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**FROM GEERTZ TO RYLE:  
THE THICK DESCRIPTION CONCEPT  
AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS  
OF CULTURES**

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This paper inquires into how the method of *thick description* developed by Gilbert Ryle makes it possible to redefine such basic concepts in social sciences as “social action” and “understanding”, and to elaborate on new institutional analysis of cultures. Ryle’s language for describing human action can provide social theory with conceptual tools to overcome the classical methodological alternative “Durkheim / Weber” in the analysis of social actions and social institutions, and to abandon the outdated subjectivists’ and mentalists’ concepts of “meaning” inherent in the old phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition in the social sciences and humanities.

The method suggested by Ryle is analyzed in comparison with Geertz’s interpretation which has ultimately resulted in *thick description* becoming one of the fundamental concepts in social anthropology and social sciences in general. The paper suggests that the way in which Geertz interprets Ryle’s method, contains profound conceptual confusion; in addition, Geertz’s analysis does not take into account the most interesting part of what has been proposed by Ryle as conceptual tools for the analysis of the human action phenomenon.

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In this paper I will discuss one of the great theoretical advances made by the British tradition of philosophy of language and philosophy of action in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is the method of *thick description* suggested by Gilbert Ryle. I will try to show the way this theoretical invention has been applied and the way it could be applied for updating the epistemology of social sciences and humanities. The term itself has recently become widely used, especially in sociology and anthropology, and the method of *thick description* is referred to in many contemporary course books in social sciences qualitative methods. True, such mention is often made without any reference to Gilbert Ryle, and what they are calling *thick description* has little in common with the method suggested by Ryle.

As for the Oxford-Cambridge philosophy of language in general, its relations with social sciences were by no means easy. As early as the 1960s, it started directly affecting the epistemology of social sciences. However, even today its language and thought style are often understood through the prism of the same old approaches that the new tradition had had to fight and dispute with in order to get established. In other words, recognition of this tradition has always been and still is marked with a shade of irony. Some social theorists see it as an opportunity for renovation and further development of the old phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften* (and, in particular, the Werberian “Understanding” (*Verstehen*) approach in sociology and other social sciences as an alternative to positivism<sup>1</sup>). Others, on the other hand, saw it as a new form of positivism, a kind of behaviorism applied to the analysis of social action or, at least, as an approach which allowed to develop in a new way the old logic of Durkheim tradition, in accordance with the requirements of the contemporary society.

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<sup>1</sup> The search for reconciliation of the thinking styles developed within this tradition with the language of Werberian *understanding* sociology (and, more broadly, phenomenological tradition in social sciences) is already present in the hallmark work by Peter Winch “The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy”, which first saw light in 1958 (Winch P., 1958). This small book is one of the first serious attempts to apply the philosophy of late Wittgenstein and other adherents of this tradition to epistemology of social sciences.

At the same time, the thinking style and analytical tools that were brought into existence by the works of L. Wittgenstein, G. Ryle, J. Austin, G.E.M. Anscombe and their followers make it possible to consider the problem of method in social sciences in a totally different light. Both Weber's and Durkheim's traditions, when treating the problem of object and method in social sciences, largely use the philosophical language and problematics inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – which is also true of the most well-known attempts to synthesize these traditions in a social theory made in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (in particular, by T. Parsons in his book of 1937 [Parsons 1966] and by P. Berger & T. Luckmann [Berger, Luckmann 1966]).

Starting from the 1970s, with the waning of both structural-functional, structuralist and Marxist paradigms, as well as the Schutz version of social phenomenology, social sciences in search of new methods to a large extent turn (especially in the English speaking academic world) to the conceptual tools developed by the Oxford-Cambridge tradition. In sociology, the sign of this “spirit-of-the-age” tendency was obviously the 1976 book by A. Giddens ambitiously entitled “New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies” [Giddens 1976]. Direct reference to the fundamental Durkheim's work “*Les règles de la méthode sociologique*”, which was even cited in the title, showed clearly that what we are dealing with here is no less than a fundamental transformation in the field of sociology and creation of new epistemology for social science. In the book, we see one of the first serious attempts to develop a positive language of new sociology beyond the Weber-Durkheim opposition, based on the theoretical advances by Wittgenstein and other Oxford-Cambridge authors. In the same work, in the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Giddens develops his critique of Parsons' theory of social action, as well as of the conceptual bases for various versions of phenomenological or interpretative sociology. At the same time, in spite of this radical attempt to update the social theory through the Oxford-Cambridge philosophy of language tradition, in this early book of his Giddens believes it possible to juxtapose it with “existential phenomenology” and with Heidegger's philosophy of the later period, in particular.

In anthropology, we see the same attempt to redefine its methodological principles based on the Oxford-Cambridge tradition in the works of Clifford Geertz. In 1973, he publishes *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which soon becomes famous and engenders hot discussion. In the book, Geertz uses the category of *thick description* to characterize the description method which, in his opinion, should make the core of contemporary social anthropology. It is

largely due to Geertz's book that Ryle's concept of *thick description* (which is the focus of our paper) has over the time become one of the main concepts in social sciences. The method of *thick description*, as we see it described in course books in qualitative methodology, is mostly a transcription of Geertz's approach to the analysis of human cultures – although more often than not in its vulgar version, without reference to the origin of the term either.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the method of *thick description* as described by Geertz and compare it with what was suggested by Ryle.

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The book by Geertz (to be more precise, its theoretical part) is probably one of the most graphic – and most controversial – attempts to make the specificity of method in social sciences operational by using theoretical advances in philosophy of language and action. Theoretically, the novelty of Geertz's approach probably lies not so much in the answers he offers, but rather in the questions he reformulates. Experts in the philosophy of action have already noted that Geertz offers a rather confusing solution of the problem of method in social sciences. Among other things, this confusion is caused by the fact that Geertz is trying to find support in two very different philosophical traditions which are actually difficult to combine: the thinking style in terms of Ryle and the later Wittgenstein philosophy of language, and the thinking in the spirit of the old German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften* and philosophical hermeneutics<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, I think the value of these attempts by Geertz lies in the fact that he tried to reformulate the very problem itself and thus elucidate it.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz emphasizes that he has borrowed the concept of *thick description* from Ryle – and this is not just a case of a borrowed term. Geertz is in fact trying to turn Ryle's concept into the pillar stone of his own method. The whole first chapter of his book is devoted to the development of this concept, bearing a telling title: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* [Geertz 1973: 3–30]. This chapter is a sort of a theoretical manifesto of the new approach in social sciences, which Geertz called *interpretive anthropology*. In particular, he is trying, through Ryle's concept, to define the specificity of social anthropology as a science:

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<sup>2</sup> See: [Descombes 1998], [Descombes 2002].

“...If you want to understand what a science is, you should look <...> at what the practitioners of it do.

In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly what doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge.

<...> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, ‘thick description’” [Geertz 1973: 5–6].

Geertz’s thesis stresses a polemic point: contrary to the common opinion, the profile of social anthropology is not determined by field work, but rather by a special “intellectual effort, an elaborate venture in ...thick description”.

It should be noted that, unlike Giddens, who only deals with theory, Geertz is a field anthropologist. He had for many years conducted research on Bali, Java and Morocco, and *The Interpretation of Cultures* included essays on the results of his research, alongside the theoretical part. Theory in his case serves to help him comprehend his personal field experience.

The idea of specificity of the method in social anthropology naturally stems from his idea of the specificity of its object, which is culture:

“The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical” [Geertz 1973: 5].

Thus, social anthropology should not be “an experimental science in search of law”, but “an interpretive one in search of meaning”. In this thesis, we recognize the reference to the old discussion about the method in social sciences between the proponents of Weber and Durkheim traditions, which has accompanied sociology since the time of its institutionalization. Here, Geertz explicitly takes Weber’s side: the object of social sciences – *the social or culture* – is by its nature different from the object of natural sciences, which is *nature*; it is not *things*, but *meanings*. Therefore, the method of social

anthropology should not be *explaining* human behaviour by looking for cause-effect laws which control behavior (from Durkheim's point of view, such laws are external and coercive in relation to social actors), but rather *understanding* – through interpretation of *meanings* of human actions.

But what does *understanding* mean? Any concept of *understanding* in social sciences should be based on the corresponding concept of *sense* or *meaning* (because it is “sense” or “meaning” that has to be “understood”). When Geertz announces that method in social anthropology is based on “the *verstehen* approach”...” [Geertz 1973: 14], he once again refers the reader to the Weberian tradition associated with the general hermeneutic *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition. However, in spite of the direct references to Weber, the *understanding* concept developed by Geertz is not quite Weberian. Geertz is trying to overcome the old language of Weberian tradition, where “understanding” means interpreting subjective meaning that individuals put in their behavior through correlating this meaning with the transcendental world of values. He then undertakes to combine this with the language developed by Ryle and Wittgenstein, which implies a totally different, non-Weberian, concept of *sense*, or *meaning* to be exact. It is to this new concept of meaning that Geertz is referring the reader to when he uses the concept that he borrowed from Ryle: “...ethnography is thick description” [Geertz 1973: 16].

Can this attempt made by Geertz be considered successful? I think that it did not take into account the most interesting aspects of what was suggested by Ryle as a conceptual tool for analyzing the phenomenon of “human action”. Further, I will try to show that, although Geertz's reading has played an important part in the methodological developments in social sciences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ryle's *thick description* can contribute much more to the contemporary social theory than it has done in the version suggested by Geertz.

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What is *thick description*? Geertz explains the concept by using a famous example taken from Ryle's article *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is “Le Penseur” Doing?*<sup>3</sup>. Let us imagine two boys who are making fast eye movements – contracting the upper and lower lids of their right eyes. The first

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<sup>3</sup> Ryle's article was first published in 1968 and reproduced in the second volume of *Collected papers*, which was published in 1971, shortly before the book by Geertz. Further I am citing this article from the edition: [Ryle 1990].

boy is doing this involuntarily, the second is sending a signal to his accomplice. In terms of physics, these movements are similar. From a photo or film shot showing the eye movement it would be impossible to say which was a wink and which was just a twitch. At the same time, although a photo cannot grasp the difference between the two movements, this difference is great, Ryle says. "... As anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows", Geertz adds on his own part [Geertz 1973: 6].

Thanks to Geertz, Ryle's winking and twitching boys have finally become the symbol of applying *thick description* concept to social anthropology. At the *thin description* level<sup>4</sup>, the two movements appear the same (*The boy's eyelids contracted and opened again*). But when we are analyzing cultural phenomena, it is the *thick description* of the action – that is the description taking account of its meaning (*The boy winked to send a signal to his friend by means of contracting his eyelids*) – turns out the only adequate description of what is in fact happening.

Switching into the language of sociology, we can say that *thick description* in this example is the description of winking as a *social action* (Geertz called this a *fleck of culture* [Ibid.]). Indeed, this makes it possible to differentiate between *winking* and *twitching*, the latter being a simple involuntary eye movement. But this is not enough. With Ryle, this is just the beginning. As Ryle himself stresses, his example serves not so much to show the difference between an intentional *action* (which is always *code-governed*, that is, based on a pre-existing social code), and a non-intentional, purely physical motion. This difference as such is well known to us, says Ryle [Ryle 1990: 480–481]. After giving it first time, Ryle makes his example more and more complicated, bringing on stage several more winking characters (I will discuss his masterly analysis further on).

In fact, by using the winking boy example Ryle is trying to demonstrate a new method for approaching the phenomenon of human action in general. I think this method itself deserves careful consideration.

There are three underlying principles to be distinguished. These include:

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<sup>4</sup> Ryle writes: "At the lowest or the thinnest level of description" [Ryle 1990: 480]. Ryle's model considers not two-level, but multi-level description model, where the extent of *thickness* or *thinness* is determined by how fully all the levels involved and embedded in each other are represented. Geertz's interpretation, as will be shown, ignores this multi-levelness, reducing it to a simple binary opposition: thick *versus* thin. See also: [Descombes 1998].



1) the concept of action as a code-governed one, which relies on the corresponding concept of meaning (this concept is close to Wittgenstein's *rule-governed* action);

2) the idea of logical structure of action and the principle of its analysis through the description of its logical structure; this structure, according to the image that Ryle proposes, is a "logical sandwich" consisting of levels which are hierarchically structured, and are successively subordinated based on the *adverbial* principle;

3) the idea of the logical structure of *knowing-how*, i.e. the structure of practical knowledge and abilities that the actors possess, organized on the same principle of a "logical sandwich"; these actor skills that are arranged in an hierarchical system, as well as the availability of certain social *codes* are the conditions which make the action possible (the conditions that are practical and institutional at the same time).

Further, I am going to discuss these three aspects of Ryle's model of action description in comparison with Geertz's interpretation. My idea is that Geertz's reading takes account (albeit partly) of the first aspect, while ignoring the second and third ones altogether.

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Let us start with the first aspect. How exactly is winking different from twitching? It is by no means because in the winking case the purely physical movement (twitching) is allegedly dubbed by a mental gesture imparting meaning to the former. *Winking* does not mean performing two actions, the physical and the mental ones, simultaneously (or consecutively), as it is sometimes thought: contracting the eyelids and sending a mental signal [Geertz 1973: 6]. The boy in the example is only performing one action, which is winking. Notably, this is a major point in Ryle's analysis, which suggests, among other things, coping with Descartes dualism between mind and body, as well as the corresponding criticism of the mentalist concept of social action<sup>5</sup>. At this point, when relating Ryle's example Geertz follows the original to a letter:

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<sup>5</sup> On Descartes dualism and "category mistakes" in contemporary social sciences epistemology associated with it, see chapter "Descartes' Myth", in the classical work by Ryle "The Concept of Mind", first published in 1949 [Ryle 2009: 1–13]. On criticism of mentalist concept of action, see chapter "Knowing How and Knowing That" [Ryle 2009: 14–48].

“As Ryle points out, the winker has not done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking. That’s all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and – *voilà!* – a gesture” [Geertz 1973: 6].

Hence comes a conclusion important for anthropology. Winking is only possible in a culture where a corresponding pre-established *social code* is available – in other words, a corresponding model, pattern of social action, or, to use Geertz’s words, the corresponding *structure of signification*. Only in such cultural context is it possible to contract eyelids intentionally in order to pass on a secret signal, and only in such culture will this movement be *winking*.

In order to understand why Geertz finds this example of Ryle’s, and the conceptual equipment underlying it, of major importance, we must remember the institutional situation in American academic world as it was in 1960–1970. By developing his *interpretive anthropology*, Geertz is trying to act on two fronts. On the one hand, Geertz’s interpretive anthropology was opposed to the positivist, or “objectivist” trend in American Academy, which focused on the behaviorist or structuralist models of accounting for human behavior. On the other hand, however – and this has been much less discussed – by appealing to Ryle and late Wittgenstein, Geertz is also trying to get away from the old mentalist theories of *sense* associated with the *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition by relying, even though not consistently, on a new concept of meaning.

Referring to Ryle’s example, Geertz emphasizes that culture does not consist of *external things* that one can simply observe, nor does it consist of mental *meanings* that are internal for every individual. Culture is public by nature because this is the nature of meaning:

“Culture is public because meaning is. You can’t wink (or burlesque one) without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids, and you can’t conduct a sheep raid (or mimic one) without knowing what it is to steal a sheep and how practically to go about it. <...> The cognitivist fallacy – that culture consists (to quote another spokesman for the movement, Stephen Tyler) of “mental phenomena which can [he means “should”] be analyzed by normal methods similar to those of mathematics and logic” – is as destructive of an effective use of the concept as are the behaviorist and idealist fallacies to which it is a misdrawn correction. Perhaps, as its errors are more sophisticated and its distortions subtler, it is even more so.

The generalized attack on privacy theories of meaning is, since early Husserl and late Wittgenstein, so much a part of modern thought that it need not be developed once more here. What is necessary is to see to it that the news of it reaches anthropology; <...> culture consists of socially established structures of meaning..." [Geertz 1973: 12].

Thus, the culture that anthropology is to analyse is not an assemblage of mental phenomena, psychological or cognitive structures, or certain features of individual mind. Ryle's concept of meaning is, thanks to Geertz, adapted to the needs of social anthropology: anthropological analysis is to deal with the public, socially established structure of meaning, which makes human action possible (*meaningful actions*), rather than consider *meanings* as something internal, subjective in relation to individuals, as *mind content* of the individual.

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Let us now consider what I have called the second aspect of Ryle's model: the principle of action analysis through describing its logical structure. As already said, Ryle does not stop at the differentiation between twitching and winking, that is, the differentiation between purely physical non-meaningful movements, on the one hand, and the *action* proper, i.e. a *meaningful* gesture, which is only possible where there is a pre-established "social code". Ryle goes much further. As we already said above, based on this example he tries to illustrate his technique for human action analysis in general.

Let us return to the story of the winking boy and look at how it continues. Let us imagine, Ryle says, that the winking boy is just learning to wink and is doing it very clumsily. Let us imagine a third boy who has decided to amuse his friends and is parodying the second boy's winking. How is he doing it? In the same way: he is contracting his right eyelids. The third boy, when asked about what he was doing, could answer: "I was trying (1) to look like Tommy trying (2) to signal to his accomplice by trying (3) to contract his right eyelids" [Ryle 1990: 481–482]. But, as Ryle emphasizes once more, by parodying Tommy the boy doesn't accomplishing three parallel actions, but only one, which is actually parodying. Meanwhile, if we were to register this with a camera, it would show us the same image as before – just eyelid contraction. From the onlooker's viewpoint, who is registering physical gestures only, this movement is no different from either twitching or winking.

This Chinese box sequence of increasing action structure complexity can be easily continued, Ryle says. In order to make his teasing more effective, the parodist can decide to work on his mimics alone, in front of the mirror. When asked what he is doing he could answer: “I am trying (1) to get myself ready to try (2) to amuse my cronies by grimacing like Tommy trying (3) to signal covertly to his accomplice by trying (4) to contract his eyelids” [Ryle 1990: 482]. This action can, in turn, be supplemented with further levels. For instance, the winking boy can say that he was not in fact trying to give a secret signal, but rather to mislead the others by just pretending to do so. In that case, in order to describe what he is doing in front of the mirror, the parodist would have to use five verbs to compliment the “try” verb [Ryle 1990: 482]. However, Ryle says, as in all the previous cases, the camera film would show the same movement again – just eyelid contraction.

So how do the *thick* and *thin* descriptions relate to each other? “The thinnest description of what the rehearsing parodist is doing is, roughly, the same as for the involuntary eyelid twitch; but its thick description is a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by that thinnest description. <...> The account of what he is trying to effect by this eyelid-contraction, i.e. the specification of its success-conditions, requires every one of the successively subordinate “try” clauses, of which I will spare you the repetition” [Ryle 1990: 482–483].

Thus, the *thick description* according to Ryle is a syntactic structure that includes all the overlying description layers, which characterize the corresponding logical subordination modalities of action performance (adverbial modifiers). Thus, if we describe the parodist’s action as winking (“the boy winked giving a signal to his friends by fast contractions of his right eyelids”), this will only constitute a *thin* description, although not the thinnest possible. The thinnest possible description would be the behaviorist one: “the boy quickly contracted his right eyelids”. A “thicker” description is obtained from the “thin” one by adding a correspondingly higher level of description (which says *what exactly* and *by what means* is going on when the action is being performed: “mimicking” by means of winking). In turn, every thin description of an action is obtained from the thin description at the previous, lower and thinner level, by adding the next one. Between the “highest” and the “lowest” levels of the thick description there is a sequence of logically enclosed progressively “thinner” descriptions. The *thick* description which adequately renders what is going on is a sandwich: it includes the highest level of description (in this case, “the boy is parodying the winking Tommy”) and the whole descending pyramid

of progressively thinner descriptions, finishing with “the boy quickly contracted his right eyelids”.

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To what extent is Ryle’s language applicable in sociology, anthropology and other social sciences? It is obvious that originally Ryle did not mean his *thick description* concept to be used by sociologists and anthropologists in their field work. He required this concept to analyse a special type of action which is designated by verbs like *think*, *contemplate*, *reflect*, etc. How shall we describe what Rodin’s thinker is actually doing? – This is the question that he seeks to answer in the articles *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is “Le Penseur” Doing?* and *Thinking and Reflecting*, where the concept of *thick description* is being developed.<sup>6</sup> However, while solving this task, he actually succeeds in developing much more: a general analytical technique suitable for analysing a whole variety of actions. The language developed by Ryle can serve as a new tool for understanding and describing social action in general – and this, in my opinion, is an example of the way conceptual tools developed by Oxford-Cambridge school of action philosophy can be used by the social theory to overcome the outdated conceptual dead-ends of Durkheim and Weber traditions in epistemology of social sciences.

In terms of theory, Ryle’s approach does indeed make it possible to overcome the outdated Werber-Durkheim dilemma; however, there is also the problem of the concept feasibility. Thick descriptions of a particular logical structure may turn out to be, so to say, *too thick*, and their bulkiness, it seems, risks making the idea practically inapplicable.

This problem seems to be solved by the following consideration. The *thickness* principle does not at all mean that any adequate description of an action should explicitly include the complete logical structure, consisting as it does of a set of sequentially subordinated participial constructions describing the corresponding modalities (manner) of action. Such structures can indeed be very bulky, and in terms of actual research practice in social sciences, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Ryle saw his task in developing such paradigm for analyzing what we signify by *think*, *contemplate*, etc, which would make it possible to avoid the dead-ends of both Cartesian dualism (which explained thinking by appealing to some non-observable actions in the mental world parallel to the physical one), and behaviorist reductionism (which reduced thinking to its physical manifestations accessible for simple observation). This range of problems is also considered in the articles assembled in: [Ryle 1979].

clear that in most cases there is no need to construct and present them in full. In a *thick description*, the top level must be present, but, at the same time, it can have a reduced (elliptical) form, while the extent and nature of this reduction can vary depending on the research task facing the sociologists and on the knowledge of the subject by the audience that they are addressing. Thus, the description of “a boy who, by winking his right eyelids tried to parody another boy, who was trying to wink at his friend”, does not need any thinner descriptions (like “by deliberately contracting his eyelids) to be added to it, if we are addressing a member of the culture who is perfectly aware of what winking is and how it is performed. At the same time, we could have added this layer in case our research objective required indicating social skills necessary for the actors to achieve success – in this case, the possession of the basic skill of “deliberately contracting one’s eyelids”.

Here, we can remember about the third aspect of Ryle’s model, which was mentioned above – i.e.. about the idea of the *knowing-how* logical structure, that is, the actors’ practical skills and actions techniques organized in accordance with the same “logical sandwich” principle. According to Ryle’s analysis, these skills – as well as the semantic action levels – are hierarchically subordinated: it is impossible to learn to *wink* without first learning how to deliberately contract the eyelids, as it is impossible to *parody winking* without first winking proper and differentiating between winking and simple twitching. I will not go deep into this subject here; I just want to note that, in my view, it has considerable heuristic potential (underestimated so far) for a whole range of research fields in social sciences, from critical analysis of ideologies to socializing problems, and from pedagogics to the problems of institutional modernization of cultures.

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So what is left of Ryle’s action analytics in the interpretation suggested by Geertz? Very little. In place of Ryle’s idea of multi-layered sandwich structure of *thick description*, Geertz has just the idea of two opposed description types, the *thin* and the *thick* ones. Moreover, Geertz re-interprets Ryle’s terms in the manner that is quite traditional for social sciences. Geertz suggests that we interpret the *thick description* as that implying interpretation of action meanings oriented to the interpretation of the actors themselves (the well-known principle of description “from the native’s point of view”). *Thin description*, on the other hand, is allegedly a behaviorist one, rejecting interpretation of action

meanings on account of their *unobservability*, and claiming, at the same time, to be highly *objective* in describing the observable phenomena.

As a result, Geertz's interpretation of Ryle turns out highly ambiguous. On the one hand, Ryle's examples serve him to illustrate the idea of *code-oriented* (or *rule-following*) action and the corresponding meaning concept as developed by the Oxford-Cambridge school of language philosophy (although Geertz uses not a very adequate terms of *structure of signification* and *structure of meaning*, which are associated with the structuralist theory, this does not affect his point). And he takes this idea from Ryle, turning it into a convincing theoretical manifesto of the new anthropology. According to Geertz, it is Ryle's multi-layered structures of social actions (which in fact constitute what we call *culture*), that should be the object of anthropology:

“...The point is that between what Ryle calls the “thin description” of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twicher...) is doing (“rapidly contracting his right eyelids”) and the “thick description” of what he is doing (“practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion”) lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category, are as much non-winks as winks are non-twitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids” [Geertz 1973: 7].

On the other hand, after having made this statement, Geertz almost immediately departs from Ryle's way of operationalizing *thick* and *thin*, and suggests using these concepts in a way which is incompatible with it: any ethnographic description, Geertz now says, even the crudest note in the field diary, in practice always represents *thick description*, because any ethnographic description inevitably involves interpretation, although the anthropologists themselves might not be aware of this. By way of illustrating this idea Geertz gives his own example to follow Ryle's, this time not invented but taken from life. The example is an extract from his own field diary, which tells about events that took place in Morocco in 1912 and were taken down by Geertz much later, in 1968, when he was discussing them with a witness. This fragment, which later became popular with anthropologists, tells a story of a Jewish trader named Cohen at the time when the French troops were trying to establish their colonial power over the country. In a single complex narrative there are several lines of action intertwined, performed by characters who differ from

each other dramatically by their cultural frames: Cohen himself, who is trying to trade in accordance with the still existing traditional *mezrag* system, which is starting to fall apart; the Berber tribe sheikh, whom Cohen asks for help after he is robbed by a neighbouring tribe; French colonial troops officers (who are trying to subdue the territory, with intermittent success), who do not approve of the old local customary law.

The conclusions that Geertz arrives at, based on this extract from his own field diary, can be reduced to two theses. These theses distance Geertz not only from Ryle's idea of *thick description*, but even from the general way of thinking characteristic of the Oxford-Cambridge tradition.

First, Geertz argues, anthropology by its very nature never deals with *brute facts*, but only with *interpretations*. This means, as he thinks, that any anthropological description is always by nature a *thick description*, although anthropologists often forget this:

“...Quoted raw, a note in a bottle, this passage conveys, as any similar one similarly presented would do, a fair sense of how much goes into ethnographic description of even the most elemental sort--how extraordinarily “thick” it is. In finished anthropological writings, including those collected here, this fact--that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to -- is obscured. <...> It does lead to a view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is.

Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks...” [Geertz 1973: 9].

By redefining Ryle's concepts, Geertz is using them to criticize the unfounded claims to *objectiveness* put forward by the anthropologists holding positivist-behaviorist views. At the same time, such redefining of *thick* and *thin* concepts means that Geertz, whether he is aware of it or not, is giving up Ryle's multi-layered analysis of action and social realities (or, for that matter, the reality of *institutional facts*), and returning to the old hermeneutic thinking style, which implies simple dualism of *brute facts* and *meanings*. However, in this case Ryle's concept of *thick description* loses its heuristic sense completely.

Second, Geertz argues, an anthropologist studying real cultures has to deal with an unordered mass of meaning structures. In this sense, Geertz thinks, Ryle's example excessively simplifies the reality. Geertz believes that his own example taken from his field diary shows that in practice the anthropologist



always has to deal with a *confusion of languages*, as it happens in his story, where at least three interpretation frames are intertwined: Jewish, Berber and French. From this thesis, which I think is false<sup>7</sup>, it follows that when compiling a *thick description*, the anthropologist should, by an effort of imagination, render the reality coherent (which it is not by nature), and suggest the author's integrated conception of the events that involve odd fragments of various conceptual structures:

“...The point for now is only that ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with – except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection – is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. <...> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” [Geertz 1973: 9–10].

It is not by chance that the old manuscript metaphor, which is typical for hermeneutic tradition, is used here. Several pages later Geertz almost completely departs from the language of Ryle-Wittgenstein and suggests, largely in hermeneutic spirit, interpreting social reality as *social discourse* (“The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; *he writes it down*” [Geertz 1973: 19]), while the *thick description* should be understood as the author's interpretation designed to capture and express not the discourse proper, but the (transcendental) meaning behind it. This understanding of *thick description* has nothing in

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<sup>7</sup> The thesis about the anthropologist always dealing with unordered mass of structures of meaning belonging to different frames of such structures, to my mind, is wrong (due an unhappy choice of example). Indeed, in Geertz's example three forms of social life, three cultures have come together – the whole situation is concerned with a period of transition in Moroccan development, when three cultural worlds came together in one point in space and time. However, what takes place here is actually a clash or confrontation, and not a *confusion of tongues*. In order for different *cultural tongues* to be able to clash, or even be confused, they must already exist, each having its own logic, and they can and must be analysed as separate societies. Meanwhile, the situation when we are faced with an unordered mass of fragments of various conceptual structures is not a rule, but an exception, and such situations are unstable. They are temporary and occur in societies where there are no stable social institutions, where in a sense there is actually no society (already or yet). I think the hermeneutical “sense” concept that Geertz developed based on this example rests on a mistaken choice of example and its interpretation.

common with Ryle's concept (who believes that reality can be interpreted through describing the logical structure of actions characteristic of a particular culture), and is based on a completely different concept of action and its *meaning*.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

Let us draw a conclusion. I think the lively but controversial interpretation by Geertz by no means covers to the full the heuristic potential of Ryle's *thick description* for social theory. In terms of the requirements of contemporary institutional social theory, Ryle's interpretation by Geertz has an essential drawback: it almost completely ignores the analytical technique developed by Ryle, that of the logical-semantic and praxeological analysis of human action (or *social action*).

In terms of sociology, Ryle's *thick description* can be used as an analytical procedure for isolating (identifying) the institutions in the culture studied and describing their logical-semantic structure. Ryle (as well as other representatives of Oxford-Cambridge tradition in the philosophy of language and philosophy of action) offers us conceptual tools, which allow us to coin a new (non-Werberian) definition of social action and develop a new approach to the

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<sup>8</sup> Now Geertz refers the reader to the hermeneutic concept of meaning of Paul Ricœur and his *idea of the inscription of action* [Geertz 1973: 19]. Whereas with Ryle the meaning of action is logically inseparable from the action itself (the meaning of winking is *winking* – no less, no more – and the elucidation of what it represents is done through the description of the logical structure of *winking* as action), with Ricœur, whom Geertz now follows, the meaning of an event (speech act) does not coincide with the event (speech act) proper, but is rather interpreted as some separate symbolic dimension (*idea, content, essence*). Anthropological description registers the meaning of the speech act (*the said*), but not the speech act proper (*the event of speech act*): “Not the event of speaking, but the “said” of speaking, where we understand by the “said” of speaking that intentional exteriorization constitutive of the aim of discourse thanks to which the *sagen* – the saying – wants to become *Aus-sage*: the enunciated. In short, what we write is the noema [“thought”, “content”, “gist”] of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event” [Ibid.]. As a result, Geertz now formulates his theory of anthropological description in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics: “So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the “said” of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” [Geertz 1973: 20]. It is only logical that the object of interpretative anthropology in the end turns out *symbolic dimensions of social action* [Geertz 1973: 20]. Note that earlier Geertz suggested that Ryle's multi-layered structures of social actions should be considered the object of anthropology. Thus Geertz is trying to combine two principally different concepts of the object of anthropology as a science linked with two different philosophical traditions.

problem of “interpretation” in social sciences, avoiding the subjective and mentalist concepts of *meaning* and the dualism of the world of phenomena and world of meanings (values, senses), which is characteristic of hermeneutics<sup>9</sup>. A major role in this analysis is also played by Ryle’s problematics of *knowing-how*, or practical knowledge – a set of skills common to all competent actors in a given culture that allow social action patterns to be reproduced in their everyday practice. These skills, as it has been said, are also arranged in the form of multi-layered hierarchical *logical sandwich*. Thus, Ryle’s approach manifests an inseparable link between semantics and pragmatics in the phenomenon of social action. For this reason, in my opinion, the language suggested by Ryle could become one of the efficient tools for the analysis (both semantic and praxeological) of the practical functioning, reproduction and transformation of social institutions.

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<sup>9</sup>From the Oxford-Cambridge authors’ viewpoint, the dualism characteristic of the hermetic thinking is logically erroneous. It is based on the fundamental concept of the existence of two radically different and parallel worlds: the world of facts and the world of meanings, the world of nature and the world of values, the world of physical bodies (including human ones) and the world of minds. This turn of thought refers us back to the ancient philosophical opposition of Mind and Matter, which Ryle, in particular, believes to be one big *category mistake* [Ryle 2009: 12]. Note that some authors (ranging from Nietzsche to some modern social theoreticians) argue that such dualism is erroneous not just logically, but also ethically (when it turns into a basis for a certain outlook, system of values and way of life). This issue, however, deserves separate consideration.

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В данной работе сделана попытка показать, каким образом разработанная Гилбертом Райлом проблематика *thick description* дает возможность переопределить базовые понятия социальных наук (такие как “социальное действие” и “понимание”) и предложить новую, институциональную, форму анализа культур. Райловский язык описания человеческого действия дает современной социальной теории концептуальные инструменты, позволяющие преодолеть классическую методологическую альтернативу “Дюркгейм / Вебер” в анализе социальных действий и социальных институтов и отказаться от устаревших субъективистских и менталистских концепций “смысла”, свойственных старой феноменологической и герменевтической традиции в социальных и гуманитарных науках.

Райловская концепция *thick description* анализировалась нами в сопоставлении с ее интерпретацией у К. Гирца, благодаря которой понятие *thick description* стало одним из основных понятий современной социальной антропологии и в целом социальных наук. В работе показано, что в гирцевской интерпретации содержится глубокая концептуальная путаница; кроме того, в ней оказалась неучтенной наиболее интересная часть того, что было предложено Райлом в качестве концептуальных инструментов для анализа феномена человеческого действия.

*Препринт WP20/2013/01*  
*Серия WP20*  
*Философия и исследования культуры*

Каплун Виктор Львович

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и институциональный анализ культур**

*(на английском языке)*

Зав. редакцией оперативного выпуска *А.В. Заиченко*  
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