I am grateful for having the opportunity to comment on this inspiring essay. I am deeply moved by the human potential that Rapport (through Levinas) encourages us to imagine in this thought piece. Following Levinas’s discernment of the “perfect foundations of human being” within the mystery of the individual, Rapport insists that the role of the anthropologist is to write a “science of the species: what it is to be human,” celebrating unique individualism “imaginatively,” and the commonality of humanity “systematically.” Imagination—reaching toward the unknown individual other—appears to be a key tool allowing movement beyond the binding classification certainties erected through the production and maintenance of culture.

My own reading of Rapport’s beautifully written and conceived essay was interrupted by two entirely coincident textual encounters that offered an opportunity to consider if the abstract ideas offered up in the essay would connect productively to the world they seek to describe and touch. These encounters were (1) a news story I read and (2) a letter I received from one of my interlocutors on death row in a US prison.

I stumbled across this headline for an online news story (in the New Daily) on the day I first read Rapport’s essay (April 6, 2018): “Incredible act of forgiveness from the grieving mum of slain backpacker” (Plummer 2018). This mother revealed to journalists the moment “of connection and understanding” she had after she flew from the United Kingdom to a court in Brisbane, Australia, and locked eyes for 3 seconds with the psychically disturbed “broken man” who had murdered her daughter. The article reported her saying, “It’s only through those moments of connection and understanding, when you get a moment of insight into the mind of another being, that change can be initiated.” Swimming against a stream of public opinion that urged her to seek revenge and punishment for the murderer, the mother found solace in that silent face: the face of the other exposed through its nakedness that produced an obligation to forgive. Her choice to answer “Here I am” to the extreme otherness of her daughter’s murderer stood out as a stark demonstration of the power of ego and the potential of “Anyone” to choose a novel approach toward the radical other with no expectation of return. Here was an empirically located moment of silent face-to-face encounter with alter that left behind its meaningful “traces.”

Yes, I find myself at home with Levinas and Rapport in that news report.

But then I got a letter from one of my long-incarcerated African American interlocutors on death row in a US prison. He had served 29 years in uninterrupted solitary confinement until he was moved recently into the prison’s “general population.” It is poignant to consider Levinas’s thinking and its potential relevance to anthropology through a prisoner’s experiences of both solitary confinement and of intermittent human encounter. Indeed, while Rapport has presented to us a biographical origin of Levinas’s thinking in Levinas’s experience of the Holocaust and reading of the Old Testament, another formative biographical relation is Levinas’s deep exposure to incarceration, not only during World War Two as a prisoner of war, but also through his childhood, living next to a prison in Kaunas, Lithuania. Thinking about incarceration, punishment, and enforced isolation gives a particular tenor to thoughts about “humanity, being, culture, violation, sociality, and morality.”

Even in that desolate and involuntarily solitary space where my imprisoned interlocutor paints, reads, writes, and occasionally rages, he constitutes his sense of being in the world through relations in his mind if not in person. In other words, he exists with the possibility of others, and precisely because he has always been a self in relation—to others and even to a self of the past who committed crimes that landed him in jail. In total isolation, he has constructed an idea of self/body, and of other/world, through a shifting but nonetheless socially informed lens—a learned but ever evolving idea about what a body should look like, feel like, about what others think and do, inside and out, however illusory at times.

As for me, the ethnographer, who is not even able to witness his daily life in order to imagine an embodied in situ approximation of his being (Kohn 1994), I must be content with written exchanges and rare visits. From these remnants, I would write his unique life imaginatively to expose a creative individual totally cut off from public view and encounter. I would recognize his survival in solitude as testimony to the power of his self-hood, his ego, his boundless resourcefulness and energy, and I would let a public (within and beyond anthropology) learn about this to counter their misconceptions about this man’s value. And yet this man is much more than an individual. He’s one of many thousands of black men behind bars in the United States in an era of racially biased mass incarceration that Alexander (2010) has aptly named the “New Jim Crow.” Yes, it is indeed my primary duty and goal to honor the individual spirit, to look into his face and say “Here I am,” and then to turn around and say, publicly, “Here he is!” But for the final step, I need to declare him as indispensable as a social being—an intrinsic part of more than just A social world, but OUR social world, and it will be because of both of these qualities—his individual worth and his social worth—that we (with powers to vote and to protest) will start to reassess the huge loss of thousands like him who have paid their dues and should be free. For me to only write about his individual life imaginatively and to the human species systematically and to not at some point contextualize these against local and national constructions of race, ethnicity, religion, poverty, slavery, and so on is to isolate my growing understanding of him (which arises from his declared understandings of himself in the world) from the social malaise that maintains a system of unjust mass incarceration. Exposing this malaise is...
his goal as much as it is mine. The resultant ethnography reflects an emic as well as an etic perspective, to use an increasingly unpopular terminology in this postcultural moment. These different levels, inside/outside, individual/social, cannot be entirely separated in my view, even if it is tempting to try to do so.

So that leaves me with a final question: Can the “existentially consequential” “roar . . . on the other side of silence” for the invisible incarcerated black man be the potential of a visible return to freedom and a productive creative contribution to a society made anew because of his active presence?

Bernhard Leistle
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6, Canada (bernhardleistle@cunet.carleton.ca). 12 X 18

Based on a thorough reading of an impressive range of texts by the French Jewish Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Nigel Rapport reflects on the kind of anthropology that could withstand what he refers to as the Levinasian “challenge.” It seems to me that Rapport sees the authority of this challenge grounded in philosophy’s ability to make statements about human nature that transcend the cultural and historical situation in which they are produced. I do not intend to deny the possibility of this transcendence but would like to problematize its taken-for-grantedness. Levinas’s thinking was clearly intertwined with the horrors of twentieth-century history, by which he was personally affected. It is one of the strengths of Rapport’s essay that it does not deny this intertwining, making the relation between Levinasian ethics and the Holocaust one of its major themes. I am asking myself, however, whether Rapport goes far enough in this contextualization of Levinas’s philosophy. There is a strong connection between social-cultural orders and violence against the Other in Rapport’s presentation, based on sentences like this one: “In society such as it functions one cannot live without killing, or at least without taking the preliminary steps for the death of someone.” As soon as we enter the realm of cultural existence, this seems to say, we are already on the way to mass murder and genocide: “The door opens to a Holocaust.”

Why should anthropologists accept a reductive equivocation between culture and violence? One objective of anthropological research is to show the great, possibly infinite variability of human behavior in particular local contexts. This does not mean to deny the aggressive tendencies of cultures in favor of more harmonious, idealized notions; but it means to inquire into the particular social and cultural forces that lead to mass murder and genocide. The Holocaust that left its imprint on Levinas’s thinking was not a holocaust but the Nazis’ concrete attempt to annihilate the Jews of Europe. It was a historical event that had its “necessary condition” in modern civilization, as Zygmunt Bauman (2000:13) has argued. It was the particular culture of Western modernity whose murderous tendencies Levinas has highlighted so dramatically and against which he held his concept of a primordial ethical relationship to the Other.

To put it bluntly, philosophically, I do not see a reason to privilege Levinas’s “universalism” over anthropology’s “relativism.” To me the fundamental phenomenon seems to lie in an intertwining of particularity and universality that characterizes both philosophy and anthropology but is realized differently in each of them. The philosopher reaches for the universal from a particular standpoint; the anthropologist aims for the particular based on taken-for-granted universal faculties (e.g., the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries).

If this is accepted, we can ask ourselves whether there are other ways of responding to Levinas’s philosophy than the one outlined by Rapport. If an anthropological inquiry into cultural and historical realities stands on equal epistemological footing with the universalist claims of philosophy, then a possible response is pragmatic. Anthropologists can choose what they find useful in the concepts of a philosopher and apply these concepts to form new theories and methodologies. Most anthropologists take this pragmatic approach in their dealings with philosophy, and Levinas has a lot to offer in this respect. His insistence on the primacy of the ethical relationship to the other person makes a major contribution to the longstanding and ongoing debate around ethics in fieldwork and ethnographic representation. As Rapport shows convincingly, Levinas’s work teems with powerful descriptions of affective phenomena that anthropologists encounter routinely but often lack the conceptual language to address—love, desire, sexuality, pain, death. In general, Levinas’s thought opens new avenues to inquire into discourses on ethics, alterity, and spirituality: Do anthropologists find conceptions in other cultural contexts that are reminiscent of, analogous to, contrasting with, those of the “face,” or “inspiration” in Levinas?

But Rapport does not mean this kind of pragmatic response that leaves the basic hermeneutic paradigm of anthropology untouched. Clearly, he has something more radical in mind. I agree that there is a profound provocation for anthropology coming from philosophical attempts to think through the problem of the Other (adding, however, that there is also an “ethnological provocation of philosophy,” as the German philosopher Iris Därmann [2005] put it). With unparalleled consequentiality, Levinas has argued that “naming,” “describing,” or “understanding” the Other means to deny what defines it (i.e., its otherness). The Other understood by me in a certain sense (even in the case of mis-understanding) is not the Other itself but becomes part of my “sphere of ownness.” Whether this inevitable process of appropriation needs to be identified with an act of violation, as Levinas does, is a different question. Anthropology comes up against this problem of the otherness

1. In the sense that he claims to speak out ahistorical and transcultural truths, Levinas is a “universalist,” even if these truths proclaim the unknowability of the Other.
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Kohn, T

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