

Epistemology contra methodology: Theoretical oversights in the call towards practicality

By Hayder Al-Mohammad (University of Kent)

One of the distinguishing features of anthropology is its reliance on the ethnographic method of sustained, long-term fieldwork in a given 'field' or set of 'fields'. This reliance on practical engagement along with the rise in the popularity of practice theory and embodiment as a paradigm of not only the acquisition and performance of knowledge but also as a founded mode of being in a world has resulted in discursive and epistemic deadlocks or limitations being translated into or as practical or methodological deadlocks. In this paper I want to highlight the theoretical oversights of reliance on practicality as a means of dealing with issues which in essence are epistemic and categorical but which are translated as methodological problems. After exemplifying these categorical misnomers I want to propose that what we as anthropologists encounter in many cases as insufficiencies in our understanding of certain topics cannot be overcome with more sophisticated and nuanced methods but rather we gain more by acknowledging such insufficiencies as constituting the type of knowledge we are trying to gain.

The early intervention to, if not remind, then make the anthropological community aware that bodies are not simply meaning making machines nor conduits which enact social rules, structure and cultural forms, was roughly concurrent with the more general move in anthropology toward appropriating some of the insights from phenomenological philosophy and what is still described today as post-structuralist/postmodern theory. Two names stand out as being of particular importance and relevance to contemporary discourses of the body from the latter part of the twentieth century: Bourdieu and Foucault. Bourdieu's (1977) work on the 'prelogical logic of practice', his reappropriation of 'habitus' as a means of thinking about and describing how socially and culturally specific 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1973) constitute ways of thinking about and acting within a world - in short, how persons come to be and how action within the social milieu is generated and regulated -, has had, and continues to have, a strong impact on how the body and practice is thought of and written about. Foucault's impact, though, has certainly been greater across the academic board. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995) he presented the body 'docile', a body which 'may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (136), to the twofold end of producing 'an increased aptitude and an increased domination' (138). The idea of a pre-discursive body was anathema within the Foucauldian scheme, the body was to be thought of as a product of a technology of power and not a biological substrate or empty vessel which culture colours, fills-in and clothes.

Amongst all this theoretical excitement anthropologists were flying as far as they ever had done before but were now worrying about such things as 'praxis' and 'discourse' and how they 'inscribed themselves on the body' (Kondo 1990); or, how the body was sexed and gendered (Strathern 1988; Boddy 1989); or, how the body resisted or contested domination of various forms (Feldman 1991). The difference from previous anthropological work lay in the use, if nothing else, of language - and language-games. Cerroni-Long (1999) underscores

such a position by claiming that the post-modern anthropologists had not been able to suggest - let alone implement - one, single, minuscule, peripheral research method that differs in any substantive way from those developed around foundational disciplinary assumptions. The postmodern critiques were textual and theoretical in nature but seeking no practical or pragmatic change and were even more solipsistic than their modernist forebears (Retsikas 2008).¹

If the enthusiasm for postmodernism within anthropology expired affecting rather little change in the actual material practice of 'fieldwork' then the same could not be said of those anthropologists interested in the acquisition of knowledge, cognition, embodiment and phenomenology. One of the most substantial developments in fieldwork methodology, namely the paradigm of 'apprenticeship' as a form of ethnographic fieldwork, came from those interested in the above fields. As a research method apprenticeship fieldwork may not have created a new method or methodology *per se* but rather made explicit what was implicit in much participant observation: namely it privileged the *participation* in 'participant observation' (Palsson 1994) and created a formal schema in which to undertake such fieldwork (Coy 1989a; Coy 1989b). Much has been said and done about this particular fieldwork methodology and in what I have written below I have focused on some of the epistemic issues which this particular methodology raises.

My interest in anthropological methods and epistemology revealed a dramatic lacuna within the discipline of anthropology itself. Try as I might to find a sustained inquiry into the epistemic basis and status of fieldwork, I have continually been disappointed. Of the few works which have an explicit epistemological focus on anthropology and fieldwork, Sperber's (1985) work is by far the most committed though leaves the issue of what type[s] of knowledge and what types of claims we can justifiably make based on the ethnographic encounter essentially untouched. Throop's work (2002; 2003a; 2003b) is the most recent to engage with epistemology within anthropology. Unlike Sperber's his work has a much more focused agenda, attending to the 'lack of conceptual clarity' surrounding the uses of the term 'experience' by anthropologists and sociologists. However, rather than focusing on the epistemic complexity and the metaphysics which many anthropologists and sociologists begin their understandings of 'experience', Throop is more committed to the definitional problematic of the term.² Or, in his and Murphy's (2003a) considerations of what they perceive as inconsistencies and unacknowledged debts to philosophers such as Husserl in Bourdieu's work, epistemic inadequacies are overlooked in favour Bourdieu's possible misreading of theoretical texts.

Unlike the texts already mentioned, this paper is in the main committed to pointing to some of the epistemic limitations of fieldwork and the inferences we can make from fieldwork experience through reference to phenomenological and transcendental philosophers.³ As I want to show, many anthropologists have been inappropriately using particular philosophers in constructing their arguments regarding the body and the role of the socio-cultural sphere in perception and experience, hence I return to these philosophers to outline the error of using fieldwork as a basis to support what are essentially metaphysical, ontological claims. It is important to stress that what is of concern in this paper is not to highlight misunderstandings or misappropriations of philosophical arguments in anthropology. The concern of this paper is to demonstrate the error in translating *ontic* categories of experience into *ontological* categories and how easily we slip into such errors. As anthropologists it is crucial that we are aware of what types of intellectual commitments and arguments we can make from the material produced in fieldwork, and as I will hope to show, in the very terms of the

philosophers used by the anthropologists discussed below, we cannot conclude what they have concluded on the basis of the material and arguments presented.

I initially begin the paper by looking at issues surrounding the body through the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, two philosophers who are made extensive reference to by phenomenological anthropologists and those interested in embodiment as a paradigm for knowledge acquisition and production. I argue that anthropologists mistakenly make reference to these philosophers if they consider the body as something which positive knowledge can be gained of – not *from* – as the body is a condition of experience rarely an object of experience in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. I then move on to make a homologous argument regarding the lifeworld, sociality and the grounds of practice as invisible constituents in experience, all the while drawing attention to the fact that these problems are epistemic, not technical, and are thus not resolvable through new methodological techniques and practices. Again and again I stress within this paper that the problems highlighted within the horizons of the philosophical traditions already mentioned are problems we lack knowledge of in anthropology because many of these issues cannot yield positive knowledge, which is not necessarily a problem. It is simply to acknowledge some of the limitations of fieldwork methodology and may in fact have something important to tell us about it.

The body, participation and metaphysics

Many anthropologists interested in the body and practice theory have continually resorted to attacking Cartesian dualism and extending the frame of attack by drawing analogies and homologies between the supposed error of mind/body dualism and the dualisms of, for example, theory/practice (Bell 1993; Bourdieu 1977), or writing/speaking (Grossman 2004) and even fieldwork/ethnographic text (Clifford 1988). Leder (1990), however, formulates a much more felicitous programme for thinking about Descartes' work in the *Meditations* and the *Discourses* by not immediately committing to a critique of metaphysical dualism.⁴ Leder argues that as we learn to 'do' things as 'second nature' the process of doing no longer advances itself through the ecstatic and becomes, rather, recessively achieved: gradually, the once ecstatic becomes sedimented and recessive. The recessive forms part of the habitus, that unthinking context of action, demeanour and performance; and, the more adept one becomes at 'doing' things, the less visible or 'alerted' the body becomes. Thus, the 'duality' of the body is mentally interpreted but actually experienced bodily: the dualism is based in lived experience and then fallaciously interpreted as ontological. This is not to denounce Cartesian metaphysics – that surely cannot be given in experience – but to draw attention to the fact that our experience of the world can account for the Cartesian perspective.

However much we may support a particular metaphysics we cannot draw metaphysical implications from fieldwork. If we are able then it is most certainly incumbent upon the anthropologist to take on the project of elucidating either how phenomena or the facticity of fieldwork translates into metaphysics; or, if phenomena or facticity already is or does metaphysics then that needs to be shown and demonstrated as clearly as possible. This is not a process of methodological exposition but requires epistemological clarity as to what the form[s] of doing of a given methodological practice yield or produce in terms of knowledge of the world, and: what is the status of this knowledge? What is its nature? What are the justificatory principles at play to support it? How does one come to recognise this knowledge as knowledge and what differentiates it from other forms of knowledge, if at all? At the moment there are anthropologists who are simply too reckless with the types of claims they

are making based on the experiences – or empirical data to the more scientifically minded – they present in their arguments. I must stress before I go further: though I may discuss metaphysics which anthropologists have embroiled themselves in, my focus is on the epistemic illegitimacy of such a move and not whether their conclusions are erroneous.

To exemplify some of the categorical errors and overly hasty commitments to metaphysical conclusions I will rely on one of Michael Jackson's (1983) early papers. Jackson recalls how the seemingly mundane task of lighting a fire during fieldwork amongst the Kuaranko formed the basis for a shift in research interests. Whereas previously Jackson had taken little care over the process of lighting a fire, expending greater amounts of precious, hard gotten firewood than the villagers, he one day watched the women of the village kindle a fire and imitated the process with the following result:

When I took pains to make a fire in this way I found myself suddenly aware of the intelligence of the technique ... this 'practical mimesis' afforded me insight into how people economised both fuel and human energy; it made me see the close kinship between economy of effort and grace of movement; it made me realise the common sense which informs even the most elementary tasks in a Kuaranko village (340).

The insight is triple claims Jackson: firstly, it moved him away from the mode of a 'disembodied ... linear communicational model for understanding bodily praxis' (ibid). Secondly, it highlighted that participation is the goal of research and not the means for eliciting answers to questions. Thirdly, and most interesting of all as it links the previous insights together, 'to participate bodily in everyday practical tasks was a creative technique which often helped me grasp the *sense* of an activity by using my body as others did ... to recognise the embodiedness of our Being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one' (ibid).

Jackson commits a categorical error when he claims by using his body in the same manner as others did he recognised the 'embodiedness of our Being-in-the-world'. To be clear, for Heidegger (1993) being-in-the-world is an ontological claim. Heidegger's claim is that human-being as skilful coping and comportment within the world (as against a perceiving subject) does not stand against a totality of objects but belongs to and is in the world. In contrast with the view of the skeptic in philosophy who refutes the existence of the 'external world' through recourse to representational failure and errors of judgment of the world, Heidegger's Dasein does not represent and therefore cannot misrepresent: 'since even particular coping practices can 'misrepresent' in the sense that we can take something as something it is not, and so fail to cope, what cannot fail is the background coping that makes the success or failure of all levels of specific coping possible' (Dreyfus 1991:106). We see that Heidegger is arguing for an analysis of what Charles Guignon (1983), a Heideggerian scholar, calls the 'everyday epistemic predicament' against the traditional and refined epistemological attitude (98-104). Before Dasein takes on the traditional epistemological attitude, Dasein is *in* the world, already operating and *involved* in the world, so that the epistemological attitude is always secondary if we are to understand being-in-the-world in Heidegger's sense, i.e. ontologically. Dasein is always already *in* the world, that is to say that Dasein already has an ordinary understanding of the world, in the sense of a common-sense relation, which is not devoid of any propositional attitudes: Dasein already has beliefs about the external world, so that Dasein's very first encounter is *in* and *with* the world. This is the structure of Heidegger's claim of being-in-the-world and as can be seen it cannot be

experienced as it is pre-phenomenal. Thus Jackson commits a paralognism by trying to commit to a metaphysical position through recourse to the phenomenal domain.

The importance of the above lies not in Jackson's infidelity to Heidegger's work, that is of no real consequence anthropologically, but certainly demonstrates that anthropologists all too easily commit categorical errors. We cannot use our experiences, or the experiences of others, to support or negate Heidegger's (or any metaphysician's) claim as there can be no phenomenal basis for critiquing claims about the nature of reality, the nature of human beings and the nature of their constitution. It may well be felt that Heidegger's claims about the world cannot be substantiated which would involve an attack on the formal architecture of the argument, but as anthropologists we have to remain agnostic in terms of any metaphysical commitments derived from fieldwork experience: our role cannot be to take the experiences of the people we work with and translate that into arguments for or against certain metaphysics. Anthropologists may very well want to engage with various metaphysical projects elucidated by the groups they are working with as these may be taken to be stands on what the world is for them. The anthropologist's role, however, is not to judge on the veracity of such projects. That much seems clear.

To return to the quote above, the third claim Jackson makes of the insights gained in fieldwork I would suggest informs or underpins much of the work being undertaken in the anthropology of apprenticeship, namely in undertaking the same practices of others I gain insight into the practice of others. Marchand writes of the virtues of the methodology of his undertaking an apprenticeship in the following terms: 'In this exchange of 'toil' for 'ethnographic knowledge' (as well as craft skills), my physical contribution offers me privileged access to my co-workers' practices and their expertise' (2008:248). 'Access' to what however? In putting myself, my body, through the same apprenticeship as another do I get insight into the process and/or the experience of those who have undertaken the apprenticeship?

Let me take the issue of the 'body' and highlight some of the difficulties in attempting to use experiences of the body as the basis of positive knowledge of not only others but even of one's own experiences. Husserl notes that all spatial orientation is, in some form or another, a relation to *my* body. Whether something is nearer or farther, to the right or left, above or below, it is only that in relation to *my* body. *My* body is the locus and condition of all experience in the world and is what situates me within it. Husserl however notes an important condition of bodily-being:

The Body then has, for its particular Ego, the unique distinction of bearing in itself the *zero-point* of all these orientations. One of its spatial points, even if not an actually seen one, *is* always characterized in the mode of the ultimate central here: that is, a here which has no other here outside of itself, in relation to which it would be a '*there*.' It is thus that all things of the surrounding world possess an orientation to the Body, just as, accordingly, all expressions of orientation imply this relation (1989:166, emphasis in original).

All experience is experienced in a *here* but a *here* which is a nullity; a *here* which *a priori* is the basis of experience but which itself elides positive experience of itself in most of our encounters with the world around us. My body is the phenomenally absent *here* around which all phenomenal *theres* are possible (Leder 1990:8-19).

Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* (1961) presents the issue thus:

5.633 ... this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do *not* really see the eye.

And from nothing *in the field of sight can* it be concluded that it is seen from an eye.

Or, in his later work on psychology he repeats the same formal argument: 'What I really want to say is that by looking I do not observe my visual impression, but rather whatever I am looking at' (1982:619). Sartre (1993:304) and Merleau-Ponty (1995:309) both make use of the same metaphor as well, namely the eye being unable to see itself seeing, only ever able to see its own eyes as eyes – as objects and not as the primal constituents of vision. In the very moment of perception itself is excluded the perceiving organ from the domain of objects perceived. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'as for my body, I do not observe it itself: to be able to do so, I would need the use of a second body, which would not itself be observable' (1995:91). He thus concludes: 'Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object, ever being 'completely constituted', is that it is that by which there are objects' (ibid:92).

The body's constitutive role in experience, its grounding, making possible, and yet remaining peripheral in the horizon of perceptual awareness is what makes human experience what it is according to Merleau-Ponty (ibid) and Husserl (1989). 'My body is constantly perceived,' Merleau-Ponty writes, yet 'it remains marginal to all my perceptions' (1995:90). The body is neither the private subject nor just an object amongst other objects; persons do not have bodies, their being is a *body-being*. Husserl invokes a felicitous distinction between the body (*Koerper*) as a material entity and the lived-body (*Leib*) which speaks, interacts, encounters and engages with the world. Bodies can become objects such as corpses or when our bodies fail us, when they no longer ground experience but preclude it; the material body is always part of the lived-body, but the lived-body is neither synonymous nor coterminous with the material body.

The point of all this philosophy is twofold. Firstly, for more than a decade the phenomenologically inclined anthropologist has been making greater use of the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, however, these philosophers stress again and again the absence, constitutive transcendental deadlocks and invisibility inherent in human experience. Secondly, we fundamentally misunderstand the position of somebody like Merleau-Ponty if we take his position to be either a form of behaviourism à la Gilbert Ryle (cf. 1963) or someone for whom our embodied, skilled comportment within the world is a technicity which is susceptible to analysis and understanding in terms either of constituent parts or corporeal and material processes which combine under a supposed unity of the body, person or even subject. Or, even more worryingly, to read Merleau-Ponty as someone interested in first-person private experience as a means of acquiring insights into phenomenal and ontological structures. This latter claim is disposed of by Kant in an argument homologous to Merleau-Ponty's position in *The Visible and Invisible* (1997):

‘But the proposition, ‘I think,’ in so far as it declares, ‘I exist thinking,’ is not the mere representation of a logical function. It determines the subject (which is in this case an object also) in relation to existence... In this proposition there is therefore something more to be found than the mere spontaneity of thought; there is also the receptivity of intuition, that is, my thought of myself applied to the empirical intuition of myself. Now, in this intuition the thinking self must seek the conditions of the employment of its logical functions as categories of substance, cause, and so forth; not merely for the purpose of distinguishing itself as an object in itself by means of the representation ‘I,’ but also for the purpose of determining the mode of its existence, that is, of cognizing itself as noumenon. But this is impossible, for the internal empirical intuition is sensuous, and presents us with nothing but phenomenal data, which do not assist the object of pure consciousness in its attempt to cognize itself as a separate existence, but are useful only as contributions to experience’ (Kant 2000:B340).

This returns the matter again to the existential grounds of being – in this paper the body and not the Kantian ‘I’ – not themselves susceptible of becoming an object of experience irrespective of whether we try to reflect on our experiential mechanisms and processes.

The anthropologist interested in the body and using fieldwork to gain insight into it must account for the following: how do we move from our factual, ontic experience to an understanding of the body *qua* that which is ontologically primordial and experientially constitutive? If an anthropologist is committed to a paradigm of embodied knowledge in its most lucidly articulated form, i.e. Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, then this is what one has to do. The body, as the a priori condition of knowledge, is not an object amongst others but an ontological, transcendental condition of being and experience.⁵ One avenue of potential overlap pursued by anthropologists is the, as Merleau-Ponty himself expressly indicates, imbrications of history, the cultural and social fields and perception (1964:20-28). In this way anthropologists have felt they have a foot-in to the study of perception without entering the more rarefied fields of the philosophy of perception by focusing on the socio-cultural elements of perception. It is not, however, at all clear what the relationship between perception and the historico-socio-cultural co-ordinates which inform perception are. Thus the anthropological mantra of the centrality of the historic-socio-cultural co-ordinates to perception has a basis in the philosophical literature but with no outline of how to operationalise the claim within fieldwork research, and also runs up, again, against the deadlock of how factual experience can contribute to an understanding of the constitutive forms of perception.

Moving on from the body, I will now proceed to work through another set of issues – i.e. practice and knowledge of it – and, just as I attempted with the body, highlight that the social and the cultural fields are not factual categories – they are not categories of phenomena – but are transcendently constitutive in Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of perception and hence do not allow for explication through appeal to experiential content. Below I will draw attention to what this could possibly mean and look like within anthropological discussions of practice.

Practice, lifeworld and ‘communities of practice’

‘In ritual’, writes Geertz, ‘the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world’ (1973:112). This is to say that the supposed disparity in belief and practice not only comes together and

combines in ritual, but also dispels the very disparity itself. Or, in Geertz's own terms, the 'ethos' of a people, 'the general lifestyle, how people like to do things', and their 'world view', the 'image of an actual state of affairs of which such a way of life is an authentic expression' (ibid.:127), converge materially and publicly in ritual. The anthropologist's role in all of this is to uncover and interpret the inherent meaning of each ritual

Bourdieu (1990) problematises Geertz' hermeneutic approach in relation to ritual and praxis more generally by claiming that ritual practice is not something to be perceived, understood and ultimately interpreted within the cultural co-ordinates ready to the hand of an anthropologist. The logic of ritual is *immanent* in the very practice of it, that is, it 'can only be grasped in action' (ibid:92) itself. It is not that belief and practice, thought and action are distinct in everyday life and only come together in certain cultural practices, rather, the logic of practice is in no way analogous or homologous to language, thought or any other such paradigm. Such analogising falls to the 'fallacy of seeking to contain in concepts a logic made to do without concepts' (ibid.). Hence, when describing the relation between *habitus* and practice Bourdieu highlights a crucial problematic:

'The *habitus* is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable'. That part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself a product' (1977:79).

In Bourdieu's formulation one is no longer dealing with a problem relating to 'ritual' but to human practice more generally. It is Bourdieu's claim of the obscurity of practice in the eyes of the producer⁶ which I want to focus and elaborate on in terms of its epistemic implications.

Nelson Goodman's 'pre-logical' validity is described as follows: 'principles of deductive inference are justified by their conformity with accepted deductive practice. Their validity depends upon accordance with the particular deductive inferences we actually make and sanction' (1965:67). Which is to say that even the supposedly worldless logical truths are only comprehensible, legitimate and relevant on a bedrock of already constituted and assumed understanding which is either disavowed or not made reference to. Husserl along much the same lines claims:

'every objective logic, every a priori science in the usual sense, that of discovering how this logic itself is to be grounded, hence no longer 'logically' but by being traced back to the universal prelogical apriori [i.e. lifeworld (*lebenswelt*)] through which everything logical, the total edifice of objective theory in all its methodological forms, demonstrates its legitimate sense and from which, then, all logic itself must receive its norms (1970:141).

Such statements seem to legitimate the anthropological commonplace that our knowledge of and about the world – 'objective' or otherwise - is social through and through; that a claim 'P' about the world is sensible and comprehensible within a given social-field and not only by virtue of the logical form and semantic content of the claim. If that is the case it would also apply to learning and practice in the form of a 'community of practice' as proposed by Lave and Wenger: 'learning is not merely situated in practice - as if it were some

independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world' (1991:35).

Grasseni (2007; 2008) proposes that 'communities of practice' – for the sake of expediency this will be taken to be commensurate with lifeworld - as an analytic allows the anthropologist to overcome epistemological barriers such as 'cultural incommensurability' (Hollis and Lukes 1982), the anthropologist's version of the philosopher's problem of 'other minds'. If we take her proposal of basing the cultural/epistemological overcoming on Wittgenstein's notion of 'certainty' as 'our immediate and reflexive sense of being rooted in reality' I am left somewhat confused. For Wittgenstein (1969) 'certainty' is pre-reflexive and so too his 'forms of life' which Grasseni (2007; 2008) in two different papers claims to be a possible ground for positive knowledge. This is what Wittgenstein (1969) himself had to say on the matter:

358. Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life...
359. But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.

For Wittgenstein 'certainty' is not investigable empirically nor through phenomenal content hence it seems rather difficult to know how this 'overcoming' could take shape. In this account it is not only that we cannot know the grounds of certainty and forms of life of another culture, we cannot positively know and articulate our own grounds of certainty and forms of life as well. To attempt to do so would be 'nonsense' in Wittgensteinian (1965) terms.⁷

Let me take this a step further by looking at the epistemic issues on a more individualistic basis. Nozick (1981), attempting to move away from the Platonic tripartite account of knowledge⁸, insists that the mistake being made by epistemologists is to accept the necessity of internal justification for a claim to knowing. Nozick's account⁹ stipulates that for an individual to have knowledge of something is very different from having access to the justificatory means or conditions by which such claims to knowledge are predicated upon (42-53). Hence, in an ethnographic context, an informant may well be more than familiar with the mechanics, techniques and prescriptions of cultural practices, how they relate to wider socio-cultural institutions; what gets left out, however, is the very means and grounds by which the informant comes to know this information. Wittgenstein particularises the problem thus:

- '341. [...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.
342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *indeed* not doubted.
343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.' (1969, *emphasis* in original)

For Wittgenstein what is known is predicated on grounds and conditions which cannot be known. The anthropologist attempting to get at the 'subsoil' in the form of the lifeworld or forms of life of the social world is doomed to pursue a project that fundamentally and constitutively cannot be undertaken. If this is the case then, to return to Grasseni, it is much

more likely that this *unknowability* of the social constitution of perception and, as Grasseni (2008) herself calls it, ‘silence’ of the transcendental constituents of knowledge, which may well form the basis of the overcoming of cultural and epistemic boundaries than what Grasseni offers instead.

To reformulate Wittgenstein’s argument in terms of Bourdieu’s *misrecognition*, it can be said that in practice what remains unknown are the generative structures - themselves generated, structured and maintained in practice – which give rise to the *matter-of-courseness*, naturalness and spontaneity of much habituated, seemingly rule-based, practice. The attempt to decipher or locate any rules which could regulate social behavior may seem a profitable avenue for investigation. However, it is Winch (1958) who exposes the cussed and unsatisfactory nature of ‘rules’. Imagining a rather likable man, ‘A’, at a blackboard, he engages him in a trial of wits with his friend, ‘B’, in which A invites B to guess at the continuation of a sequence of numbers he writes on the board. B is destined to fail, it becomes clear, because while A was following a wholly consistent rule, it was, sadly for B, ‘always to substitute a continuation different from the one suggested by B at every stage’ (ibid:30). The rule, while ‘perfectly good’ is not mathematical, and thus defies the mechanistic logic of the natural scientifically-inclined B; and, even if B were to guess the ruse (and the rule), still he could not predict the ‘result’.

Winch asserts that, in the domain of the *social* sciences, the notion of rule-following can legitimately pertain ‘only in a situation in which it makes sense to suppose that somebody else could in principle discover the rule which I am following’ (ibid:30) and that such situations arise through a ‘certain sort of training’ leading to the ‘matter-of-courseness’ of which Wittgenstein writes: ‘the rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them as a matter of course. As much as it is a matter of course for me to call this colour ‘blue’’ (1953:258). This, precisely, can be held to be the very beginnings of discourse-formation, the commonsense social alignment behind a shared taken for granted meaning-position, the agreement than such and such *makes sense*; and that, despite any evidence to the contrary, such an agreement was always meant to and will, from this point on, always continue to *make sense*.

But if explanation can reside in the communication which is made possible by such an agreement, we must beware investing it with too much significance as Nelson Goodman (1988) makes clear. Our faith in the data which constitutes the *matter-of-coursenesses* gives rise to a variety of extrapolations from said data, any one of which might be taken as equally valid, leading to a multiplicity of world-views. The very rules which provide for a particular world-view will, applied differently, result in an equally (in)coherent and (in)consistent alternative; with no rational deficit between the versions on offer. His construction of a ‘gruesome’ world, in which our most dearly held axioms are recast in the light of a future time ‘T’ and thereby stood on their heads¹⁰, neatly problematizes Wittgenstein’s ‘colour blue’. Add to this insight that of Quine (1960), that theory and facts have a tendency to become muddled, and that facts are not concrete enough to posit theory, nor theory strong enough to posit facts, and the potency of the explanation engendered in human discourse, at once over- and under-determined, is limited indeed.

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been essentially negative but that does not mean that the critiques put forward should not produce positive outcomes. In the paper I have tried to show that the

body as conceptualised by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is not an object but a metaphysical, primordial condition of being and perception. Bodies are certainly material and ever present before us and our familiarity with them is great in many respects. We see bodies move and see parts of bodies speak and blink; we touch bodies, smell them and hear them too. But this familiarity we have with bodies is of a certain sort. What we do not have access to in our experiences of the world and our experiences of other bodies and our own, are the constitutive structures which allow and make experience and perception possible. When I touch my hand I may experience it as an object or not, but I certainly do not experience the transcendental forms which make possible the sensation of touch what it is. The transcendentalism of Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty stipulates that the conditions and criteria of knowledge are not susceptible to the types of knowing which they themselves are a condition of. This is the very nature of the body qua a priori condition of experience for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty: a constitutive nullity or invisibility in the field of positivity and visibility. As mentioned previously, there is no methodology available for anthropologists to abstract invisibility from visibility and such attempts to do so fall foul of rather basic epistemic criteria. If there are practical procedures or processes which allow anthropologists to make epistemically justified metaphysical claims based on fieldwork experiences then no anthropologist as yet has presented a coherent account of them.

Just as I showed that for the philosophers discussed already the body was the metaphysical grounds of experience, I also wanted to show that ‘certainty’, ‘forms of life’ and the ‘lifeworld’ were transcendental categories as well. For Wittgenstein, ‘certainty’ and ‘forms of life’ are not knowledge but allow for knowledge, they are the sub-soil (what Heidegger (1968) calls the density and inertia of ‘earth’) of our practical engagement within the world. That being the case these categories are not disposed to the empirical and phenomenal investigation of fieldwork.

The problem as I have laid out is twofold: firstly, embodiment, the ontological status of the body, and so on and so forth, are fundamentally difficult issues to investigate. If what the philosophers discussed claim is the case then they are impossible matters to investigate, not just difficult. Hence what can the practicalities of new research methods actually do to deal with the epistemic limits and boundaries I have discussed above? Very little is my answer. We need to find new ways of thinking about the issues I have discussed above without the urge to produce positive knowledge: so little of what we actually do is based on knowledge and even less has a firm ground by which we can justifiably base our conclusions on. Maybe we need to focus on the limits of our methods and knowledge of the world and begin to see them as positive conditions of what we do and how we think rather than constantly attempting to ‘overcome them’? There are insights to be gained from limitations if we are prepared to think with them and not simply ‘through them’.

Secondly, anthropologists must now become more aware of the types of logics they submit themselves to when they make reference to thinkers outside the domain of anthropology. They must also be aware that they can no longer, if they ever could before, have recourse to the mystical experience that is fieldwork to legitimate their conclusions in their work on the basis of ‘having been there’. As I have tried to show with the discussion on the body, even something which seems so clear cut and ready-to-hand to study, something which our very practicality in the world is predicated on, is outside the realms of studying and understanding in any positive sense of the term.

I want to conclude with a quote from Hume that commits to a position which I believe anthropology will be committed to unless it moves away from dealing with epistemic limits as hindrances or irritants to the grander project of positive understanding of the people we work with and the world we work within:

'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from [our perceptions]. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imaginations to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appeared in that narrow compass (1985:116).

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About the Author

Hayder Al-Mohammad is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent. He can be contacted at [ha74\(AT\)kent.ac.uk](mailto:ha74(AT)kent.ac.uk).

Endnotes

¹ It may seem somewhat contradictory to claim that the very ways we think about and write ethnographies has changed rather radically because of the postmodern critiques yet still charge that materially things have changed rather little. Moreover, one should not overlook the importance of self-reflexive methods and the greater emphasis on the anthropologist's positioning which were affected by postmodern anthropologists. The point, of course, is what has been the affects of the postmodern critiques on the *actual* methods of fieldwork methods themselves? And it is on this point that the critiques have proved to be rather peripheral.

² Throop is rather haphazard with his characterizations of philosophical projects and definitions of key philosophical terms. For instance, Throop (2003) claims that Kant in the *First Critique* asserted that 'space, time, number, etc' were the 'fundamental categories of thought' (368). Kant is clear that space and time are not categories of the Mind but pure forms of sensible intuition inherent in our sensory capacities and not the mind (cf. the section the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' in the *First Critique*, especially A19/B34 to A22/B36 and also Allison's (1983: 93-101) authoritative reading of Kant). Furthermore, there are some curious positions taken on Hume and Locke which do not seem to be consistent with contemporary scholarship or what the philosophers themselves have claimed.

³ Transcendental philosophy is defined by Kant (2000) as an inquiry into the necessary, a priori conditions of the thing being investigated as opposed to investigating what is being investigated *is*. It is opposed to the term 'transcendent' as it refers to what is outside human experience and the world.

⁴ The claim I am making is not spectacular in any shape or form. Lambeck (1998) recognises more than most that anthropology has no justifiable means of making metaphysical conclusions from the experiences of fieldwork and he does not, as I do not, see this as a limiting factor. We engage in fieldwork not to be speculative metaphysicians but to produce knowledge grounded in the experiences of the people we work with.

⁵ I limit myself to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and also Husserlian and Heideggerian as these are the traditions I am familiar with though I imagine the problems discussed crosses many borders though is unlikely to trouble the naturalist and/or cognitive-psychologist.

⁶ It should not be overlooked that there are different forms of mis- or unrecognition. Bourdieu insists throughout his texts on the theory or logic of practice that 'misrecognition' is also political in nature: 'The whole truth of collective magic and belief is contained in this game of two-fold objective truth, a double game played with truth, through which the group, the source of all objectivity, in a sense lies to itself by producing a truth whose sole function and meaning are to deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie that would deceive no one, were not everyone determined to be mistaken' (1990:234). Without over-egging the point, my interests are epistemic and not political in this paper, even though the line that divides the two is blurry at best and untenable at worst.

⁷ That is, to talk of what cannot be accounted for within the bounds of language (Wittgenstein 1965). The issue of how one distinguishes between 'sense' and 'nonsense' which has been the cause of great debates in philosophy and other disciplines is not something I can deal with in this paper.

⁸ It is in the *Theaetetus* (1987), Plato's account of the criteria necessary and sufficient for knowledge as distinct from belief, which was subsequently formalised in the following terms: 1) S believes that P; 2) P is true; 3) S is justified in believing that P is true.

⁹ For the purposes of this essay I have left out the technicalities of the arguments as I am not advocating a theory of knowledge in any form, rather, I find elements of Nozick's account of epistemic externalism fertile in thinking through certain epistemological issues relating to practice.

¹⁰ Goodman's Paradox suggests a formulation by which emeralds, traditionally thought of as 'green' are, in fact, 'grue': that is, they are green up until a certain point in future time 'T', at which point they become blue. This posits an alter-reality while upholding the self-evidence of our own, and thus our reassurance of a stable, predictable physical world is held in abeyance in the anticipation of future time 'T'.