Interpretation and the limits of interpretability: on rethinking Clifford Geertz's semiotics of religious experience

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This paper critically interrogates Clifford Geertz's analysis of religious belief as it relates to both his broader semiotics of culture and his views on how such beliefs are implicated in the formation of particular dispositions, propensities, and habits informing social action. It is argued that Geertz's account of religion can be held to reveal some of the most central assumptions of his social theory, his hermeneutics of culture, and his philosophy of action.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; Clifford Geertz; William James; person-centered ethnography; phenomenology; practice; religion; subjectivity

Introduction

In this paper I critically interrogate Clifford Geertz's analysis of religious belief as it relates to both his broader semiotics of culture and his views on how such beliefs are implicated in the formation of particular dispositions, propensities, and habits informing social action. To do so, the paper is organised in two parts. In the first part I discuss the extent to which Geertz's perspective on religious belief and practice as outlined in the context of *The interpretation of cultures* (1973) is deeply revealing of some of the most central assumptions of his social theory, his hermeneutics of culture, and his philosophy of action. Most importantly, I will point to how these same writings evidence what I believe are two neglected aspects of Geertz's culture theory, namely his interest in subjectivity and practice.

In the second half of the paper I will turn specifically to his more recent critique of William James' 'subjectivist' account of religion in *The varieties of religious experience* (1987[1902]). Geertz's critique of James will help to clarify how the Geertzian project seeks to contribute to understandings of the cultural constitution of particular subjectivities in contemporary culture theory. In the conclusion of the paper I attempt to make a case for the significance of extending Geertz's perspective on two fronts: on the one hand, as Geertz himself called for, toward a more nuanced understanding of subjective experience as evidenced in James' original writings on the philosophical psychology of religious experience, and on the other hand, toward a

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micro-analytic understanding of subject formation, power, and truth as suggested in Michel Foucault's last and most mature writings on *The hermeneutics of the subject* (2005).

Geertz's semiotics of culture: the familiar story

Geertz is, of course, renowned for his semiotic approach to culture and social action. What he is perhaps not as well known for, however, is his view that such a semiotics must be grounded in the formation and interplay of various dispositions, propensities, habits, and skills. This perspective brings Geertz's thinking in line with some rather unlikely consociates, namely, practice theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Anthony Giddens (1984). The reasons behind the lack of attention to this side of Geertz's culture theory in anthropology is not exactly clear to me. However, it may have something to do with the fact that many of Geertz's most powerful and explicit articulations of his position are embedded in his discussions of religion. In particular, they are found in the context of his examination of the relationship between religious symbolism and practice in his book, *The interpretation of cultures* (1973). Before turning to explore this neglected side of Geertz's culture theory, however, I would like to review what might be considered some of the most general aspects of his interpretivist perspective.

Generally speaking, following Max Weber, Geertz asserts that his vision of an interpretive science whose purpose is to explore the 'webs of significance' that constitute culture is founded on the idea that culture is a public, ideational, and yet non-mentalistic system of construable signs. Paraphrasing the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Geertz holds that it is precisely the inherently public nature of culture that challenges the notion that somehow cultural symbols exist 'in someone's head.' It is in this context that we get an entrée into what is one of the central concerns in Geertz's writings on religion: the effort to examine the interrelationship between cultural symbols and the moods, propensities, dispositions, and habits of social actors.

Geertz believes with Ryle that 'mind' is a term that most accurately denotes not some privately accessible 'ghost in the machine,' but a publicly accessible 'class of skills, propensities, capacities, tendencies and habits... [in short] an organized system of dispositions which finds its manifestation in some actions and some things' (1973, p. 58). He argues that it is these 'external' (i.e. public) symbolic manifestations of complexes of skills and habits that ultimately underlie all reflective thought. What many scholars assume to be 'mental' processes are, according to Geertz, more accurately a dynamic matching of 'states and processes of [public] symbolic models against [equally public] states and processes of the wider world' (Geertz 1973, p. 78).

Geertz argues that it is only this public view of symbols as 'material vehicles of thought' that can ensure the possibility for uncovering properties of cultural and personal systems through systematic empirical analysis (1973, p. 362). In Geertz's view then, his perspective provides anthropology with a way in which to uncover 'what *is* given, what the conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is' (p. 364, emphasis in the original). It is his view that this potential 'method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience' can provide anthropology with the basis for establishing what he referred to at the time as a valid 'scientific phenomenology of culture' (p. 364). This early reference to phenomenology is quite interesting given Geertz's critiques of the broader phenomenological movement in philosophy, and as we will see, with regard to his critical reading of William James' subjectivist take on religious experience. That said, it is also interesting that Geertz's writings on religion seek to advance a particular view of experience

that may yet still be reconcilable with the very subjectivist and phenomenological approaches he is so critical of.

Attempting to move beyond what he labels the 'cognitivist/subjectivist' fallacy, Geertz argues that anthropologists must recognise that culture, mind, and experience are, in the end, symbolically mediated public interpretations and actions through and through. For these reasons Geertz makes a point of distinguishing his position clearly from that of phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl (1962), who tend to advocate 'strong subjectivist tendencies' that 'place stress upon a supposed inner state of an actor rather than on a certain sort of relation – a symbolically mediated one – between actor and situation' (Geertz 1973, p. 110 n 35). Building instead on Gilbert Ryle and George Herbert Mead, Geertz argues that the assumption that culture is both public and social leads inevitably to the insight that cultural processes do not 'happen in the head' but consist, in contrast, in a traffic of significant symbols that serve to 'impose meaning upon experience' (1973, p. 45). Geertz argues in fact that 'undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man's behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless' (p. 46). It is this externalised, socially infused understanding of culture as a coherent system of significant symbols informing conscious experience that allows Geertz to later establish his memorable metaphor of 'culture as text' (pp. 448–449).

Symbols, moods, and motives in Geertz's semiotics of religion

I have already alluded to Geertz's emphasis upon dispositions, tendencies, and habits in the context of his hermeneutic theory of culture and social action. It is in turning specifically to his writings on religion, however, that we find a more clearly articulated attempt to integrate his thinking on the relationship between culture, symbolic systems, and what we might call in contemporary terms, subjectivity and practice. Perhaps the best place to start in this regard is with Geertz's now famous definition of religion in his article, 'Religion as a cultural system.' According to Geertz,

> a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973, p. 90)

Most striking here is Geertz's reliance upon moods and motivations, especially given the anti-psychologistic stance that he has long been noted for. Key for understanding the relationship between systems of symbols and the moods and motivations that are instilled in individuals who partake in such systems is the recognition that all cultural patterns have, as Geertz terms it, 'an intrinsic double aspect.' That is, cultural patterns are simultaneously both *models of* and *models for* reality. Cultural patterns both conform to social and psychological realities and alter those self-same realities to their own dictates.

A central way that religious systems do this is, in Geertz's words, 'by inducing in the worshiper a certain distinctive set of dispositions (tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronenesses) which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activities and the quality of his experience' (1973, p. 95). Again, Geertz holds that the way that religious systems 'lend a chronic character to the flow of activities' and to the 'quality of experience' is significantly rooted in the way that such systems impact an individual's motivations and moods.

Motivations are understood by Geertz to be 'persisting tendencies' or 'chronic inclinations' 'to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations' (1973, p. 96). Motives are, in his estimation, not reducible to acts or feelings, however. They are instead 'liabilities to perform particular classes of act or have particular classes of feeling' (p. 97). Motives are the generative source of acts and feelings. They are not the acts and feelings themselves. They are then, in a word, dispositions. Motives are dispositions to feel and act in particular ways, according to specific goals or ends, in particular sets of circumstances.

Where motives are specifically oriented to particular ends, to particular goals that feelings and actions are directed toward achieving, moods are characterised by Geertz to be diffuse and objectless. It is well worth quoting at length Geertz's eloquent distinction between these two sorts of subjective experience.

> The major difference between moods and motivations is that where the latter are, so to speak, vectorial qualities, the former are merely scalar. Motives have a directional cast, they describe a certain overall course, gravitate toward certain, usually temporary, consummations. But moods vary only as to intensity: they go nowhere. They spring from certain circumstances but they are responsive to no ends. Like fogs, they just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate. When present they are totalistic: if one is sad everything and everybody seems dreary; if one is gay, everything and everybody seems splendid. ... But perhaps the most important difference, so far as we are concerned, between moods and motivations is that motivations are 'made meaningful' with reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduce, whereas moods are 'made meaningful' with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring. *We interpret motives in terms of their consummations, but we interpret moods in terms of their sources*. (Geertz 1973, p. 97, my emphasis)

Whether understood in terms of the diffuse, context-oriented, and totalistic encompassment of moods or the focused, goal-oriented, and discrete enactment of motivations, such varieties of subjective life are, for Geertz, significantly patterned by religious symbols and the broader cultural patterns within which they are embedded. That Geertz is so keen to impress upon us the 'depth' to which religious ideas and symbols penetrate social actors' lived experience is certainly striking to those of us who are much more familiar with the text-centered symbolic side of Geertz's thinking. It is also interesting, I think, given the scant attention that even more psychologically oriented anthropologists like myself have paid to the place and significance of 'moods' in patterning subjective life and social action (see Groark and Throop n.d.). Indeed, of interest to those of us who are engaged in a dialogue with Geertz's culture theory is the extent to which his take on religion reveals what might be termed the sentimental side to his semiotics.

It is important to emphasise, however, that Geertz's interest in moods and motivations is not a theme that is carried forward and substantially elaborated upon elsewhere in his work. It is also important to recall Geertz's questionable attempt to define motivation in dispositional, and not experiential or emotional, terms; a stance that highlights a more practice theoretical and less experiential take on social action. And yet, even given Geertz's well known anti-mentalistic stance, and what we will soon see to be his anti-Jamesian view that religion is not reducible to 'religious feeling,' the extent to which he turns to such generally 'non-cognitive' experiences as motivations, moods, and dispositions in his discussion of the significance of religious ways of being is nonetheless quite noteworthy. At the very least, I contend that this points to Geertz's willingness to develop an incipient, if ambivalent, interest in subjective experience, one that we will see him take up yet again in his later critique of William James' philosophical psychology of religion.

The problem of suffering and the surfeit of meaning

The significance of motives and moods takes on further import in Geertz's discussion of the 'problem of meaning' in religious practice. He notes that numerous thinkers have suggested that religious systems often arise to address both extraordinary events and humankind's recurrent confrontations with the limits of interpretability. Without the coherence provided by culturally elaborated systems of significant symbols, humans find themselves, Geertz asserts, on the brink of chaotic dissolution. Such a lack of 'interpretability' leads to forms of moodedness that are permeated by anxiety, angst, and disquiet (Geertz 1973, p. 100). The quest for meaning, in particular the quest for religious meaning, is understood in this light as a response to the forms of moodedness that arise in the face of the 'opacity' of certain events, such as 'the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain' (p. 108).

The existential problems humans face when confronting 'a chaos of thingless names and nameless things' is at the heart of problems of interpretability and meaning, says Geertz (1973, p. 103). There are, he suggests, three specific points where the limits of interpretability threaten to bring forth just such a chaos. These include: 1) the limits of our analytic capacities that arise as 'bafflement in the face of the intransigently opaque;' 2) the limits of our powers of endurance and the 'problem of suffering;' and 3) the limits of our moral insight when confronted with 'intractable ethical paradoxes' (p. 100). Whereas the limits of our analytic capacities lead to the cultivation of 'more intellective aspects' of meaning, the experience of suffering is founded in the attempt to give definition and precision to our life of 'moods, sentiments, passions, affections, [and] feelings' (p. 104). The limits of moral insight are, in contrast, tied to the refining of evaluative capacities as we seek to construct systems of value that aid in the making of 'sound moral judgments' (p. 106).

Again the place of moods and motives in this discussion is striking. Moreover, the significance of Geertz's working through these three aspects of the problem of meaning with such an explicit interest in moods, affects, values, and forms of intellection lies, I believe, in foregrounding this often neglected side to Geertz's semiotics of culture, namely his interest in subjectivity, or what we might also term 'experience.'

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So far I have argued that Geertz's writings on religion in the context of *The interpretation of cultures* advances both practical and experiential dimensions to what has most often been viewed as a strictly symbolic or interpretivist approach to culture and social action. What is perhaps even more interesting is that it is in the context of these same writings that Geertz works to integrate the practical, experiential, and interpretive aspects of his semiotics of culture. This he accomplishes in discussing the concept of perspectives, attitudes, or modes of seeing and in analyzing the role that ritual plays in the synthesis of mood, motivation, and symbol. It is with regard to the former that Geertz seeks to clarify how his take on subjectivity or experience differs from putatively more subjectivist accounts in phenomenology. It is in the context of the later that he highlights the key role that practice plays in instilling dispositions, propensities, and habits embedded in particular systems of cultural meaning, religious or otherwise.

On the religious perspective

Geertz takes on the problem of experience by means of a discussion of 'perspective.' Perspective, Geertz explains, refers to a specific 'mode of seeing' in which individuals are inclined to

perceive, comprehend, discern, and grasp the world in a particular way. For instance, the religious perspective can be compared to other perspectives, such as aesthetic, common-sense, historical, and scientific perspectives. It is possible for individuals to shift between such perspectives and as such shift between distinctive modes of being-in-the-world. In this discussion of perspective we find Geertz owning up to the clear inspiration he has taken from the phenomenological writings of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz who wrote much about the phenomenological modifications underpinning a social actor's ability to shift between various 'attitudes,' from the natural attitude to the scientific attitude for instance. That said, Geertz is clear to distinguish his views from what he takes to be the overly 'subjectivist' underpinnings of phenomenological approaches to experience. So even despite his interest in the moods and motivations that are necessarily implicated in these various perspectives or attitudes, he does not want to be mistaken for emphasising 'a supposed inner state of an actor rather than... a certain sort of relation – a symbolically mediated one – between an actor and a situation' (Geertz 1973, p. 110, n 35).

Geertz's own somewhat ambivalent stance toward phenomenology, in particular Schutzian social phenomenology, is evident throughout this discussion of perspective, however. Despite his criticisms he maintains that he does not wish to suggest that a phenomenological account of religious experience is not essential to a complete understanding of religion and religious belief. Citing the Peircian-inspired writings of Walker Percy, he cautions that such a phenomenological analysis must be one that is intersubjective and nontranscendental. It is, in his words, a phenomenology that must be undertaken in 'genuinely scientific terms.'

Following Schutz's lead, Geertz sets out to define the contours of the religious perspective by means of comparison to other such modes of seeing. He begins with the common-sense perspective, what Husserl and Schutz would have termed the 'natural attitude.' The common-sense perspective is one wherein a social actor takes for granted what is given to him in his experience of the world. It is the unquestioned immersion in the givenness of a reality that is significantly culturally defined and yet naturalised to appear to the social actor as that which is 'just there.' Associated with this mode of seeing is a particular motivation – the pragmatic motive to engage with the reality of the 'just there' for purposes of attending to everyday concerns, needs, desires, and wants.

The scientific perspective, in contrast, is a mode of seeing that challenges the givenness of the common-sensical through 'deliberate doubt and systematic inquiry.' In shifting from the common-sensical to the scientific perspective, disinterested observation replaces pragmatic motivations and abstract models displace everyday assumptions. Much of the scientific perspective is grounded in discovering what lies behind the given, what hidden processes give rise to the perceptible.

The 'suspension of naïve realism and practical interest' inherent in the common-sense perspective is accomplished in yet another distinctive way through the aesthetic perspective, Geertz argues. If the scientific attitude is one of revealing what is behind the perceptible, the aesthetic perspective is one that revels in the surfaces of it. Where the scientific attitude is oriented to a disinterested doubting of what is given in everyday forms of perception and appreciation, the aesthetic attitude holds the everyday in abeyance 'in favour of an eager dwelling upon appearances, an engrossment in surfaces, an absorption in things, as we say, "in themselves"' (Geertz 1973, p. 111).

Religious perspectives differ from common-sensical perspectives in that they are oriented beyond everyday realities to realities that 'correct and complete them.' And it is not action but faith and acceptance that are seen as the mode of engagement with such realities.

Whereas scientific perspectives question everyday realities through 'institutionalised skepticism' and probabilistic hypotheses, religious perspectives question the everyday in terms of non-hypothetical truths. It is not detached scientific analysis that drives religious perspectives but committed encounters with such truths. And finally, the religious perspective differs from the aesthetic perspective in that it does not work to question factuality but instead to deliberately 'create an aura of utter actuality.'

As will be evident in Geertz's later critique of William James' account of religious experience, Geertz's take on experience is one that some of us more phenomenologically oriented anthropologists might deem to be rather 'thin.' His emphasis upon the ways in which cultural realities pattern particular perspectives that include distinctive moods, motivations, and corresponding modes of appreciating, judging, and acting, however, evidences an orientation to subjectivity that seems rather more pronounced than some of Geertz's most ardent critics may have traditionally given him credit for. And yet, it may still be fair for us to wonder whether or not Geertz's anti-subjectivist version of hermeneutic anthropology grants him the necessary tools to adequately disentangle the complex subjective textures and temporalities embedded in such moods, motivations, and modes of perceiving.

Ritual and the synthesis of symbol, mood, motivation, and reality

As mentioned above, the primary means by which Geertz sees such a religious perspective being concretely instilled in particular practitioners is through what can be understood to be a decidedly practice-based interest in ritual activities. It is not purely cognitive or symbolically mediated reflection upon a set of religious principles that propels the perspectives entailed in religious belief. It is rather ritual practices that do so. According to Geertz, ritual practices are held to generate the context within which the appropriate set of moods and motives (an ethos) are able to articulate with an acknowledged 'image of cosmic order' (a world view). It is through ritual performance then that what may have previously been merely beliefs can be transformed into experiential and existential actualities.

Geertz holds that a social actor's participation in ritual performance is the very vehicle through which a given symbolic system is verified and vivified for him. The practices entailed in such performances are not only imaginative but also bodily enactments that are reflected in and are generative of the very moods, motivations, ideals, and values encompassed in any given community's religious attitudes. It is through ritual practice then that the symbolic and the experiential are brought into a mutually informing dialogue. And it is through such practice that social actors are instilled with the attitudes, perspectives, habits, and dispositions that more or less align with religious and cultural belief systems.

Geertz's interest in more formally articulated ritual performances, such as Javanese shadow puppet plays and Balinese theatrical performances, is also extended, however, to more mundane everyday actions that social actors consistently engage in while interacting with their consociates. As he states in his discussion of the various types of practices that are implicated in the phenomenologically rich concept of *rasa* in Java,

> On the world-view side, there are yoga-like mystical techniques (meditation, staring at candles, repeating set words or phrases) and highly involved speculative theories of the emotions and their relations to sickness, natural objects, social institutions, and so on. On the ethos side, there is a moral stress on subdued dress, speech, and gesture, on refined sensitivity to small changes in the emotional state both of oneself and of others, and on a stable, highly regularised predictability of behaviour. (Geertz 1973, p. 136)

I should be clear here in noting that some of Geertz's critics have charged him with overly emphasising, in even what are arguably his most practice-based reflections on everyday and ritualised forms of social action, the functionally homogenising and static effect of such practices. It is important to recall, however, that Geertz does in fact show an interest in such engines of change driving transformation in any given religious or cultural system. He does so most directly in *The interpretation of cultures*, perhaps, in the context of his thick description of the social tensions and disruptions occurring during the ritualised interactions at a Javanese funeral or *slamatan*. It is also worth noting that despite this interest in social transformation, particularly as generated through socio-political and economic alterations to Java's social terrain, he still does not often give much of an account of individual agency (*à la* practice theory) or of the necessary diversity of experience that is arrayed within any given community of practice (*à la* cultural phenomenology or person-centered ethnography). He does, however, interestingly trace how the emerging social and political complexity in Java at the time of his fieldwork was concretely reflected in the attitudes, moods, and emotions of those specific individuals involved in Paidjan's funeral. As he explains,

> The disorganization of the ritual resulted from a basic ambiguity in the meaning of the rite for those who participated in it. Most simply stated, this ambiguity lay in the fact that the symbols which compose the slametan had both religious and political significance, were charged with both sacred and profane import. The people who came into Karman's yard, including Karman himself, were not sure whether they were engaged in a sacralized consideration of first and last things or in a secular struggle for power. (Geertz 1973, p. 165)

It is perhaps in evoking the place of ambiguity, situationally-dependent forms of meaning, and shifting fields of power arising in the dynamics of ongoing social interaction that Geertz comes closest to advancing a perspective that aligns with many contemporary agency theorists who often draw from some combination of micro-interactional, phenomenological, or practice-based approaches. Still, such potentiality for proximity between these perspectives is more an *approchement* than a realisation, for Geertz does not ever seek to closely examine what may have been the highly personalised forms of ambiguity and conflict underlying Karman's particular engagement with the ritual, nor does he focus on detailing the real-time embodied sequences of concrete practices and forms of talk and interaction that constitute the underlying dynamics of the social scene.

Now, while I believe that Geertz's writings on religion do point to a productive place to begin reconciling his hermeneutic or meaning-based approach to cultural analysis with contemporary practice and phenomenologically based theoretical concerns in anthropology and the social sciences more broadly defined, I do also acknowledge that it is perhaps too much of a stretch to see his perspective in any straightforward or unproblematic way as strictly aligned with them. In my attempt to work to productively extend Geertz's approach in ways that may allow us to engage in just such a dialogue, I believe that it is helpful to turn to one of his last published pieces on religion, his critique of William James' philosophical psychology of religious experience.

The varieties of religious subjectivity: Geertz contra James?

Geertz (2000) begins his essay-length meditation on James by noting the individualism and sentimentalism inherent in James' definition of religion as rooted in an individual's feeling of a 'pinch of destiny.' Religion, says James, is necessarily located *not* primarily in institutions

or great works but in an individual's 'recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character.' To be sure, James' experiential pragmatism, his radical empiricism as he called it, is ardently subjective and pluralistic to its core. It is, for James, truly *varieties of experience*, religious or otherwise, that best represent the state of our being as meaning-seeking and meaning-making human agents. James' take on meaning is thoroughly embodied, lived, and, he would say, 'experiential.' Meaning is not reducible to thought, or the ossifying abstractions embedded in cognitive schemas, images, and ideas. Meaning is experienced in the richest and most dynamic sense of the term. Anything we call meaningful in our lives, James held, is as much defined by moments of focused clarity as it is by ever fluctuating undercurrents of vagueness and ambiguity. It was James (1890), we should recall, who wished to reinstate 'the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life.'

James' (1987[1902]) book-length and very much person-centered description of the richly textured experiences of individuals' religious lives, rests on what Geertz takes to be a far too radically personal, private, subjective, and experiential understanding of religion. As Geertz states, 'cordoning off a space for "religion" in a realm called "experience" – "the darker, blinder strata of character" – seems, somehow, no longer so reasonable and natural a thing to try to do' (Geertz 2000, p. 169). Embedding his critique in what is putatively the current contours of 'our' taken-for-granted assumptions about contemporary religious life, Geertz, ever a master of rhetorical prose, suggests that when we think of 'religious struggle' in contemporary terms, it is not 'private wrestlings with inner demons' nor ongoing 'battlements of the soul' that are most likely to come to our collective imaginations. It is instead the struggle that arises in the context of protest, collective violence, terrorism, revolt, genocide, torture, and warfare that does. Religious struggle, in Geertz's words, 'mostly refers to quite outdoor occurrences, *plein air* proceedings in the public square – alleyway encounters, high court holdings' (p. 169).

Geertz's much earlier calls for turning from phenomenological subjectivism to the development of what he called, with a textual wink, an 'outdoor psychology,' is certainly on one level well in line with these critiques. In other ways, however, there is something new going on here for Geertz. First off, such a perspective certainly constitutes a movement away from his earlier ambivalently phenomenologically inspired writings on the religious attitude discussed above. Second, this is not primarily an argument from philosophy, whether Wittgensteinian, Rylean, Schutzian, or otherwise, that seeks to question the merits of pursuing subjectivist accounts of social life. It is more significantly a call to recognise the place of cultural meaning, power dynamics, and social identity in anything that we might choose to label as religion. In his words,

> 'Experience,' however ineradicable it may be from any discourse on faith that is responsive to its regenerative claims. . . no longer seems adequate to frame by itself our understanding of the passions and actions we want, under some description or other, to call religious. Firmer, more determinate, more transpersonal, extravert terms – 'Meaning,' say, or 'Identity,' or 'Power' – must be deployed to catch the tonalities of devotion in our time. (Geertz 2000, p. 170)

While attempting to draw our attention to the collective processes underpinning the formation and negotiation of meaning, self-representation (identity), and power, Geertz is not, however, quite ready to throw out the Jamesian baby with the bathwater. It is very interesting that he argues in the second half of this same article that an understanding of religion that is thoroughly divested of interiority, of the life of sentiment, faith, and belief, 'is hardly worth the name' (p. 178). Geertz wishes to argue here that while there are some serious shortcomings to myopically focusing on an individual's experience of religion, it is still not possible to understand the

convictions, the motivations, and the moods that are instilled in social actors who have taken up a stance on the world through the lens of a religious perspective, without turning to examine closely such personal forms of meaning. In contemporary social theory, Geertz laments,

> [t]he whole vast variety of personal experience, or, more carefully, representations of personal experience, that James, on the one hand, so exquisitely explored, and, on the other, so resolutely walled off from those 'dictators of what we may believe,' the public, the social, and the everyday, is not only isolated once more from the convolutions of history – it goes unremarked altogether. (Geertz 2000, p. 179)

To understand religious meaning, religious identity, and the power struggles associated with contemporary religions, social institutions, and the state, it is impossible, Geertz asserts, to ignore the experience of individual practitioners. To understand what Geertz takes to be a fundamental shift in religious sensibility underlying the 'conflicts and dilemmas of our age,' it is necessary to follow not James' 'radically individualistic, subjectivistic, 'brute perception' concept of religion and religiousness,' but instead his 'intense, marvelously observant, almost pathologically sensitive attention to the shades and subtleties of thought and emotion' that inform individuals' always culturally inflected choices, decisions, reveries, and acts (p. 185), that is, their experience.

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Now it is perhaps time to show my hand here. As a psychological and medical anthropologist with a longstanding interest in contributing to and developing a phenomenological approach to cultural meaning and social action, I have always had a rather complicated appreciation of Geertz's culture theory. On the one hand, I have thoroughly respected his attempts to advance a philosophically mature anthropology that can share the floor with philosophy in its attempts to understand those forms of being-in-the-world that most fundamentally characterise us as humans. On the other hand, I have found, like many of my peers in psychological anthropology, that his largely anti-subjectivist and anti-experiential take on meaning is somewhat lacking. Being deeply inspired by the work of James, Husserl, and Schutz, I have also found myself critical of Geertz's critiques of phenomenology. And along with those in my field who have devoted their careers to examining social suffering, collective violence, genocide, and myriad other forms of human cruelty, suffering, and pain, I have at times been sympathetic to critiques that charge Geertz with failing to pay adequate attention to questions concerning the dynamics of power, agency, and vulnerability.

What I would like to do in the concluding sections of this paper is to suggest a few possible paths for generatively extending Geertz's semiotic theory of culture and social action along lines that would help to correct for some of these shortcomings. The seeds for such an enterprise, as I have implied throughout this paper, are already importantly suggested in Geertz's account of how religious experience is understood in relation to the problems of interpretation and the limits of interpretability and how religion can be viewed as a mode of practice and a form of subjectivity based upon culturally instilled tendencies, habits, dispositions, feelings, moods, and motivations. Moreover, they are evident in his later calls for recognising the place of identity, power, and meaning in understanding religious experience, while still acknowledging the importance of examining the 'subtleties of thought and emotion' underlying such putatively rarified forms of existence.

There are indeed many lines we could take to forward such a project. Here I would like to suggest just a few. First, on the subjective side of the equation, the richness, complexity, and diversity of experience foregrounded in James' philosophical psychology of religion has been

pursued in recent years by psychological and medical anthropologists subscribing to cultural phenomenological, embodiment, and person-centered approaches. Turning to how it is that social and cultural life is constituted both subjectively and intersubjectively, such approaches have called for the recognition that, as Thomas Csordas (1990) following Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts it, our subjective life does not begin with but rather ends in objects. That is, forms of cultural understanding and practice, established canons of norms, values, and morality, our taken-for-granted assumptions about what is true, good, and beautiful, are not simply objectively given to social actors. They are instead active achievements that are mediated through our always embodied modes of subjective life. When we turn our analytic lens away from pre-given objects of experience toward those processes of subjective and intersubjective constitution underlying them, we are better placed, cultural phenomenologists argue, to examine the diverse ways that social actors can come to inhabit what is taken to be a shared reality, religious or otherwise.

Interestingly, in his discussion of the different subjective orientations that are distilled in differing 'perspectives,' whether religious, scientific, common-sensical, etc., Geertz points to how it is that one and the same object can become constituted in distinctive ways by means of the particular perspective that a given social actor takes in orienting to it. The resonance between Geertz's discussion of perspective and recent work in phenomenological anthropology highlighting the constitutive side of both subject and object formation is not at all surprising when we again recall that Geertz is drawing here from phenomenology and the work of Husserl (1962) and Schutz (1967) who would call such differing perspectives 'attitudes.'

The very dynamism and complexity of subjective orientations to objects of experience is evident in Husserl's (1962) insight that shifts in such attitudes, what he calls phenomenological modifications, operate continuously for experiencing subjects who may take more or less reflective stances or more or less engaged stances when relating to objects of experience, be those objects of the 'mind' or of the 'world.' Indeed, from a phenomenological perspective distinctions between subjective and objective aspects of reality, between what is of the 'mind' and of the 'world,' are themselves in part determined by the attitude that a social actor takes up. There is, from the phenomenological perspective, no strict line demarcating the subjective and the objective, for both are significantly constituted by attitudes toward experience that render certain aspects of it thoughts, images, feelings, sentiments, moods, sensations, perceptions, judgments, forms of appreciation, etc., on the one hand, or properties of physical objects, bodies, persons, animals, celestial phenomena, spirits, natural occurrences, etc., on the other.

Cultural phenomenologists are certainly appreciative of Geertz's own phenomenologically inspired call to recognise that concretely enacted participation in religious life works precisely to shift participants' perspectives from a common-sensical to a religious one. As Geertz attests, 'religious belief in the midst of ritual, where it engulfs the total person, transporting him, so far as he is concerned, into another mode of existence, and religious belief as the pale, remembered reflection of that experience in the midst of everyday life are not precisely the same thing' (Geertz 1973, pp. 119–120). That said, cultural phenomenologists would still ask Geertz, however, to provide a more rigorous phenomenological account of the concrete embodiment of such practices and the experiential particularities tied to 'transporting' or shifting a given actor's perspective from the common-sensical to the religious.

For instance, in the context of his description of the Rangda-Barong performances in Bali, Geertz alludes to the ways that the encounter between performers and audience in the enactment of the relation between these two mythical beings necessarily engages not only an imaginative but a bodily appropriation of the drama. In particular he describes an 'extraordinarily developed

capacity for psychological dissociation,' possession, and 'trance' as a means for the Balinese 'to cross a threshold into another order of existence' (p. 116). Aside from describing the scene as one of 'frenzied activities' and mass 'violent trances,' he does not, however, go into any specificity with regard to what it is like for the particular actors to concretely experience such a transformation. What exactly is entailed in an individual's experience of embodying a demon, a 'minor' witch, or 'various sorts of legendary and mythical figures' in trance? To use Csordas' (1993) felicitous phrase, what specific *somatic modes of attention* are implicated in the process of recognising that an individual is about to, or has already, become possessed? Are there particular embodied sensations of tingling, numbness, or pain, or are there particular smells, visions, or sounds that serve as indications of the presence or impending arrival of a particular possessing demon or spirit? Are there differing experiences of self-efficacy and will at play when individuals begin to feel their bodies operating in ways that they do not intentionally command? To what extent do individuals recall the process of possession and the aftermath of its enactment? How do subsequent narrative recountings of the experience by those who were possessed and those who were not serve to shape both personal and collective attitudes toward such practices? These are all questions that would be taken up in detail in the context of a more explicitly cultural phenomenological approach to ethnographic description and analysis.

On the person-centered side of things, psychological and medical anthropologists have sought to examine the compelling cares and concerns – in Geertz's language, the moods and motivations – that shape an individual's lived experience of her social and physical worlds (see Wikan 1990, Hollan 2001). Indeed, as Geertz suggested, most certainly tied up with particular phenomenological modifications and modes of constitution are particular feelings, emotions, and sentiments. And it is often the very complex ambivalences, ambiguities, and diversities inherent in any given actor's life of sentiment and feeling that make overly reductive and predictive models of human behavior suspect from a person-centered perspective. To understand human meaning and action, person-centered ethnographers remind us, it is necessary to delve deep into not only what Malinowski (1935) would have termed the *context of the situation* and the *context of culture*, but also to what Douglas Hollan (personal communication) has termed the *person-as-context* – that is, the often unique ways that the particularities of an individual's life trajectory and upbringing have led her to feel, think, appreciate, imagine, fantasize, and anticipate in distinctive ways. In social interaction, what is taken up by any given interlocutor as meaningful, significant, of concern, is based not only upon the context of the other's contribution to the interaction, but also necessarily on an individual's own tendencies to interpret, feel, and emote in particular ways. How such personally inflected cultural forms of being and experiencing are instilled in, recognised or contested by particular actors is, I believe, at the very heart of the anthropological enterprise.

In the case of Paidjan's funeral, a person-centered ethnographer would, with Geertz, most certainly be interested in undertaking a thick description of the various actions, conflicts, and problems leading up to the politically fraught attempts to appropriately bury the boy. That said, there would additionally be efforts on the part of a person-centered ethnographer to explore the always highly personalised ways that the various actors engaged in the social scene are motivated to give meaning to their experiences. It would not be assumed, for instance, that all of the mourners attending the event would be able to cultivate feelings of *iklas* – 'a kind of willed affectlessness, a detached and static state of "not caring",' as Geertz describes it (1973, p. 153). There would be instead an active attempt, in talking to, interviewing, and observing the various participants over an extended period of time, to discover how the event in question was anticipated, registered, and recalled in terms of particular experiences

of mourning, longing, and grief, of frustration, anger, and regret, or of fear, anxiety, and shame. It would be assumed that individuals participating in the event would have highly complex, shifting, and ambivalent attitudes that are rooted in longstanding imaginal, emotional, and motivational patterns tied to their personal histories of attachment and loss. An attempt would thus be made to situate Geertz's description of Karman's frustration and anger in the wake of the Modin's refusal to officiate the boy's funeral on the ground of Karman's anti-Muslim political affiliations, within the context of Karman's personal history of dealing with authority, with perceived slights from others, and overt refusals to requests in times of vulnerability and need.

Yet another point whereby we might think to begin profitably extending Geertz's hermeneutics of culture is through some of Michel Foucault's later writings on the hermeneutics of the self and subject formation. While I certainly do not consider myself an expert on Foucauldian thought, over the past few years I have been actively thinking through the relevance of some of the ideas articulated in these later works for my own ethnographic investigations into the role that pain and suffering play in the formation of particular ethical subjectivities on the island of Yap in the Western Pacific (Throop forthcoming). For those who may be unfamiliar with Foucault's later lectures and writings, it may indeed come as a surprise that a psychologically oriented anthropologist such as myself would choose to rely upon a Foucauldian framework for extending what I take to be an incipient interest in practice and subjectivity in Geertz's writings on religion. It is true that the works that Foucault is most recognised for in contemporary anthropological theorizing are often those that systematically work to dispense with all references to 'experience' and 'subjectivity' in favour of a reliance upon the constructs of 'discourse' and 'power.' Indeed, Foucault's clearly anti-subjectivist stance arose in part from his well known public dispute with Sartre over the existentialist idea that all knowledge is necessarily mediated through actively constitutive processes of conscious subjects (see Paras 2006, p. 38). In addition, it is significantly tied to Foucault's attempts to examine the history of systems of knowledge and power that provide the very conditions for the possibility of certain ideas to arise and gain legitimacy in given sociohistorical periods.

That said, there is an increasingly recognised shift in Foucault's appreciation of subjectivity and experience in the context of his later writings and lectures (see Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986, 1997, 2005; cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, Paras 2006).[1] In these works – works that are rooted in studies of ancient philosophy, aesthetics, morality, and yes, religion – Foucault explicitly uses the 'language of experience' as a means to look 'at the subject from *within*, as an actor' (Paras 2006, p. 144). Much like Geertz, however, I believe that Foucault still presents us with a view of subjectivity that is far too 'thin.' And his perspective could similarly be augmented through an approach that focuses explicit attention to the necessarily dynamic, ambiguous, always complexly textured, and uniquely conflictual nature of the *particular* subjectivities that are engaged in such forms of moral self-fashioning (see Throop 2003, forthcoming). For my purposes in this paper, however, what is very helpful and productive about Foucault's later writings is their ability to provide a basis from which to extend Geertz's thinking on the place of practice in relation to processes of self-formation in a given community.

Foucault's understanding of the formation of subjectivities is embedded in his view of the basic building blocks of moral systems more generally (Foucault 1985; cf. Robbins 2004). For Foucault, all moral systems can be understood to have two basic elements: (1) *Codes of behaviour* that consist of explicitly recognised, prescribed, and prohibited forms of conduct; and (2) *Forms of subjectivation* that are tied to 'setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self

by oneself, [and] for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as an object' (Foucault 1985, p. 29).

As Joel Robbins points out, while codes of behaviour are deemed to be fairly straightforward by Foucault, forms of subjectivation are viewed to be much more complex and include a number of possible components (Robbins 2004).[2] Of these, the most pertinent for my purposes here are his notions of *technologies* and corresponding *hermeneutics of self*. According to Foucault, technologies of self are understood to refer to those particular activities, ideas, and practices implicated in the fashioning of moral subjects. They consist, in his words, of the ethical work 'that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour' (Foucault 1985, p. 27). Different technologies of self, Foucault argues, are implicated in differing hermeneutics of self – that is, different ways of interpreting the self in moral terms. What the self is understood to be, its relationship to others, the broader community, ongoing, past, or anticipated activity, as well as its ability to reveal itself to others, to speak to the truth of its own self-experience (both to itself and to others), are all implicated in such differing hermeneutic strategies or disciplines of interpretation.

With his focus upon early Greek, Roman, and Christian periods, key examples of technologies and hermeneutics of self proffered by Foucault include such practices as the renunciation of personal desires, sexual abstinence, the examination of conscience, acts of confession, and enduring pain and suffering. Similar such practices, we should recall, were highlighted by Geertz in his discussion of Javanese understandings and orientations to the notion of *rasa*. A key insight of Foucault's that certainly resonates with Geertz's reflections on religious life is the idea that the practices implicated in the formation of ethical subjectivities are seldom solely relegated to the realm of explicitly morally defined behaviours. Instead, they may actively recruit aesthetic forms of appreciation and practice.[3]

Of direct pertinence in this regard is the fact that Foucault's examination of antiquity led him to focus upon morality as an 'art of existence.' Such a view of morality is less concerned with providing instruction on what individuals should or should not *do*, than on how they should *be* (Paras 2006, p. 128). An art of existence is thus held to 'enable men to turn their life into a work: an object that might be judged according to aesthetic and stylistic categories' (p. 126). As Paras explains,

> Such arts ideally allowed one to acquire a set of qualities. These qualities were neither aptitudes, nor precisely 'virtues,' but rather attributes of being. Foucault called the aggregate of acquired qualities, 'modalities of experience.' (Paras 2006, p. 127)

It is precisely here in Foucault's discussion of differing 'modalities of experience' that we might be afforded a significant point of articulation with cultural phenomenological, embodiment, and person-centered approaches that seek to also detail those modalities of experience implicated in generating differing modes of social action. It is also here that we find a possible space to begin thinking through how it is that power is implicated in the 'subtleties of thought and feeling' that Geertz found to be such a productive place to turn in furthering our understanding of the dynamics and complexities of meaning and practice in contemporary religious life. To come to cultivate a 'this-worldly, even practical mysticism' in the form of 'detached tranquility which is proof against disturbance from either within or without' for Javanese persons, evokes not only a particular phenomenological outlook but also certain relations of power that are reflected in the vicissitudes of individuals' struggles to align their own self-experience with the moral expectations of their community of practice. And it is just toward such a point of

articulation between the particularities of subjective experience, the dynamics of social life, and differing regimes of interpretation, that such a newly founded Geertzian semiotics of culture may be profitably extended.

Conclusion

Admittedly what I have provided here is only a sketch of a few of the ways that it might be possible to turn toward developing a neo-Geertzian theory of culture that takes into account both the rich diversity and complexity of subjective life and the dynamics of power implicated in the practices underlying modes of subject formation. By drawing so heavily from other thinkers in pursing such a development, some readers may wonder why we should bother calling such an approach 'neo-Geertzian' and not 'neo-phenomenological' or 'neo-Foucauldian.' Given that my primary motivation for writing this essay was to engage in what has hopefully been an active and productive dialogue with one of our discipline's most thoughtful, insightful, and influential culture theorists, I frankly do not much care as to what, if anything, we might term the fruits of such an endeavour. That the seeds for seeing points of articulation between what might otherwise be viewed as quite historically and substantively distinctive approaches in philosophy and social theory lie in Geertz's writings may be, however, one very compelling reason to continue thinking with him as we work collectively to advance and transform what it is, and how it is, that we go about understanding what we and what our informants 'are up to, or think we are up to.'

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. As Eric Paras observes, 'The definition of the subject that Foucault offered at the beginning of 1980s, if it is to be judged coherent, necessarily carried within it the ideas of autonomy, reflexivity, and lived experience... the Foucauldian subject of 1980 was a free individual. It had the ability to pursue (or not pursue) techniques that would transform its subjectival modality – but which would not, one way or the other, disrupt its status as an independent locus of experience' (Paras 2006, p. 123).
2. According to Foucault, forms of subjectivation include at least four different aspects: 1) determination of the ethical substance; 2) reliance upon particular modes of subjection; 3) specified technologies of self; and 4) orientation toward a predetermined telos. In his words, the formation of ethical subjectivity is 'a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice [i.e., ethical substance], defines his position relative to the precept he will follow [i.e., mode of subjection], and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal [i.e., telos]. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself [i.e., technologies of self]' (Foucault 1985, p. 28).
3. While it has often been the case that Western philosophers since the 1800s have sought to make a rather strict distinction between aesthetic and moral forms of judgment, it is interesting that when we turn back to early Greek philosophy there is much overlap between notions of the beautiful and notions of the good. For instance, the Greek term *to kalon*, which is often translated as 'beauty,' did not, however, 'refer to a thing's autonomous aesthetic value, but rather to its 'excellence, which is connected with its moral worth and/or usefulness' (Feagin 1995). Moreover, for Aristotle, virtues (*aretai*) were themselves conceived as traits, capacities, and dispositions (e.g., justice, courage, temperance, generosity, intelligence, wisdom, etc.) that bring about happiness or 'flourishing' (*eudaemon*) on account of their relative 'refinement, beauty, or excellence' (*kalos*) (see Aristotle 1985).

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