. A clown

> trips and tumbles on purpose.... The spectators applaud his skill at seeming clumsy, but what they applaud is not some extra hidden performance executed 'in his head'.... Tripping on purpose is both a bodily and a mental process, but it is not two processes, such as one process of purposing to trip and, as an effect, another process of tripping (Ryle 2000: 33, 34; cf. Geertz 1973: 59).

And further: 'When we describe people as exercising qualities of mind, we are not referring to occult episodes of which their overt acts and utterances are effects; we are referring to those overt acts and utterances themselves' (Ryle 2000: 26).

In Ryle's approach it makes sense to study one genus of phenomena only – and these phenomena have a public character. For Ryle it does not make sense to study one genus of phenomena happening in people's heads and other genus of phenomena happening to people's bodies. It therefore follows that there are all phenomena are public and that none can be characterised as private. The mind, Ryle insisted, is not its own place: 'the chessboard, the platform, the scholar's desk, the judge's bench, the lorry-driver's seat, the studio, and the football field are among its places' (Ryle 2000: 50; Geertz 1973: 83). Neither thinking nor culture can be private.[4]

Geertz was the first among anthropologists to make use of Ryle for the purpose of the social sciences.[5] We can say that Geertz socialised Ryle, for *The concept of mind*

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[4] Here I do not discuss Wittgenstein's influence on Geertz, as it would go beyond the scope of the present paper. As A. C. Grayling pointed out, there was some overlapping of ideas between OLP (ordinary language philosophy), of which Ryle was a part, and Wittgenstein's late philosophy, but there is no sign of vivid mutual influences (Grayling 2001: 128). I omit Wittgenstein from my analysis and restrict my discussion to Ryle, nor am I interested in criticisms of Ryle's argument here either (cf. Bloor 1970; Scruton 2002: 61–62).

[5] Since then interesting works have appeared influenced by Ryle's, for example, Heelas and Lock's reinterpretation of Dinka cosmology as a possible way of construing the mind without becoming a dualist (Heelas and Lock 1981).

lacks any deeper sociological insight.[6]

As just noted, then, this is the second motif that readers can find in *IC*. According to this motif, through its symbols culture has acquired a public character. According to Sherry Ortner,

> Geertz's most radical theoretical move was to argue that culture is not something locked inside people's heads, but rather is embodied in public symbols, symbols through which the members of a society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos…. (Ortner 1984: 129)

I agree with Ortner that Geertz's move was indeed radical. His application of Ryle's monist philosophy exposed the dualism of anthropology that was current at the time and made it harder for anthropologists to insist on the difference between the social body and the cultural mind. But since Geertz made use of dualism as well, it is not easy to conclude whether he himself was aware of the consequences and radical nature of his ideas. When we think it out thoroughly, dualism and monism are in essence incommensurable, two different apprehensions of the world. As they can be found together in *IC*, it is they that create the tension that makes the book hard to comprehend.

Parsons and Ryle in the same boat

Let us move from discussing the differences between dualism and monism to the theoretical consequences of the two approaches. Given that Ryle maintained that there are not two worlds, the corporeal and the ideal, but only, one, how is it then possible to distinguish between body and mind? Or, if we put it in sociological jargon, if there exists only one genus of phenomena – publicly accessible phenomena – how can we distinguish between culture and social structure?

I will demonstrate the key problem, namely the incommensurability of the two metaphors, with reference to classic anthropological notions that represent different levels of dualism: symbol and meaning, ritual and myth, culture and social structure. All of these represent the common stock of anthropological jargon, and they can certainly be found in Geertz's work too. It would be a mistake to consider these notions as being independent of one another. Together they usually form a more or less coherent theory, even if anthropologists do not articulate this explicitly. I will

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[6] It is important to note that, whatever its name, Ryle's book is about '*what people do…*not about *how brains make it possible* for people to do what they do' (Dennett, 2000: xiii).

discuss dualism and monism in the writings of Geertz and two of his contemporaries, Edmund Leach[7] and Marshall Sahlins.

a) Symbol and Meaning

We have just seen that Geertz owes to Ryle a crucial notion about the nature of symbols and culture namely that through its symbols culture acquires a public character. Let us first recall Ortner's quote. Her article does not make it clear who advocated the idea that culture is locked inside people's heads. Ortner's praise of Geertz's treatment of symbols might have been stressed in comparison to the concept of collective representations put forward by Durkheim and his followers, or Schneider's symbolic anthropology, which was interested in 'understanding the *internal logic* of systems of symbols and meanings', or Turner's project of symbolic anthropology, which was influenced by Durkheim, or finally Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, which aimed at exploring the workings of the universal human mind (Ortner 1984: 130, 135–136).

All the aforementioned theories are mentioned in Ortner's article. If, however, we peek into Geertz's opening essay from *IC*, we find that his notion of public culture is put forward in opposition to the cognitive anthropology of Ward Goodenough and Stephen Tyler (1973: 10–12):

> Variously called ethnoscience, componential analysis, or cognitive anthropology (a terminological wavering which reflects a deeper uncertainty), this school of thought holds that culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior. (1973: 11)

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[7] Geertz's relation to Leach, let alone British anthropology, was an intricate one. In his early writings on religion, Geertz attacked functionalism for its inability to explain social change (Geertz 1973: 143; cf. Leach 2004: 10). No later than in Leach's *Political systems of Highland Burma* from 1954 (Leach 2004) can we find the attitude that attempts to face the challenge of explaining social change seriously. Five years later, a similar argument to Leach's can be found in Firth's 'Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion': 'Putting this last point more trenchantly, so far from the religion of the Tikopia merely reflecting or maintaining the social structure, in some of its aspects it offers avenues of *escape from* society, into personal fantasy, which is then allowed social recognition and credited with social functions' (1959: 145). On this basis I do not think that Geertz was just in his appreciation. Moreover, nowhere in *IC* does Geertz produce a reasonable critique of Leach's or Firth's respective positions. The curious fact is that Firth mentions Geertz as one of those who had commented on his own paper. Geertz must therefore have known about Firth's attempt at an explanation of social change, but his charge was about the inability of functional anthropology in general.

There is one more point. When 'Religion as a Cultural System' first appeared, Geertz accused Leach of having been a vulgar positivist (Geertz 1966: 35). This reference was later dropped and does not appear in *IC*. Leach retorted the same year and described Geertz as a theologian disguised as a professor of anthropology (Leach 1966: 39). One could feel the bitter taste even ten years later when Leach dubbed Geertz a major novelist (Leach 1976: 1).

Neither author is even mentioned in Ortner's article, nor is cognitive anthropology, even though all the theories she mentioned (the Durkheimian school, structuralism, non-Geertzian symbolic approaches) can be said to be advocating a cognitive approach to culture – or an ideational (i.e. dualistic) one, as Keesing called it (1974).

It must be stressed that the notion of culture as public was an important aspect of Geertz's anthropology at a certain period of his academic career. And probably this idea was not only directed against Tyler and Goodenough, who are mentioned only once in *IC*! Why would Geertz have constantly bothered to stress that culture is not in people's heads had the competing idea that culture *is* in people's heads been advocated by only one school which at the time was rather marginal among the many different anthropological approaches?

For our task, it is crucial to discriminate between different conceptions of public symbols held by anthropologists. Probably not many anthropologists would object to Geertz's maxim that culture must be studied in publicly accessible spheres. Anthropologists observe natives' actions and listen to their utterances, making judgements about the character of their cultures and societies from their interactions with them. The task of the anthropologist is to make some sense of informants' utterances and actions by arranging them in some kind of meaningful order. One anthropologist who explicitly argued that anthropology must study public symbols before Geertz did was Edmund Leach as part of an attempt to delimit the fields of anthropology and psychology (Leach 1958: 151).

Given that the majority of anthropologists would side with the idea of the public character of culture mentioned by Leach and also by Geertz, Geertz's move does not seem that radical. Nonetheless, if we prove that by 'public symbols' Geertz meant something different than Leach, we can assert that Geertz's approach was radical and that Geertz offered an interesting alternative. Quoting from Ryle would then appear not as a mere fancy but as the expression of a genuine theoretical commitment.

There is indeed such evidence. When Leach delimited the spheres of anthropology and psychology, he implicitly consented to the dogma of the ghost in the machine. When he said that anthropology studies public symbols, he added that it was psychology that studies private symbols (1958: 151). As Leach put it, we cannot infer from what we observe to inner emotional states or to what a person is supposedly thinking (Leach 1966: 40; 1976: passim). Conversely it is mostly Leach's later

writings, especially when he was under Lévi-Strauss's influence, that support the contention that he was a dualist.

For Ryle and Geertz it does not make any sense to talk about private symbolism or private meanings which can be studied by some specialised discipline like psychology. Ryle himself was not against psychology; he only meant that psychology could not be defined as the study of private symbolism, since private symbolism is not possible in his philosophical outlook (Ryle 2000: 304–305). If there is a difference between anthropology and psychology, it must lie elsewhere. For example, psychology could serve as an enquiry into individual (though not private) phenomena.

We can corroborate our claims by shifting from the issue of symbols to the issue of meaning. There is a classic distinction between symbol and meaning that Geertz enunciated, namely that a symbol is a vehicle for meaning. In Geertz's words, a symbol 'is used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's meaning' (Geertz 1973: 91). Frankenberry and Penner argue that it is not clear from Geertz's account what the words 'conception', 'symbol' and 'meaning' do precisely mean (Frankenberry and Penner 1999: 620). Here I stick to Talal Asad's explanation that 'conception' is merely a synonym for 'meaning' here (1993: 30).

This definition is clearly based on dualistic assumptions. Symbols exist in physical, corporeal or publicly accessible forms – objects, acts, events, qualities, and relations. It may be the wood out of which the religious symbol is carved, it may be some utterance in its waveform, or it may be a gesture, but they all belong to the physical world (Geertz 1973: 91). But the meanings their vehicles carry are limited to the ideal world of people's heads. Public and tangible symbols are deciphered or decoded into private and ideal meanings.

The distinction between meaning and symbol is stated in dualistic terms as the difference between ideal and corporeal. Now a problem emerges. We know that anthropology is interested in public symbols and that public symbols are those that are shared by a particular society and are used publicly, for example, during ceremonies, rituals, in the market place etc. How is it possible that everyone in the same society understands the meaning or the conception of a particular symbol in the same manner? How can all Christians ascribe the same meaning to Christ on the Cross? And how can a Christian be sure that his fellow Christians understand the symbol the way he does?

The typical answer would be that we know the true meanings of symbols because we have been socialized and taught to know their true meanings. All members of a particular society share the ability to interpret symbols in specific ways. But an anthropologist can never open his interlocutors' heads – he cannot know what his interlocutors really think. As the traditional anthropological saying goes, there is 'the systematic divergence between what people say about what they do, what they actually do and what they think' (Kuper 1996: 15). Whilst talk and action are publicly accessible, thinking is not, nor can meanings be. So an anthropologist can but guess the true meanings of the symbols concerned or take at face value the answer of his interlocutor who admits that he is (openly) saying what he (privately) thinks. But a sceptical conclusion follows, since the anthropologist can never be sure about his or her judgements of others.

Asad's distinction between outward signs and inward meanings (1993: 59–60) – which expresses the very same distinction, although it is reformulated in slightly different terms – supports this conjecture. As Asad argues, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Leach and Turner employed the same dualistic distinction (cf. Durkheim, 1973: 160) – as did Geertz, as we have just seen.

Geertz's critics have nonetheless pointed out that, in the very same article in which the dualistic conception of symbols is discussed, Geertz formulated a quite different view of symbols. While in the first conception there is a difference between the symbol and its meaning, in the second conception the symbol and its meaning are one (Asad 1993: 30; Geertz 1973: 91; Frankenberry and Penner 1999: 620). Asad rightly upbraids Geertz for confusing the two notions, but in his subsequent criticism of Geertz he follows a slightly different path.

It should now be apparent that Geertz formulates two absolutely different approaches to symbols. The dualistic theory is in no way different from what his contemporaries said, and it is in no sense revolutionary. The monist theory represents the point at which Geertz departs from the mainstream anthropology of his times. This, in other words, is his revolutionary move. In it Geertz made use of Ryle, in whose teachings the problem of meaning as an ideal-and-private-world interpretation of a material-and-public-world symbol cannot even appear. This is expressed in the notion of thick description that comes straight from Ryle (Geertz 1973: 6ff). Using the metaphor of a multi-layered sandwich, Ryle says:

> So now our parodist, in practising his parody of this, would have to be described with the help of five verbs of trying – and still there is only one thing he is trying to do, and still there is only the one contraction of the eyelids that, at a given moment, the cinematograph film records. The thinnest description of what the rehearsing parodist is doing is, roughly, the same as for the involuntary eyelid twitch; but its thick description is a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by that the thinnest description. (1968)

A parodist can be doing many different things. There is one wink, and it can be saturated with a host of different meanings. But all the possible meanings are always public, not locked inside people's heads, and, most importantly, the meanings are inseparable from their vehicle. Only the dualistic way we talk ('What did the wink [a symbol] mean [a meaning]?') makes us think of two separate entities – meanings and their physical vehicles.

It is essential to realize that even the thinnest description, or a purely physical and objective act, or the purely visual (or sensual) appearance, the contraction of eyelids itself or an involuntary twitch, needs to be explained, to have some meaning ascribed to it. It is an involuntary twitch as opposed to other possibilities. Classic social scientists and anthropologists would consider the thinnest description to be some indubitable material-world foundation that is capable of carrying many different meanings which have to be decoded according to a peculiar cultural logic. In Ryle's system it is simply one meaning among others.

The world of symbols and meanings is the first domain in which Geertz confuses dualism and monism. In certain sense this world represents the very basis of anthropological thinking, as symbols are the smallest objects of anthropological analysis. Now I want to ascend one level, up, to the world of myths and rituals.

b) Myth and ritual

The difference between myth and ritual is a classic one. We can represent it by means of Durkheim's definition of religion. Durkheim said that 'religion is a system of beliefs and practices' (Durkheim 1995: 41), while 'ritual is an enacted myth' (ibid.: 79). His book *The elementary forms of the religious life* is based on dualism. Every religion is a system of beliefs traditionally represented by myths and a system of practices represented by rituals. Intellectually, an individual shares the collective mythology; corporeally, he takes part in collective rituals. Myths are in people's heads, and they represent the collective representations through which some people

see the world, while rituals are based on myths and are enacted in the physical realm (ibid.: 34).

Geertz did not use these reciprocal notions of myth and ritual. Here it will be instructive to turn our attention to Leach. Contrary to his anthropological companions, Leach did not recognize the classical distinction between myth and ritual. Instead he invoked Durkheim and Malinowski and openly attacked their shared conceptions. According to Leach, 'myth regarded as a statement in words "says" the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action' (Leach 2004: 13–14). Drawing a diagram of a car on the blackboard and writing underneath it 'this is a car' both say the same thing (2004: 14).

Apart from the quite novel conception of myths and rituals, Leach does not even seem to use the distinction between culture and social structure shared by Parsons and Geertz, although he quoted the same or similar words. This is clear from his quote from Firth:

> Society emphasises the human component, the aggregate of people and the relations
> between them. Culture emphasises the component of accumulated resources, immaterial
> as well as material, which the people inherit, employ, transmute, add to, and transmit.
> (Firth 1951: 27, quoted in Leach 2004: 16 n. 28)

Similar social relations (marriage) in different societies are expressed by different cultural customs (wearing a ring, wearing a turban). Therefore two different persons may be part of the same social system, yet have different cultures (2004: 16–17).

It seems that Leach's solution perfectly supplies what is missing in Geertz, while Geertz's thick description neatly fits Leach's shrewd observations in its turn. First, telling a myth is itself actually a ritual; secondly, a particular social relationship within a social system and its cultural expression are both public. We now have a way of drawing a clear line between two genera of public phenomena, and there is no longer any place for culture being locked inside people's heads.

However, there are a few obstacles. We already know that Leach looked at symbols as a dualist. We also know that he consented to dualism by admitting the existence of private phenomena. Moreover, Leach takes from the quotation from Firth above the idea that culture also consists of immaterial things – probably values, ideas, thoughts, etc. The trouble is that Leach does not discuss this immaterial component of culture throughout his book so that one cannot infer a definite statement about the

existence of some ideal world. The status of the term 'culture' is also unclear, since social anthropology did not use the word much at that time.

I argue that Leach remained a dualist despite having formulated a novel conception of myth. It is hard to extrapolate dualism from *Political Systems*: we cannot deduce it from the word culture, and we have to look for clues elsewhere. There is one paragraph in which Leach discusses the difference between real and ideal societies. While real societies do exist on their own, scientists construe corresponding but abstract ideal types: 'The structures which the anthropologist describes are models which exist only as logical constructions in his own mind' (2004: 5), and further: 'When the anthropologist attempts to describe a social system he necessarily describes only a model of the social reality' (ibid.: 8). For Parsons and Geertz social structures exist on their own because they causally influence people, whereas for Leach social structures exist 'as if'. Social structures for Leach are abstractions from real societies that exist in time and space (ibid.: 5). Nonetheless, had Leach been asked what causally influences human behaviour, he would have replied that it is real societies.

It seems that there is a content to belief, which this time is scientific, about how societies work and about the reality the scientist observes and from which he draws his abstractions. And it is probably not only a scientific point of view: 'Individuals can and do hold contradictory and inconsistent ideas about this system' (ibid.: 4). It is different Kachin perspectives, respectively the *gumlao* and *gumsa* ideologies, which represent different accounts of the nature of the social system concerned. Leach as an anthropologist presents yet another *ideal* perspective. But the system is there. Leach's seminal and monistic observations about the nature of myths and rituals do not undermine the dualistic foundations of his approach. And his particular observation about myths did not lead him to reformulate or even give up his dualistic outlook.

c) Culture and Social Structure

We have already ascended up to another level, where the mythology-ritual scheme enters the culture-social structure scheme. Mythology forms a part of the ideal culture, while ritual is a part of the physical world, the world where social structures are also located. And this is compatible with the symbol-meaning division, which presents the basic elements that constitute higher levels of analysis.

This is in accord with Geertz's difference between the cultural or 'logico-meaningful' component and the social or 'causal-functional' component: it is rituals and social structures that causally influence people, and it is culture and myths that clothe the former with meanings and some degree of logical coherence (Geertz 1973: 142–6). This point of view is also consistent with Geertz's idea that religion is a perspective that is incommensurable with other perspectives (ibid.: 110, 111). Even though for Geertz differing perspectives (or cultural systems) were represented by ideology, religion, science, art and common sense,[8] the term 'perspective' can in principle be applied to cultures as well.

When it comes to religion as perspective, Frankenberry and Penner and Asad all note that, in the middle of his paper about religion, Geertz switched to talk of religion as if it were a perspective (Frankenberry and Penner 1999: 629; Asad 1993: 48). This move is congruent with dualistic distinctions, but it is in stark contrast with what Geertz stated at the very beginning of the very same article – that symbols and thus religion and culture are public, not to mention that this also runs counter to the notion of thick description. If you insist on the fact that symbols are public and at the same time they are not in one's head, then you logically find yourself to be in accordance with monism. And there can be no talk of unobservable perspectives and meanings.

From one point of view it is possible to speak of perspectives while retaining monism. We might say that a person can recognize only certain layers of our multi-layered sandwich, ignoring other possibilities not visible to that particular individual. It allows us, for example, to speak of the aesthetic, commonsensical, ideological or religious meanings of a particular painting. When we say we are employing a particular perspective, our statement should not be taken too literally.

Geertz put the term 'perspective' in quotes so that it may imply some distancing from the literal meaning (1973: 110), but at the same time he used dualistic jargon and also set some of his analyses in Parsonian dualism. Again this is the paradox of Geertz's theory.

Untying the knot

We have seen that Geertz and Leach both flirted with dualism, but neither went so far as to give dualism up. But why bother untying the Gordian knot when you can simply cut it? It was Marshall Sahlins who ultimately cut the anthropological knot of

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[8] Geertz talked about the latter two in his later articles (1975, 1976).

dualism. In his *Stone Age Economics* (1972) Sahlins collapsed the Marxist distinction between the material base of society and its superstructure (Kuper 1999: 169, 276). Then, in his *Historical metaphors and mythical realities* (1981), he showed 'that the conventional opposition between structure and event could now be shown up as an illusion. From the native point of view, each event was a concrete example of an ideological structure' (Kuper 1999: 179). Sahlins offers a treatise that is based on a refined monism. The symbol-meaning, ritual-mythology, structure-culture dualism is collapsed at last. Sahlins thus brought monistic intuitions in anthropology to their logical consequences. Something similar can be said of Paul Rabinow, who developed Geertz's textual metaphor, through which any culture can be seen as a multi-layered sandwich (Rabinow 1986).[9]

Stephen Pepper argued that the basic problem with theories is that they usually confuse incommensurable root metaphors (1942: 104). Dualism and monism can be considered as two opposing root metaphors, and both can be found in *IC*. The result is a book full of ambiguities: on the one hand, there is a fresh conception of symbols and meaning, while on the other the theory advocated in it does not seem that different from the theories of Geertz's contemporaries. Geertz's move was from one point of view indeed revolutionary, but it seems that it was revolutionary beyond what Geertz himself could have imagined, at least in the early nineteen-seventies. In his collection, he was unable to provide readers with any clue that would have pointed to a solution to his own theoretical wavering.

Had Geertz really been a systematic thinker he would have attempted to reconcile dualism with monism. He would have probably dropped either one and subsumed some intuitions under the winning theory. He could have pursued a different solution that different metaphors are good for solving different problems, as Lakoff and Johnson suggested later (2003). Geertz could have remained a monist and retained some dualistic intuitions well suited to explaining certain sorts of behaviour as pretence, concealment or lies, he could have insisted that dualism explains the difference between what people do and what they think, or he could have remained a strict dualist. But Geertz did not offer to his readers any kind of solution. I therefore agree with Adam Kuper: 'Hardly surprisingly, there have been recurrent complaints

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[9] It is not without interest that Durkheim can be read in a traditional manner as a dualist and in an unorthodox manner as a monist. For the latter approach, see Nielsen (1999), Sahlins's note (1981: 67), Lukes (1972: 491–2).

that Geertz's ideas and methods are not systematically developed, that crucial terms are loosely defined, and that implicit contradictions are left unresolved' (1999: 76). But are we not committing a category mistake in trying to force upon Geertz categories he did not use? To classify Geertz, or any other anthropologist, as either a dualist or a monist might be tantamount to imposing the anthropologist's own categories upon native thought.

It is possible to rebut this view by saying that speaking in terms of 'in head/out there' does not make a dualist of anyone. A classic example from philosophy illustrates this point very well. Berkeley held that the material world does not exist. However, although we may agree with his point of view and deny things their material status, nothing prevents us from speaking about the *things* that surround us. It is beyond doubt that there is a tree in the quad. Monists can speak of minds and bodies just as much as Berkeley could speak of trees. Minds and bodies do not represent two different classes; instead they represent different attributes within the same class.

By the same token, we can talk about putting ideas in someone else's head or about ideas passing through our minds. Only, we cannot take these expressions too literally; they are rather to be taken metaphorically. Ideas in the mind are not entities of a specific kind definable by attributes that distinguish them from entities of a different kind (e.g. bodies). There are situations in which it is more appropriate to talk about ideas instead of things. All the anthropologists mentioned above, in writing about minds and beliefs, were only following conventional usage and were not committed to any kind of dualism.

A similar objection can be raised in connection with the anthropological enterprise itself. What constitutes proof that a group of people holds dualistic beliefs? Rita Astuti holds that we cannot infer ontological commitments from the explicit discourses of our informants and that we should rather study our informants' cognitive underlay (Astuti 2001: 435). But making a difference between mind and body, no matter how implicit, does not equal endorsing dualism of any sort. This applies to philosophers and social theorists as well as to the peoples that anthropologists study. The only difference lies in the fact that, while we cannot accuse the people we study of incoherence, the same does not apply in the case of social scientists.

In this article I have attempted to provide enough evidence to support the thesis that Geertz was a bad theory builder. His ideas, if pursued consistently, yield only confusion and chaos. Authors like Schilbrack, who are keen on following Geertz's ideas, should be aware of the unstable foundations of Geertz's project as sketched out in *IC*. There is, however, one more option: maybe Geertz knew perfectly well what he was doing, deliberately staging this theoretical play and conning all his readers and admirers. In this view his long con earned him the position of the trickster of anthropology. And this ancestor ghost will continue to make endless fun of younger generations of anthropologists and social scientists.

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