Beyond definition, description, and analysis—and to a large extent dependent on these basic processes—is the more subtle business of interpretation, of explaining what is not immediately apparent; of taking facts and going beyond them to discover the deeper meaning or significance of a subject, the relationship of particulars to a general principle, the truth that lies beneath the surface.

INTERPRETING AN ACTIVITY

Take the subject of football, for example. On the face of it, football is simply a popular spectator sport, a national pastime, a "he-man" game filled with action and excitement. On a deeper level, however—as the writer of the following essay points out—football is more than a game. It is an acting-out of a basic and primitive human compulsion to gain and hold on to property. Note how the writer supports his interpretation by providing explicit facts about the game on the basis of an implicit general principle.

FOOTBALL—THE GAME OF AGGRESSION

George Stade

There are many ways in which professional football is unique among sports, and as many others in which it is the fullest expression of what is at the heart of all sports. There is no other major sport so dependent upon raw force, nor any so dependent on a complex and delicate strategy; none so wide in the range of specialized functions demanded from its players; none so dependent upon the undifferentiated athletic sine qua non, a quickwitted body; none so primitive; none so futuristic; none so American.

Football is first of all a form of play, something one engages in instinctively and only for the sake of performing the activity in question. Among forms of play, football is a game, which means that it is built on communal needs, rather than on private evasions, like mountain climbing. Among games it is a sport; it requires athletic ability unlike croquet. And among sports, it is one whose mode is violence and whose violence is its special glory.

In some sports—basketball, baseball, soccer—violence is occasional (and usually illegal); in others, like hockey, it is incidental; in others still, car racing, for example, it is accidental. Definitive violence football shares alone with boxing and bullfighting, among major sports. But in bullfighting a man is pitted not against another man but against an animal, and boxing is a competition between individuals, not teams, and that makes a great difference. If shame is the proper and usual penalty for failures in sporting competitions between individuals, guilt is the consequence of failing not only oneself and one's fans, but also one's teammates. Failure in football, moreover, seems more related to a failure of courage, seems more humbling than in any other sport outside of bullfighting. If in other sports one loses a knack, is outsmarted, or is merely inferior in ability, but in football, the team's experience exceedingly well because the "lacks desire," or "can't take it anymore," or "tears footloose," as his teammates will put it.

Many sports, especially those in which there is a goal to be defended, seem enactments of the games animals play under the stimulus of what ethologists,
students of animal behavior, call territory "the drive to gain, maintain, and defend the exclusive right to a piece of property," as Robert Andrey puts it. The most striking symptom of this drive is aggressiveness, but among social animals, such as primates, it leads to "animosity for the social partner, hostility for the territorial neighbor." The territorial instinct is closely related to whatever makes animals establish pecking orders: the tangible sign of one's status within the orders is the size and value of the territory one is able to command. Individuals fight over status, groups over lebensraum and a bit more. These instincts, some ethologists have claimed, are behind patriotism and private property and also, I would add, codes of honor, as among ancient Greeks, modern Sicilians, primitive hunters, teen-age gangs, soldiers, aristocrats, and athletes, especially football players.

The territorial basis of certain kinds of sports is closest to the surface in football, whose plays are all attempts to gain and defend property through aggression. Does this not make football par excellence the game of instinctual satisfactions, especially among Americans, who are notorious as violent patriots and instinctive defenders of private property? (At the same time, in football this drive is more elaborated than in other sports by whatever turns instinct into art; football is more richly patterned, more formal, more complex in the functions of its parts, which makes football par excellence the game of aesthetic satisfactions.) Even the unusual animosity, if that is the word, that exists among football players has been remarked upon, notably by Norman Mailer: And what is it that corresponds in football to the various feathers, furs, fans, gorgeous colors by means of which animals puff themselves into exaggerated gestures of masculine potency? The football player's equipment, of course. His cleats raise him an inch off the ground. Knee and thigh pads thrust the force lines of his legs forward. His pants are tight against his rump and the back of his thighs, portions of his body which: the requirements of the game stuff with muscle. Even the tubby guard looks slim of waist by comparison with his shoulders, extended half a foot on either side by padding. Finally the helmet, which from the aesthetic point of view most clearly expresses the genius of the sport. Not only does the helmet make the player inches taller and give his head a size proportionate to the rest of him; it makes him anonymous, inscrutable, more serviceable as a symbol. The football player in uniform strikes the eye in a succession of gestalt shifts: first a hooded phantom out of the paleolithic past of the species; then a premonition of a future of specemen.

In sum, and I am almost serious about this, football players are to America what tragic actors were to ancient Athens and gladiators to Rome: models of perennially heroic, aggressive, violent humanity, but adapted to the social realities of the times and places that formed them.

INTERPRETING BEHAVIOR

Probe beneath the surface of most human activities and you often uncover a wonderland worthy of Alice's journey behind the looking-glass. Our next writer, for instance, cites a college professor whose studies in religion and American culture led him to suggest that the modern shopping mall is the new religious and ceremonial center of urban America. Professor Ira Zepp calls the mall a "camouflage for the sacred" in modern life and substantiates his case by tracing the similarities between a typical mall and a Gothic cathedral.