

Anthropology in conversation with an Islamic tradition:

Emmanuel Levinas and the practice of critique

Abstract

As an alternative to approaching Islam as an object for anthropological analysis, this article develops the idea of an anthropologist participating in a conversation going along within an Islamic tradition. The idea of a conversation is developed through the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his ideal of knowing as a ethical relation with an infinite other. Levinas opposes a sterile and oppressive relation of 'totality' where the knowing self encompasses the other within concepts and thought that originate in the self, with a critical and creative relation of 'infinity' in which the alterity of the other is maintained and invites conversation that brings the self into question. The article discusses recent disciplinary discussions of how anthropology should engage with alterity that have been framed in terms of ontology and post-secular anthropology in the light of Levinas's ideal of knowing as ethical and critical practice.

How can, or perhaps more importantly how should, anthropology engage with Islam? I was first prompted to revisit this problem by a response in the question and answer session following a talk I gave at a university anthropology department in the US on the topic of Islam in Uzbekistan. The questioner, a Muslim, said that he had

been offended by my presentation. I had been talking about lived experience as a site for the development of moral selves. A person comes to an understanding of what it is to be a Muslim, I had argued, through rituals and practices that refer to Muslim histories and sacred texts, but also in the ongoing flow of experience, in marrying off their children successfully, helping a neighbour to build a house, participating fully in a sociality of neighbourhood and kinship, and perhaps more problematically for my questioner, in dream or waking interaction with spirits, often in the context of illness whether as a patient or a healer. I sought to engage sincerely with the experience of individual Muslims in Uzbekistan. But the questioner felt that I was misrepresenting what Islam is truly about, that I was presenting beliefs and practices that many Muslims would themselves view as humanly produced tradition, the misunderstandings or non-Qur'anic practices of some Muslims, as standing for Islam itself.

I was taken by surprise by the response because this is not a new problem and one I thought had long been resolved. It was the central concern of disciplinary debates in the 1970s and 1980s from which the 'anthropology of Islam' emerged as a subfield. Those debates revolved around the question of how to frame the diversity in the practice and belief that anthropologists encountered in located communities, groups, and individuals within Islam as a global analytical object. Had I, with the best intentions of respecting the self-presentations of individuals who identified as Muslim, unwittingly drifted back into a stance somewhat similar to that Robert Launay has described as typical of anthropologists prior to these debates (Launay 1992: 2); that is, a concern for located ways of perceiving and being that implicitly treated Islam as an extrinsic phenomena, something that might have been understood as syncretically adapted within local cultural systems or practices, while

at the same time presenting my analysis as about Islam itself? At issue is whether and to what extent an anthropologist, who may or may not be Muslim, can take Islam seriously. Framed like this the question is one that has recently been revisited more generally in the discipline, in the discussions around what some of its proponents have called the 'ontological turn', as well as discussions among anthropologists working with Christianity about the relationship between anthropology and theology. In this article I want to think about an anthropological engagement with Islam, and with alterity more generally, by reflecting on Emmanuel Levinas's ideal of knowing as a critical, ethical relation with an infinite other. It is an attempt to move away from approaching Islam as our *object* of study to participating in a conversation going along within an Islamic tradition.

Anthropology of Islam

In his book *The Calligraphic State* the anthropologist Brinkely Messick writes that a 'central problem in Muslim thought concerns the difficult transition from the unity and authenticity of the Text of God to the multiplicity and inherently disputed quality of the texts of men' (Messick 1993: 16-17). Messick succinctly expresses the tension between unity and diversity that has produced widely differing approaches to sacred text by Muslims. An anthropology of Islam that confines itself to a study of different approaches to sacred text, how competing understandings and interpretations are debated, contested and enforced would, however, not address the problem I have already alluded to in relation to my own research in Uzbekistan, that is the non-scripturally founded practice and experience that, for many Muslims, contributes understandings of Islam and Muslim selfhood.

In the 1970s and 1980s much of the debate that attempted to delineate Islam as an object that could be approached ethnographically revolved around questions of system, structure or scale. Islam, it was suggested, should be approached in terms of local historically developed symbolic systems, as Moroccan, Indonesian, or other culturally inflected variants of Islam (Geertz 1968), as the articulation of a global Islam with local political, economic, and social circumstances (Eickelman 1982; Manger 1999), or with Gellner's often critiqued idea of Islam as a composite of a scripturally founded Great Tradition and locally specific 'folk' variants (Gellner 1981).

In contrast to approaches that fashioned an object of Islam as an artefact of the observer's own work of analysis, other anthropologists took Muslims themselves as their starting point in an effort to approach Islam in its own terms. Two contributions that best express this effort are those of Abdul Hamid el-Zein and Talal Asad. El-Zein's response to diversity of practice, including that not founded directly on scriptural interpretation, was to advocate a full recognition of the legitimacy of diverse local *islams*. This position explicitly rejects a distinction between theological and folk Islam in anthropological analysis (el-Zein 1977). He anticipates Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's more recent call for the 'ontological self-determination of the world's peoples' (Viveiros de Castro 2003), to which I will return below, in asserting that this categorical distinction privileges scholarly theology, and the anthropological project itself, as being more systematic, reflective, and addressed to ultimate questions of cosmology. For el-Zein, folk and formal theology are both reflections on the unity of God and nature, but while formal theology takes the Divine text of the Qur'an as its starting point, folk theology starts from nature and subsumes the Qur'an within that order. Whatever criticisms might be made of this position, from the standpoint of scripturally grounded interpretation that it legitimates heterodoxy

and polytheism, as the respondent to my talk might have argued, or from an anthropological disciplinary position that it makes it impossible to identify Islam as an object of analysis at all, el-Zein encourages anthropologists to take as their starting point the practice and belief of those who identify themselves as Muslim, and he does so from an intelligibly Islamic position of *tawhīd*, the unity of God and creation.

Asad's reply in his influential paper *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* is also a call to take Muslims seriously in their own terms. He is equally critical of essentialist distinctions between Great and Little Traditions. At the same time, for Asad Islam cannot be identified as simply anything a Muslim believes or practices. Rather, an anthropology of Islam 'should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith' (Asad 1986: 14). The discursive element of this formula pays attention to the relations of power, the institutions and processes through which orthodoxies, visions of an ideal Muslim past, present, and future, are debated and established as hegemonic. Asad's concept of a tradition, which he takes from Alasdair MacIntyre's work on virtue (MacIntyre 2007), is what locates the anthropological object of study in something distinctively Islamic. The debates, disputes, and struggles over the nature of a Muslim community and person are conducted in terms of shared, historically developed conceptions of Muslim pasts and futures, anchored in the founding sacred texts.

With Asad's intervention the disciplinary debates over defining Islam as an analytical object seemed to have run their course. In the following two decades questions of definition were largely put to one side and anthropologists turned their attention to

exploring the lives and experiences of Muslims and how Islam is lived. Attention has been focused on the differing and often competing strands of interpretation among Muslims and their efforts to debate and authorise correct practice (eg. Bowen 1993; Horvatic 1994). In the 2000s ground breaking works were produced on the topic of piety that not only illuminate the efforts of Muslims to develop moral subjectivities, but decentre concepts at the heart of the idea of secular modernity, such as the primacy of human freedom and the idea of modernity itself (Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005).

The tension expressed in the positions of el-Zein and Asad, however, has not disappeared. Alongside the work that focused on differing relations to sacred text or Muslim piety, others have addressed practice where the question of what can or should legitimately be understood as Islam is much more ambiguous and contested, not least by Muslims themselves, such as experiences of spirit possession (McIntosh 2004; Nourse 1996), or they have argued that Muslim (and other) selves are addressed to multiple, often contradictory referential frames, rather than being unitary and coherent (Ewing 1997; Louw 2012). The question of what anthropologists are actually studying when they engage with Muslims has once more explicitly re-emerged in critiques of an over-emphasis in recent anthropological work on questions of piety (Marsden 2005; Marsden & Retsikas 2013). In Samuli Schielke's words, there is 'too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam' (Schielke 2010: 2). The risk Schielke identifies is that of essentialism, presenting a single aspect of the life of a Muslim, those pious moments, as standing for the whole. For the majority, Schielke argues, moral subjectivities are characterised more by ambiguity and diversity of referential frames, than by a neat coherence. Instead, these anthropologists call for attention to be paid to the 'everyday' life and experience of people who happen to

be Muslim, to recognise the 'humanity of people on their own terms', to develop a 'grounded and nuanced understanding of what it means to live a life' (Schielke 2010: 5).

This move has itself provoked the counter-critique that privileging 'everyday Islam' reproduces a secular humanist perspective, that it sets up an opposition between a supposedly natural human condition of scepticism, uncertainty, and freedom, and an exceptional or impossible state of pious conformity to doctrinal norms, which refuses to take seriously those it frames as exceptional pious subjects (Fadil & Fernando 2015). The anthropology of Islam appears to have returned to the debates of three decades ago, only with a perhaps a more contemporary concern for 'taking seriously' Islam and Muslims. We cannot take some Muslims seriously, it seems, without dismissing the experience and perspective of other Muslims.

The problem, I argue, is with the idea of an object itself. Even Asad's seemingly broad idea of Islam as a discursive tradition ultimately positions the anthropologist as judge who decides which process or reference is noted as belonging to the Islamic tradition, what is really Islamic and what is not. I want to suggest that Islam, if it ever becomes an object, does so only in the moral reasoning of an individual Muslim, whether through the directed processes of ethical self-formation that a number of anthropologists have productively described, or in the going on of life with all its ambiguities, contradictions, and multiplicity of referential frames. Any personal understanding of Islam cannot be represented in a general object without doing violence to those understandings. In this sense, there are as many Islams as there are Muslims. Simply sidestepping the problem of definition by following Schielke's call to make life experience our focus is not the answer. There are two problems here.

Firstly, it means that anthropologists would abandon any attempt to engage with Islam directly or with Muslims as Muslims, and instead produce ethnographies of lives within which Islam may or may not be an important reference. Secondly, taking life experience as our focus carries with it the danger of implicitly treating Islam, once more, as an extrinsic object that is reproduced, adapted, creatively refashioned, in lives lived.

In this article I want to think about how an anthropologist might engage with Islam directly, actively, and ethnographically, but without making Islam or Muslims our *objects*. It is a suggestion for a move from an anthropology of Islam to doing anthropology *in conversation with an Islamic tradition*. I am inspired by and develop upon a direction of research present in the work a number of anthropologists writing on Islam, including Asad and Schielke themselves. In a recent clarification of his idea of tradition Asad writes that he uses the concept to ‘address both the use of inherited language and the acquisition of embodied abilities by repetition’ (Asad 2015: 167), how a Muslim learns to embody dispositions, sensibilities and propensities, to change themselves and their environment. While the scope of Islam as an object for anthropology may actually be narrowed with this focus, Asad developed it in conversations with an Islamic scholar in Cairo, Shaykh Usama Sayyid al-Azhari, in which Shaykh Usama talked about the education of good character, how human beings are formed with particular intentions in the different contexts of social life, the household, the school, the mosque or the street.

The point here is that Asad is not making Shaykh Usama his ‘informant’ and their conversations his ‘ethnographic data’, but he develops his thinking in conversation with an other. As I will develop below through a discussion of Levinas’s ethical

philosophy, this is what for me makes his endeavour distinctively anthropology. Similarly productive conversations have informed the writing of other anthropologists. Schielke, in the conclusion to his book *Egypt in the Future Tense*, begins to think about the nature of hope in an uncertain world in conversations with young men in his fieldsite about Islamic ideas of destiny and freedom (Schielke 2015). A further example is Amira Mittermaier's study of Sufism in Cairo that critiques oppositions between 'the imagined' and 'the real' through the Islamic concept of *barzakh*, the 'in-betweenness' of this world and the next (Mittermaier 2011).

I want to bring this approach into dialogue with discussions going along similar lines more broadly in the discipline. I have taken inspiration from Tim Ingold's move from an anthropology 'of' to an anthropology 'with' (Ingold 2008; Ingold & Lucas 2007), as well as the call by Joel Robbins for anthropologists to engage more closely with theologians, to 'imagine that theologians might either produce theories that get some things right about the world they currently get wrong or model a kind of action in the world that is in some or other way more effective or ethically adequate than their own' (Robbins 2006: 287). Both these calls are expressions of what I see as the motivating impulse of anthropology, the recognition of radically different ways of being and perceiving, also expressed in the recent discussions framed in terms of ontology (Viveiros de Castro 2003). All these interventions, moreover, point to how this is as much an ethical as an intellectual practice.

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas for me clarifies how the ethical and the intellectual are bound together in anthropological practice. As set out in his major work *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas develops an ideal of knowing that is

founded on a relation, a conversation with an other that maintains difference, not in order to oppose or exclude, but where it is the conversation with alterity that itself makes knowing possible, productive and creative. Knowing is a critical and ethical endeavour. Levinas's thought resonates with disciplinary concerns that have been expressed in the self-reflexive critiques of objectivity and representation of the 1980s (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989) through to the more contemporary discussions of ontology. For me, Levinas clarifies what is at stake and points to how to think through anthropology as scholarly discipline and human practice.

Levinas and anthropology

Levinas's aim in *Totality and Infinity* is to establish the primacy of ethics in the encounter of the knowing self with a world populated by others. My relation with an other should not be one of domination where I encompass the other within my own projects and thought concepts, a relation Levinas designates as 'totality'. Instead, I should enter into conversation that recognises the alterity of the other that cannot be contained in anything that originates in my self, that overflows my self, and so step beyond my self. This is what Levinas designates as a relation of 'infinity'. At the centre of Levinas's thinking is an idea of the human person as radically singular, so that a person cannot be thought of as a representative of a general category or a member of a species (Mensch 2015: 4). The other is absolutely Other and cannot be encompassed by categories or understandings originating in the self: 'The other presents himself as exceeding *the idea of the other in me*' (TI: 50). Truth for Levinas is only possible when the knowing self can step outside the sameness of his or her own existence. This occurs in conversation with an other 'where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an 'I', as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself'

(*TI*: 39). Thus Truth for Levinas is founded in the ethical relation, defined by the recognition of, and conversation with, the alterity of an other.

Levinas positions his philosophy in large part in opposition to Martin Heidegger's ontology of being. He thus contrasts two modes of knowing or theory, ontology and critique (*TI*: 42-8). For Levinas ontology designates theory that seeks *comprehension*, assimilating the other to the same so that alterity vanishes. This may be effected through the use of a middle term, a thought concept, that reduces the other to a generality that originates in the self. Heideggerian ontology for Levinas reduces others and the world to a relation with Being, absorbed into my own projects. This mode of knowing, 'totality', is 'identified with the freedom of the knowing being encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it' (*TI*: 42).

Critique, by contrast, maintains the distance between self and other. Truth is produced in a conversation with the other where alterity is not overcome or neutralised, nor does alterity present a barrier preventing engagement, but rather the conversation with alterity is the productive source of self-critique. 'The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics' (*TI*: 43). Freedom is opposed to ethics. The totalising relation is for Levinas not only a tyranny but it is also sterile, it produces nothing but more of the same. The relation of infinity, the overflowing of the self where I am prompted to examine reflexively my normal spontaneous being, is critique that is productive of true knowing. I am drawn beyond myself.

Two objections might be made to Levinas's philosophy with regards to anthropology. Firstly, his insistence on the essential separation of self from other would seem to be founded on a conception of autonomous personhood that the general direction of anthropological thinking over past decades has called into question. Secondly, is Levinas's philosophy really an expression of Jewish theology that has limited relevance outside a Jewish, or at least a theistic, tradition? Samuel Moyn, who has traced the roots of Levinas's thinking, not only in Jewish writing but also in Protestant theology, argues that Levinas's Other is in fact 'a secularised appeal to the divine, a God, in humanised form' (Moyn 2005: 239). The human other, rather than God, becomes the transcendent source of Truth.

For Levinas it is the radical uniqueness of the person that establishes the condition of interiority and separation that makes knowing possible. This uniqueness is founded upon our sensuous, embodied immersion in the world, prior to and exceeding our representation of it, that Levinas expresses with the notion of 'enjoyment' (Mensch 2015: 83-6). Leora Batnitzky has argued that central to Levinas's thought is Descartes's modern subject, separate and independent, although for Levinas interiority is not a product of self-representation in thought but rather of sensual experience (Batnitzky 2004). This separation is the condition for the ethical relation. Our needs, and their bodily satisfaction, establish our uniqueness that can then be escaped in a relation with an other. This in contrast to Heidegger's idea of ontology where our needs, our projects, place us already outside ourselves in the world, excluding the notion of interiority and therefore of ethics in Levinas's terms (Mensch 2015: 44).

Levinas's idea of the primary human condition being that of a 'particular existent unique and autochthonous' would seem to be fundamentally incompatible with the conceptions of personhood as intersubjective, relational, porous or fractal that anthropologists have encountered in their participation in other ways of being and perceiving. Furthermore, the person for Levinas would seem to be confined to the human person. Language is what enables the knowing self, in conversation with an other, to reach beyond the visual representation that encompasses the other, towards the ethical relation (Mensch 2015: 115). This is part of what Levinas expresses in his idea of the 'face':

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content. (*TI*: 194)

It is through language that the infinity of the other is recognised and maintained:

In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor (*TI*: 195)

Can Levinas's ethical relation, established by language, take place with non-human persons, be they non-human animals, spirits, or the land, or would the 'imagination' of such a relation be an extension of the self? What of a person's encounters with material objects?

My response is that I do not intend to develop Levinas's philosophy as Grand Theory that can be applied as an explanatory model for lives, societies or process that I encounter. That would of course be to establish a relation of totality in Levinas's

terms. Rather, I am thinking through Levinas to elucidate practice that I see already going on within *anthropology*, to foreground it and develop from this a non-objectifying engagement with Islam. I am thinking through Levinas to identify the ethical quality of my knowing as an anthropologist, a position from which I can step outside or 'overflow' in a relation with others. The 'alterity' of Levinas's philosophy with relation to the modes of being and perceiving of others I might engage with is not a problem but the condition of knowing. Levinas establishes knowing not as the identification or establishment of coherence between my own concepts and others but rather as a creative emergence in the space between self in conversation with an infinite other. The practice of anthropology in fact extends the possibility of the other beyond the human, but Levinas provides the grounding upon which the non-human might be engaged without being reduced to a product of cultural or social representation. This is the ethical relation that takes me outside my spontaneous existence. Levinas's ethical relation serves as a reminder that my encounters and the knowing that results from them, whether with human or non-human others, genuinely are encounters with alterity and not disguised extensions of the self.

The second objection, that Levinas's philosophy is just a disguised theology, is in large part already addressed in the foregoing discussion. It does not matter that Levinas draws his ideas from Jewish or Christian thought. Firstly, I am not seeking to comprehend Islam through Levinas but to identify an ethical mode of knowing going on in anthropology. Furthermore, Levinas's call is to step outside my self in conversation with an other, to allow an other to challenge my existing conceptions. If Levinas develops his own thinking in conversation with a Jewish and Christian tradition, this is precisely the relation I am attempting to develop with an Islamic tradition.

Levinas's thought complicates the idea of anthropology as it is expressed in the commonly invoked phrase 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar', that was at one time a strap line on my own department's website. Anthropology as an intellectual endeavour has always been critical. Anthropologists have sought to decentre what they see as categories of thought that are taken by themselves, their academic audiences, and their students to be natural and universal, by engaging with different ways of being and perceiving that they encounter in their fieldwork. Categories supposed to be universal are exposed as being the product of contingent cultural or discursive regimes, now identified as located 'western', 'secular', or 'scientific' worldviews. Melford Spiro (1992) has expressed this critical work as a process of translation. Not a direct translation of the Other into the native language of the anthropologist, but rather translation via a third conceptual vocabulary invented by the anthropologist, which both makes the seemingly exotic thought and practice of the Other intelligible after all, and also prompts a re-thinking of the taken-for-grantedness of the world of the anthropologist's audience. A classic example would be Mauss's work on the gift. With a new vocabulary of 'total social phenomena', 'obligation', and 'spirit of the gift', the word and idea of the 'gift' is alienated from 'our' language and becomes a vehicle for comparing radically diverse modes of exchange and the 'social', 'cultural' or 'moral' contexts in which they are embedded.

While the critique that is sought in anthropology's project of 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar' would seem to be in harmony with Levinas's ideal of knowing, if this is achieved as Spiro has pointed out through means of translation via a third thought concept, then it is in danger of being a species of the totalising

relation that Levinas opposes. A representation of generalised cultural systems, social structures, or worldviews is produced, not only 'theirs' but 'ours' as well (Western, secular, scientific). This problem has been recognised by anthropologists since the critique of the culture concept initiated in the 1980s that highlighted issues of representation and objectivity. In order to avoid this, a common approach has been for anthropologists to practice something similar to what Lila Abu-Lughod has called 'ethnographies of the particular' (Abu-Lughod 1991).

For Abu-Lughod, anthropologists' use of the culture concept to represent and compare difference is a form of Edward Said's Orientalism. A generalised self is produced in relation to a generalised other. Essential difference between culture groups is fabricated by ignoring and flattening difference in ways that enable hierarchies of value and relations of domination. In relation to Islam, she has argued that this kind of generalising, Orientalising thinking has resulted in discourses of 'good' and 'bad' Islam. The diverse and complex interpretations of what it means to be a Muslim, the debates among Muslims themselves, is flattened under labels of moderate or extremist (Abu-Lughod 2006). Her answer is an ethnographic engagement with particular lives located in time and place that does not generate opposition between self and other. The de-essentialising move to explore global processes, not as reified phenomena in themselves, but as how they are lived and given significance in particular lives, might be said to have become the default position for anthropological research. The literature on 'the state' produced since the mid-1990s is illustrative. This work has explored how an idea, experience or effect of the state emerges in everyday encounters with officials, government offices, in practices of corruption, or in material manifestations of roads and buildings (Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Gupta 1995; Harvey 2005; Reeves 2014). It has

productively critiqued the very idea of the state as a taken-for-granted 'real' entity or phenomenon, and stimulated new ways to think about it.

But in Levinas's analytic it is precisely the conversation with alterity that enables me to exceed my self. By eliminating the distance between self and other as Abu-Lughod seeks to do, I do not necessarily escape my own thought. I start from a thought concept, for example the state that originates in established disciplinary thinking, and finish with multiple, more nuanced, ways of imagining this same thought concept. I do this by imagining my concept into the lives of the people I encounter in fieldwork, the inspiration for thinking through concepts that are essentially my own. I do not mean that attention to the particular is illegitimate or not worthwhile, nor that because the state is an established disciplinary concept it should not be thought through in different ways. Recognition of the particularity of individual lives is in part how I understand Levinas's ideal of the irreducible individuality of a person. But Levinas points to an essential aspect of the person, that any person I encounter is not the same as me, and cannot be totally encompassed by thought that originates in me. The other cannot be comprehended but should be engaged with in conversation, and it is their very difference that prompts critique and creativity. This is not true only for 'exotic' others, but any other. It neutralises the Orientalised Other that Said and Abu-Lughod are combatting, not by trying to overcome or eliminate distance between self and other, but precisely by recognising the irreducible alterity of the other and making this the source of a critical, ethical, relational mode of knowing.

Anthropology in conversation...

Levinas's ideal of knowing provides a further challenge to a conception of anthropology in terms of a division between fieldwork, where an anthropologist gathers data while participating in the ambiguities and anxieties of life and personal relationships, and the work of analysis, the crafting of ordered, descriptive accounts and theory from notes and other material gathered during fieldwork that seek to understand and represent other ways of being and perceiving. Instead, what is brought to the fore is *transformation* effected in that anthropologist. Encounters and conversations with others, irreducibly other to the knowing self, call into question some of the perceptions and thought categories that an anthropologist brings with him or herself. This might be in personal encounters with human others or other-than-human, or with texts. Writing then is an activity of reflection on this transformation.

In this section I want to start with an encounter during a research trip to Morocco that interrupted my own 'spontaneity'. Rather than providing a thorough reflection on this encounter itself, I use it as a springboard to think about what anthropology 'in conversation' might be. I want to reflect on recent disciplinary discussions about anthropology as an ethical project and mode of knowing that I think are broadly represented by three distinctive contributions, those of Michael Carrithers, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Tim Ingold.

In 2014 I was developing a new research project in and around Fes, Morocco. The research concerns sacred text and its performance in, for example, recitation, memorisation, or healing. On a visit to explore potential research sites I came across cases of jinn spirit possession. One such encounter occurred in my visit to a town near Fes with a young man who was helping to introduce me to people who might be

able to help with this. He told me about an exorcism that was being conducted by an imam he knew, and the imam and the family involved agreed for me to be present on condition that I agreed in turn to being invited to convert to Islam. On arrival, I was shown how to perform the ritual ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) by one of the sons of the household and then shown into the salon where the imam was already present, along with the sister of the young man who had helped me perform the ablution. On a table in front of the brother and sister was a five litre bottle of water and a large glass mug each, as well as a bucket. As the imam started reciting verses from the Qur'an the sister began to grimace and tense up as if in pain. She pleaded for the imam to stop, and I took this to be the jinn speaking through her. As the recitation went on, the young woman became more and more agitated, twisting her body and threw back her head and shouted out, seemingly in pain. The imam began to harangue the jinn, demanding that the jinn leave the woman. The jinn pleaded and promised to depart, and the imam interrogated the jinn, asking if the jinn were a man or woman, calling it a liar, saying that a Muslim jinn would never possess someone. During the recitation both the brother and sister drank large quantities of water, vomiting it up from time to time. I found the whole experience disorienting, unsettling, and a little frightening. The young man assisting me with the research later told me that the imam had been treating the sister for some time, but had just started with the brother as well. He also told me that the imam tried to convert the jinn he exorcised to Islam. After this session was over, the imam demanded of me forcefully, as he had done of the jinn, that I too should become a Muslim, that there was no reason not to now that I had seen the evidence of this possession.

How should I respond to this encounter that is so far outside my normal understanding of what is possible or 'real'? This is of course a common and recurring

question for anthropologists. It is one that I confronted in my previous research in Uzbekistan where people recounted their own waking and dream encounters with spirits and jinn, where the recited verses of the Qur'an imparted healing qualities to material objects that could be transferred to others, that were similarly outside the limits of my normal conception. How might anthropology in conversation enable a direct engagement with Islam that does not make Islam or Muslims objects, to be comprehended through the researcher's own thought concepts, cultural such as 'Moroccan folk Islam', or social such as relations of power, questions of agency, or strategies to negotiate within socially produced gendered hierarchies?

Three recent responses by anthropologists to this problem are for me represented in the work of Carrithers, Viveiros de Castro, and Ingold. All three approaches have a degree of resonance with Levinas' ideal. Each in their own way make knowing an ethical practice rather than a supposedly morally neutral quest for objective knowledge. They dismantle the position of the anthropologist as the privileged producer of systematic thinking and theory and recognise an essential intellectual equivalence, although not identity, of anthropologists and those they engage with. They furthermore see critique as being central to anthropology as a mode of knowing. As Ingold as puts it: 'An education in anthropology ... does more than furnish knowledge *about* the world ... it rather educates our *perception* of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being' (Ingold 2008: 82). However, none are entirely satisfactory as principles for the direct, non-objectifying engagement with Islam that I am seeking.

Carrithers has called anthropology a moral science of possibilities and its practice an 'engaged learning', a sharing of perspectives. Fieldwork is an enterprise in which

anthropologists invest their physical and emotional selves. They develop an 'ironic' stance, inhabiting alternative understandings and categories without letting go of their own. The ironic perspective opens up the multiple worlds of possibilities that de-centre the seemingly universal, taken-for-granted categories and assumptions that the anthropologist might have occupied before the encounter with others (Carrithers 2005).

Carrithers's vision recognises that knowledge is grounded in the morally charged relations that the anthropologist develops with others, and that these engender a sense of mutual worth and trust. But his concept of irony is founded on an underlying idea of cultures, worlds, or rationalities that the anthropologist and their others inhabit, albeit as moral agents creatively and intersubjectively acting upon one another rather than mechanically reproducing cultural scripts. Indeed, with something like this in mind I sought to take seriously the subjective experience of interaction with spirits in Uzbekistan, adopting an 'as if' or ironic stance. In doing so I needed to place the experience of those I described rather uncomfortably in a version of the culture concept, which I attempted to soften by presenting as a flexible resource that affords possibilities for perception. Thinking about the experiences of jinn possession in Morocco, I would similarly need to place those individuals within my construction of 'their' culturally produced rationality, and doing so would assume a degree of coherence in their experiences that would be the product of my own intellectual work, my own interpretive 'fiction' as Geertz has put it.

The problem of the culture concept is even more evident in much of the recent turn to ontology, a leading proponent of which has been Viveiros de Castro who has

posed the question 'What happens if we take native thought seriously?' (Viveiros de Castro 2003). By this he does not mean representing the Other 'in their own terms'. Rather, in a position that recalls the spirit of el-Zein's argument, his appeal is to dismantle the model of knowledge production that places the anthropologist in the privileged role of reflexive conceptual thinker, while the native is positioned in a spontaneously inhabited worldview, the raw material for the anthropologist's creative production of universal theory. The concern of anthropology should be with ontology, the conceptual imagination, 'the faculty of creating those intellectual objects and relations which furnish the indefinitely many possible worlds of which humans are capable.' The native is as much engaged in this process as is the anthropologist; in terms of ontology, the anthropologist's and the native's thought are of the same kind.

For many of its proponents the ontological turn represents precisely a move to found a critical knowing in an engagement with alterity (Henare et al. 2007), but the question is how this alterity is imagined. Viveiros de Castro's representation of an 'Amerindian multinaturalism' has been criticised as being a generalised, overly coherent depiction that is the artefact of the anthropologist's own thought (Bessire & Bond 2014; Ramos 2012). For there to be a native ontology there needs to be a generalised native. The encounters with jinn possession in Morocco would need to be understood as expressing 'their' ontology radically different to 'our' naturalist, secular scientific one. Could Islam itself constitute such an ontology? With the idea of ontology we could not hope to encompass the multiplicity of diverse voices and interpretations within the historically developed and ongoing body of philosophy, thought, and interpretation of sacred text carried out by Muslims with reference to Divine Revelation. This question aside, can the experience of jinn possession by an

individual in a small town in Morocco be neatly placed within a notional Islamic ontology? Would we need to identify, or rather fabricate, a Moroccan variant of an Islamic ontology in a return to Geertz's notion of culture? Can any individual be confined to a single ontology, or is ambiguity and contradiction part of the natural human condition as Scheilke has argued? The notion of ontology produces Muslims as Viveiros de Castro's 'natives' and Islam as their ontology, an object that could only come into being as the product of the anthropologist's own thought.

The problem of the object is one that Ingold addresses in his call for anthropology to be not a study *of* people but a way of studying *with* people (Ingold 2008; Ingold & Lucas 2007). 'Anthropology of' for Ingold tends to transform anything anthropology encounters into an object amenable to analysis in its own analytical terms; as social relations or cultural production of meaning. Ingold focuses particularly on encounters with material objects such as artworks or buildings. Where Levinas, whose thought developed in the experience of Nazi Germany, sees the totalising relation as one of domination and tyranny, Ingold sees the problem as an inability to engage with the creative processes that bring these objects into being. In common with Viveiros de Castro, Ingold recognises people as engaged in the same enterprise as anthropologists. Not in terms of the ontologies or conceptual worlds they create, but on the level of practice. We are all engaged in *doing* anthropology for Ingold, we are commonly 'concerned with exploring, interpreting and describing the worlds we inhabit, the ways we perceive them' (Ingold & Lucas 2007: 291), so he advocates an anthropology *with* art or architecture for example. I have found Ingold's idea of doing anthropology *with* inspirational, but it lacks the recognition of the irreducible alterity of the other that is foundational to Levinas's ideal of knowing and what makes knowing critique. What Ingold's anthropology *with* emphasises instead is

what is shared, the common practice of the anthropologist and their co-interpreter or explorer. This is not to say that practicing anthropology *with* necessarily lacks critique, but this critique, I would argue, is founded in the implicit, unacknowledged choice of the anthropologist to engage with people or situations that challenge their own spontaneity. Without explicitly recognising the relation with the alterity of the other as the source of anthropological knowing, doing anthropology *with* in itself could too easily become an exploration and extension of the anthropologist's own thought, an extension of the self.

The question remains of how to think with my encounters with jinn possession in Morocco and the people involved, without attributing to them an ontology, worldview, or culture. In developing a Levinas-inspired conversation with Islam, who or what would be the other or others, and what form would the conversation take? In the next section I will discuss how the idea of an Islamic tradition might be developed in a non-objectifying way, as an ongoing conversation in which the anthropologist might participate.

... an Islamic tradition

Following Joel Robbins's call for anthropology to develop a different relation to Christian theology, to take seriously its intellectual positions and not just to appropriate it as ethnography, there has been a broad move to develop a 'post-secular' anthropology. Could this move point to how we might think about and engage with an Islamic tradition, especially as some of its contributors work not in Christian but Muslim contexts (Hoffstaedter 2013; Kahn 2011)? It was Robbins's paper on the 'awkward relationship' between anthropology and theology that first prompted me to think that something that might be imagined as the Islamic tradition

of thought, as well as Christian theology, might be approached similarly to the way anthropologists are accustomed to engaging with (the Western tradition of) philosophy (Robbins 2006).

A problem, however, is that this move is once more founded on the idea of contrasting ontologies, Christian, Islamic, and others, versus what Joel Kahn has called the secular position of scientific naturalism (Kahn 2011: 78). There is a lot of resonance in the post-secular move with Levinas's ideal of knowing. Kahn, who draws on Levinas's idea of the overflowing of experience, calls for a mutually transformative conversation between both sides, secular scientific and religious reason, instead of the more typical 'bracketing' of experience where the anthropologist merely suspends disbelief in the face of the Other. Philip Fountain argues that anthropology should not think *about* religion but *with* it so that the universal superiority of secular thought is decentred. (Fountain 2013: 315-6). But engagement or conversation continues to be imagined between alternative ontologies, worldviews, or rationalities that are always and inevitably generalised, conceptual objects.

The idea of an Islamic tradition that I am suggesting would be understood as the historically developed and ongoing textually recorded body of philosophy, theology, and debate that has at its centre Divine Revelation through the Prophet Muhammad, and also the lived experience of people who relate to it in diverse, creative ways. Levinas's ideal of infinity directs us away from representing or thinking about this tradition as in any way a coherent ontology. There is no more coherence in the Islamic tradition, even the purely textual tradition of philosophy and theological debate, than in what we might gloss as the western philosophical tradition. It is

telling that in my scholarly writing I would typically need to qualify the former with 'Arab' or 'Islamic' but can refer to the latter as simply 'philosophy' in order to be understood by most readers. Rather, the Islamic tradition I am developing here is a gathering together in conversation of distinctive voices and experiences, in texts and in lives across time and space. The anthropologist would seek to engage with this conversation not as the representative of a naturalist or secular sensibility but as an individual. Unlike the idea of ontology, this conversation does not come into objective existence through the intellectual work of the anthropologist who identifies system and coherence that the 'native', being immersed in the process of living within their own cultures or ontologies, does not. The anthropologist can assume no ownership but must visit as a guest, his or her own interpretations and responses remaining open to challenge from multiple perspectives, from within anthropology, from the discipline of Islamic studies, and from voices in the Islamic tradition itself.

The encounter with jinn possession in Morocco that I related above is part of the Islamic tradition as ongoing conversation alongside, for example, the textual contributions produced within the scholarly traditions of the classical legal schools of Sunni Islam, those of philosophers, Sufi thinkers, or the thought and practice of contemporary Muslims, where all this is oriented in one way or another to the act of Divine Revelation. There is no hierarchic separation here between the 'everyday' thought and practice of 'ordinary' Muslims, those who strive for pious ethical subjectivities, or the understandings expressed in the diverse forms of textual and other scholarship. Moreover, my encounters with others in Morocco and their experiences of possession are with individuals capable of occupying multiple, even contradictory perspectives simultaneously including, perhaps, what might be

understood as scientific naturalist ones. Any common ground or exchange of perspectives that would occur in this ground of personal conversation and relation. As an individual, I am no more reducible to a naturalist or secular ontology than the Moroccans I met are reducible to any Islamic ontology or vernacular theology that I would have to infer from my understanding of their experience. This is not to say that ideologies or discourses that could be described as secular, scientific, modernist, or Islamic in one form or another do not exist, do not have effects, nor that they should not be examined. Just that, following Levinas, individuals always exceed the limits of any concept and should not be subsumed within them.

Levinas's ideal of knowing as moral practice and critique is founded on a calling into question of my own spontaneity in conversation with an other. The unsettling experience of observing jinn exorcism and my further conversations about personal experiences of possession are the starting point for my knowing. Anthropology in conversation with an Islamic tradition would continue in further personal encounters in Morocco and elsewhere as well as with textual and scholarly productions. In seeking to explore the new possibilities for thought I might look, for example, to discussions within works of Qur'anic interpretation, cosmology, or Sufi philosophy on the existence of jinn and sorcery, and the experience of possession. Might some of this induce thinking about the nature of good and evil as a material phenomenon, as well as moral, aesthetic or spiritual state (Hadromi-Allouche 2012)? Reflecting on the recitation of Qur'anic verses, how might an understanding of the Qur'an as Divine Speech prompt me to rethink the nature of 'text' and 'word' (Graham 1987), what a memorisation and recitation is and does in the person, the listener, and the world? Might a reading of the Sufi Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology on the nature of being, his thinking on the faculty of the creative imagination, prompt different thinking on the

nature of perception, being human, and what might be understood as the material world? Not only for Sufis or Muslims, but for life more generally? Do practices and experiences that anthropologists tend to label as magic, spirit possession, witchcraft, or sorcery, need to be conceptualised as distinctive culturally inflected responses to empirically real processes such as economic dislocation, the workings of a person's psychology, or as some other social or cultural process? Or does an engagement with the Islamic tradition prompt questions directly about the phenomenon of imagination itself, rather than treating imagination as an index for something else that is more 'real' (Mittermaier 2011).

In practical terms this will mean a much closer engagement with the academic discipline of Islamic studies than has been typical in the past for anthropologists. Not only does this discipline make much of the Islamic textual tradition of theology and philosophy accessible to non-specialists, but its mode of knowing is often one that I have been arguing is central to anthropology as a disciplinary project. As Henry Corbin, a prominent scholar of Ibn al-'Arabī has put it:

To our mind the best explanation of Ibn 'Arabī remains Ibn 'Arabī himself.
The only means of understanding him is to become for a moment his
disciple, to approach him as he himself approached many masters of Ṣūfism.
(Corbin 1969: 5)

What I am proposing is an explicit, conscious stepping away from making our research and writing about Islam, Muslims, or Sufis as such, away from the explicit or implicit assumption of an analytical object. Following Levinas's ideal of the irreducible individuality of the person and of knowing as critique, I am proposing an

anthropology in conversation with an Islamic tradition where my encounter with others prompts questions and reflections that I express in my academic writing. The aim would not be the representation of an Islamic ontology addressed to an audience of fellow secular, scientific naturalists. It would rather be the reflections of an individual anthropologist that I hope would find resonance with others. It is an effort to engage directly and ethnographically with an Islamic tradition without making Islam or Muslims my objects.

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