Clifford Geertz: “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”

Study Questions

1. How does Geertz’s example of the difference between a “twitch” and a “wink” demonstrate the interpretive relevance of “thick description”? (6-7)

2. Geertz reflects that the role of the ethnographer is more like that of a literary critic than that of a “cipher clerk”. Why do you think the former is a more adequate analogy? (9)

3. What basic assumption does the psychological approach to ethnography (attributed to Ward Goodenough) operate on? (11)

4. Why does Geertz find it important to emphasize that “anthropological writings are themselves [second or third order] interpretations”, moreover, “fictions”? (15)

5. What does he mean by saying that the “line between mode of representation and substantive content is undrawable”? (16)

6. Why is it that culture cannot exclusively be viewed as a symbolic system? Why is it also important to attend to behavior? (17)

7. Why is excessive coherence a danger to be avoided in cultural interpretations? (18)

8. What does he mean when saying that the interpretation of cultures “consists in rescuing the ‘said’ of such [cultural] discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms”? (20)

9. How does the “microscopic” view of the anthropologist differ from that of the approach of historians, economists, political scientists, and sociologists? (21)

10. Why are the “heaven-in-a-grain-of-sand” and “natural laboratory” approaches (for different reasons but equally) undesirable? (24)

11. Besides the specificity of thick descriptions, why is there still a need for theorizing cultural anthropology? (24)

12. Why is excessive coherence a danger to be avoided in cultural interpretations? (18)

13. What is meant by “clinical inference” and why is it not a workable approach in anthropology? (25)

14. How does “inscription” and “specification” relate to each other in an “interpretive science”? (28)

15. How can we explicate what Geertz concludes in the final paragraph of section VII? (28)