On the Limits of Symbolic Interpretation in Anthropology[1]

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I

This paper offers some sceptical arguments against "symbolic" interpretations of human action. The general doctrine criticised is nowhere very clearly or explicitly stated; still less is it argued for. Before attempting to formulate it, I give an illustration (Leach 1974:1074):

> An ethnographer observes a man killing a sheep by cutting its throat. A bystander, when asked what is going on, replies: "He is making an offering to the ancestors." What is the logical status of such a statement? What does it "mean" apart from its standing as a description of the sacrificer's actions? How does it come to mean what it means? Does it always mean the same thing? These are issues of great complexity and, for anthropologists anyway, of great importance.

To my mind, the bystander's explanation of what is going on is quite enough.[2] The subsequent questions are frequently leading, in that they rest on assumptions (e.g., who says they "mean" anything, apart from . . .?)—if they did not, they would have no answers; in that any complexity is self-created; and in that they are of no explanatory, i.e., scientific, importance whatsoever. I shall argue that when I describe a man peering down a microscope as "doing research on enzymes," the cognitive status of that statement is no different from that of "He is making an offering to the ancestors." Cognition is univocal, I shall maintain. The approach of looking for symbolic meanings adds unfruitful complication to anthropology, is fundamentally arbitrary, and is morally dubious.

A preliminary attempt to formulate the doctrine to be criticised might be: all human actions have a significance beyond any stated or manifest purpose, namely, they symbolise, stand for, or say something or other.[3] A weaker version would be: human actions "which are not immediately explainable as a rational response to a given situation, or in which the explanations offered do not appear to relate directly to the observable facts" (Leach 1974:1074), symbolise, stand for, or say something or other. The strong thesis would lead one to see symbolism everywhere; the weaker thesis looks for it only when rationality or observation give no immediate explanation. Common to the two is a distinction between practical or instrumental (or rational or observable) purpose and symbolic or communicative purpose. I shall contest this distinction.

Among anthropologists the fashion for trying to "read" the symbolism of myths, religions, taboos, ceremonies, social arrangements, social structures, meals, classification systems, etc., is so widespread that criticising it may seem about as effective as spitting into the wind. Further, to do this with very general arguments risks bypassing the blinkered and decidophobic[4] specialist. It is the values and limits of the whole enterprise of symbolic interpretation that I want to call into question, so transcendental arguments are unavoidable. However, they will be directed, not at an extensive literature survey, but at a single, in some ways representative piece. While constituting an exemplar of the whole symbolic-interpretation approach,[5] and hence a suitable focus for my discussion, its suitability is enhanced because it also has atypical features. The atypicalities stem from its authorship: E. R. Leach is a bold and forceful writer, a thoroughgoing rationalist, an anthropologist willing and able to follow the argument wherever it leads. Unlike that of so many other practitioners of the symbolic-interpretation approach, who trade in hint, allusion, insinuation, non-sequitur, and free association, Leach's work makes argument not just worthwhile, but possible.

II

The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain is an old and prestigious learned society. Among the honours in its gift are several annual public lectures, named in honour of distinguished ancestors.[6] An invitation to deliver one of these is recognition of high status,[7] guarantee of a distinguished audience,[8] and (usually) promise of subsequent publication. In 1966 E. R. Leach[9] delivered the Henry Myers[10] Lecture,[11] which was published the next year in the Institute's *Proceedings*. Entitled "Virgin Birth," the lecture takes up a controversy Leach himself had triggered. Leach (1961) had argued that reports of primitive peoples who did not know the connection between coition and pregnancy were not to be trusted. He suggested that this connection is known in every society and that denials should not be taken at face value. Leach uses the occasion of this lecture to develop in more detail his ideas about how such denials are to be taken, using the Malinowskian device of drawing attention to a similar aspect of our own society—the Christian doctrine of virgin birth—to highlight his points. He also takes the opportunity to argue vigorously the strength of his approach and the weaknesses of those who maintain that belief in virgin birth should be taken at face value.

With characteristic directness, Leach goes to the heart of the

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[1] My thanks to Joseph Agassi, J. N. Hattiangadi, and J. O. Wisdom for their comments on this paper.

[2] It is an entirely satisfactory piece of "situational logic"; see Jarvie (1972:chap. 1).

[3] Symbol: "Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation); *esp.* a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract, as a being, idea, quality, or condition; a representative or typical figure, sign, or token" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This admirable definition anticipates a number of my arguments, especially those from vagueness, arbitrariness, and conventionality. See also Gombrich (1972).

[4] For the concept of the decidophobe, and his connection with blinkered scholarship, see Kaufman (1973).

[5] Perhaps one way to render the approach more coherent would be to interpret it as a metaphysical (because unfalsifiable) research programme, with a fairly solid central idea (something like "deep symbolism or hidden meaning lies beneath most social activities") and variant ways of making it concrete and guiding research (heuristics). This would enable us to deal with both the common features in, and the differences between, hunts for phallic symbolism, power symbolism, structural meaning, archetypes, binary discriminations, ordered classification, and so on. The notion of a metaphysical research programme comes from Popper (1959) and Agassi (1956), some of the terminology from Lakatos (1970).

[6] Examples include the Huxley Memorial Lecture, the Frazer Lecture, etc. Medals (the Rivers Memorial Medal, the Patron's Medal, The Wellcome Medal), essay prizes (the Curl Bequest Essay Prize, the Hocart Prize Essay), and, of course, election to Institute office are also honorific.

[7] As I understand it, a named lecture, like a named chair, indicates endowment and hence especially high status in the scholarly world (see Freedman 1967).

[8] The officers of the Institute make an effort to attend, as does the membership, in expectation of an "occasion."

[9] E. R. Leach, a student of Malinowski and Firth, has had a very distinguished academic career, which culminated in his being knighted in 1975.

[10] Henry Myers, a Fellow of the Institute, provided a sum of money for a lecture on "the place of religious belief in human development."

[11] Previously delivered by scholars such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1945), Sir Raymond Firth (1948), Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard (1954), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962).

matter. Belief in virgin birth is belief in something that cannot be true (Leach 1967:44–45):

> How should we interpret ethnographical statements of palpable untruth? . . . say that it is a species of religious dogma; the truth which it expresses does not relate to the ordinary matter-of-fact world of everyday things but to metaphysics. It is plain . . . that Christians who say that they "believe" in the doctrine of Virgin Birth . . . are not ordinarily arguing from a position of ignorance. . . . Frazer's childish savage should be eliminated from anthropological discussion once and for all; in his place we should put a slightly muddle-headed theologian. . . .

A slightly muddle-headed theologian is he who believes palpable untruths. Clearly not stemming from ignorance, such untruths must be metaphysical. "Metaphysical" is here distinguished from "the ordinary matter-of-fact world of everyday things."[12] In metaphysics, virgin births can be affirmed; in the ordinary matter-of-fact world of everyday things, they cannot. To do so would make the affirmers look childish.

The distinction between the everyday world and metaphysics is familiar enough (at least to a philosopher). In the distant past it was used by positivists to deride metaphysics. Leach uses it to rescue palpable falsehoods from ridicule by calling them metaphysics.[13] In a similar way, after the Second World War, philosophers of religion used the positivist's own distinction to shield religion from positivist attack. Another notable use made of it was in social anthropology, where it became a device to get anthropologists to take religious, magical, paradoxical, and absurd statements seriously (see Agassi and Jarvie 1967, 1973). Broadly speaking, the key idea is to divide beliefs and actions into two kinds: practical, instrumental, and functional ones and meaningful or symbolically expressive ones, Hence, statements about virgin birth, or babies arriving by stork and being found under gooseberry bushes, have to be taken with a grain of metaphysical (or symbolic) salt. Statements about how to wield an adze, sail a canoe, plant a seed, or cast a fishing net are, by contrast, practical, instrumental, and functional: in short: they mean exactly what they say,[14] no more and no less. Why the difference between the instrumental and the symbolic? Clearly, because if we do not make the distinction, cognition becomes univocal, and statements about virgin birth are to be treated exactly as are statements about studying enzymes. By introducing an element of symbolism or expressive meaning, statements that might otherwise have been dismissed as superstition or muddle can once again be taken seriously. If a man tells me I am losing the game because I am holding the squash racquet incorrectly, I will take what he says at its face value. If, however, he tells me my game is poor because I haven't found Christ,[15] likely I will smile condescendingly. Why? Because I don't share the cultural context needed to unpack all he means by "finding Christ." It could be that, translated, it means, "obeying the coach in the name of the Lord." Once I saw this, I would take his comment seriously, even if I didn't agree with it.

Presumably this makes clear why Leach entertains symbolic interpretations: it allows things to be taken seriously that in another context might be dismissed. It explains how intelligent Catholics who know the connection between intercourse and pregnancy can affirm the Immaculate Conception; it similarly rescues the Australian Aborigines, not to mention flat-earthers and fundamentalists. Leach himself instances the saying of Latin grace in Trinity College Hall (Sir James Frazer's college). Neither superstition nor devotion can be inferred from this; it is merely a sign that the meal is about to begin or has just ended —"the actual word content is totally irrelevant" (p. 41). Similarly, the English marriage ritual tells us about the formal social relations being established between the parties.

This basic doctrine—that what people say and do has a symbolic dimension—is very widely diffused in the intellectual world, including anthropology. And no wonder; it is very plausible. Observing Leach in the act of pounding the typewriter keys, we might say he is acting instrumentally—writing his forthcoming Henry Myers Lecture. Observing him later mounting the steps to the rostrum with crossed fingers, we might say he is signalling the importance of the occasion and perhaps his own hope that he will be well received. That is much kinder than suggesting he is superstitious and trying to ward off bad fortune. Now consider that subclass of actions we call speech-acts. A ritual performance like delivery of a lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute is functional; murmuring grace in Trinity College Hall is symbolic expression. No doubt the boundaries between functional and symbolic may shift over time, and no doubt every action is partly symbolic and partly functional. Nevertheless, the two can be kept analytically distinct, and different approaches to them by anthropologists are in order. Statements or ceremonies connected with virgin birth cannot be treated as anthropologically equivalent to the lectures of a social scientist discussing that same doctrine on a cross-cultural basis. Hence religious actions and utterances, magical rituals and utterances, and otherwise absurd or unintelligible actions and utterances cannot just be labelled as such and critically explained; they must be scrutinised for their symbolic "meaning," how they came to mean that, and whether they always and everywhere mean the same thing. Doctrines of virgin birth, wherever they are found, should be taken symbolically, not literally. They cannot be taken literally because they are false and well-known throughout the world to be false. It is "impossible on common-sense grounds" (p. 45) that what is well-known to most of mankind should not be known to all.[16] To say that Mariolaters do not know the connection between pregnancy and coition would be to accuse them of childish ignorance or stupidity, and, in anthropology, ignorance is a term of abuse (p. 41). Furthermore, Leach argues, causal or historical explanations of the idea of virgin birth are not acceptable because they are "inaccessible to observation or verification" (p. 43).

Agreeing to label his own position "vulgar positivism," Leach suggests that to those who practice symbolic interpretation "insight comes simply from seeing how the facts fit together" (p. 39), rather as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle (p. 44) fit together to form a pattern. It is a comparative attempt to examine the variety of forms in which a single ethnographic pattern can manifest itself (p. 44).

In the case of ideas of virgin birth among Aborigines or in Christian doctrine, Leach develops further the idea that they refer not to the everyday world but to metaphysics. That is, they are about the difference between the physical and the metaphysical (p. 46), i.e., the split between the here-and-now and the not here-and-now, between the living and the no longer or not yet living, between men and gods. Virgin birth is a way of saying men and gods can interact (sexually). For Leach and, I suspect, for others of the symbolic-interpretationist persuasion, "there are different kinds of truth" (p. 44).

III

That the assumptions involved in symbolic interpretation should be replete with bad philosophy is one thing; that they contain bad anthropology as well means they shouldn't be let pass.

[12] A philosopher can only protest that this matter-of-fact everyday world is full of metaphysics; and so is everyone else's, did but they know it.

[13] One can bridle at the positivist insult to metaphysics. Most of the really interesting ideas in science and philosophy are metaphysical, and some of them may be true!

[14] Some philosophers think there is a deep problem in how we mean what we say.

[15] Or Chairman Mao, or the ultimate now.

[16] There seem to be many counter-examples to this principle.

Such patternings as symbolic interpretation discloses have, I submit, neither interest nor point. In his usual disarming way, Leach himself asks, "What is the point of arranging the facts in this way? How do I *know* that such patterns are significant? I don't. I find them interesting" (p. 45). This may be an argument-stopper in certain anthropological circles, but perhaps a philosopher can be forgiven for being a sceptical spoil-sport. Leach has himself suggested that "anthropological theories often tell us more about the anthropologists than about their subject matter" (p. 46). This excellent anthropological principle applies very well to the symbolic-interpretation theory espoused by Leach, even though he is not like those anthropologists of a crypto-religious persuasion, but a self-proclaimed positivist and a rationalist. The anthropology of symbolic interpretation is thus highly interesting.

Leach's central argument is that error = stupidity and abuse. that the contradictory and incoherent views of "good Catholics" are easier to respect than those of earlier anthropologists such as Hartland, McLennan, and Tylor. This incomprehensible preference for the sophistries of theologians over the condescension of his rationalist predecessors makes anthropological but not philosophical sense. We remember that, after grace, the Provost of Kings has to eat with the former, but not with the latter. Leach's predecessors' turning in their graves counts less than the comfort it must bring to so many of his colleagues that positivism presents such a toothless mouth towards religion. Yet I feel there is something cheap in this kind of argument, even though Leach himself uses it against his opponents (living and dead).[17] If philosophically sophisticated religious men and sociologically sophisticated anthropologists at Cambridge, Oxford, and elsewhere have this symbolic-interpretation approach to religion and magic in common, it is possible to take it two ways. The first is to take the symbolic-interpretation view, like the virgin-birth view, as merely a symbolic expression. That is to say, we should view Henry Myers Lectures and the like as rituals, perhaps as sermons, exhorting us not to condescend. Argument and scholarship are just a kind of conjuror's patter to keep the audience distracted while the social signals are being made. How, though, do we know that the patter is to be read symbolically, not instrumentally? By the same reasoning, obviously, that Leach uses to persuade us to view the virgin-birth doctrine symbolically: its author is not a child or an ignoramus, but a slightly muddle-headed theologian.

Now, how do we decide that the dogmas of Mother Church or the Henry Myers Lectures are the work of slightly muddle-headed theologians? The answer again is the same: because the "patter" is palpably false and cannot be taken seriously, i.e., instrumentally. Underlying this point is a point of agreement between Leach and his critics which should be stressed, because Leach plays it down. Even those who indulge in symbolic interpretation do not take everything to have a hidden meaning. Most statements and actions do not; and anyway, we always have to begin by taking the text, whether dogma or lecture, seriously, i.e., at its face value. This is a kind of moral obligation upon those who do not wish to condescend: we must give a text and hence its author the benefit of the doubt. To begin with, even virgin birth and symbolic interpretation beg to be judged true or false. Only when we fail on that assumption to get any sense may we, perhaps, allow ourselves to be condescending, to say "this cannot mean what it says." Hence, to have a "different kind of truth" is a consolation prize for being false, plain and simple. "Different kinds of truth" is symbolic-interpretationist talk for "What status can we possibly confer on palpable falsehoods?" As we have seen, to read even this manoeuvre as a piece of symbolic expression involves the prior move of trying to take it at face value and failing. In the rest of this paper I shall stick to looking at the face value of the symbolic-interpretation view; but in the event that the reader comes to agree with me that it is false, he may then wish as I do to declare the symbolic-interpretation view symbolic, and I shall offer occasional hints as to how this can be carried through.

[17] Note the passage on p. 43 where by association Leach charges 19th-century anthropologists with imperialism and sexual fantasies.

IV

Against the view that human actions and statements can be explained or understood by means of an interpretation of their hidden symbolism, I would like to begin with a very simple but transcendental argument. This is that there are many different systems of symbolic interpretation on offer. These systems compete with one another. Possibly someone might argue that the competition is a muddle, and in fact they are consistent and could be mapped onto each other in order to form a single coherent system. Good luck to anyone who tries that one. Meanwhile, for purposes of my argument, I assume that the systems of symbolic interpretation of Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, Leach, Turner, Douglas, Sperber, et al., are incompatible.

Now, either they all have an equal claim on our attention, in which case their incoherence and inconsistency are bewildering, or one is correct and the others are not (merely symbolic expressions, if you will). In the latter case, which is the correct one? How do we check its correctness? Why is there no agreement on it? There being no answer to any of these questions, one is inclined to conclude that the proliferation of systems of symbolic interpretation is an anarchy brought about by there being no standards in the field. This may be why Leach simply says he can't defend his own system of interpretation, but finds it interesting. Many people find many different things interesting; many people find many different things a bore. I find arbitrary proliferation of symbolic systems (or facts) a bore. Moreover, the science of anthropology not being coincident with Leach's undefended interests, I conclude that the unresolvable conflict between systems of symbolic interpretation possibly signals arbitrariness and hence allows us to declare them either false and uninteresting, false and symbolically revealing, or whatever.

A second, equally simple, and closely related argument explains this possible arbitrariness. To seek the meaning or symbolic interpretation of an utterance or ceremony presupposes that a determinate meaning exists. Supposing it does, how did it get there? When a signaller waves his flags, or a Balinese dancer caresses the air, we know the gestures carry an intentional meaning. The code has a cipher. What reason have we to think that the religious and magical actions of people contain (coded) messages over and above the intentional meaning of the acts and words? Is Leach not here a prisoner of his metaphors? Society is after all neither a language nor a jigsaw puzzle. The symbolic-interpretationist's metaphors, then, are highly misleading: they make him no better than a muddle-headed theologian. Since no account of how any alleged meanings got there is available, we are forced to withdraw the supposition that a determinate meaning does indeed exist. Meanings, patterns, symbols that are determinate are there only when they have been put there. Symbolic-interpretationists sometimes resemble those who scrutinise the works of Shakespeare for the hidden messages from Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, or Christopher Marlowe (with the difference that such scrutinisers assume that Bacon, Jonson, or Marlowe put the messages there). No one has yet considered the pattern Shakespeare's use of individual letters makes on the printed page and dismissed objections to the pointlessness of it by declaring that he found it interesting.

I am not saying that every social pattern or regularity is (consciously or unconsciously) intended. On the contrary, I follow the tradition from Mandeville and Smith to Hayek and Popper in thinking most of what we call society to be the prod-

uct of human action, but not of human design. I do no more than invoke a principle of intellectual economy against looking for hidden messages that are not there, and more so against hidden messages that are not quite messages, whose interest cannot be explained, and which appear to explain nothing and proliferate in a confusing way. Against such muddle-headed theology the dogma of virgin birth is a paradigm of clarity.

Are we not to conclude from these first two arguments that nothing is gained by hunting symbolic interpretations of palpable falsehoods? That such interpretations are arbitrary and will proliferate bewilderingly because of the false assumption that a determinate interpretation exists? In fact there is no determinate interpretation; still less is there a canonical one. Or is it perhaps the case that these two transcendental philosophical arguments are hard to grasp? Since I have accused Leach of anthropological and moral, as well as philosophical, error, let me come at the issue again from a different angle, using other arguments.

Let us take some quite uncontested platitudes: One reason people do things (say grace, perform rain dances, give lectures) is habit. Another reason is beliefs they hold which convert easily into imperatives to action (if you don't attend mass regularly, things will go badly for you later; if you don't bring your children up in the faith, how will they be saved? if you neglect the rain dance, you might be responsible for the drought; scholars have a duty to give lectures). I say that all the resultant actions should be explained by the beliefs. Let us put, as it were, this question to Leach. What status does he accord to such beliefs? Some are palpably false, at least one is not; all lead to concrete action in the matter-of-fact, everyday world. Are they metaphysics, symbols? Although he doesn't believe in taking the contents of the words too seriously in every case, Leach clearly wants to separate beliefs that are palpably untrue from all other beliefs a person professes to be holding. How that is to be managed without attending to the contents of the words is unclear; what criterion demarcates word content that can be taken seriously (e.g., Henry Myers Lectures) from word content that is irrelevant (e.g., the wedding ceremony, Latin grace in Trinity College Hall) is nowhere stated. Nor can it be, for, to repeat, Leach must himself operate on the principle that we take a text or an utterance literally and seriously at first and desist from this only when we fail. Fail to do what? Make it come out true, of course. Hidden lemma: utterances and texts which fail to come out true represent a failure on our part to take them sufficiently seriously, i.e., to come up with a symbolic reading, or a notion of different kinds of truth, such that they can be taken seriously, i.e., to be true. This raises at once the intriguing possibility of an argument that would give us a symbolic reading that was false. The doctrine of virgin birth can be read as a way of saying men and gods can interact: the trouble is, they can't (because there are no gods). What does the symbolic-interpretation view tell us to do now?

The issue simply does not begin as Leach naively declares with his question, "How should we interpret ethnographical statements about palpable untruth?" (p. 44). For one thing, it is this very assumption of untruth which is preceded by taking the utterance seriously (i.e., not symbolically). The alternative is a priori to declare it the result of benighted ignorance or stupidity, and this kind of condescension Leach is at pains to rule out. For another thing, the question comes too quickly, while skipping the stages I am insisting on, and as a result they come all too easily: the people we are talking about do not for a minute agree that their beliefs *are* untrue. This fact has been waved aside. Says Leach: "I find it highly improbable on common-sense grounds that genuine 'ignorance' of the basic facts of physiological paternity should anywhere be a cultural fact" (p. 41). Wow![18] And what of the speaker who affirms a gospel he actually does think false, but nevertheless means literally, intending to overrule his own ability to reason and his own judgement because of a decision to accept those of a priest or party-leader? Here we see how Leach's philosophical errors lead to anthropological errors: what he finds highly improbable may be an ethnographic fact.

An altogether more fruitful set of anthropological questions is By what means are (what look to us like false) beliefs shielded from refutation? How do societies continue to function while their members act on the basis of false beliefs? and When beliefs change, what brings the change about? Some beliefs—as Gellner (1973) has observed—are shielded by being so vague, ambiguous, absurd, or mysterious that they can hardly be refuted at all; other beliefs, as Evans-Pritchard (1937), has reported, even though refutable, are shielded by multiple ad hoc evasion strategies; others, as Orwell observes, have no power to judge questions of truth or falsity; still others declare such questions illegitimate. Despite this, a society with beliefs completely out of key with the environment doubtless would not survive, so change of and progress in beliefs is a very difficult problem to explain.

Leach's "statements we know to be untrue" (p. 44), then, begs the question of the line between the known truth and the rest—doubtful statements and errors—and this line is the problem, not the solution. The very idea of a boundary between true statements, where word content matters, and untrue statements, where it does not, is a product of the positivist cast of much of Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment, and neo-positivist thought, and hence of much of anthropology. The anthropologically hard thing to grasp seems to be that some people believe not only that two times two equals four, that a canoeist needs a paddle, and that fish can't be caught in trees, but also that the sky is up and the earth down, that Jesus was conceived through the ear, that an infinity of angels can dance on the head of a pin, that Christ bodily ascended into heaven, that transubstantiation occurs during the Eucharist, that the stars govern our destinies, that magic makes the world go round, that a full moon brings out the werewolves, etc.—and, moreover, that some societies and some people believe all of these simultaneously, often enough together with their negations and refutations. Without consideration of their word content, there would be no problem here.

If word content is irrelevant, why do we use the words we do? Why, for example, at grace do we not intone: "Eeny, meeny, miny, min, Let the present meal begin?" Obviously, the answer is because these words are meaningless; not just lacking sense, but lacking religious or traditional legitimation. They could, it is true, perfectly well serve to "say" that the meal is about to begin, but they would not be grace. Conclusion: the content of the words we utter is *far* from being irrelevant. Grace says that God has provided and that we are thankful. *It is totally irrelevant whether those present any longer believe (or even understand)*[19] *what they are saying*. Thanking God happens to be what they are doing when they say grace—regardless of whether He exists. Leach's English bride may indeed be an atheist, be insincere, be getting married in bad faith. Nevertheless, the words of the wedding ceremony are highly relevant to understanding what is going on. It is the content of the words that legitimates the ceremony both to her and to the state. One does not say grace in place of wedding vows, any more than one says "eeny, meeny, miny, mo." In a religious society, major social occasions seek religious sanction; religion may then atrophy, but its form of words can continue as a traditional or legal sanction. Either way, the content of the words counts. Those modern brides and grooms who revise the wording of the ceremony rightly consider the words and vows of very considerable relevance.

[18] Or, if you prefer more detail, see Spiro (1968).

[19] Notoriously, Buddhist monks in places like Hong Kong know no Sanskrit, even though much of what they recite is in that language.

Leach looks upon religious utterances such as the wedding ritual as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle "structured in an extremely clear and well defined way" and argues that "not one bride in a thousand has an inkling of the total pattern" (n. 2). This is not only condescending, but unenlightening. The patterns of a person's behaviour do not explain it; the patterns or structures in ritual, doctrine, and myth are neither objectively there nor explanatory. The projected patterns, or the anthropologist's belief that he can discern patterns, are where we begin, not end.

Of course, it is all too easy to explain the bride's acceptance of a wedding ceremony. She may be a believer in the religion to which the ceremony belongs; she may be pleasing her believing or at least traditionalist relatives; or she may believe that following accepted custom is in itself a good—perhaps because she is a disciple of Leach.[20] Or she may believe in magic (Agassi and Jarvie 1967, 1973).

Does it bespeak respect to the bride to admit that she believes in magic, or is it better for this end to deny her her right to believe in magic?

True respect for others, which Leach is so convinced his predecessors Hartland, McLennan, and Frazer and his contemporary Spiro lack, begins by taking others' words seriously—as Spiro suggests anthropologists should, as Leach did to Spiro (in part), as I am doing to Leach. If the ideas expressed by those words seem confused, incoherent, internally inconsistent, manifestly absurd, or empirically false, it does no service to anyone to weasel out by saying these persons must be speaking symbolically. Soon it is necessary to add a buttress and claim that there is a whole hidden area of symbolic speaking and acting of which the actors are totally unaware, or which they always put in inverted commas (Leach 1974). Further to support this view, some anthropologists go so far as to suggest that this symbolising activity is backed by an imaginary process called "symbolic thinking"—which is presumably to be contrasted with ordinary, straightforward, rational thinking. It is a short step from this to a kind of symbolic cognition, or, as Leach calls it, different kinds of truth.

Instead of all this, I suggest the economical principle that we explain the acts and speech-acts of believers in Azande witchcraft, Henry Myers Lecturers, and Christian theologians in exactly the same way: they believe what they are saying and act (including speak) upon their beliefs. Only if we have strong counter-evidence, such as that the bride is an atheist, the college men unbelievers, or the Henry Myers Lecturer not really as attached to Christianity as he sounds, need we offer further explanation of their actions. That further explanation should be not symbolic but sociological. When theologians trade in vagueness, muddle, or sophistry, and when Henry Myers Lecturers find this preferable to Frazer, we need to look into the social functions of the absurd (Gellner 1973). Anthropologists were enlightened when an earlier Leach distinguished what people *do* from the *norm*, and those two from what they *say* they do (Leach 1945). Leach needs to apply his earlier insight to the Christian practices he indulges, namely the significantly named "apologetics": it is odd to find him instead identifying action, norm, and account among muddle-headed theologians in the name of justice to the intellects of primitive peoples. Religion is a mode of social organization, as well as intellectual organization, and the organizational status quo always has a vested interest in self-preservation: hence the sophistical manipulation of mysteries, different kinds of truth, different levels of meaning, symbolic meaning, etc.

V

It has not been my purpose to deny that people make, take over, use, and manipulate symbols. Ballet, the Morse code, the cross, the swastika, the flag, the authority of uniforms, the magic of pomp and circumstance, etc., are real enough. But these symbol systems, like language itself, are transparent, because they are accessible to their participants and users: they may be intentional, customary, or unconscious; they may even affect us in ways we do not understand. They nevertheless are not in a separate cognitive domain. To assume they are is really to multiply universes of discourse beyond necessity. There is no hidden meaning in belief in virgin birth, astrology, or the order of dishes in a meal. And when the anthropologist meets absurd dissembling about virgin birth, symbolic interpretation, or whatever, he should report it as such and do the sociology of dissembling and the absurd.

I have tried to explain the factual, moral, epistemological, and anthropological mistakes upon which the symbolic-interpretation view rests. Is there in that view a central philosophical error? We get a clue when Leach argues that we cannot infer from a wedding ceremony or the saying of Latin grace that anyone present believes what the words say. This is true enough, but it is poor anthropology to report it as an ethnographic discovery. It is but a particular case of the general sceptical problem that we have no access to other minds. Who knows what people believe? How can anything as elusive as belief explain what they do?[21] The best policy when faced with such a sceptical challenge is to bypass it. Never mind how we know what they believe; concentrate on reconstructing the cognitive claims that could explain their action. The truth of the cognitive claims makes no difference to how well they explain action. The Azande are philosophically interesting because they apparently have a *Weltanschauung* in which a force called witchcraft is diffused through the world, causing action at a distance. This contrasts interestingly with the crazy idea of Michael Faraday that the world is ultimately made of up of fields of force (see Agassi 1972, Berkson 1974). Moreover, the sociology of these two sets of ideas is fascinating. The Azande problem is how the ideas are sustained in the face of the evidence; the Faraday problem is how his ideas were ignored despite his arguments. Metaphysics and their social repercussions are highly problematic and interesting. The metaphysics of transubstantiation are less interesting because they are so vague and poor. They are a kind of degenerating research programme, while the Azande's metaphysics are progressive. Far from rehabilitating the "savage" by comparing him favourably with muddle-headed theologians, I would argue, Leach has denigrated him and conferred undeserved status on the muddle-headed in our culture. The alternative view which I have argued here follows Horton (1962, 1964, 1967) and others in comparing Africans with Faraday and characterizing those hunting for symbolism as engaged in desperate attempts to salvage ideas that are erroneous or muddle-headed. We need to be clear about what is mistaken but nevertheless interesting and what is hedged about and hence innocuous but nevertheless uninteresting. For myself, I would far prefer to regard "savage" ideas as in the former category than in the latter.

Comments

by MYRON J. ARONOFF
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Although Jarvie claims that his critique is aimed at "symbolic" interpretations of human action and that he explains "the factual, moral, epistemological, and anthropological mistakes upon which *the* symbolic-interpretation view rests" (emphasis added) he never demonstrates that a single coherent approach exists. In fact, he admits from the outset that the "general doctrine" he criticizes "is nowhere very clearly or explicitly stated," and

[20] Or she may have no choice: there is no secular marriage in Israel.

[21] This appears to be the reasoning behind Needham (1972).

later he claims that the many different systems of symbolic interpretation compete with and are incompatible with one another. At no point does Jarvie attempt to examine and specify the areas of agreement and compatibility, in contrast with the areas of incompatibility, between the *various* approaches. Instead, he simply assumes that the proliferation of systems of symbolic interpretation is an "anarchy" due to lack of "standards" in the field, that the conflicts between the different approaches are "unresolvable," and that this "possibly" signals "arbitrariness" which allows him to declare them either "false" or "uninteresting." I stress that Jarvie neither makes the most elementary comparison of even the major approaches nor offers the most minimal evidence to support his assumptions/conclusions about them. What he does is create his own image of this nonexistent single approach, building into it assumptions which, although convenient to his arguments, do not accurately reflect the work of many major scholars in the field, and then concentrate his attack on one essay which he claims is representative of the approach. In short, this is a classic case of the "straw man" approach to criticism.

Whereas he claims that "it is the values and limits of the *whole enterprise of symbolic interpretation* that I want to call into question" (emphasis added), Jarvie directs all of his specific arguments against "a single, *in some ways representative* piece" (emphasis added). Unfortunately, he fails to specify any criteria by which the reader might judge the extent to which, and in what ways, this work is representative of the field he criticizes. Evidently the reader is expected to accept the representativeness of Leach's essay on faith. This would require a leap of faith which would be difficult to make for those who are not already committed to Jarvie's viewpoint and are at the same time remotely familiar with the literature. Even for objective readers not familiar with the literature, Jarvie's own claim that there are numerous competing and mutually contradictory approaches might appear to contradict his claim that Leach's essay is representative—for how can one lecture represent a diverse and anarchic field? Although he offers no evidence to indicate the typicality of Leach's work, Jarvie lists some of the supposed atypicalities—among other things contrasting it with the work of "so many other practitioners of the symbolic-interpretation approach, who trade in hint, allusion, insinuation, non-sequitur and free association." Since he does not indicate in numbers or proportion how many are "so many" or name culprits and offer evidence to support his charges, it would appear that he is dangerously close to being guilty of these very charges. This approach is both surprising and disappointing in a scholar of Jarvie's stature and certainly does not help advance his arguments.

In formulating his interpretation of the "doctrine" to be criticized, Jarvie imputes certain assumptions to the scholars who seek to interpret the roles and functions of symbols in society. According to Jarvie, they assume that either all human actions, or only those which are not amenable to rational and immediately observable explanation, are symbolic. He stresses that the similarity of these two approaches is the "distinction between practical or instrumental (or rational or observable) purpose and symbolic or communicative purpose," a distinction he rejects. Elsewhere he states, "the key idea is to divide beliefs and actions into two kinds: practical, instrumental, and functional ones and meaningful or symbolically expressive ones." Since Jarvie only cites the work of Leach, he offers no evidence that this is in fact a commonly accepted point of view in many or most of the diverse approaches to the interpretation of symbols. Particularly given the way that Jarvie attempts to force these distinctions into mutually exclusive categories, I suggest that very few practitioners of symbolic interpretation would accept such a position as a valid one. His assumptions that all symbolic interpretation is based on "hidden messages" that are not there and that all symbolic interpretation is an attempt to interpret "palpable falsehoods" are simply not valid and could not be supported by even the most rudimentary examination of a sample of the major works in the field (e.g., Geertz 1964).

If we eliminate the arguments which are based on unrepresentative and inaccurate assumptions and positions, there remains an important difference between Jarvie's position and that of most, if not by definition all, practitioners of symbolic analysis. If I have correctly understood his position, it is based on an a priori assumption that all statements and actions have a clear, single, unambiguous, and obvious meaning and should be accepted at their face value. He appears to argue that all human actions are rational, instrumental, and goal-oriented. If this is the case, then here we have a clear contradiction not only to the interpretation of symbolic interaction, but also to many other approaches in contemporary sociology and anthropology dating at least from Durkheim.

To insist on a literal interpretation would clearly force the scholar to miss the point of a wide range of human behavior and would undoubtedly make social interaction infinitely more difficult, if not impossible. Although Jarvie claims that cognition is univocal, recent research on cognitive maps by scholars like J. M. F. Jaspers indicate a much more complicated and sophisticated view of human cognition. Clearly symbols are not only multivocal, but also multileveled. In many social contexts it is either unnecessary or impossible to spell out everything one means in a highly literal and explicit manner; and yet implicit meanings are clearly understood through allusion, inference, and the use of symbols. The use of irony and sarcasm, various types of games and joking relationships, and every type of ritual are dependent for their success on not being taken literally. The following statement by Jarvie is a good example: "No doubt the boundaries between functional and symbolic may shift over time, and no doubt every action is partly symbolic and partly functional. Nevertheless, the two can be kept analytically distinct, and different approaches to them by anthropologists are in order." If we take this statement literally, it is a direct contradiction to statements which precede and follow it in which he denies the validity of such a distinction. Therefore, we are faced with at least two alternatives in interpreting it: (1) assuming that Jarvie is not aware of the blatant contradiction and taking it literally or (2) assuming that the contradiction is intentional and ironic—not to be taken literally, but to be interpreted to mean the opposite of what it literally states. I suspect that in taking the statement as ironic I am open to Jarvie's charge of looking for "hidden meanings"; I am also likely to understand more accurately his intended meaning.

If I have erred and Jarvie means the statement literally, then aside from the fact that it contradicts other statements within the essay, this means that we are in close agreement on basic viewpoints. I would only differ on the necessity for anthropologists to use different approaches, since I do not see the approaches, any more than the phenomena, as mutually exclusive. I see no reason that "statements or ceremonies connected with the virgin birth cannot be treated as anthropologically equivalent to the lectures of a social scientist discussing the same doctrine on a cross-cultural basis."

At times I am not at all sure what Jarvie intends. For example, he claims that "since no account of how any alleged meanings got there is available, we are forced to withdraw the supposition that a determinate meaning does indeed exist." For one thing, we do have well-documented analyses of how symbols mutate and acquire additional or new meanings (cf. Deshen 1976, for example), but surely Jarvie does not insist that a scholar must be present at the birth of a symbol to verify its existence and/or the meanings attached to it in specific sociocultural contexts. He asks, "And what of the speaker who affirms a gospel he actually does think false, but nevertheless means literally, intending to overrule his own ability to reason and his own judgement because of a decision to accept those of a priest or a party-leader?" In a recent publication I examine a situation in which a group of secondary leaders of the Israel

Labor Party, who are highly dependent upon the top party leadership and who have highly internalized party norms and culture, attempted to reconcile a conflicting ideological world view with their perceptions of social reality (Aronoff 1976). For example, I analyse the implications of the strong assertion of one actor that "all Jews are equal" and his insistence that all of his colleagues vote in concurrence with this statement. I show that this statement was a strongly held belief of the actor and a central element of party ideology, but that the actor and his colleagues were painfully aware of the fact that in present Israeli society some Jews are more equal than others. The explanation requires the elaboration of different *levels* of meaning in different historical, institutional, social, and symbolic contexts. I stress that I speak of different levels of meaning and not different kinds of truth (as does Jarvie). At one level I attempt to illustrate that this statement can only be understood in the context of a ritual in which the political actors *asserted* the validity of and their continued belief in aspects of party ideology which conflicted with their perceptions of social reality. This kind of analysis, as well as other kinds represented by what Jarvie calls "altogether more fruitful . . . anthropological questions," is being undertaken by scholars whom he lumps under the label "symbolic-interpretationist"; and Jarvie's questions cannot be fully answered without resorting to the analysis of the meanings of symbols at different levels and in different contexts.

Some of Jarvie's conclusions, which are posed as if they contradicted the viewpoint of the so-called symbolic-interpretation approach, would no doubt be acceptable to most of the scholars working within the various approaches. For example, the conclusion that "the content of the words we utter is *far* from being irrelevant" is axiomatic in most of the work with which I am familiar. On the other hand, some of his conclusions would no doubt be rejected by most of these same scholars, e.g., "*It is totally irrelevant whether those present any longer believe (or even understand) what they are saying.*" I fail to find a single argument in the essay to support this statement.

Jarvie lumps the diverse approaches of "Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, Leach, Turner, Douglas, Sperber, et al." While he is at it, why ignore his colleagues in philosophy, e.g., Cassirer, Langer, Morris, Pierce, Ryle, Wittgenstein, et al., and the leading scholars in the field of semiotics, as long as he is only listing names and not attempting a comparative analysis of various approaches? One cannot fault Jarvie for not making a critical comparative analysis of diverse approaches, but one can and should fault him for focusing on Leach's essay as if it were somehow representative of a nonexistent single approach. Certainly the work of so many serious scholars, working at different levels of abstraction and degrees of universality and from a wide range of approaches, deserves a more serious critique than this. Let us hope that one will be forthcoming in CA in the near future.

by Joseph William Bastien
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Jarvie's argument against Leach persuaded me to bypass the sceptical debate, not because either's thesis is more cogent than the other, but because their debate is more the matter of philosophers. Philosophical questions of truth and falseness are not the primary concern of ethnologists. Ethnologists should be evaluated in terms of how well their theories correspond to the natives' social and symbolic structure and how much ethnographic data they explain.

Jarvie is mistaken in implying that symbolic anthropologists do not consider the native's interpretation of a ritual gesture; they see it as an important indication of the symbol's meanings (see Bastien 1973 and Turner 1967). In addition to the user's explanation, symbols contain other meanings because of their use within a contextual setting. Symbolic anthropologists explain the "killing of the sheep" not only as an offering to the ancestors, but also in terms of overt and implicit reference to antecedent circumstances and the social-behavioral context (Turner 1967:45). In other words, intensive fieldwork and accumulation of data, rather than philosophical speculation, provide the meanings within the social and symbolic pattern.

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On the general point I would go along with Jarvie, but when it comes to specifics we part company. That, indeed, seems to be the core of the problem. The fieldwork process, which Jarvie skips over lightly, entails a transformation of semantic environments (rather than Jarvie's epistemologies). Thus, "He is making an offering *to* (my italics) the ancestors" might very well have been better translated as "*for* (on behalf of?) the ancestors," which entails a quite different motion or emotion or purposive value. Which is it? If both relevances are there, we have something much more complicated than we started off with.

Again, all that stuff about virgin birth. Jarvie must surely know that a young woman who is technically a virgin, but has ruptured her hymen by riding her bicycle too vigorously, may enter a warm bath into which a male happens to have ejaculated and conceive. This is technically or semantically an immaculate conception. No coition. And, if and when the babe is born, it would be—in the loose way "virgin birth" is used—a virgin birth. So what is now the status of the theological dogma?

It used to be a common navigational technique to aim very definitely to the right (or left) of an intended arrival. In this way, by building in "error," if the arrival point did not turn up at the expected time one knew it was over to the left (or right) and was not in the dilemma of having to choose. In much the same way, it is surely wiser to assume that, in relation to experience, all statements are in some sense lies, have a built-in "error," and are, therefore, surer indicators of where something like truth lies. This entails the precise opposite of a gadarene rush into assuming that all statements are "symbolic"—in the loose sense that Jarvie uses the term. Just as our navigator sailed or flew a *deliberately wrong* course to avoid a later dilemma, so, in relation to a fieldworker, statements emerging from a semantic environment (which the fieldworker can know only vaguely) are usefully tested by "where is the lie, the built-in error?" in relation to one's own assumptions. This is very different from asking "Why is he/she lying, not telling the truth?" The assumption is not one of dishonesty or deceit in the interlocutor. On the contrary, the assumption is that oneself, as fieldworker, is ignorant of the roundedness of the semantic environment—that interlocutors mean what they say, but in relation to one's own semantic environment there is a purposeful built-in error in what is being said. A New Guinean's account of an encounter with his dead father cannot be written off as self-delusion. He means what he says, and says what he means. The question is *not* "What does *he* mean by what he says?" but "What is indicated by what was said?" Or, "What course is being steered to get to where?"

by Shlomo Deshen
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Jarvie's indictment of "the symbolic-interpretationists" is sweeping. Basing himself on a single work by Leach, Jarvie imputes assumptions to a broad range of social scientists from Durkheim through Leach to Sperber. They are said to differentiate radically between instrumental and symbolic action and to consider

activities or beliefs that make sense in instrumental terms beyond the pale of their inquiry. Only upon failing to find such sense, says Jarvie, do they look for symbolic interpretations.

Jarvie's comments may apply to some quarters of symbolic anthropology, but they do not accurately describe it as a whole. For many anthropologists, the major issue in the area of symbolism is not, as Jarvie would have it, "Why do people hold false beliefs?" Facile distinctions between "true" and "false" are not unanimously accepted by anthropologists. The major issue is much broader: to uncover the symbolic aspects of all human actions.

Let me demonstrate my point with Jarvie's own illustrations: Contrary to Jarvie's belief, the man who claims that a player is losing the squash game because he holds his racquet incorrectly is in fact making a statement that is amenable to symbolic interpretation. There is no one way of properly holding a racquet, but many which may vary slightly. The man, however, claims that only one is correct. He is expressing his view at a particular point in time and at the juncture of specific social incidents. Why is he closing what is largely open and indeterminate in this particular way and under these particular stimuli? The answer to these questions lies in symbolic interpretation of the incident, such as that the man is expressing a particular view of body presentation that may be related to his existential situation. His view can be delineated by analyzing the context in which it figures. The work of ethnomethodologists and of many anthropologists has demonstrated that statements about the prosaic, mundane, and instrumental carry much symbolic weight.

On the other hand, when the man claims that a player is losing the game because he "hasn't found Christ," that statement again is open to symbolic interpretation, but not for the reason that Jarvie imputes to anthropologists. The statement is obviously premised on a belief in Christ, but it also expresses the foreclosure of specific alternatives of religious action—a foreclosure that belief in Christ as such does not require. Why does the man choose this particular form of religious verbal expression? At what social juncture, and in the context of what other possible explanations, does it emerge? Tackling these questions leads us to a more profound and precise insight into the nature of the declared belief.

I agree with Jarvie that distinctions such as "true" and "false," "instrumental" and "symbolic," are often not viable in anthropology and tend to distort analysis. Indeed, the question whether an actor's statement is scientifically or doctrinally true is not for anthropology to answer; it is a problem for the relevant disciplines or belief systems. Hence any problem formulated on a predicated answer to the question is misleading. "The content of the words we utter" should be (and in fact often is) the main object of research in symbolic anthropology, not the search for a symbolic reduction or for a translation of the words. But Jarvie again carries his argument too far when he proceeds to state emphatically that it is irrelevant whether the actors understand or believe the words they utter or not. It would seem to me that the content that the actors infuse into their actions is highly pertinent to the analysis of those actions. Lacking this, one is reduced to the kind of weak truism to which Jarvie himself is driven when he interprets the wedding formula of Leach's bride merely as "legitimat(ing) the ceremony both to her and to the state." Moreover, Jarvie writes "religion may . . . atrophy, but its form of words can continue as a traditional or legal sanction." Here he strikes me as going back to functionalism in its more sterile form. Many fieldworkers will also disagree with him that "it is all too easy to explain the bride's acceptance of a wedding ceremony." This kind of problem—the acceptance of a wedding ceremony—is in fact one of the most complex problems that a fieldworker encounters. I grant, however, that it can be approached—given sensitive data on the meaning that the ceremony holds for particular actors.

Here again we must face the problem of analyzing the ways in which people decide between alternatives. Jarvie suggests that the bride accepts the ceremony because she is driven by the constraints of institutions or circumstances. In Israel, for instance, he notes, the bride will accept the ceremony because there is no legal secular marriage. That is so in theory; there are, however, ways of circumventing the law, such as marrying abroad. Virtually every course of human action anywhere implies decision-taking based on a certain degree of freedom from constraint. Ultimate and complete lack of choice is virtually unknown in ethnography, a point highlighted by recent studies of so-called total institutions. Human actions, therefore, cannot be understood without incorporating into the analysis behind-the-scenes data on meanings, motivations, and particular contexts. Such person-oriented data perforce lead one to focus on symbols and beliefs and their analysis (for work along these lines, see Deshen and Shokeid 1974 and many others cited in Turner 1975*a*).

I agree with Jarvie that there are flaws in symbolic interpretation in anthropology. These are certainly clear in the case of the reductionist theories, such as those of Freud, Jung, Durkheim, and others. Nevertheless, Jarvie's present essay, particularly when read in the context of some of his past work on anthropology (1964), does not seem very constructive. While sweepingly debunking much of modern anthropology, it leads one to conclude that Jarvie recommends a dubious version of the functionalism which he himself disparaged long ago. When we approach the behavior of actors in the field, symbolic interpretation in the existential sense I have indicated seems to me a viable alternative to superficiality. An essay promising to discuss the limits of symbolic interpretation is incomplete and misleading when in fact it focusses exclusively on its faults.

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Jarvie's latest effort to clarify epistemological issues in anthropology is a confusing, stridently polemical, and occasionally distasteful piece. Because the article generates more emotional heat than light, it presents special difficulties for the reviewer. Rather than guess at what Jarvie may mean in apparently critical passages, I confine myself here to considering a few of his more distressing misinterpretations of symbolic analysis as it is practiced in contemporary social anthropology.

In introducing his topic, Jarvie strikes the pose of someone about to rid the discipline of a fashionable disease—"symbolic interpretation," as he rather repetitiously labels it. Having prepared the reader for a blanket indictment of a considerable body of anthropological writing, Jarvie immediately muddies the waters by saying that the "general doctrine" of what he wishes to criticize" is nowhere very clearly or explicitly stated." This smacks of jousting with windmills and induces—in me, at any rate—an uneasy feeling, sustained throughout the article, that its author lays about him indiscriminately, with no clear notion of where, or what, the enemy is. This feeling is confirmed when one consults Jarvie's bibliography, seeking in that way to identify his unnamed targets. When one excludes the author's citations of his own works, his references include only three anthropological works published after 1970. Names usually associated with the anthropological study of symbol systems—Douglas (1966), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Geertz (1973), Lévi-Strauss (1966), Schneider (1968), Turner (1974), to mention but a few—are absent from Jarvie's bibliography, and the reader is left to wonder whether these are the "anthropologists of a crypto-religious persuasion" for whom he holds out no hope.

One major problem with the article is its failure to grasp the relationship Leach and others posit between practical and expressive components of culture. Jarvie rather indiscriminately

adopts a common—indeed, stereotypical—argument against symbolic analysis according to which that approach is seen as a kind of academic cabalism, a trivial pursuit of "hidden meanings" (a term Jarvie uses as a refrain, and which he evidently believes captures exactly the nature of symbolic analysis). In a relative sense, of course, the criticism may be appropriate: particular works in the field may be little more than formalist exercises, just as earlier writings, following a different approach, may have been obsessive in their utilitarian explanations of really quite exotic customs. The point, however, is that as a general rule symbolic analysis is concerned with systems of meaning, the material of which is public and accessible, rather than with systems of rules of social organization. Far from being "hidden" and cabalistic, meanings are often the most "real" aspect of social action: a man offering a sacrifice to God would likely be incensed if someone suggested he were simply cutting a sheep's throat; a bride selecting her wedding gown would deny that she was involved merely in an economic transaction.

Meanings are accessible in the ethnographic context; the systems they form are not. When Jarvie castigates Leach and unnamed others for their "muddle-headed" pursuit of "hidden meanings," he seems to refer to this tendency to establish systematic relationships between aspects of life that are not, to the ethnographer and to his informant, immediately evident. Here the pivotal concept is *metaphor*, and it is Jarvie's failure even to mention the development of this idea in symbolic analysis that, for me, vitiates his argument. The approach Jarvie criticizes rests on the foundation that humans living their ordinary lives, and not just effete anthropologists with a yen to play literary critic, are prolific creators and users of metaphor. The impetus, if not always the result, of symbolic analysis is ethnographic. Unless we begin by recognizing that our informants are themselves adept at switching among diverse cultural codes—topography, kinship, cooking, dress, astronomy, and so on—how do we even begin to understand what the fate of a sheep has to do with an individual's relation to his God, or why a bit of expensive fabric says something about a woman's conjugal status?

Finally, I must confess my sympathy for those whom Jarvie criticizes for believing that, in Leach's phrase, "there are different kinds of truth." I cannot see how Jarvie's assertion, nowhere very well-developed, that "cognition is univocal" at all contradicts Leach's structuralist premise. People everywhere probably do think in much the same fashion, if that is what Jarvie means, but psychic unity, I hope, does *not* mean that it is impossible to think critically. Symbolic analysis rests not on a hard-and-fast distinction between "real" instrumental meaning and "hidden" symbolic meaning, but on the ability of the mind to operate reflexively, on its own materials, and produce second-order statements (to construct, following Hjelmslev [1961], a "denotative semiology"). Beliefs about virgin birth are not the same as a set of statements about those beliefs; they are different kinds of truth.

by F. Allan Hanson
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The fact that we may find a belief palpably untrue does not constitute sufficient reason to assume that those who profess it do not take it at face value. On this point I think Jarvie is entirely correct. One of the things he wants to do about palpably untrue beliefs, however, is to determine how they are shielded from disproof and why they persist. This task demands, as he says, "the sociology of dissembling and the absurd." Here I think Jarvie has left out a step. Beliefs which *we* judge to be palpably false may not be so by indigenous metaphysics and standards of meaning, evidence, and truth. Only after those standards have been articulated and a belief has been demonstrated to be untrue by *them* does it become fair game for the sociology of the absurd. Hence I would side with Leach on the notion that there are different kinds of truth, and in a way which I think could eventually escalate into a major point of difference with Jarvie.

Another issue, separable from the first, is whether meanings or symbolisms are to be found beneath the surface of empirical behavior. Jarvie denies it; near the end of Part IV he goes so far as to claim that "the patterns or structures in ritual, doctrine, and myth are neither objectively there nor explanatory." This runs so fundamentally counter to anthropological praxis that it is difficult to find a middle course between a total review of the discipline and the dogmatic retort "Oh yes they are!" Jarvie presents two simple, "transcendental" arguments to support his position, and brief responses to them might be in order. The first argument rests on his contention that numerous incompatible systems of symbolic interpretation have been postulated (by Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, Leach, Turner, Douglas, Sperber, and others, to reproduce his list) and no agreement exists on which is the correct one. To Jarvie this points to the conclusion that there simply is no correct interpretation. In the first place, it is not correct to say that the various systems listed are all incompatible. They do not all ask the same questions, some being concerned with the nature of the mind and others with the structure of social and cultural institutions. Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach all appear on Jarvie's list of "incompatibilities," but who would claim that Radcliffe-Brown's analytic approach is incompatible with Durkheim's? And in the very Myers Lecture that is the main target of Jarvie's essay, Leach said (1967:44): "the method which I advocate is the one which Lévi-Strauss calls 'structuralist.' " Nor can I accept Jarvie's idea that lack of agreement over which of several alternative systems is best (or even over the standards by which such judgment should be made) proves that none of them is more nearly correct than any other. If that were true, the history of science—any science—would be very different from what it is.

Jarvie's second argument is that determinate hidden meanings do not exist because we cannot say how they got there. But he himself indicates the answer to this when, immediately after stating his argument, he adds: "I am not saying that every social pattern or regularity is (consciously or unconsciously) intended. On the contrary, I follow the tradition from Mandeville and Smith to Hayek and Popper in thinking most of what we call society to be the product of human action, but not of human design." Such social patterns and regularities, I submit, *are* the meanings hidden behind empirical behavior. They are meaningful not in the intentional sense that someone designed them, but in the implicational sense that they presuppose and imply each other in patterned systems that we call social structure or culture. We understand and elucidate those meanings by explicitly formulating and delineating the workings of the systems or structures to which they belong; whether or not the actors are aware of them is immaterial to their objective reality. Elsewhere I have tried to work out these ideas in more detail (Hanson 1975, 1976). Jarvie's own ideal, Karl Popper, has developed a point of view similar to this under the rubrics of the "third world" of "objective mind" (Popper 1968, 1969)—a notion on which Jarvie himself has provided extended commentary (1972: chap. 6). To respond, then, to Jarvie's argument about how the hidden meanings got there, and in language familiar to him, we may say they stem from the unintended consequences of human action.

Finally, a note on scholarly procedure. Toward the end of Part II there appears the following sentence, including a quotation from Leach: "It is 'impossible on common-sense grounds' (p. 45) that what is well-known to most of mankind should not be known to all." Scrutiny of the Henry Myers Lecture reveals that the passage quoted from Leach does not appear on p. 45. Perhaps Jarvie has in mind Leach's statement on p. 41: "I find

it highly improbable on common-sense grounds that genuine 'ignorance' of the basic facts of physiological paternity should anywhere be a cultural fact." (Jarvie also quotes this passage, accurately this time, in Part IV.) But if that is the passage Jarvie is citing, it is puzzling why his quotation contains "impossible" instead of Leach's own "highly improbable" and why Jarvie's sentence and footnote 16 should imply that Leach was enunciating a general principle when his remarks were clearly directed specifically at ignorance of physiological paternity.

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It is unfortunate that Jarvie chooses to refresh our memories on the controversy between the symbolists and the literatists or the sociological versus the intellectualist approach by using Leach as his model for criticizing symbolic studies and particularly unfortunate that he chooses Leach's essay on virgin birth as representative. In a general exposition of symbolic studies, Turner (1975*a*) does not even cite Leach. It appears that Jarvie is confounding all symbolic studies with the rational scientific paradigm advocated by Leach. Thus, perhaps the major weakness of the article is that the choice of example is fundamentally arbitrary.

Another weakness is the rejection of the distinction between expressive and instrumental behavior. I am in agreement with Jarvie's analysis of Leach's hidden motive in making the distinction: an attempt to *credit* mystical beliefs and action and render them logical in order to circumvent a neo-Tylorian perspective of primitive people. I also agree that it is arbitrary to assume that cognition is multivocal. This is done under the guise of science, and consequently the anthropologist is forced to confront the truth or falseness of the beliefs. So we have the paradigm: Instrumental (rational): Scientific Explanation::Expressive (symbolic): Muddle-headed Explanation. A fundamental question here, however, is who does the splitting—the anthropologist or the people? If we can assume that people act because they believe their actions (ritual or practical) will have certain consequences (instrumental), then indeed they do not act because they know that the behavior is symbolically prescribed. So, if we use their categories we are not committing an immoral, arbitrary mistake. On the other hand, if Leach makes the decision, Jarvie is perfectly correct in accusing him of immoral arbitrariness.

All this leads to the question of the basis of Jarvie's judgments. What standards does Jarvie use to judge the truth or falseness of symbolic studies? What are *his* beliefs? He states that "all action should be explained by beliefs." I wonder if his basic assumptions are on a conscious or an unconscious level, if they are univocal, if they are all instrumental, and, finally, where they come from. He believes that if symbolic-interpretationists cannot explain how hidden meaning got there, it does not exist. The assumption that anthropologists must explain origins hints at the diachronic-synchronic problem and should lead to explaining the social function of the absurd more than hints at functional analysis. In addition, Jarvie is utilizing the cause-effect paradigm, again pointing to his criterion for validity—positivism. Doesn't this contradict his suggestion that there are no universal standards for the truth or falseness of beliefs? Or is he attempting to bring two divergent approaches in anthropology together?

Contrary to Jarvie's assertion, I suggest that symbols are not necessarily of human design on a conscious level, but are used by people, often on an unconscious level, to give meaning and order to their everyday lives and the world in which they live. Here, we get to the core of the argument. People may tell the anthropologist their beliefs (conscious) about symbols (including behavior), but beliefs alone and disjointed cannot be used as the only explanation for behavior. It is not a question of judging beliefs true or false, but of constructing a belief system that explains behavior in terms of people's theories and philosophies. Within such a system we find symbols (objects, behavior, words, gestures, etc.) used in different ways by people in different contexts to create a meaningful order. According to Turner (1975*a*:155) the "multivocality [of symbols] enables a wide range of groups and individuals to relate to the same signifier-vehicle in a variety of ways." Furthermore, he argues that symbols are not simply informational storage units, but the crucial factors in social action (1975*b*). The meanings of symbols can oscillate between the instrumental and expressive aspects of behavior (emically defined) depending on the beliefs of the people involved. Thus, beliefs should be studied within a *single framework*, whether they are true or false by outside standards, but it is up to the (anthropologist) outsider to analyze their overall meaning. To my mind, this is not morally dubious and condescending, but intellectually and philosophically imperative for the building of good theory (Hill 1975).

With such an approach, the errors that Jarvie accuses symbolic-interpretationists of making are avoided. Cognition is not assumed to be multivocal, but the use of symbols can be analyzed within a system of belief and action. In fact, beliefs may be contradictory; contradictions render the world entirely explicable, on the one hand, and provide explanations for the failure of specific beliefs, on the other. This approach would solve the virgin-birth problem; Christians *believe* that it happened in another time, a time of miracles. We do not have to explain the absurd (from a positivistic perspective) as Jarvie suggests. Indeed, is he suggesting that we can go no farther than description in anthropology? We need to strive toward explanations of thought processes on a more general level. Here the level of interpretation and explanation becomes important and can perhaps in a more productive way render the sociological and intellectual paradigms complementary, as Horton (1962) wishes and Jarvie unconvincingly suggests.

Does Jarvie's criticism of symbolic studies tell us more about Jarvie than about symbolic studies? I think so. He has always placed himself on the cutting edge of anthropology and, in doing so, has produced some stimulating and thought-provoking ideas. However, his broad criticism of an entire approach in anthropology without broadening his references is counterproductive. It seems to me that he is using one approach (belief system) in anthropology to criticize another without consciously understanding his own basic assumptions. The basis for his judgments of the truth or falseness of symbolic studies resembles a positivistic belief in ultimate truth. The paradigm he attacks shares some elements with his arguments against it (assuming that symbolic interpretation is symbolic). Why does he fail to take it at face value? Is he a positivist or a phenomenalist? I believe that Jarvie would agree, nonetheless, with a statement by Polanyi (1962:11–12) that "man must try forever to discover knowledge that will stand up by itself, objectively, but the moment he reflects on his own knowledge . . . he finds himself asserting it to be true. . . ."

by ROGER JOSEPH
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The broadest contention of this paper is that anthropology consists of empirically derived causal sequences; epistemes that establish relationships through symbolic association are incorrect. Rather than constituting an either/or solution, the two approaches can be viewed as complementary or dialectically related (Murphy 1971). The point of dialectical procedure is not to discover a "hidden" reality, but to uncover processes. Jarvie wishes to restrict anthropology to the positivistic external; he apparently rejects any strategy to get at what Mauss calls a "total system."

The specific case against symbolic interpretations is made on

the basis of a single article by the positivist-cum-structuralist Leach. Presumably, Jarvie agrees with the early instrumentalist Leach of Burma. Jarvie asks a lot of us here: to accept that "Virgin Birth" is representative of the later Leach and that Leach is representative of the symbolic perspective. The author asserts the truth of both propositions, but presents no documentation. There is, in fact, evidence to the contrary (cf. Crocker 1973). Lurking in the shadows of this essay are Popper and Wittgenstein, but Leach, both early and late, is more the former than the latter.

Jarvie is on safer ground when he questions methodology. Mauss's study of the gift is brilliant, but how does one test it? The root critique of any symbolic approach is whether it is accessible to *any* canon of scientific inquiry. If the answer is no, then Jarvie is correct to assign a theological, arbitrary status to this perspective. Before symbolic anthropology can offer universal categories, it must discover whether independent researchers working within a limited temporal-spatial dimension can uncover similar bodies of symbolic interpretation which disclose cognitive maps unclear in previous work. Such a discovery has been made in the study of symbolic representations in North Africa and the Middle East (Fernea and Malarkey 1975). One of the distinguishing attributes of these studies is that they are responses to empirical data. One cannot understand ideas in the mind without reference to acts on the ground. Symbolic anthropology has opened up new domains of research. Jarvie reminds us that we cannot rush into this enterprise willy nilly, but only with a sound grounding in empirical science.

by EDMUND LEACH
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Jarvie declares that he is bored with what I find interesting and fascinated by what I find boring, and there seems to me little more to be said about this entirely unoriginal but calculatedly offensive paper. I would comment, however, on Jarvie's flat assertion relating to graces at meals that "the content of the words we utter is *far* from being irrelevant." As a philosopher, Jarvie has of course a vested interest in the relevance of words as such, but he is in error as to the facts. The noise sequences which function as grace in the Hall of my Cambridge college vary greatly in the course of the year and are mostly gibberish in any language; however, as it happens, a scientist colleague of mine assures me that on one occasion he did in fact recite precisely the "Eeny, meeny . . ." formula which Jarvie ridicules!

Incidentally, I hold hardly any of the opinions which Jarvie credits to me in the course of his argument.

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I found Jarvie's paper irrelevant to the area of study with which I am most familiar: the interpretation of visual images in cultural contexts. Visual symbols would be most annoying to Jarvie, for they are unquestionably in a "separate cognitive domain" and are not "transparent" because they are often inaccessible to their viewers.

Leach may be criticized for suggesting that people do not always believe what they say they believe, but is that reason to say that the symbolic approach is invalid? Belief per se is not the province of the anthropologist, but how belief affects the symbolic concepts of man in time and space—his world view, his idea of the relationship between the supernatural and natural worlds—is very much so. While denial of the "truth" of the Virgin Birth is easy (either you believe it or you don't), denial that such a concept has symbolic implications in certain people's views of the relationship between supernatural and natural forces is untenable.

In his discussion of the Virgin Birth, Jarvie reveals that he is ignorant of its "symbolic or communicative purpose" by betraying a lack of understanding of the doctrine itself. Jarvie confuses Greco-Roman myths of sexual intercourse between gods and mortals, as expressed in "The Rape of Europa," with the Christian concept of the Virgin Birth. When Jarvie refers to the Virgin Birth in such terms as "Jesus was conceived through the ear," it is clear that he is missing the symbolic (there's that word again) point of the whole story. In Christian belief, it is the very *lack* of natural function (i.e., sexual intercourse of any kind, divine or mortal) that makes the Virgin Birth miraculous. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth is an example of the belief in the power of God ("by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man"). Unlike Greco-Roman myths of god-mortal relationships, it has nothing whatever to do with supernatural sexual activities. In fact, it is far closer to the Judaic symbolic conceptualization of a special relationship between God and man (between supernatural and natural worlds). Speaking of which, I wonder if Jarvie would interpret Moses's dietary rules as the "instrumental" acts of an enlightened public-health official or merely as absurdities (see Douglas 1970 on "secular defilement").

Any persuasive remnant in Jarvie's statement of the limits of symbolic interpretation in anthropology is seriously weakened by further examples of his fundamental lack of understanding of the symbolic systems he discusses. One reads that the metaphysical label "explains how intelligent Catholics who know the connection between intercourse and pregnancy can affirm the Immaculate Conception." Jarvie's confusion of the doctrine of Virgin Birth with that of the Immaculate Conception is not uncommon, but one does expect the plaintiff to know his facts. That Mary was born of natural parents (the normal way) without original sin is symbolic of another special relationship between God and man. What is original sin? It is yet another "absurd" concept in the Christian belief system symbolic of the relationship between supernatural and natural forces in the universe.

I think that Jarvie has a point in criticizing symbolic interpretations because they are difficult to test and because they change. To enlarge Jarvie's legitimate complaints, I see the major problems with symbolic interpretation of human action under two broad categories:

1. In considering symbolic systems, belief systems, or world views of any particular culture group, how does the diachronic factor affect the synchronic: how does one account for change in patterns of belief systems? Can cultural disjunction be measured? How significant are disjunctive forces in cultural progression?

2. How are the validity of alleged symbolic systems testable? What means can be used to validate a particular belief system described by an investigator as representative or "true" within a given cultural context?

A commentary is not the place to delve into the implications of these issues, much less to try to answer them. Suffice it to say here that repeated empirical observations of symbolic behavior in field situations is the key to answering these questions. Data from fieldwork will either confirm or invalidate hypothetical constructs anthropologists form in order to understand man's conceptualizing behavior.

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The key issues in Jarvie's article are part of an intratribal debate between social anthropologists and students of Karl Popper at the London School (cf. Jarvie 1967, 1972). I get the distinct impression, however, that Leach himself is the centerpiece and not those colleagues who "trade in hint, allusion, insinuation, non-sequitur, and free association."

Symbolic interpretation includes the categories and uses of

symbols which Jarvie himself outlines. Many anthropologists see justification for Leach's structural endeavors as an example of the study of those symbols that, as Jarvie puts it, "affect us in ways we do not understand." If there is justification for looking beyond the intentional meaning of informant statements, it lies here. Like Popper's institutions, some symbols may be the consequences of "other-directed" action and are something people tacitly use, but do not overtly design. Hence, "my" grammar and beliefs are both related to my actions, but are realized in significantly different ways. Sociological explanations do not suffice to explain these differences. Manifest meanings are not necessarily the stuff from which institutions (Popper, Jarvie) or all symbols (Leach) are made.

I agree with Jarvie, however, that informant statements reflect situational knowledge of the culture and have rational, if not empirical, significance. "Situational logic" emphasizes that standards of rationality do not differ, but premises (beliefs) and their context do. If nothing else, cultures can be distinguished by the unique, even dubious, premises they offer for rational action. To the "muddle-headed theologian," truth may come only in "unpalpable" forms used to serve rational ends. To suggest otherwise is to hold up to ridicule all informants and the "cultural truths" they offer.

Although Jarvie takes great pains to dissociate himself from Leach's proclivity for creating symbolic "goods with which to think," the two nevertheless seem to share the view that the truth and rationality of informant statements can be questioned in the meta-perspective of Western science. This position is precarious for Jarvie, as it seems to contradict the "rationality principle" of his situational logic (Jarvie 1967:218). For example, Jarvie evaluates the comparative merits of Azande witchcraft and Western transubstantiation, finding the latter less interesting philosophically because it is "so vague and poor." The seemingly progressive status of Azande magic has its limits, however. In an earlier rendition of this argument, Jarvie (1972:65) remarks, "I hold that standards of rationality are comparable and Western ones are better than Zande." Apparently some situations are more rational than others. Presumably, the Catholic biologist who resides in the West has both the "poorer" rationality of his faith to justify the Virgin Birth and the "better" rationality of his science to refute such "unpalpable truths." Alternative standards of rationality seem to exist within, as well as between, cultures. Jarvie's initial thesis that the statement "making an offering to the ancestors" is the same as the statement "doing research on enzymes" now appears to be weakened, if not contradicted.

Within this "metatheoretical" framework, one might ask how we discern univocal cognition. If rationality is "better" or "poorer" in some cultures, how do we use cognition to explain anything? I would argue, out of necessity if nothing else, that to choose between better and poorer rationality is to choose, like Laplace's demon, between moral, not empirical, alternatives.

by S. Nagata
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Jarvie's paper, in my opinion, follows the recent trend in anthropology which charges that structuralist theories are unfalsifiable and reductionist. In contrast to neo-Tylorians or Marxists, however, Jarvie argues against seeking "hidden messages . . . whose interest cannot be explained" and for limiting study to the intentional meaning of the acts and words and their "social repercussions." I am not entirely persuaded to abandon "symbolic interpretation" by these arguments.

To begin with, I think there is no disagreement among anthropologists about the need "to look into the social function of the absurd," but this does not exhaust the question as to the status of the "absurd" itself. It may be facile to dismiss the "absurd" as mistake and error and forgive the savages for the social condition in which they live—as Durkheim did and Jarvie seems also to be saying. But one sometimes believes in spite of the environment, and this was precisely the point Horton (1960) raised against Durkheim.

In this connection, Jarvie appears to merge ideas with beliefs that "convert easily into imperatives to action," but there are also ideas that are the result of speculative activities and remain speculative. It is for these speculative and contemplative constructs from other cultures, whose social use is often minimal and sometimes even eschewed by their practitioners (artists and mathematicians?), that symbolic interpretations become a powerful means of analysis.

Of these products of speculation, there are also those whose *interest* lies in providing meaning to the world and man. Jarvie argues that "the truth of the cognitive claims [of these ideas] makes no difference to how well they explain action." I find it difficult to understand this statement, for there are rationalizations and secondary elaborations (Evans-Pritchard) through the efforts of which ideologies get formulated and compel action to fit the ideas (as in revolution). Not all speculations about the world and man end up being ideologies, however, and some remain wistfully metaphysical, like Pascal's metaphor of man. In this instance, the metaphor was certainly intended, but in others that anthropologists are called upon to explain the intention is often forgotten or lost in tradition. To limit the study of such speculative products to their social repercussions may result in ignoring the internal logic that emerges out of the demand for speculative consistency (as has been the case with Malinowski's "mythical charter"). Precisely because of this selective attitude toward the cognitive claims (i.e., the search for their social functions), such endeavours may lead to the exact opposite of Jarvie's recommendation to take words seriously. This is, in fact, the state of the anthropological writings of the recent past, especially those concerned with the native peoples of North America, which, instead of recording myths, chants, prayers, etc., verbatim, have stopped at interpreted glosses and English translations. Contrary to Jarvie's argument, therefore, I feel that symbolic interpretation accords greater respect to ethnographic reality.

by Renato Rosaldo
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Why, asks Jarvie, should anthropologists search for the "hidden meaning" of human action when people give perfectly sound explanations of their own conduct? I agree only insofar as what Jarvie means is that symbolic interpretations make the wrong first move when they merrily leap over the actor's manifest intentions in their eager pursuit of what lies concealed below or beyond or wherever. Arguably, a description of the actor's intentions should never be omitted from an interpretive study and might well constitute the point of departure (without being the final goal) of such investigations.

At times, I suppose, the problem of discovering a person's intentions may be as unambiguous, transparent, and straightforward as the article claims. Often, however, such descriptions of intentionality are not so immediately, if ever, transparent, and the problems they pose comprise a central issue, as basic as it is vexed, for the translation of culture. An especially telling example of the problem of translation is the case Jarvie presents in which a fundamentalist tells him that his game of squash will improve after he finds Christ. What, Jarvie muses for an instant, did the fundamentalist mean by that? That question is so basic to anthropological inquiry that one wonders how the article can gloss over such well-meaning advice, dismissing it because, coming as it does from another cultural context, its meaning is not immediately evident and the job of "unpacking" its significance would unnecessarily complicate matters. Jarvie is so cavalier in brushing aside what E. E. Evans-

Pritchard and many of the rest of us would regard as the central issue of interpretive anthropology that I wonder how he would judge, for example, Nuer statements that twins are birds or a Bororo's claim to be a parrot. Perhaps he would view such statements as instances of "primitive mentalities" or "palpable falsehoods"; at best his paper suggests that he would conduct a sociological study of how people shield their absurd beliefs from refutation. In either case he would be wrong.

Let me be as blunt as Jarvie: the article is just plain wrong when it claims that the determination of an actor's intentions is a simple matter of univocal cognition. The problems involved in explicating and contextualizing statements made by people (like the Nuer, the Bororo, and Jarvie's fundamentalist) whose beliefs we do not share and whose cultural worlds we do not inhabit are not a cut-and-dried matter, hence the extent to which and the sense in which people's beliefs are false should only come (if at all) at the second stage of analysis. The first step is to determine what people mean when they say, for instance, that by "finding Christ" they improved their game of squash; only then could inquiry move to the second step of asking about truth, falsehood, shielding mechanisms, and the rest.

Jarvie claims that symbolic interpretations seek a single, determinate meaning in human action. Once again he is wrong, wrong, wrong. While Jarvie presents certain (I agree) outlandish interpretations of Shakespeare, he implies that there is only one way to read *Hamlet*. Following the same logic, Jarvie also claims that one student of meaning (say, Jarvie) must be right and all the others (Douglas, Leach, Lévi-Strauss, et al.) must be wrong. I find both assertions untenable. As for students of meaning, I think that some are righter than others and that all of them, some of the time, speak on different analytical levels without necessarily contradicting one another. As for *Hamlet* and human conduct in general, I think it admits of a number of different levels of interpretation because it is overdetermined and its explanation—if it is to strive for complexity and intelligibility—should encompass multiple factors, ranging from conscious intentions to structural determinants.

In sum, Jarvie maintains that actors' explanations of their own actions are "univocal" and render the search for "hidden meanings" irrelevant. His mistakes, among others, are two: (1) the determination of an actor's intentions is as problematic as it is central to interpretive anthropology; (2) even if we discover the actor's intentions (whether true or false or, as is more likely, some mixture of the two), this implies neither that "hidden meanings" contribute nothing to our understanding of social action nor that they are condescending, pernicious, rococo scrolls on the simple truth.

by W. G. Studdert-Kennedy
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Jarvie hops from the particular and ad hominem to his transcendental dismissals with a donnish mock-chagrin one has to suspect. Is this how anthropologists of different segments "joke" together, a symbol of frustrating affinity? Will one be marked down as a solemn owl for taking him too seriously? Because, of course, his argument is outrageously constructed—avoiding elementary discriminations, imputing unjustly, calling on misleading analogies, striving to provoke. The allusions to Latin graces and Cambridge colleges are entirely apt: there is a great priming of combination-room petards to hoist the obnoxious tribal elder.

Leach is indeed hard done by. His essay, set up to represent an alleged general doctrine of symbolic interpretation, is given the most cursory consideration, and space is consumed in inconsequential argumentation as Leach moves from typewriter to rostrum of the Royal Anthropological Institute. But others fare worse. All "systems of symbolic interpretation," Jarvie declares, are incompatible. The transcendental argument that ensues is hard to follow. He must be saying that there is an (arbitrary?) incompatibility between *theoretical* systems in which the treatments of "symbols" and meaning are elements. But to argue from the existence of theoretical diversity as Jarvie does is absurd, doubly absurd when extended, as it would have to be, to other bodies of social theory—political theory, say, or alternative postulates in economic theory. General social theories frequently differ, and some are incompatible with others. One is persuaded one way or the other on complex grounds which at certain levels cannot include positive demonstration. Some interpretations are more compelling than others, and some need to be read as part of a progressive research programme. Some of the anthropologists Jarvie names have a developed awareness of the sociological contexts of meaning and cannot therefore be identified with his theoretical straw man. Sperber (1975), for example, could readily demonstrate his explicit repudiation of assumptions attributed to him about the nature of "symbols," the decoding of "meanings," the origins of "nonrational" beliefs, the relation between anthropologist and the society he studies, the acknowledgment of ignorance, vagueness, habit, and literal belief in "false" synthetic statements (see, for example, his account of the delightful Dorze belief in the Christianity of leopards). Above all, Sperber does not make the crude epistemological distinction which is central to Jarvie's critique, but is, however, in the business of discriminating between the "intentional, customary, or unconscious" systems of meaning and those that "may even affect us in ways we do not understand." We are not shown how this task can be greatly simplified by the forthright injunctions laid out earlier in Jarvie's essay.

Finally, it travesties the issues involved to draw an analogy with the Baconians rather than the Shakespearean critics, many of whom mechanically, some of whom imaginatively explore resonant systems of meaning on which they place contrasting theoretical constructions. Or does Jarvie believe that there are determinate solutions to the problems of interpreting (politically and sociologically) significant symbolic action in that area as well?

by Roy Willis
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Jarvie's article raises some crucial questions about the whole business of symbolic interpretation in anthropology. The trouble is that he doesn't go far enough. There is also an unresolved contradiction in his argument.

Jarvie begins by asserting that there is a logical equivalence between "he is making an offering to the ancestors" (primitive society) and "he is doing research on enzymes" (modern society). Good. But he goes on to say that these statements are "quite enough," there is no "hidden meaning," etc. Possibly—yet at the end of his article he expresses a preference for "progressive" Zande notions about a ubiquitous "witchcraft" force over the "degenerate" doctrine of transubstantiation. Apparently Zande ideas are progressive because of their resemblance to field theory in modern physics (hence the reference to Faraday). Ah, but what is the virtue Jarvie finds in Zande ideas but a "symbolic" significance, after all? The mere statement, by Zande or anyone, is *not* enough, and Jarvie has contradicted himself.

So symbolic significance is cognitive inference from one area of knowledge to another. The existence of such discrete areas of knowledge (such as anthropology, philosophy, physics) is a particular feature of modern Western culture. One consequence of this situation is that one can always play the symbolist at his own game by showing that *his* system is not bedrock rationality, but the (presumably unconscious) expression of a "deeper," underlying system and therefore itself symbolic. I think

Jarvie is right in arguing that Leach's attempt to halt this regress by saying that *his* interpretation is merely "interesting" will not do. The paradigm of all such attempts, surely, is the total anthropological enterprise of seeking to explain away all exotic, ultimately all non-rational-scientific, thought and behavior as "symbolic" (i.e., second-class) truth.

Jarvie is right to protest at the iniquity of such a program, or programs, but I am not sure he realizes the full implications of his line of reasoning once the internal contradiction referred to above is ironed out of it. The plethora of competing, mutually incompatible symbolic interpretations is a reality, a "positive fact," as is the enormous public demand for symbolic "readings" of experience. We *do* need to ask radical questions about this state of affairs, and be prepared to follow wherever the questions, and their answers, may lead.

Reply

by I. C. Jarvie
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Some of the commentators on my paper think that I should have written a survey of the symbolist literature (Aronoff) or a balanced critique of Leach (Studdert-Kennedy). Quite apart from the sacred right of authors to write the paper they want to write and not that which their critics think they ought to have written, excellent surveys already exist (Sperber 1975, Turner 1975*a*), and Spiro (1968) has criticised Leach in scrupulous detail. Turning to the paper itself, several commentators criticise me for lumping together rather than discriminating the various systems of symbolic interpretation, even suggesting that I have created a spurious unity, hence a straw man (Aronoff) or a windmill (Drummond). My reply is that I wanted to expose and criticise common assumptions, assumptions not necessarily explicitly stated or defended anywhere. In particular, I wanted to raise the fundamental question "When should an anthropologist resort to symbolic readings of human acts and words?" Most symbolist writers never raise the question; they just plunge into symbolic interpretations. Implicit and sometimes explicit answers can, however, be adduced: for example, some do symbolic interpretation when they feel like it, some when dealing with magic or religion, some when dealing with expressive rather than instrumental behaviour and speech, some when rational accounts seem inadequate, and so on. The answer I proposed owes something to Raymond Firth and is an attempt to improve the last of the list: go to symbolism only when intentional, instrumental, or functional readings are inadequate for the purpose at hand. Where the purpose at hand is describing the nature of the universe, explaining disease, or improving your squash, symbolism should be a last resort, not a first.

Two reasons were offered for such voluntary restraint on the use of symbolic interpretation. The first was the bewildering variety of different interpretative systems on the market, all of which are of doubtful explanatory value and all of which are untestable (as Joseph, Miller, and Rosaldo seem to agree). The second was that the assumption that there are hidden messages in what people do and say is contentious (cf. Sperber 1975).

A third reason was implicit: it is just too easy to do symbolic interpretation. All speech and action has symbolic aspects. Since these aspects are so contentious and diverse, is it not better to go as far as we can with the literal reading of words and acts (as Burridge says, they mean what they say and say what they mean; Aronoff, Bastien, Hanson, Miller, Nagata, and Rosaldo all agree; Leach once again demurs), before turning to symbols? There may be no such thing as the one *true* symbolic meaning, any more than the one true literal meaning. Ambiguity is ineliminable. All interpretations are hypotheses. Better by far to start with those capable of some test, rather than with those known in advance to be untestable. The Kalabari world view, Chinese theories of disease, the coach's explanation of poor squash performance—these are subject to the tests of logic and the facts. Modern Western science doubtless has its symbolic and poetic aspects; but since it is a cognitive endeavour, no one mistakes these for its primary ones.

Nevertheless, I nowhere deny that symbolism becomes appropriate when certain kinds of questions are raised. For example, Lawrence (1964) has shown how cargo cults in one area of New Guinea can be cognitively reconstructed as successive attempts to explain events and the universe, and that there is some progress in the successive approximations, along with some regressions. Burridge (1960, 1969), by raising questions about the New Guinea moral universe and its relation to the social universe, is able to add symbolic interpretations of great power. He does this by use of the minimum of symbols and a close account of what he encountered in the field. This, rather than system building, is, I agree with Burridge, the only disciplined approach. It seems to me that Douglas raises questions in *Purity and Danger* that make the move to symbolism necessary, as does Topley (1970) in connection with Chinese ideas of disease. My paper called for limits to symbolic interpretation, not its abandonment.

On a number of matters my commentators disagree with each other, and sometimes with me. Interested readers will judge for themselves whose arguments are strongest. For my own part, I must thank Miller for correcting my theology (although much of it is Leach's) and Hanson for correcting my scholarship. Morris and Willis wonder at my preference for Azande magic over Christian theology. Both are degenerating research programmes, but at least Azande doctrines are crisp, precise, and testable.

It only remains for me to apologise to those who found me out of date (Aronoff, although his standards—papers published last year and this—are exacting), confusing, calculatedly offensive, distasteful, stridently polemical, unjust, misleading. At times like these I feel like Raymond Chandler's character Philip Marlowe, who is told by Mrs. Regan in *The Big Sleep* that she doesn't like his manners. He replies to the effect that he gets a lot of complaints, that he doesn't like them himself, he grieves over them long winter nights, but meanwhile, the question remains. . . .

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An Economic Analysis of Polygyny: The Case of Maiduguri[1]

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Nearly all Sub-Saharan and most Muslim countries permit polygyny.[2] In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, as many as 35% of married men take simultaneously more than one wife (Dorjahn 1959), so that the majority of the population participates in a polygynous household at some time. I shall offer insights into the determinants of polygyny through an analysis of a predominantly Kanuri city in northeastern Nigeria that makes use of economic theory and econometrics (the testing of economic hypotheses).

Economic theory contributes to the understanding of some aspects of cultural phenomena. Its applicability extends beyond the domain of industrial production to encompass the everyday decisions of mothers, children, lovers, or marriage-brokers, without distinction as to language or country. This broad focus follows from the definition of economics as the study of the allocation of scarce means to competing ends. Economic theory initiates an analysis of individual behavior in the process of constrained choice by making simplifying assumptions. Economists assume very simple rules of psychology, not because they naively overlook nuances of individual motivation, anxieties, or rationalizations, but because they hope that these simple abstractions will be sufficient approximations for the purpose. The criterion is that the theory work—that it produce reasonably accurate predictions.

A central behavioral assumption made by economists is that people are rational. Man, as pictured by economists, tries to utilize his resources in such a way that at the margin he achieves optimal allocation; if he is a worker, he equates the marginal benefit of supplying one more hour of work to its marginal cost in terms of the alternative allotments of time. Economists do not claim, however, that workers (or businessmen) actually reach their decisions by consulting curves or functions showing marginal cost and revenue. Similarly, when the proponents of the "new home economics" (see Becker 1965, Lancaster 1966) develop concepts like the marginal cost of children or the marginal revenue from seeking a husband, they do not claim to discover new behavioral rules. The validity of the assumption of rationality lies, not in its descriptive accuracy, but in the fulfillment of the theory it helps generate. Put another way, the principle is that the adequacy of a theory must be judged not by assessing the realism of its assumptions, but by examining the

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[2] The only Muslim countries limiting polygyny are Turkey, Tunisia, and Pakistan. Egypt is in the process of joining them.