

THE RESOLUTE IRRESOLUTION OF CLIFFORD GEERTZ

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Clifford Geertz, arguably the best-known and most influential American anthropologist of the past several decades, died of a broken heart on October 30, 2006, at the age of eighty—the result of “complications” following heart surgery. All this, according to initial death notices.

Two days later, on November 1, the *New York Times* published an obituary.¹ It was a friendly portrait—organized largely around brief characterizations and reviews of ten of his books—in which Geertz was depicted somewhat vapidly as “the eminent anthropologist whose work focused on interpreting the symbols he believed give meaning and order to people’s lives.” The obituary then managed to freely associate his writings with an extraordinary jumble of views: that objective knowledge of the true meaning of things is not possible and that “ethnographic reality does not exist apart from anthropologists’ written versions of it”; but that “cultures and peoples should speak for themselves”; and that, at the same time, anthropologists should be empirically rigorous and draw explanatory conclusions of their own about the meaning of a peoples’ symbols by actually observing them

1. Andrew L. Yarrow, “Clifford Geertz, Cultural Anthropologist, Is Dead at 80,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2006.

in use. It was this method, the *Times* said, that Geertz called “thick description.” The *Times* concluded its memorial by suggesting that, at the end of his career, the eminent anthropologist felt disheartened by the inability of the social sciences to generalize or develop grand and sweeping theories of human behavior.

On November 7, things got even worse: the *Wall Street Journal* published its obituary.² This one was a conspicuously hostile depiction (written in a genre of sarcastic tastelessness), in which the great man was described as “perhaps the leading anthropological thinker of Twentieth Century Part Two, even if hardly anyone knew exactly why.” The obituary associated his writings with bits and pieces of skeptical postmodern doctrine (“he argued for the comforting and evasive simplification that there could be no facts about social life”; “he emphasized words about acts rather than the acts themselves”). Remarkably, the obituary even managed to associate Geertz with the moral agenda of identity politics (“the holy intellectual trinity of race/class/gender became the imperative explanatory tools to explain and understand anything”). The *Journal* concluded its memorial by portraying this complex scholar and personality as a “static gloomy icon,” who had wasted his time pondering “the links between writing and behavior”; as a writer who insisted that “belligerent if elegant imprecision . . . was the most one could expect from the intellectual life earnestly lived”; and as the enforcer of “a conventional world view which provided intimidating intellectual cover for politically correct thoughts and deeds.”

In other words, within a week or so of that painful day in late October, it had become apparent to Geertz’s admirers (and I am one of them) that the maladies and perplexities—the complications—associated with his death extended far beyond his physical condition, and that some of us were going to have to rise to the challenge of more precisely saying why he was such a towering influence. Reading the *Wall Street Journal*’s truly belligerent (and inaccurate) obituary, it occurred to me that some of the misunderstandings of Geertz’s work, most of them predictable, were exemplary of a predicament in the social sciences that he had tried to expose.

So who was Clifford Geertz, and what was he up to? Part of the answer is temperamental and part is philosophical, and the two parts fit together almost perfectly. But before I say how, let me recapitulate some well-known facts about his career. His collection of essays *Available Light* opens with an autobiographical address, “Passage and Accident: A Life of Learning,” delivered to the American Council of Learned Societies in 1999.³ The G.I. bill (which he refers to, with characteristic wit, as the “degreeing of America”) launched him into academia

2. Lionel Tiger, “Fuzz, Fuzz . . . It Was Covered in Fuzz,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2006.

3. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

where, as he puts it, he just kept catching the right wave. He went from Antioch College (“the reigning attitude, Jewish, all irony, impatience and auto-critique”), to the Department of Social Relations at Harvard (“a gathering of fugitives from traditional departments”), to the University of Chicago where he became a major voice of the “symbolic” or “interpretive” anthropology movement of the 1960s.⁴ Always a fugitive from every academic pigeonhole, he felt more at home at Chicago’s interdisciplinary Committee on the Comparative Study of New Nations than in the Department of Anthropology. The next and final wave he caught was to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where in 1970 he helped found the School of Social Science and became the cultural anthropologist in residence. He retired, as professor emeritus at the Institute, in the year 2000, and remained *in situ* until his death.

I met him in 1968. At the time, I was a graduate student in the “anthropology wing” of the Department of Social Relations at Harvard. I made a pilgrimage to Chicago and an appointment to see Clifford Geertz. We discussed his views of religion and a paper I had just written about shamanism, which I had sent him in advance. Years later, in the early 1980s, when I got to know him better, he generously participated in a Social Science Research Council project that I had co-organized. It was designed to assess the prospects of reviving the discipline of cultural psychology in the light of recent developments in “culture theory.”⁵ I reminded him of our 1968 meeting, which he did not recall. He had, however, made a lasting impression on me. That first meeting was a bit daunting, perhaps because in addition to his obvious brilliance and intellectual energy, he was more reserved or introverted, yet skittish and edgy—almost paradoxically so—than I had anticipated, albeit quite willing to talk with a student from out of the blue who had phoned him up at home. Although he soon became a public intellectual,

4. For an instructive collection of his essays in “symbolic anthropology,” see: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). He intended the title as an allusion to Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Here, I think, a brief remark about symbolic anthropology is in order. In its discourse, a “symbol” is anything—an action, a practice, an object, a pattern of sounds, a cremation ceremony, the gathering together of people to share a meal—that is a vehicle of meaning. The goal of “interpretive analysis” is to spell out the implicit or unstated presuppositions, implications, or “meanings” (goals, values, and pictures of the world—the ideas or concepts) that make this or that action, practice, object, or pattern of sounds intelligible to members of some interpretive community (call it a “culture”) in some specified context. “Thick description” is the process of spelling out the context-dependent meanings of, for example, a specific action or activity (such as a Balinese cockfight). The

New York Times obituary, though friendly, was confused when it described “the eminent anthropologist” as someone “whose work focused on interpreting the symbols he believed give meaning and order to people’s lives”—for Geertz, the (particular) lives that people lead *are* the “symbols.” Symbolic anthropology is about the interpretation of behavior by reference to ideas or concepts made manifest or expressed through acts and activities. The *Wall Street Journal* obituary, written by the anthropologist Lionel Tiger, who should have known better, was not only confused but also fundamentally misinformed (and preposterous), when it suggested that Geertz “emphasized words about acts rather than the acts themselves.”

5. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine, eds., *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

he was a private man who very much liked working on his own.⁶ He was also, though, a person whose company it was great fun to keep, in part because of his verbal intelligence and engaging capacity to produce apparently spontaneous yet meticulously wrought commentaries on almost any conceivable cultural theme, high or low. There was also his dexterity at dethroning witticisms and entertaining sallies—but more on that later.

In a recent commentary in a collection of papers about his career, Geertz gives an account of his life more personal and revealing than the one in his ACLS address.⁷ In the later essay, he portrays his “actual life” as “rather a looking for small bits of order to hang onto in the midst of chaos”—and he defines the term “actual life” as meaning the life “that has gone on out there and back then where things happen and happened.”⁸ This is hardly the rhetoric of a skeptical postmodernist. It is worth quoting this account of himself at some length, as part of the process of coming to understand his temperament and intellectual agenda, and thus of setting the record straight. He writes:

So it is hardly to wonder that my work looks like a grasping for patterns in a swirl of change: I was preadapted. My parents were divorced when I was three, and I was dispatched (the verb is appropriate) to live alone with an older woman, a nonrelative, amid the sylvan beauties of the Northern California countryside (a “nonvillage” of three or four hundred farmers, shopkeepers and summer visitors) in the plumb depths of the Great Depression. I was well cared for, and that’s about it, and I was pretty much left to put my life together (not without real help from schoolteachers responding to a bright kid, and, later on, the U. S. Navy, responding to a callow klutz) by myself. Without going on . . . all this predisposed me to becoming, in both life and work, the seeker after a pattern, however fragmentary, amid a swirl of accident, however pervasive. . . . It has never occurred to me, not really being a deep thinker, just a nervous one, to try to resolve this “binary.” I have just sought to live with it. Pitched early into things, I assumed, and I still assume, that what you are supposed to do is keep going with whatever you can find lying about to keep going with: to get from yesterday to today without foreclosing tomorrow. And it does, that resolute irresolution, indeed show in my work.

That resolve to be nervously irresolute, his disinclination to unify binaries or choose between them—how do those aspects of Geertz’s temperament manifest themselves in his work? *In many ways* would have been, for him, a char-

6. Geertz’s influence has been massive; his collaborators and students relatively few. I believe he counted (and prized) James Boon and Lawrence Rosen (both professors at Princeton University) as the anthropologists who came closest to being his students in the fullest sense of the word.

7. Geertz, “Commentary,” in *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*, ed. Richard A. Shweder and Byron Good (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

8. Geertz, “Commentary,” 123.

acteristic answer. Consider, for example, the heated and widely publicized debate (it divided the profession) between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere about whether eighteenth-century Hawaiians really believed that Captain Cook was a god. Sahlins said “Yes!” Obeyesekere said “No!” The two men, both giants in the discipline of anthropology and both very well known to Geertz, had each written a book on the topic; and he reviewed them simultaneously in the *New York Review of Books*.⁹ At the time, anthropologists, historians, and activists in Polyneesian identity politics were eager to pick a winner—to know who was right—and looked to Geertz’s authority. What he offered, instead of a judgment of the kind desired, was an assessment of the controversy, though he also took the measure of the two main antagonists. “To all this highly carpentered and suspiciously seamless argument,” he wrote of Sahlins’s case, “Obeyesekere gives a resounding ‘no’—more apparently for moral and political reasons than for empirical ones.” Contemplate that sentence and the skill and temper of the mind that crafted it. The intellectual stance is empirical, in that Geertz was (as he titled his 1995 memoir) “after the fact”: he is “after,” in pursuit of, any small bits of order he can find.¹⁰ Thus he is suspicious (*pace* Sahlins) of highly carpentered and seamless arguments. And yet (*pace* Obeyesekere), he is equally suspicious of politically and morally motivated arguments. This is not the stance either of skeptical postmodernism or of politically correct identity politics. It is something else, something resolutely irresolute.¹¹

Consider as well a seminar that Geertz gave at the Russell Sage Foundation in the spring of 1991, where I was a visiting scholar at the time. He delivered a paper describing in great detail the spread of the genocidal conflict between

9. Geertz, “Culture War,” *New York Review of Books*, November 30, 1995.

10. Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Note that the book’s title has at least three meanings, in ironic competition: chasing after facts (empirical), writing after the death of the fact (postepistemological), and writing about a past that it is too late to affect (historical).

11. Toward the very end of his review, Geertz, apparently recognizing that in a review of this type he could not escape without giving some indication of which of the two authors he found more persuasive, inserted a parenthetical aside favoring Sahlins, “the structuralist glitter surrounding his analyses aside.” Geertz favored Sahlins in large part because he found Sahlins’s descriptions more circumstantial, his portrayals more penetrating. Moreover, Geertz was impressed by the “spectacular particularity” of the seventeen appendices in Sahlins’s book. Still, Geertz’s review expresses throughout his discomfort that

“neither of these warriors is given to shaded views” and that both their books are “full of certainties and accusations, thoroughly consumed with scoring points.” He was clearly put off by what he viewed as the impulse of each author (and of their followers) to “take offense and argue for victory”: “After one reads these two having at one another up, down, and sideways for five hundred lapel-grabbing pages or so, whatever happened to Cook, and why, seems a good deal less important, and probably less determinable, than the questions they raise.” Geertz offered the view that, with regard to how the Hawaiians perceived Captain Cook, Sahlins and Obeyesekere “are not really so far apart on that as they pretend.” At another point, he added that, “if this were the college debate it sometimes sounds like, Sahlins, wittier, more focused, and better informed, would win hands down. But it is not a college debate.” The review concludes by making it apparent that Geertz would much rather keep a conversation going about how to understand other cultures than pick a winner or resolve this particular controversy.

communists and Muslims across Indonesia in 1965–66 and the management of the killings at the village level, right down to the forethought with which each faction prepared burial sites for the other. It was a discerning, lucid, and riveting empirical case study. During the question period, a distinguished psychologist in the audience commented that it was his habit during seminar presentations to keep copious notes, but that in this case his writing pad was empty, leading him to conclude that “thick description makes for thin notes!” The Mahatma of “thick description” responded by expressing his pleasure that the psychologist had really listened to the case at hand and had not tried to abstract out principles that went too far beyond the contextual information given.

Then a distinguished macrosociologist in the audience, who was apparently an old acquaintance from the 1950s, asked Geertz what had happened to the general-systems theorizing they had done as young men, and what had happened to his early interest in comparative research aimed at finding universal generalizations about social change. It was a moment when Geertz might well have replied, quoting himself: “I have never been able to understand why such comments as ‘your conclusions, such as they are, only cover two million people [Bali], or fifteen million [Morocco], or sixty-five million [Java], and only over some years or centuries’ are supposed to be criticisms.” What Geertz did say was that he never felt comfortable doing that early work (it was not in his nature), that many meanings decisive for human behavior are “local” or “parochial,” that therefore most social science generalizations are likely to be restricted in scope, and that about any of this he had no regrets. He may have been, as he said, temperamentally or biographically inclined to have that insight and to draw that conclusion, but certainly he was not disheartened by it. As he spoke, there were no tears in his eyes.

Dinner followed the seminar presentation. A Foundation visiting scholar from Europe asked Geertz: “So how do you feel about being the father of skeptical postmodern social science and radical deconstruction?” Geertz slammed the door on the question, arguing that ethnographic facts are made *out*, not made *up*. There are fragments of order, out there, to be discerned and made evident by imaginative anthropological minds able to see through, and by means of, their ethnographic experiences. He straight out denied the paternity suit—the skeptical postmodernists, radical deconstructionists, and postcultural theorists of the 1980s, he opined, were no progeny of his.

Since the early 1980s, the field of cultural anthropology has become decentralized (some might say partitioned or even fractured) along something like the following fault lines. There is the territory of the moral activists, who view anthropology as a forum for political struggles against sexism, racism, homophobia, capitalism, and neocolonialism. These moral activists have a very strong sense of what is universally right and wrong, and there is very little about which

they are irresolute. Then there is the territory of the skeptical postmodernists, who have read all “objective” accounts of ethnographic realities corrosively, have questioned the existence of identifiable cultural groups, and (as part of a critique of “essentialism” or “monumentalism” or just plain stereotyping) have dismissed attempts to portray the members of any culture with any characteristic face. One of the ironies of the field currently is that denizens of those two intellectual territories once believed they could be allies against some common enemies, among them Clifford Geertz.¹² He (and many others as well) were thought to be both politically backward in their conception of the aims of anthropology, and epistemologically backward in holding that ethnographic states of affairs were real and orderly enough to be objects of discovery—never mind how much inventiveness was required to “make out” rather than “make up” the patterns discerned.

This alliance between moralizing identity politics and skeptical postmodernism was short lived. Having a common enemy was not enough to make the alliance seem natural. Any ethically motivated politics of identity demands robust notions not just of identity but also of boundaries and in-group membership, along with a powerful conviction that some things are just objectively wrong. Skeptical postmodernism has a corrosive effect on all of those notions and convictions, and its practitioners are adept at torturing claims about the universal “woman’s perspective,” or the imagined common identity of this or that in-group, or the supposedly objective moral foundations of any political cause.

A third intellectual territory within American cultural anthropology might be called “neopositivism.” This territory is occupied by investigators who view cultural anthropology as a value-neutral discipline and who generally subscribe to the view that whatever patterns exist in social life are “lawlike” and can be understood with reference to universal explanatory theories. Obviously, Geertz had a different view of the character of social life and the prospects of developing “lawlike” explanatory statements about human behavior. “The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture,” he said of his approach, “is to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”¹³ (He didn’t mean over tea.)

I think it is fair to say that Geertz never lived in, and rarely visited, any of these three intellectual territories. Hence it was not surprising that, at that dinner that night in the spring of 1991, he refused the invitation to step across the frontier into skeptical postmodernism. He cared too much about his fragmentary patterns, about “how much difference, difference makes,” and about doing empir-

12. I have commented on this irony before, in other contexts. See my introduction, “Anti-Postculturalism (and the View from Manywheres),” in *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

13. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 24.

ical ethnography. His famous essay “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture” is often cited (and taught) as a key text in the emergence of skeptical postmodern thinking, but a look at, for instance, the following passage shows how hazardous that characterization is:

Coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description. Cultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence, else we would not call them systems; and by observation, they normally have a great deal more. But there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid’s delusion or a swindler’s story. The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued. Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the constructions of impeccable descriptions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe.¹⁴

These are not the words of a theorist out to show that cultures are closed, coherent worlds, whose concepts and practices are incommensurable with those of every other cultural world, or that there is no common-to-all real world. These are the words, rather, of a field ethnographer who approaches his labors as an indefatigable collector and interpreter of data—a scholar averse to fudge.

Geertz made the same set of points in remarks that he offered, off the cuff, at the Social Science Research Council conference that I mentioned earlier. Paul Kay, a rigorous comparative ethnographer (his interest was in universal generalizations about the evolution of color terms in all human languages), challenged Geertz with an argument that may have presupposed too much about the aims and methods of interpretive symbolic anthropology. The transcripts of the exchange between Kay and Geertz are fairly detailed (and therefore, much abbreviated here). Paul Kay, to parry:

I have been waiting to say something scandalous ever since this conference started—and I think now is my chance. So I had better seize time by the forelock—and indeed “time” will be my example. The general point I want to make is this. We have heard a lot about the systematicity of culture, the organization of culture, the way it all fits together into one neat thing. I have a kind of historical theory about his view—which I admit is scandalous, but nevertheless I ask you to listen to it. First, I want to tell you why the view arose, and then I want to give a counter-example to the view. I think the view arose that cultures are integrated because anthropology arose in an institutional setting where people had to write Ph.D. theses. Ph.D. theses, if they were successful, were published as books—and books tell a consistent story. I semi-seriously

14. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 17–18.

propose that the exigencies of the publishing trade or literary genre have been imposed on the subject matter of cultural anthropology so as to make everyone feel that if I go out to study the “whoever,” I’ve got to come back and tell a consistent and entertaining story about what the “whoever” are like—and everything they do had better fit into this one story. Let me mention one counterexample to this view. . . .

Kay then went on to offer a few substantive observations about conceptions of “time.” The response that Geertz made gave no ground:

I think Paul’s comments are a mere parody. There are Type 1 and Type 2 errors. It is possible to overthematize, and it’s possible to underthematize. That’s just an explosion. The rest is comment. This has to do with time representation.

Geertz continued with a discussion of various conceptions of time in Bali, then returned to his overarching points about cultural coherence and incoherence—or, as he put it, “whether everybody has everything”:

So the question isn’t whether everybody has everything—they probably do—but rather the degree to which things are elaborated and their power and force. And that’s an empirical problem that can be overthematized and overdone. It’s not enough to say: “Yeah, we’ve got that too and everything’s the same everywhere.” As I’ve said before, the elements of a culture are not like a pile of sand and not like a spider’s web. It’s more like an octopus, a rather badly integrated creature—what passes for a brain keeps it together, more or less, in one ungainly whole. But we must, as anthropologists, search for as much coherency as we can find, try to find connections, and where we can’t find them simply say that we can’t find them.

Kay replied by saying that he “absolutely agreed” with Geertz and that, moreover,

my point will have been made if people take exactly, literally, and seriously everything in Cliff’s response about how much integration and pattern there is and how much there isn’t, and the extent to which the same schemata that are integrated one way in one culture are present in another culture but are integrated into different larger patterns or not integrated at all.¹⁵

15. Richard A. Shweder, “Preview: A Colloquy of Culture Theorists,” in Shweder and LeVine, *Culture Theory*, 17–19.

When actually brought to concentrate on what Geertz said, rather than on what others said that he was saying, a few of his critics understood that his thought required “thick description” (rather than a summary or a label), every bit as much as the complex cultures he so intensely studied. But the experience of Paul Kay was somewhat rare. Instead, universalizers in the social sciences viewed Geertz, mistakenly, as a skeptic or a relativist or the father of postmodernism. Neopositivists viewed him, mistakenly, as averse to science. There were postmodernists and morally motivated activists in identity politics, who, somewhat more correctly, viewed him as an old-fashioned liberal, and held it against him that he thought there was good work to be done with that old-fashioned idea “patterns of culture”—even if the patterns are fragmentary or partial or, like the design of an octopus, aesthetically incoherent.

Is it possible that the *writing* of a writer this poorly read is at fault? Certainly, his style was distinctive, and much has been written about it.¹⁶ I once myself compared his writing style to Cyrano de Bergerac’s nose, in that it’s conspicuous, it’s spectacular; but if you are interested in understanding what’s being said, it’s best just to ignore it. As far as I know, no one (except the *Wall Street Journal*) ever accused Geertz of being obscure or imprecise. He himself viewed his writing style as a way to express his stance and temperament: he consciously wrote as a nervous, resolutely irresolute observer, who saw no need to be on one side or the other of any binary divide in the social sciences. His style was designed to indicate, by calling attention to its own characteristics, that the author of the text being read believed that “rushing to judgment is more than a mistake, it is a crime” and that the author was busily at work positioning himself between any variety of relativism (which he claimed “disables judgment”) and any variety of absolutism (which he claimed removes judgment from history).

Geertz once called what he was doing “cliff-hanging.” Regardless of one’s taste for labyrinthine clause embeddings, high-strung hedges, elaborate qualifications, insinuating phrases, and literary cliff-hangers, there is no denying that Geertz was a discerning writer of meticulous sensibility, who, with his broad knowledge of history, philosophy, culture, and numerous academic disciplines, knew how to take the measure of a complex scene (or text, in the literal or the metaphorical sense of *text*) and capture it in a gorgeous sentence. Here is what he had to say about Ruth Benedict’s depiction of the Japanese in her famous book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, written at the end of World War II: “The enemy who at the beginning of the book is the most alien we have ever fought is, by the end of it, the most reasonable we ever conquered.”¹⁷ The sentence is vintage

16. See, for example, James A. Boon, “Geertz’s Style: A Moral Matter,” in Shweder and Good, *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*, 28–37.

17. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Geertz; and it is not imprecise. It is, though, ironic, and Geertz was an ironist. When irony fails, it sours into sarcasm (as in the *Wall Street Journal* obituary for Geertz). But *his* tropes rarely failed—although he did love to quip and sally (“It is important to say something and not just threaten to say something”) and otherwise entertain his readers (and infuriate his critics) with evocative (and at times wickedly humorous) turns of phrase, such as: “relax and enjoy it ethnocentrism” or “culture-free conceptions of what we amount to as basic, sticker-price *homo* and essential, no additives *sapiens*.”

And he was willing to register sharp judgments about the work of well-known scholars (even his friends) and current schools of thought. About “sociobiology”: “a degenerative research program destined to expire in its own confusions.” About James Clifford, the postmodernist historian of anthropology: “Clifford, whatever his originality and his openness to experiment, seems stalled, unsteady, fumbling for direction.” The sharp judgments cut in all directions. If the record is to be set straight, it should be noted that he was critical not only of intellectual fanatics in the academy (the total-systems builders, those he referred to as the “it all comes down to . . .” types, those who fancy “theory-of-everything” notions), but also of infidels (including skeptical antiscience postmodernists). This documentable fact may surprise some of his detractors, but the detractors are wrong.

So what *was* Geertz? What tag line can his name wear? Despite his own successes in deploying them (“thick description,” “blurred genres,” “local knowledge”), he was averse to labels. I once labeled him a “romantic pluralist” and will have more to say about his pluralism in a moment.¹⁸ The few descriptives that he did not mind being applied to himself—for example, “resolutely irresolute”—were ones implying that impatient readers should look elsewhere. He probably would not have accepted the label “Wittgensteinian,” at least not without qualification, but, in some sense or another, I do think he may have viewed himself as Wittgenstein’s reincarnation as an anthropologist. For in some of Wittgenstein’s writings, Geertz apparently discovered a philosophy—one opposed to big-systems thinking and ideas about universally fixed essences—that suited his temperamental disinclination to be pinned down. No fixed kernel to human nature, he would say. No mind for all cultures. No deep down homo. “If you want a *good* rule-of-thumb generalization from anthropology,” he once wrote, “I would suggest the following: Any sentence that begins, ‘All societies have . . .’ is either baseless or banal.” In accord with Wittgenstein, Geertz saw

18. Shweder, *Why Do Men Barbecue?* 15–16. Also Richard A. Shweder, “Anthropology’s Romantic Rebellion Against the Enlightenment; Or, There’s More to Thinking than Reason and Evidence,” in Shweder and LeVine, *Culture Theory*, 27–66.

reality as an almost unthinkably complex continuum of overlapping likenesses and differences that it was a bad joke or a kind of violence to try filing into neat boxes (and certainly not into *two* boxes). “I don’t do systems,” he would say; and his antipathy toward general laws and formal principles was apparent even in friendly conversation.

Given that he felt most himself when he could be resolutely irresolute, he experienced the binaries that fuel academic debate—subjective vs. objective, humanities vs. sciences, particulars vs. universals, behavior vs. ideas—as tired, old, and alien. That tendency is apparent, for example, in his essay on the work of Charles Taylor, a philosopher known for his criticism of attempts by social scientists to model the study of human behavior on the natural sciences.¹⁹ I mention this essay in particular because Geertz is often pigeonholed with the pigeons labeled “humanist,” yet in this essay he resists even that classification, rejecting Taylor’s assumption that the academy comprises “two cultures” (that of the natural sciences vs. that of the humanities; that of positivists vs. that of interpretivists). Cliff-hanging as ever, Geertz asks unsettling questions about the supposed unity or conditions of identity of the various sciences, of the various humanities—questions like: “What method is common to paleontology and particle physics?” and “What relation to reality is shared by topology and entomology?”²⁰ Such questions, Geertz argues, are hardly more useful than asking, “Is sociology closer to physics than to literary criticism?” or “Is political science more hermeneutic than microbiology, chemistry more explanatory than psychology?” In the end, he even rejected the contrast so widely presumed between doing interpretive science and doing natural science.

In my own view, for what it’s worth, Geertz was among the world’s most significant proponents of cultural, moral, and scientific pluralism. Underwriting his work was belief that diversity is inherent to the human condition; that there is no universal essence to human nature, no essence strongly determining human behavior; that across history and culture, human nature is continuously transformed by the never-ending attempt of particular groups of human beings—Balinese, Moroccans, Northern European Calvinists, Satmar Hasidim—to understand themselves and create a social world that manifests their self-understandings; that in science, as in life, securing universal agreement about what is good, true, beautiful, or even efficient is rarely possible; and finally, that the ecumenical impulse to value uniformity (convergence in belief) over variety, and to overlook, devalue, or seek to eradicate “difference,” is not a

19. Geertz, “The Strange Estrangement: Taylor and the Natural Sciences,” in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83–95. See also Geertz, “The Legacy of Thomas Kuhn:

The Right Text at the Right Time,” *Common Knowledge* 6.1 (Spring 1997): 1–5.

20. In asking these two skeptical questions, Geertz was drawing on and quoting the work of Richard Rorty.

good thing. Given this provocative (and as it turned out portable) set of beliefs, it is not surprising that his work is so widely debated outside his own discipline, particularly I suppose among historians and comparative legal scholars. In my own, newly revived field—a discipline that studies psychological diversity across human populations—Geertz’s name is everywhere. His is among the most cited in the forthcoming *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*.²¹

Although not always well interpreted, Geertz’s legacy is positive and, one hopes, his influence will continue to be for the good. His goal, in an age of “globalization,” was to help us imagine difference: different conceptions of the self, of morality, of emotions, of religion, of political authority, of kinship, of time, as made manifest by groups of people, ways of life. It was evident to him that cultural differences are here to stay and need to be understood properly for the sake of both intra- and international tranquility. “Positioning Muslims in France, Whites in South Africa, Arabs in Israel, or Koreans in Japan are not altogether the same sort of thing,” he wrote. “But if political theory is going to be of any relevance at all in the splintered world, it will have to have something cogent to say about how, in the face of a drive towards a destructive integrity, such structures can be brought into being, how they can be sustained, and how they can be made to work.”²² He was opposed to destructive integrities of any kind (whether moral, social, or scientific).

In his essay “Anti-Anti-Relativism,” Geertz quotes a famous passage in Montaigne—“Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice . . . for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in”—and then adds, in his own voice: “That notion, whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go entirely away unless anthropology does.” Nervously positioning himself where he can respond to antirelativists without embracing what they are against, and at the same time taking his measure of both camps, Geertz goes on to say: “What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism—the danger that our perceptions will be dulled, our intellects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the over-learned and overvalued acceptances of our own society.”²³ Though this outlook is itself a moral one, accepting it can make moral judgments very difficult when (as is increasingly the case) more than one culture is involved.

I myself am convinced there is far more to moral judgment than Montaigne’s comment enables us to imagine. Many years after Geertz wrote “Anti-Anti-Relativism,” quoting Montaigne with admiration, Byron Good and I had

21. Shinobu Kitayama and Dov Cohen, eds., *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (New York: Guilford, 2007).

22. Geertz, *Available Light*, 257.

23. Geertz, “Anti-Anti-Relativism,” *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 86.2 (June 1984): 263–78.

the privilege of organizing a “presidential session” at the one hundredth annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association to celebrate the life and work of Clifford Geertz.²⁴ In my own presentation that day (the year was 2002), I pressed Geertz very hard: precisely what does the sharpening of our perceptions, expanding of our intellects, and widening of our sympathies that you wrote about actually amount to? Doesn’t cultural critique presuppose that we can separate the provincial aspects from the nonprovincial aspects of our own moral judgments? If there is so little in the moral domain that transcends culture and history, how is it possible for others to be both different from us in their social norms and entitled to have their social norms valued, or at least tolerated, by us at the same time? To all of which, Cliff replied: “Rick’s questions are very much to the point, so I will, of course, do my best to evade them.”²⁵

I had anticipated Cliff would respond in that way. He never pretended there were easy answers to tough questions. What he took as his task, and did accomplish, was to wise-us-up and make us self-relevantly aware of how very easy it is to confuse familiar local evaluations with Universal Reason. I would call that idea, task, and accomplishment “liberal pluralism.” But Cliff did his best to evade that label also. Still, against all odds, and through all his many manners of writing, he was tacking back and forth, year by year, in search of a version of liberalism “with both the courage and the capacity to engage itself with a differenced world.”²⁶ He was acutely aware that critics of liberalism around the world argue that liberals are prevented (precisely because of their liberal commitments) “from recognizing the force and durability of ties of religion, language, custom, locality, race, and descent in human affairs, or from regarding the entry of such considerations into civic life as other than pathological—primitive, backward, regressive, and irrational.” True to form, resisting as always received dichotomies and forced choices, he was trying to convince us that it is possible to embrace liberalism and durable bonds of community simultaneously. That possibility had, for him, some urgency: “The image of a world full of people so passionately fond of each other’s cultures that they aspire only to celebrate one another does not seem to me a clear and present danger; the image of one full of people happily apotheosizing their heroes and diabolizing their enemies alas does.”²⁷

At the very end of his 1999 autobiographical address to the American

24. The published result of that session was *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*, already cited.

25. Shweder and Good, *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*, 110.

26. Geertz, “The World in Pieces: Cultural Politics at the End of the Century,” *FOCAAL: European Journal of*

Anthropology 32 (1998): 91–117. Also see Geertz, *Available Light*, 258.

27. Geertz, “The Uses of Diversity,” vol. 7 of *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986), 253–75; also in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25 (Winter 1986): 105–23. Also see Geertz, *Available Light*, 86.

Council of Learned Societies, Geertz invoked images of his sunset years (“As my friends and co-conspirators age and depart . . . and I, myself, stiffen and grow uncited . . .”). Now he too has died, leaving many of us acutely aware of the presence of his absence. A thoughtful psychologist I know sent me a sort of condolence note: “I myself not only never met Geertz but never even saw him in person—yet I found myself to be truly depressed by the news.” The note brought tears to my eyes, but it also made me smile.

As he grew older, Cliff’s voice developed a rasp and his appearance became more and more sagelike. Still, the most malinformed remark in the *Wall Street Journal* obituary is the one about Clifford Geertz as a “static, gloomy icon.” He was far too edgy and intellectually restless to be static, too ironical and quick witted to be gloomy—and he was utterly uninterested in having devotees or becoming a sacred image for anyone. Probably, though, I am not alone in wanting to hold a séance now, so I can ask him for a moral will, an intellectual testament, his last words. I know what he’d say, though, and can hear the not-quite-this, not-quite-that tone in which he’d say it. He’d say: there is no point in looking for Fixed Answers to Big Questions about the Universal Meaning of Life. He’d say: we are better off cliff-hanging.