I

In this article I discuss the view that interpretation of the language of a radically foreign culture is impossible, and that the thought of such a culture must hence remain unfathomable to us; a philosophical doctrine with obvious and embarrassing implications for anthropology and history. For these disciplines are inter alia concerned with providing us with accounts of the modes of thinking of alien peoples, whether in distant times or in remote regions of the world. And without a proper grasp of these peoples’ thoughts, in a narrow sense, we have no adequate grasp either of their intentions, desires or actions: We are reduced to recording only the most extrinsic, behavioural aspects of their culture. For convenience, I shall refer to the view that such transcultural understanding is impossible as the Hermetic Thesis, the thesis that foreign cultures are hermetically closed to each other.¹

At the outset we must clear up an ambiguity in the Hermetic Thesis as it has been propounded in the literature. Sometimes a strong claim is advanced, to the effect that the learning of a language creates insurmountable obstacles to a member of a radically alien culture; at other times only the weaker claim is made that exact translation cannot be attained. The latter position is compatible with the admission that the language which defies translation can still be learnt by the alien. In this article, I shall examine the weaker position only. This is in part because I consider this to be the most plausible version, although I would oppose the view, which some might hold, that the stronger position may be rejected out of hand as flying in the face of established fact. One would be the fact that anthropologists have been known to go into the jungle and crack the code of tribal societies whose cultural stage represents the starkest possible contrast with the anthropologists. But this alleged fact might be disputed on the grounds that the anthropologists have only managed to conform to native discourse in its purely external, behavioural aspect, while failing to penetrate the meaning which it embodies. Such a sceptical conception can be given precise meaning on the basis of a realist semantics, in the Dummettian sense, countenancing verifica-
tion-transcendent meanings. But this leads to the primary reason why I bypass the stronger version of the Hermetic Thesis here: The reasoning in favour of this view would closely parallel the one I shall offer below as the strongest argument for the translational variant of that thesis. Hence, to avoid tedious repetition, I shall confine myself to one deployment of this reasoning. Its application to the stronger position will be obvious from the use to which I put it below; so will the way in which it can be countered.

II

To examine the weak version of the Hermetic Thesis, we must first agree on what is to be understood by a translation. In the debate over translatability, authors have often arrived at contradictory conclusions on the basis of identical arguments and examples, due to the fact that they impose different constraints upon the notion of translation. And often such constraints have not been explicitly spelled out. A clarification is needed. Trivially and minimally, a translation is a pairing of meaning-equivalent expressions from different languages. We may raise this a little beyond triviality by plugging in a substantive theory of meaning, namely the theory which construes meaning as a function of truth or satisfaction conditions (with or without an additional requirement that these conditions be epistemically accessible); translation is then made out to be the pairing of expressions, from different languages, with identical truth or satisfaction conditions.

But presumably the ordinary notion of translation goes further than this. We would hardly call a large and intricately interwoven set of sentences of one language a translation of an atomic sentence of another language (i.e. a sentence not subject to further analysis in that language), despite coincidence of truth conditions, nor would we accept a highly complex term of the first language as a translation of a simple term in the second. An example might be the terms "seven" and "27-45+5²" which have identical satisfaction conditions in all possible worlds but which do not intuitively translate each other. Some additional requirement of identical logical form seems to be at play, a notion related to Carnap’s concept of intensional isomorphism, calling for the aligned expressions to have identical decompositions into atomic semantic parts. Perhaps it could even be maintained that our everyday notion of translation calls for grammatical equivalence, too: a passive construction in the translated language must not be mapped into an active construction in the