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Anthropology through Levinas
Knowing the Uniqueness of *Ego* and the Mystery of Otherness

by Nigel Rapport

An anthropological commonplace since Evans-Pritchard has been that ethnographic subjects will have their rationality circumscribed by the discursive opportunities made available by a "culture." Hence, social science comes to terms with the "internal" nature of judgements (Winch). Ultimately, the relativist nature of both Winch's and Evans-Pritchard's conclusion has its source in Wittgenstein's philosophy. For Wittgenstein, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Moreover, "language" in this connection extends to the "textual" nature of behavior per se. There exists a determining habituation of embodiment and dwelling as well as of reasoning, believing, and talking. This article explores the nature of a pretextual or nontextual sphere that exists beyond conventional—"cultural"—languages. Wittgensteinian assumptions are set against those of Max Stirner and Emmanuel Levinas. While in many ways disparate, the writings of Stirner on the *ego* and of Levinas on the "other" both insist that knowledge can be derived—knowledge, indeed, of a fundamental, even absolute, nature—by way of a transcending of a taken-for-granted symbolic, conceptual, textual, and doctrinal language-world. What is key is the attention one pays to corporeality: to the "flesh and mind" of the self (Stirner), to the "body and face" of the other (Levinas). The article is theoretical and epistemological in register. An ethnographic afterword points in the direction of how the argument might be grounded in representations of fieldwork encounters.

Through my small, bonebound island I have learnt all I know, experienced all, and sensed all.

—(Dylan Thomas, letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, November 1933 [1966:48])

It has been a commonplace in anthropology since Evans-Pritchard that one anticipates ethnographic subjects—including anthropologists themselves—as having their rationality circumscribed by, indeed defined by, the discursive opportunities made available to them by a "culture." The latter entailed a moral system, not a natural system. Hence, belief in witchcraft may be "rational" according to the cosmological worldview within which observation, explanation, reaction, and social interaction must symbolically function (Evans-Pritchard 1937). The "idea of a social science" is to come to terms with the "internal" nature of judgments, as Peter Winch (1970:107) famously phrased it, internal to the subjects' discursive possibilities. Ultimately, the relativist nature of both Winch's and Evans-Pritchard's conclusion—that one cannot reason outside, or against, a system of beliefs,

because one has no other idiom in which to express one's thoughts—has its source in Wittgenstein's "ordinary-language philosophy." In Wittgenstein's own words, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (1922:5.6). Language is instrumental in determining a life-world, or "form of life," and the latter must be accepted as a given; so that "what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 1922:7). Moreover, "language" in this connection can be understood as extending to behavior as such, given the "textual" or patterned nature of the latter. To say that one is immersed in a form of life is tantamount to saying that there exists a determining habituation of one's embodiment and environmental dwelling as well as of one's reasoning, believing, and talking. One dwells within an environing, and limiting, habitus as well as within a language-game. All is determinately textualized.

This article explores the nature of a possible pretextual or nontextual sphere, however, that exists beyond ordinary or conventional—"cultural"—language, that human beings nevertheless inhabit and, moreover, from which they have the capacity to extract rational knowledge. The "pretextual" invites us beyond the domain of conventional conceptualization and classification, beyond the commonsensical and habitual, to a place from which we begin to know, again, as human beings.

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each and every individual. While language has its essential social and cultural properties, we affirm that in both speaking and writing people retain the capacity to communicate unique experiences in unique ways. At the same time, acknowledging our biological affordance to language has not prevented the emergence of stridently relativist arguments, such as those of Wittgenstein. So rather than a dualist opposition, perhaps it is better to regard the claim to the uniqueness and individuality of each person as the end of a spectrum that also includes the claim to the uniqueness and specificity of culture.

Over many works Rapport has sought to rescue the appreciation of individuals against their suppression in anthropological generalization. Again, I would support Rapport in this, and I find that, in my own writing as in his, it is important to have the kind of stories he ends with to make that point. But I would suggest this should be a question of balance, not a simple opposition. So my criticism is that Rapport takes this to an extreme, and the reason for this in this paper is that he is not here writing balanced ethnography but turning to philosophy. Just because Levinas is a renowned philosopher, his claims that the relationship to the other is absolute and his discussion of the irreducible nature of the face of the other are not in themselves evidence for such claims. Indeed, these citations make clear that Levinas is largely concerned with the particular responsibility of philosophy as a discipline and his own theological concerns. It does not create an anthropological argument that when we pursue pre- or supratextual knowledge we thereby encounter a human corporality that is unique and a mystery.

This exemplifies the problem of anthropology's relationship to philosophy, which has become asymmetrical and detrimental to the discipline. Increasingly, anthropologists look to philosophy to resolve issues we find difficult, too fluid, and too disparate. Philosophy can certainly achieve the ambitions we have for it, because it provides levels of abstraction where things can be resolved in semantics and logic. Anthropology is better served by resisting this allure of philosophy and refusing to privilege any dimension of its encounter, be it language, cognition, or ego. Instead, it should retain its grounding in comparative ethnography and argue on the basis of what we find and can ourselves attest to. It may be harder, but I would suggest that it is always better to be unresolved anthropologists than resolved philosophers.

So I blame philosophy for leading Rapport from a useful critique to a concluding section where he argues that either we accept a social analysis where culture is homogenizing or determinant or we accept these philosophers' privileging of the unique individual. It is philosophy that requires this kind of precision and distinction. At least since Bourdieu, most anthropologists have accepted that culture, in the sense of the normative, is neither deterministic nor a rule. Many actual instances will fail to accord with cultural claims. We can respect individuals without mystifying their integrity. We will always have to work in worlds that make many generalized claims and yet always though particular instances. For these reasons, anthropology is much better served by its commitment to demystification than standing in awe of any mystery of ego, or irreducibility of ontology for that matter. Let's leave that to the philosophers.

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In this thought-provoking piece, Nigel Rapport argues that human beings have the intuitive perceptual capacity to recognize a commensurateness in fellow humans that goes beyond the sociocultural and historical contingencies of time and place. The title is slightly misleading because the article draws on the philosophical thinking of both Emmanuel Levinas and the lesser-known Max Stirner. Rapport confronts us, once again, with an old tension within the discipline between the enlightened universalism of "anthropos" and the romantic diversitarianism of "ethnos" (Stocking 1992). Historically, the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states and the era of imperial and colonial expansionism led to a disproportionate stress on the study of "difference." Mainstream sociocultural anthropology became conflated with the project of ethnography (Ingold 2008), namely, the systematic study and description of individual human cultures.

Ironically, processes of (mostly cultural) globalization have renewed the anthropological attention paid to human universals and universal humanity. This is most often couched in the popular language of cosmopolitanism (Wardle 2010). Rapport (2012a) himself has been promoting "cosmopolitan anthropology," which may be conceived of as a return to the discipline's Enlightenment origins (and an antidote to dominant postmodern ideas). When Immanuel Kant first formulated anthropology as a modern project, a science of humankind, what he had in mind was precisely the linking up of the individual human being, in its everyday diversity, and its more global historical commonality.

Inspired by Stirner and Levinas, Rapport advocates for "a duty of distance and of ignorance concerning the substance of other individual human lives." Anthropological knowing, he argues, comprises "the progressive understanding of a universal human condition" (a "scientific discernment of human capacities"). This point of view relates to a strand in anthropological epistemology that stresses the importance of "strangeness" in the ethnographic encounter and the fact that there always remains a (necessary) distance between the self and the other (Agar 1996). This leaves room for mystery and wonder, for passion and anarchy, in brief, for an aesthetic appreciation of the human other (*Autrui*) that exceeds the comprehension of the ego and exists independently of

any relation to that ego. While the anthropologist in the field may get close to grasping human complexity, from the moment ethnography becomes writing he or she is caught in (con)text and interpretation. What exactly gets lost in translating "pretextual, nonconventional, acultural knowing" to "an emergent technical textualization"? Would nontextual forms of data gathering and analysis serve us any better?

For Levinas, it is the "face," the singularity of an impression that is absolutely unique, that reveals absolute otherness in the other person (Benson and O'Neill 2007). Rapport, too, stresses the importance of "*ego*'s face-to-face relation with the other." However, in today's world, many interactions between people no longer take place in a face-to-face context that allows a direct, prerational engagement with others. What does Rapport's anthropology have to say about a humanity that is increasingly mediating human interaction through "distancing" information and communication technologies? How would he respond to the critique that his vision of anthropology is overly subjectivist and anthropocentric? Is it not putting too much stress on individuality and giving too much agency to the individual? Should anthropology automatically exclude that which lies beyond the human (however broad or narrow the latter is defined)?

All people on this planet may share a similar potential to become "an autonomous, capable human actor," but far from everybody is able to realize that potential. Rapport's stress on corporeality—the "flesh and mind" of the self (Stirner) and the "body and face" of the other (Levinas)—leads to questions regarding the "boundaries" of universal humanity. From which point in a person's life trajectory does the human organ of perception that "enables *ego* to know *alter*" become functional, and when does it stop working? The proposed philosophical model is based on an ideal-type able-bodied and able-minded human. In which ways can the organ of perception malfunction, and what does this tell us about universal humanity? Moreover, if humans have "the perceptual capability of recognizing universally a humanity that is distinct from thinghood and from animality and from technology," how do they deal with instances where individual corporeal boundaries are not all that clear (e.g., Siamese twins)? Answering these queries related to abnormality may help fine-tune the model.

Finally, Rapport stresses that his contribution is theoretical and epistemological. Indeed, the questions he addresses are mainly philosophical ones. Anthropology ideally addresses these issues "in the world," but Rapport does not elaborate much on the methodologies through which anthropologists in particular can obtain access to the assumed commonality that unites humans. Which methodological toolbox do we have at our disposal? For many anthropologists, essays like this one are most likely perceived as highly abstract and difficult to apply outside the given conceptual frame. In sum, Rapport's provocative text probably raises more questions than it answers.

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This essay, drawing centrally on Stirner and Levinas, nudges us to rethink anthropology by paying a new type of attention to the self-conscious individual human being. The kind of anthropology Rapport has in mind would reconnect us with the liberal idealist thinkers of a previous era, who placed free-acting individuality at the center of their (philosophical) anthropologies. In particular, he goes back to Stirner (methodological egoism), adapting Stirner's concerns to those of a more familiar contemporary philosophical voice, Levinas's (the mystery of the other), in order to highlight how marginalized the human self has become during the past decades of anthropological thought.

Suddenly, as it were, Rapport reveals to us that contemporary social inquiry shows little, if any, interest in actual selves, since the primary engagement is still with modeled subjectivities and these only for what they demonstrate about a larger cultural field, of which individuals are considered to be a fold. I strongly agree with the need Rapport is describing—the need to put the specificity (including the vagary, the inconsequence) of individual life back into the center of anthropological thinking and likewise the need to reassert philosophical anthropology as a counterpoint to structural or other modes of cultural-contextual accounting for human experience.

It is worth drawing on another nineteenth-century thinker here—Thomas Hill Green—to foreground key points. Green's liberal idealism was posited against the social evolutionism of his day that would reduce individuality to an arbitrary expression of social-environmental forces. For Green (as for Rapport), the human individual is a spontaneous, self-realizing being whose self-consciousness freely and actively introduces newness into its relationship with the world. The individual is certainly, however, also a mystery both to others and to itself. The self remains a mystery to itself because it can know what it is only by remaking its personality in the world out of circumstances that its interactions have previously endowed with significance. Individual self-insight develops not absolutely but rather in time out of a series of contingent, will-imbued interventions.

As Green notes, the decision to give priority to the individual—as opposed to the social class, the in-group, the people, the state apparatus, the culture, God, or gods—is an epistemological one. Post-Enlightenment philosophy opened up the radical thought that everyone should count for one and none for more than one (a view shared, with diverging ramifications, by Stirner and J. S. Mill, for example), but this stance was (and has continued to be) challenged on all sides—by corporations and would-be power brokers of every stamp.