SYMBOLISM AND LITERALISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY*

In the present paper, we are concerned with the debate between two schools of thought in anthropology—literalism and symbolism. In section 1, we provide a characterization of these views and point out that both of them face difficulties of a logical nature. In section 2, we introduce machinery for dealing with these difficulties, and in section 3 we show how to solve them. In section 4, we discuss philosophical accounts of interpretation. In section 5, we bring arguments in support of two objections to symbolism: that it cannot give a recursive account of interpretation; and that by giving too much importance to making the natives' beliefs true, it is unable to give a true account of what it is that the natives believe.

Let us say at this point that the terms 'literalism' and 'symbolism', as used to characterize rival strategies in anthropology, seem to have no clear cut or uniform usages; and that our characterization has, therefore, a certain element of arbitrariness. Some might feel that we characterize symbolism too extremely and literalism too moderately. They might, perhaps, feel that literalism might be better characterized as allowing for the attribution of contradictory beliefs to natives, and symbolism as insisting on interpreting natives context by context, so as to avoid attributing 'silly' beliefs to them. The reader who would prefer such characterizations, may (looking past our justifiably somewhat arbitrary usage of terminology) construe us, from section 4 onwards, as arguing against both symbolism and literalism and in favor of an intermediate position (which we call 'literalism', in virtue of its concern with literal meaning). And he may construe us as dealing in the early sections with logical difficulties with which this intermediate position, like most positions, must deal: difficulties arising from the fact that an anthropologist may have to interpret natives whose beliefs differ from his, for instance, as to whether the natives' gods exist, or whether what the native believes to be two entities are really distinct. It is, of course, the substance rather than the terminology that matters to us.
The anthropologist is typically and fundamentally concerned to explain the behavior of the members of the society which he studies. It is natural to suppose that an individual's behavior depends, in part, on his beliefs. In order to determine what an individual believes, we must also be able to translate the language in which his assertions are made. For how else could we take his assertions as evidence about his beliefs—as, indeed, we must.

Literalism and symbolism are two strategies, both based in translational practice, which anthropologists have used in assigning explanatorily relevant beliefs to members of the societies which they study.

According to literalism, we use a translational hypothesis T to effect a correlation between each native utterance (produced or assented to) and a sentence of our own language. We then attribute to the native who produces or assents to the utterance u the belief that s—where s is just the sentence of our language correlated with the utterance u by the translational hypothesis T. According to literalism, then, those native beliefs relevant to an explanation of native behavior are just those beliefs we attribute to the natives based (in part, at least) on a literal translation of their utterances.

On the other hand, according to symbolism, the literal translation of native utterances is only the first step in a deeper project of attributing to the individuals who produce or assent to such utterances beliefs which are relevant to an explanation of their behavior. The symbolist, like the literalist, employs a (literal) translational hypothesis T to effect a correlation between native utterances (produced or assented to) and sentences of our language. But the symbolist characteristically adds that the explanatorily relevant significance of these utterances is not always disclosed by the sentences by which we literally translate them. In particular, the symbolist notes that the sentences by which we translate native utterances may contain referring expressions (definite descriptions, proper names, etc.) which appear to be meant to denote non-existent supernatural entities. He claims that we cannot attribute to the natives beliefs which purport to be about those non-existent supernatural entities which are apparently meant to be denoted by the referring expressions which figure in our literal translations of such native utterances. Rather, we must attri-