

Limits in Wittgenstein and in Anthropology: comment on Nigel Rapport's 'Anthropology through Levinas: Knowing the Uniqueness of Ego and the Mystery of Otherness'

Nigel Rapport must be congratulated for this sophisticated essay on the nature of the pre- or nontextual sphere of human life. He challenges a long intellectual arc in which the symbolic and language-based dimensions of collective life have been foregrounded and treated as determining at the expense of self-conscious, reflexive persons. He does not, however, erect a straw anthropological man fashioned out of discursive determinism; rather, it is a version of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy that he attacks. And his theoretical concerns fold into questions about writing: he uses Stirner and Levinas contra Wittgenstein to attend to a richness and beauty in human life that have often been left unattended.

I wish to comment on two aspects of this essay. First, while I share Rapport's concerns about "ordinary-language philosophy," I think that a more generous reading of Wittgenstein is actually helpful. After all, if the intention is to free anthropology from the prison-house of ordinary language, then a richer dialogue with the alleged jailer is required. Second, the vignette about heavy metal-loving Roger Weir serves to illustrate the human capacity to exceed. Weir emerges in a truly memorable way that asks questions about how anthropology writes about shared and yet singular humanity.

But what of the prison-house of ordinary-language philosophy? At times, Rapport's essay chimes with Ernest Gellner's *Language and Solitude* (1998), which situates both Wittgenstein's philosophy and the *mise-en-scène* of anthropology in the "Hapsburg dilemma," a culture war between atomistic individualism and the communitarian. Wittgenstein, Gellner says, shifted violently from the former to the latter (apparently, Malinowski merely shuffled the deck). Wittgenstein, Gellner says, granted a determining role to language, with forms of life enclosing rationality and each culture becoming self-validating and limiting. The valedictory *Language and Solitude* concludes by tilting at a narrow version of Wittgenstein: "The possibility of transcendence of cultural limits is a fact; it is the single most important fact about human life" (Gellner 1998:187). But a more generous reading of Wittgenstein is helpful. In the *Tractatus* he remarks, "The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world" (1961:5.632). The image suggests a visual horizon composed of always-incomplete perspectives on an unfinished world. Thus, limits are crucial, for the subject is, to borrow from William James, forever surrounded by *more*—uncertainty, doubt, and skepticism are anthropological data.

Today, key interlocutors such as Veena Das and Stanley Cavell also attend to limits, skepticism, and a broader reading of forms of life, even in Wittgenstein part II. Cavell (2013:41–42 *passim*) pushes beyond the conventional "ethnological" version of *forms* of life, in which language agreement and rules seem almost contractual and underpin the naturally social human being. Beyond this, however, he explores another axis in Wittgenstein's thought concerned with (forms of) *life*. And along this axis, according to Das, "we can appreciate not only the security provided by belonging to a community with shared agreements but also the dangers that human beings pose to each other" (2007:15). Along this axis, then, one notes the limits (and abutting?) of forms of *life* and the potential for skepticism. Perhaps the prison-house may not be Wittgenstein's after all but, rather, the product of "ethnological" conventions through which the symbolic and language-based axis

is foregrounded and treated as determining. This brings me to anthropological writing and its conventions.

I think this essay makes its most provocative contribution on the topic of writing: Rapport's conceptual work reveals itself to be partly methodological, and he asks questions about the anthropological language needed to attend to the human capacities of interlocutors. Of course, the heavy metal-loving Roger Weir who concludes the text has his own discursive determinism—Japanese culture filtered through karate—and Rapport has to willfully preserve Weir's mystery from the temptation to write about him as a "figure." It is this temptation that interests me. What are the conventions in anthropological writing that compel one to find figures instead of human beings, and often anonymous figures at that? How might one explore more experimental forms of knowledge production with counterparts? These questions are being asked in diverse areas of anthropology today, for example, in work on expert counterparts, their errors, skepticism, and capacities for action within the contemporary. There, and in other areas, the curiously resistant conventions and unstated power relations of the discipline's *mise-en-scène* are shown to be unhelpful.

Rapport's essay concludes with bonebound Roger Weir karate-kicking his way down a hospital corridor, refuting conventions with every blow. I was left with a desire to read more anthropology that starts there, because the evidence that will support Rapport's theoretically sophisticated position will surely be found in the writing project that begins with Weir and others abutting a world. I was left with a desire to read more about collaborations, counterparts, and even possible interventions.