

makes understanding of the culture he studies both justifiable and possible.

Abstract

The task of anthropology consists in describing and explaining cultures and ultimately reaching an understanding of them through interpretation. The practical difficulties of this are obvious to all those who have dealt with members of another culture. As Malinowski observed, the anthropologist's task is to be "the interpreter of the native." It is suggested that some of the principles elucidated in the philosophical discipline of hermeneutics, such as understanding *in context* as opposed to preunderstanding and the dialectical relationship between the interpreter and the object of interpretation, may be helpful in defining the essential problems that anthropologists may encounter in their attempts to interpret cultures.

Comments

by MORRIS FREILICH

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University, Boston, Mass. 02115, U.S.A. 23 x 74

Does hermeneutics have something of value for the field anthropologist? My hopes for enlightenment from philosophy tempt me to say yes. A critical reading of "Understanding in Anthropology" fuels my doubt. The anthropological goal is *not* just to be the "interpreter of the native." Malinowskian anthropology is dead. We have new, living prophets and a "New Anthropology" (Ardener 1971). There is a revitalized interest in the psychic unity of mankind, an interesting switch from pious platitudes to a serious examination of the nature of "mind" and the universal structures created by "mind." How the new anthropology can utilize the old, endless ethnography is hard for me to imagine. The old ethnography (not unlike Freudian psychoanalysis) provides much insight, but little understanding. We hardly need hermeneutics to tell us that the real quest is for the right question, rather than the right answer. What we need to be told (by someone) is how we are to know when we have discovered a right question and whether there is an endless variety of right questions. As a structuralist, I am forced to say that theory rather than hermeneutics will lead to the right questions. Theory, rather than endless ethnographies, will show that right questions are both few in number and universally applicable.

by F. ALLAN HANSON

Department of Anthropology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans. 66045, U.S.A. 28 x 74

American anthropology may not be as innocent of hermeneutical influences as the authors suggest, for Kroeber's thought derived a good deal from Rickert (see Kroeber 1952:70, 72-73, 101, 123-124, 136).

I am more concerned with what the essay leaves unsaid than with what it says. Hermeneutics counsels that understanding be achieved by (1) viewing the part in the context of the whole and (2) proceeding via "dialectical questioning," whereby we broaden our perspective and overcome our preconceptions. This advice is unexceptionable, as far as it goes. But the essay does not answer, or even clearly pose, what in my judgment is the critical question: precisely

what is the nature of the understanding which these hermeneutical principles are designed to generate?

At least two distinct notions of understanding could be meant. The first is some sort of subjective interpenetration whereby one understands another culture by reenacting native thought—by expanding one's own perceptions to the point that one comes to share the natives' experience of life. Watson-Franke and Watson may have this kind of understanding in mind; their reference to Schleiermacher's "arguing that we reach understanding through reexperiencing mental processes" and their appreciative comment that the Reichel-Dolmatoffs comprehended events in Aritama "in relationship to the larger context of understanding as they developed it experientially" imply as much. To my mind, that notion of understanding is unacceptable. What does it *mean* (if anything) to share someone else's experience? Is it possible ever to achieve such sharing? What methods are available to verify that it has been achieved? Even if it were possible to achieve sharing of the natives' experience, and to know that we have achieved it, is that enough for anthropological purposes? Surely we are interested in some things that natives find uninteresting, and want to account for things that they cannot explain. Understanding by sharing native experience is scarcely adequate in such circumstances.

Another concept of understanding to which the hermeneutical principles of context and dialectical questioning could lead is understanding in Ryle's (1949:54) sense of "knowing how." On this view, to understand another culture is to be able to operate in it, to know the moves or responses which natives would deem appropriate in various circumstances. If Watson-Franke and Watson mean this concept of understanding, I applaud them. As is argued elsewhere (Hanson and Martin 1973; Hanson 1975: chap. 3), this is an extremely fruitful notion of understanding; indeed, I think it is the *only* meaningful sense in which we can talk about understanding other cultures internally. It lacks overtones of mysticism, is clearly possible to achieve, is objectively verifiable, and is not limited to those elements of culture in which natives are interested or for which they can provide explanations (nor does it commit us to accepting the explanations that they do provide).

I wonder which (if either) of these notions of understanding other cultures the authors have in mind.