POST-SECULAR ANTHROPOLOGY
AS RECOGNITION AND
THE LIMITS OF UNDERSTANDING
Responding to Experiences of Jinn Possession in Morocco

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Abstract: This article contributes to discussions around a post-secular anthropology that seek to engage seriously with religious traditions and theology. Conversations in Morocco with Muslims who experienced possession by jinn spirits point to the importance of recognition. To understand those experiences risks translating them into my concepts. Recognizing them accepts that what the other says has significance. They call me to visit the broader Islamic tradition that they creatively draw on in an effort to decenter my own thinking and to open up to possibility. This space for possibility and the limits of understanding are explored by putting into dialogue Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as critique of Descartes’s dualism of mind and world, with a discussion in the Islamic tradition, between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā.

Keywords: Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, Islam, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, spirit possession

During the summer of 2019, I attended an evening school for the memorization and recitation of the Qur’an in a town in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco. I was conducting research on the performance and perception of the Qur’an as God’s speech. Arriving early one evening, the teacher asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Morocco. On hearing about my research, he told me that his sister had been possessed by a jinn spirit, and that he had performed ruqya shar‘īya, recitation of the Qur’an over her to expel
the jinn. While possessed, he said, the jinn spoke out of her in a crude, male voice. She had great strength and had to be held down by four men. During my time in Morocco, a number of others recounted their own experiences of having been possessed by jinn, or of the possession of someone close to them. The next door neighbor of the family I stayed with in the town specialized in ruqya shar'iya to treat possession and the effects of sorcery (sihr), advertising his services on a sign on the pavement outside his front door.

How can I, an anthropologist who occupies a secular position, respond to the experiences of possession that were shared with me, and to the Islamic tradition that the Muslims I met creatively draw on. A number of anthropologists have sought to develop an engagement with religious traditions and theology, sometimes framed as post-secular anthropology, that takes those traditions seriously as modes of being and knowing in ways that decenter what Joel Kahn has called a stance of “scientific naturalism” (2011: 78; see also Fountain 2013; Havea et al. 2022; Robbins 2006). Prior to this call, phenomenology has been an influential approach for anthropologists seeking to understand life-worlds that are produced as unintelligible within that stance. The promise of phenomenology is that it enables the anthropologist to examine experiences directly. Religious experiences, external to the scientific naturalist frame, need not be recast as something ‘objectively’ real, the manifestation of an empirically observable social structure or cultural system. Instead, phenomenology promises to recover a direct engagement with experiences, to reveal how the real becomes real in a creative engagement of subject and world, how God becomes real in the lives of North American, Charismatic Christians, for example (Csordas 1994; Luhrmann 2004).

The conversations I had in Morocco point to the limits of phenomenology, and more broadly of the move to understand experiences that are other to myself, and prompt an alternative response that I am calling recognition. I cannot understand those experiences except by transforming them through terms that make sense to me. Phenomenology would seek to understand how the spirits become real in perceptual experience. However, phenomenological reality is grounded in an immanent world, one world we all inhabit. This prevents a full engagement with traditions that are located in important ways with reference to an extra-worldly transcendence. It fails to engage meaningfully with a central theme in my conversations about possession, the mutual implication of perceiving, knowing, and ethical being, that is informed by an Islamic tradition.

Recognizing those I encountered in Morocco and the broader Islamic tradition with which they are in conversation is, in contrast, an opening up to possibility. To help clarify what I mean, I want first to make clear what recognition, as developed here, is not. Cristiana Giordano has described what she calls “confessional recognition” in the bureaucratic process through which victims
of human trafficking in Italy are recognized by the state as victims, transformed from invisible illegal subjects to persons with legal status. While this recognition enables women to obtain legal documents, their complex histories and identities are reduced and translated into categories that the state can know and manage (Giordano 2015). Elizabeth Povinelli also critiques liberal forms of recognition. In her discussion of the political and legal recognition of indigenous claims in Australia, she argues that this liberal form of recognition establishes an idealized imaginary of an ancient, pre-colonial tradition and custom to which living, situated Aboriginal subjects must prove a ‘real’ connection and commitment for their claims to be successful. This, Povinelli (2002) argues, is a form of domination. Aboriginal subjects are produced as failures of indigeneity, while the state’s recognition of this idealized indigeneity supports and strengthens the liberal state.

The recognition that Giordano and Povinelli describe are moves to encompass and contain the other, the immigrant or the indigenous other, within categories that are produced by the state. This is similar to the move that phenomenology makes towards experience that is not grounded in an immanent frame. Phenomenology understands possession by translating it into its own terms. Recognizing experiences of possession is not a move to understand, to occupy the position of the other, or to represent their ontology. Rather, recognition is a response to the other that accepts that what the other says has significance, even as much of that experience remains other to me. More than this, it is a call to visit the wider Islamic tradition that informs that experience in an effort to decenter the self (Rasanayagam 2018). Recognition does not make the other the object for my analysis, but opens up a space for possibility that puts my concepts and modes of being into question. This space is opened up, and the limits of phenomenology made clear, when two critical interventions are put into dialogue with each other, one that has taken place within the western tradition of philosophy and the other in the Islamic tradition. Each intervention critiques what it sees as a purely rationalist understanding of perception and knowing, but they do so on entirely different grounds. These are Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception as critique of Descartes’s dualism of mind and world, and al-Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) critique of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037). Ibn Sīnā, known as Avicenna in Europe, was a central figure in the classical Arabic philosophical tradition that took up and developed the classical Greek tradition of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy. Al-Ghazālī is famous for his refutation of what he saw as the overly rationalist approach to truth of the Arabic philosophers, instead emphasizing the centrality of revelation. He was in his time, and remains today, one of the most influential thinkers on practical ethics and Islamic theology, both within the Islamic scholarly tradition and everyday Muslim practice, and his thinking informs the experiences of jinn possession presented below.
Phenomenology, Experience, and What Is Really Real

Thomas Csordas draws on Merleau-Ponty to describe how Charismatic Catholics in the United States come to objectify indeterminate bodily sensation as encounters with a divine other (Csordas 1994). Bodily senses do not perceive already existing objects in the world, but sensation becomes phenomenologically real as perception of demons or God in processes of objectification shaped within the habitus of this North American Church. In a broadly similar direction, Tanya Luhrmann (2004) has described how Evangelical Christians, also in the United States, learn to experience God as an intimate and real presence in their lives through practices of prayer and reading the Bible that attune their attention to their bodies, the text, and the world in directed ways.

For Csordas, the phenomenological perspective, which places the body at its center, overcomes a Durkheimian reduction of human experience of otherness to a manifestation of a superorganic social structure. Instead, he argues that otherness is a characteristic of consciousness rather than an already existing objective reality. This renders the sacred something that can be explored ethnographically as it comes to be constituted in human experience (Csordas 1990: 34). However, the experiences presented by both Csordas and Luhrmann are different from those of the Christians they represent in their ethnographies. For those Christians, their experiences are of God or demons and originate beyond the perceiver’s own consciousness, or indeed any human creation. For the two anthropologists, by contrast, these experiences are ultimately a human, or at least a ‘this worldly,’ immanent production. The world, objects, the divine, and the self are produced in experience, but all takes place in this immanent world that constitutes the only ground for reality. While phenomenology seeks to recover how the real becomes real in a subject’s creative engagement in the world, it ultimately denies the reality experienced by those Christians, and recasts it as ‘really’ something else.

This dissonance is perhaps unsurprising, given that Csordas and Luhrmann are producing anthropologies of Christianity rather than Christian anthropologies, and by the latter I mean anthropologies that are rooted within distinctively Christian theologies. Joel Kahn, who has contributed to discussions on a post-secular anthropology, has noted that a common methodology for anthropologists is to “bracket out” the beliefs or cosmologies of their ethnographic others when they conflict with the anthropologist’s own scientific naturalist sensibility (Kahn 2011). An anthropologist might suspend their disbelief when encountering those who engage with spirit beings or communicate with the divine in order to understand and describe the other’s worldview, ontology, or concepts. Kahn’s concern is that this bracketing is an expression of a wider secular move to render knowledge, which is always knowledge of an immanent, empirically accessible universe, as separate from a private space.
of ethical values and beliefs. This is the root of the dissonance between Luhrmann, Csordas, and their Christian others. Experience for phenomenology produces real selves that can be ethical, but the real ground for knowledge remains this one, immanent world.

Conversations about Jinn Possession in Morocco

I present here two accounts of possession from people I met in the Middle Atlas. The first is a composite account that I have put together from a number of conversations with a woman I will call Fatma, a member of the family I lived with during my stay in the town. Fatma often accompanied me on visits to different kinds of healers and introduced me to her acquaintances who had suffered the effects of possession, sorcery attacks, or other illnesses. We would reflect on these encounters together, Fatma talking about them in the context of her own experiences. When I met her for the first time in 2014, Fatma was thirty years old, married with a young child. Her husband and brother were present when she first narrated her experiences of possession. She started by talking about how, since she was a child, friends of the family and neighbors used to comment frequently on what a good, well-behaved girl she was, and that when people talk about you too much like this, you can be struck by the eye. This is what she attributes her possession to. She also recounted that, when she was five, her father left and married another woman. She was very upset and cried a lot at the time, and this is also an opportunity for the jinn to enter a person. When a girl gets married, and is very happy, she said, the excess of emotion makes her vulnerable. Six years previous to our first meeting, she started to have periods when she would start crying for no reason. When she fainted during one of these episodes, the family called in a religious person (rajul ad-din) to read the Qur’an over her. They also took her to psychiatric and medical doctors in their own and a neighboring town, who said there was nothing wrong with her, and the medicine she got from some of them didn’t help. The only thing that helped was reading the Qur’an. This treatment went on for about a year, with the Qur’an reader being called out whenever she felt the tears coming on.

This was caused by possession by jinn. Her brother said he had helped in the treatment of his sister. The Qur’an reader would recite over her and over water that she drank. When the Qur’an was recited, he said, his sister would shake and suffer. The man would converse with the jinn, demanding that it leave his sister, and beating the jinn, threatening to beat more if it came back. His sister was unaware of this, he said, it was the jinn who was speaking and being beaten. Her husband recalled an occasion when he had woken up for the dawn prayer, and when he woke Fatma she told him to get away from her,
in a man’s voice. He felt frightened, went to the salon, and tuned the TV to a channel for Qur’anic recitation. He got Fatma to sit in front of the TV and eventually the recitation brought her to herself. At this point Fatma began to cry softly, saying that her husband and brother had put up with a lot, that the jinn were trying to break them up, trying to get her to do things like put on make-up before going to bed. She stopped wanting to see people, and the jinn were preventing her from praying. When she wanted to pray, she said, she started crying. It was as if something was telling her ‘no.’ Every time she wanted to pray she felt her head become heavy and tired, and she couldn’t get up.

After a year of treatment by Qur’an reading, Fatma decided that the only way finally to get rid of the jinn was to take control herself, cure herself, and she did this by forcing herself to pray. She started to watch Qur’an recitation channels on TV, and forced herself to read the Qur’an even though the jinn told her not to. She went to the mosque to perform the afternoon prayer because she could pray with other people, and where people gather together in a group to pray there are angels present, not devils. She felt calm there, more than in her home. She attended more of the daily prayers in the mosque, and was always there for the Friday sermon. She asked God for help before she went to sleep, and kept active with the housework. Now she is fine, “al-ḥamdu li-llāh” (thanks to God). She said that the illness changed her life, as if God, “subḥāna wa taʿālā” (Most Exalted) had brought that illness so she could become close to him.

The second account is from an assistant in a small general goods shop, who I will call Brahim. He was introduced to me through Fatma’s uncle, although I had met him a number of times previously as I visited his shop regularly. Again, this is a composite of separate conversations. He recounted how he had been possessed by a jinn for a period of three years, which he attributed to someone performing sorcery (sihr) on him. The jinn put thoughts into his head (waswās), encouraging him to visit prostitutes, to stop praying, to stop fasting during Ramadan. While possessed, he led a dissolute life, wandering the streets at night. This continued when he migrated to Spain for work. The jinn want to distance a person from religion, he said, to cause problems in a person’s family. If a person is about to give five dirhams as sadaqa (charitable giving) to someone, the jinn tells you not to, that it will be less money for you, that you’ll be poor. Anything to prevent a person from doing good. But, he said, in reality, if you give five dirhams as sadaqa, God will give you a great return on that, or you will avoid an evil in your future. The jinn convinced Brahim that he was the person destined to unite Muslims to spread Islam and prepare for the end of days, for the second coming of Jesus. It was all lies of course, he said, but he believed it. The jinn told him that he would marry a princess and be rich, that he had a power stronger than faith so would go directly to heaven whatever he did, whether he drank alcohol, committed adultery, or didn’t pray. All this was to separate him from religion, from prayer and fasting.
Brahim found out he was possessed when he was in a mosque and heard the Qur’an being recited and fainted. His friends took him to be treated by a Qur’an reciter. He continued this treatment for a number of years, seeking out reciters in different towns in Morocco, and also when he was in Spain. When the Qur’an was recited over him, Brahim recounted, he would begin to scream. Sometimes he shouted out “الله أكبر، الله أكبر، فلسطين” (God is great, God is great, Palestine). Brahim thought the jinn was trying to fool them into thinking he was Muslim. The reciter would also spray water over him, over which the Qur’an was recited, because the jinn, being made of fire, didn’t like that. He told me that although people say jinn are powerful, in fact they are weak creatures. You just have to read words from the Qur’an and they scream and run away. The jinn need humans, but humans don’t need jinn. They need a human in order to eat, he said. If you don’t say “بسم الله” (in the name of God) before a meal, the jinn eats with you. That’s why a person is stronger than a jinn. He told me that, according to the Qur’an, the prophet Sulaiman was able to control them and have them in his army. God just gave them the characteristic that they can see humans, but we can’t see them. There are Muslim jinn who won’t possess a person, Brahim said, but it is the unbelieving jinn, Christian and Jewish, who cause the problem. Brahim gave me a small booklet of short Qur’anic verses for recitation against jinn that he used to read and found helped him. In fact, he said, everything that afflicts a person comes from God. It’s a trial, an affliction (ibtilla’). God tests a person through their wealth, their body, their children, their faith. For every illness, Brahim said, according to the Qur’an there is a cure. God sent down illness but he also sent down the cure.

The Muslim’s weapon is wudu’ (purity, the ritual ablution before prayer), Brahim said. It makes you strong, like a soldier, and no enemy can enter. There is sorcery and the evil eye, envy, everywhere. We are Muslim, he said, but have gone far from religion. The morals and principles in the Prophet’s Sunna and the Qur’an are so powerful that they sent Islam to India, to Morocco. They took Islam to Spain. Those first Muslims were strong, they adhered to religion, they didn’t steal or lie. Now, he said, Muslims live in weakness. People in Europe are ahead of us, he told me. In Europe, medicine is advanced because they spend a lot of money on research. But in Morocco or in the Islamic world, this doesn’t happen. If a person goes to the hospital, the doctor doesn’t arrive, there’s no medicine, and you have to bribe the doctors to cure you. From his experience of living in Spain, Brahim said that people there live according to Islamic morals, they don’t take your wealth, they don’t lie to you, and they pay you for your work, whereas in Morocco you might work for someone for a month or two and they don’t pay you. All those principles and morals that are in Europe are in Islam. But he said that Moroccans have distanced themselves from those morals. There is poverty here, he said. Poverty forces people to
do anything. To do sihr, to lie, all that corruption and evil (mafāsid) that you see among us is produced by poverty. It was the opposite in the time of the Prophet, there were poor people who spent their money to spread Islam. Abu Bakr spent his money to fight the unbelievers. Today we have wealth, but we don’t use it to fight.

Something expressed in these accounts that I want to highlight is the unity, or mutual implication, of perceiving, knowing, and ethical being. For Fatma and Brahim, their affliction by jinn transformed their perception of themselves and the world. The jinn insinuated false perception, and true knowing was achieved through ethical work to bring themselves closer to God. Fatma emphasized how this could not happen by simply submitting herself to external agencies, be they doctors within the biomedical system or even Qur’an reciters. Ultimately, she herself had to take on the struggle of listening to the Qur’an and praying. In his own account, Brahim was concerned to emphasize how the jinn induced him to have delusional notions that were intended to distance him from God. Once he overcame this through recitation and transforming his behavior, he was able to see his own corrupted condition as part of a broader corruption of Moroccan society, which was itself distanced from God, where material poverty and sorcery were endemic.

A similar sensibility emerges in conversations I had with the teacher at the Qur’an school, who I mentioned at the start of the article. He talked about how, when he was in his twenties in the 1980s and 1990s, he had been involved in gangs, violent fights, drug taking, and crime. After injuring someone in a fight, he said his conscience started to trouble him and he went to a reciter of the Qur’an (faqīh) for help. He described how listening to Qur’anic recitation had an effect on his body, calming him, and he began to read the Qur’an himself. He memorized the Qur’an with other reciters, and learnt tajwīd (the chanted recitation of the Qur’an) from an expert in the town. He said that there is a connection between the Qur’an and the heart, and likened reading or listening to the Qur’an, God’s Speech, to recharging a battery. Just reciting it changes a person.

The mutual implication of perceiving, knowing, and ethical being evident in these accounts is a theme in Stefania Pandolfo’s work, Knot of the Soul, an ethnography of jinn possession, mental illness, and its treatment in Morocco (Pandolfo 2018). Pandolfo worked with a scholar and therapist, who she refers to as the “Imam,” who works within the tradition of Qur’anic and Prophetic medicine. Drawing on this tradition as it is interpreted and expressed in the practice of the Imam, Pandolfo develops what she calls an “ethnography of the imagination,” and describes the Imam’s therapy as “a kind of medical-spiritual phenomenology of the soul” (2018: 8).

In Pandolfo’s account of the Imam’s therapy, jinn are real. The jinn are not a manifestation of the afflicted person’s suffering, but rather the illness is itself
the manifestation of the *jinn* in the person’s body. The Imam further understands affliction as located in the person’s situation of trauma and despair, in their experiences of injustice, poverty, and dispossession. As Brahim does in his account, the Imam locates personal trauma in societal moral failure. Sorcery (*sihr*) and the evil eye are not metaphors for the existential state of injustice, but are this generalized, societal condition. The Imam characterizes affliction as “soul choking,” as preventing a person from perceiving and knowing God.

To recognize Fatma and Brahim’s experiences, however, is not to interpret out a distinctively Moroccan, or Islamic, worldview or cultural system within which they can make their own, internally coherent sense. They are not the ‘object’ for my analysis. In this regard the response of recognition shares with the vision of anthropology that has become known as the ‘ontological turn’ a resistance to representing the other (Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2009; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Further, it shares the aim of decentering the self, putting my concepts into question in an encounter with the other. However, to the extent that the ontological, or ontographic, approach is an effort to “make sense of” the other by redefining our own (the anthropologist’s) concepts to “approximate an understanding of native concepts” (Holbraad 2009: 90), it implies that the “native” occupies a world that is ontologically distinct from the world I inhabit, and that the task of the anthropologist is to make sense of that world.

Islamic thought does not constitute a bounded or coherent ontology, any more than the western tradition of philosophy does. Any such ontology would be my own construction that I produce from my reading of this diverse, historically ongoing tradition (Rasanayagam 2018). Moreover, a recurring theme in my conversations with Fatma was the difficulty of distinguishing between the effects of the evil eye, *jinn* possession, or a psychological state of depression. She recounted her own experiences of having had recourse both to the biomedical system of healthcare and Qur’anic healing, complicating any notion that a person occupies a unitary world that the concept of ontology or worldview would seem to suggest.

The aim of recognition is not to approximate the concepts of the other but to decenter my own. The accounts of *jinn* possession that were shared with me remain, in large part, other and external to me. Recognizing them is to accept that they have something significant to say to me. They are a call to me to visit the broader Islamic tradition that they creatively draw on, in an effort to interrogate my own conceptions, in this instance the secular distinctions between (objective universal) knowledge and (contingent, subjective) morality, between knowing, and ethical being, and the question of perception. The discussion that I present below on the thought of Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī is my response to what they shared, a critical examination of my secular conceptions through my reading of parts of that Islamic tradition.
Perception and Knowing: Ibn Sīnā and Descartes

Imagination, perception, and knowing are central themes in the accounts of jinni possession that were shared with me. However, the understanding of these concepts, as located within the Islamic tradition, is distinct from how they are produced in a modernist secular frame that rests on a separation between imagination as interior, subjective fantasy and knowledge of an empirical, objective reality. It is also distinct from a phenomenological understanding that challenges these oppositions. Questions of perception and knowing, how a human person can have certain knowledge, are central for both Ibn Sīnā and Descartes. Ibn Sīnā locates human perception and knowing both in the material world and in sources of knowing transcendent to it. His thinking is a development of the Neoplatonic, Aristotelian tradition interpreted within an Islamic theology of divine revelation through the Prophet Muhammad. From Neoplatonism, Ibn Sīnā takes on the conception of existence as ultimately an emanation from the One, the principle of all unity. In relation to the material world of everyday human existence, he further inherits from the Neoplatonic tradition the concept of form and matter, that the multitude of objects, organisms, and things that exist in the material world are made up of prime, first matter that becomes the particular thing when it is impressed with a form. These forms emanate from the Active Intellect, also referred to by Ibn Sīnā as the Giver of Forms, which in turn emanates from the One (McGinnis 2010). It is this classical tradition and its intromission theory of perception that Descartes rejects, and in doing so eliminates transcendence as a source of knowing.

In Ibn Sīnā’s thought, what distinguishes humans from animals is the rational soul or intellect. Conceptualization by the theoretical faculty, located in the brain, takes place through a process of abstraction by which, in contemplating some material object provided to the intellect by the external senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching, the particularizing accidents of time, place, color, and so on are stripped away to reveal an essence, such as ‘animality’ as opposed to a particular, individualized instance of an animal (McGinnis 2010: 99). Apprehension of the universal is a process of perception, a receiving of knowledge from outside the person, rather than an activity solely of rational thinking, entirely carried out within the mind, as it would be constructed in a modernist secular frame. By the intellectual work of abstraction, the theoretical intellect prepares itself to be illuminated by something like the light of the sun, emanating from the Active Intellect, which has in its essence the intelligible forms, and which confers or imprints them on the human intellect (Rahman 1952: 68–69). My intention is not to adopt Ibn Sīnā’s categories and concepts as a model for reality. In large part his thinking remains alien to me. In discussing Ibn Sīnā’s work and that of al-Ghazālī below, I am thinking through an Islamic tradition to develop a language in which I might recognize
the experiences of *jinn* that Fatma and Brahim recounted, as perception, where imagination is not reduced to subjective fantasy, without recasting them as really something else, and also without accepting their experiences as my own.

Ibn Sīnā’s thinking has in common with Descartes’s ideas a duality of mind and world, subject and object. A critical difference is in their ideas of perception. Descartes rejected the classical Greek tradition of perception that Ibn Sīnā built on. For Descartes, perception is not the receiving of forms that imprint onto the respective faculties of the body, but perception is the mental operation itself. In his representational theory, perception is the idea, the judgment and understanding produced by the mind, of an external object in the world. Therefore, perception becomes something internal to the mind and the problem becomes one of determining the correspondence between the actually existing object in the world and its representation as an interior, mental idea (Hass 2008: 11–25). Descartes marks a critical move towards the secular frame. He places the human person at the center of their own world by placing perception of it within their own mind. His rejection of earlier ideas of perception is a move towards locating creativity in the human, rather than positioning the human as simply receiving forms produced external to them. At the same time, with the rejection of the classical Greek tradition, the notion of transcendence is also lost, and with it a connection to the world that extends beyond an interior, mental representation of that world.

**The Phenomenological Critique**

Merleau-Ponty positions his philosophy as a refutation of this representational or intellectualist model of perception, as well as the empiricist tradition that understands perception as the mechanical result of stimuli that act on the sense organs. Both, he argues, pre-suppose an objective world, external and prior to the perceiving subject. Instead, Merleau-Ponty wants to recover perception as a primary opening up to the world, the “particular manner in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its object” (2012: 28). This is what Csordas and Luhrmann have developed productively in their ethnographic engagements with North American Charismatic Christian congregations. What interests me most in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is the question of transcendence, and whether what is lost in Descartes’s move can be recovered through it.

For Merleau-Ponty, the world is transcendent in that it is not presented before the subject, preformed, prior to perception, but emerges in an embodied engagement with it and exceeds any idea a subject might have of it.

When I say that things are transcendent, this signifies that I do not possess them, that I do not encompass them; they are transcendent to the extent
that I am unaware of what they are and blindly affirm their bare existence. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 388)

Transcendence for Merleau-Ponty is not an absolute alterity, outside the subject, as is Ibn Sīnā’s Active Intellect, but is the creative, embodied engagement of a subject in the world that exceeds our immediate, situated perspective and draws the subject out into it. In the natural world, he gives the example of a situated view of a landscape, which contains within it the possible landscape beyond the presently visible horizon, and further an infinite series of possible perspectives.

What has made Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, and phenomenology more generally, so powerful in the modern, secular era is that it opens space for the creative production of self and world that is entirely immanent, without reliance on divine, supernatural, or any other source of creativity and knowledge beyond one world we all inhabit. But it is this very immanence that inhibits Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology from recognizing the experiences of Fatma and Brahim. Rather than opening a space for possibility, it recasts their experiences in its own terms.

This is made clear in the discussion in *Phenomenology of Perception* of what Merleau-Ponty calls “hallucinatory phenomena” (2012: 349–358). He maintains that the patient is able to distinguish between their hallucinations and their sense perceptions, so that they can distinguish between what is a hallucination of a person or voices, and what is a person or voices actually present in the world. Since the patient does not “believe” in hallucinations in the same way that they do sense perception, he states that when they say they see or hear something, we should not believe but rather “understand” them. This is not to experience the hallucination as it is experienced by the patient, to enter their perspective, but rather to make “explicit his hallucinatory belief and my real belief, and of understanding them through each other” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 354).

The person suffering hallucinations does not see and does not hear in the normal sense; he makes use of his sensory fields and his natural insertion in a world in order to fabricate for himself, with the debris of this world, an artificial milieu conforming to the total intention of his being. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 357)

From this position, when Fatma and Brahim recount their experiences of *jinn* I should not believe them to be perceptions of the real world. Rather, I understand them as virtual fabrications, internal to the subject, produced from their actual involvement in the world and their own suffering and conflicts within it. I can understand their accounts, but I cannot recognize them. Phenomenology
closes off recognition of a central theme of their accounts, which is the ethical nature of perception and knowing.

Bernhard Leistle (2014) has suggested a phenomenological theory of spirit possession that he argues would avoid reducing it to ‘our’ logic. For Leistle, the anthropologist is faced with a demand to choose sides, either rejecting the experience as an illusion or category error, or else abandoning their own position of rationality. Leistle seeks to avoid this oppositional choice. He draws on the phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels who, in Leistle’s presentation of that thinker’s “philosophy of responsivity” (Leistle 2014: 64), argues that any self, and any order, arises out of a response to something alien to it, in particular the radically alien, which lies outside any possible interpretation by the self. The alien places a demand on the subject to which a response must be made, and this demand and response is the source of creativity and change. For Leistle, the spirits themselves are not what is alien. Rather, possession cultures are the means by which the radically alien is responded to, made part of the order. Returning to the experiences of Fatma and Brahim, the alien would be their experiences of distress, dislocation, and suffering that alienate them within their existing life world. However, this is in fact the immanent reality that I am arguing is the only reality recognized by phenomenology. For Leistle, alienness is responded to within what would be understood as a Moroccan cultural complex of jinn possession, which makes their experiences part of their cultural order and enables them to recover and transform their selves. Leistle argues that this phenomenological perspective allows the anthropologist to recognize that spirits exist in experience, that the subject is actually possessed and does not just think they are possessed. However, by understanding jinn and the wider Islamic tradition in which they are located as a cultural production, phenomenology closes off an engagement with that tradition.

I am suggesting a shift from a phenomenological stance of understanding to an ethnical stance of recognition, and I read such a shift in Tim Ingold’s recent work. In “On Not Knowing and Paying Attention,” Ingold (2023) suggests a mode of attending to the world in which he opposes knowledge, which makes the world its object, with wisdom, which makes it its milieu. Wisdom for Ingold expresses a relation of mutual response and care, of correspondence, which I read as an ethical practice. Correspondence invokes “the process by which beings or things literally answer to one another over time” (Ingold 2023: 31). It is a “feeling forward,” a continually responsive improvisation:

The choice, here, is between understanding and undercommoning. If to understand means finding support in a shared foundation, undercommoning is just the opposite. It is not a reversion to a baseline of what we all have in common to begin with, but rather a way of living together in possibility. (Ingold 2023: 33; original italics)
If phenomenology aims towards understanding how a world and self come into being in perceptual experience, how the real becomes real, Ingold’s shift to paying attention as an opening up to possibility is less a phenomenological account and more the suggestion for an ethical stance in encounters with others and the world. The question is no longer that of understanding the ‘reality’ of jinn. Rather, for the anthropologist, it is about opening oneself up to the possibility of jinn, and to the Islamic tradition with which Fatma and Brahim are in conversation. It enables recognition of what is central to their narratives, and a theme in the Islamic philosophical tradition, which is the mutual implication of perceiving, knowing, and ethical being. Possession by jinn and the overcoming of that condition is in their narratives a process of ethical transformation that brought them closer to God, and also closer to true knowing.

Post-secular Anthropology as Recognition

Al-Ghazālī’s reply to the rationalism of the classical Arab philosophers, including Ibn Sīnā, takes a very different direction from Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Descartes. The key critique he makes is of the philosophers’ privileging of the purely rational activity of the intellect. Instead, al-Ghazālī puts forward an idea of knowing that is not only rational but also, most importantly, bound up with an ethical state of being. This is expressed in his focus on the heart as the distinctively human organ of perception of God.

For it is the heart that knows God, and works for God, and strives toward God, and draws near to Him, and reveals that which is in the presence of God. The members of the body . . . are merely followers, servants, and instruments that the heart uses and employs as a king uses his slave, as the shepherd makes use of his flock, or as the craftsman uses his tool. (Al-Ghazālī 2010: 1–2)

The heart, al-Ghazālī writes in The Niche of Lights, is known by others variously as the rational faculty, spirit, or human soul (Al-Ghazālī 1998: 5). This would be what is, for Ibn Sīnā, the intellect. Alexander Treiger, a commentator on al-Ghazālī’s work, has pointed out how his ideas have a firm foundation in Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy, including the idea that perception is made possible through illumination from what Ibn Sīnā calls the Active Intellect (Treiger 2012). Al-Ghazālī does not radically break from Ibn Sīnā’s ideas of the intellect. Rather, his focus on the heart expresses the idea that ethical being is intimately bound up with perception and knowing.

Continuing Ibn Sīnā’s illuminationist language, al-Ghazālī presents knowledge of the real nature of things as God’s light that is reflected in the heart. He uses the metaphor of a mirror to emphasize the mutual implication of ethical
being, knowing, and perception. Knowledge is an image, reflected in the mirror of the heart, but the heart needs to be prepared to reflect it clearly through ethical work on the self. The heart needs to be polished, to remove the dirt and dullness that prevents it from clearly reflecting images of the real, and it needs to be turned in the correct direction (Al-Ghazālī 2010: 35–39). For al-Ghazālī, the science of practice concerns human conduct, both the exterior action of the body, such as daily activities and ritual action such as prayer, and also the interior actions of the heart. Treiger describes this as a training of the soul, focused on combating vices, cultivating virtues, and developing states of thankfulness and reliance on God (Treiger 2012: 37–38). Finally, it is up to God to reveal knowledge to the heart. Al-Ghazālī expresses this as unveiling:

For whomsoever the veil is lifted between himself and God, the form of the material world . . . and of the world of spirits . . . is clearly manifest in his heart, and he sees a Garden the width of a part of which is that of the heavens and the earth. (Al-Ghazālī 2010: 40)

For Ibn Sinā, the most perfect activity for a human is the work of the intellect, theorizing, contemplating God, the “Necessary Existent,” a purely rational activity (McGinnis 2010: 210). For al-Ghazālī, perfection is expressed by the terms witnessing and tasting, a state of being rather than an activity, in which reality is perceived immediately and directly (Treiger 2012: 55–57).

Imagination in al-Ghazālī’s thought is not subjective fantasy. Imagination and knowledge are not set up in opposition to each other, as they are in the secular frame. As images of the world and God in the heart, perception, knowing, and ethical being are mutually implicated in each other. This provides an alternative language to that of phenomenology with which to respond to Fatma and Brahim’s experiences of jinn. Al-Ghazālī describes the heart as having two doors, one open toward the world of spirits, which is the Preserved Tablet and the world of angels. The other opens to the visible, material world through the bodily senses. In waking visions or dreams, the world of spirits can be perceived, when it is unveiled to the subject. In addition, through these doors the heart is influenced from without via the external senses, or from within by the imagination, appetite, and anger. These need to be disciplined to maintain the heart’s focus on God. The most important of these influences on the heart are “involuntary suggestions” or ideas and recollections that move the will and stir up desires and intentions. When these suggestions lead to evil, in that they have a harmful result, they are called “prompting to evil” or waswās (Al-Ghazālī 2010: 77–90). This would be what Fatma and Brahim experienced in their contact with jinn.

Drawing, in part, on the thought of al-Ghazālī, the Imam who figures in Pandolfo’s ethnography sees the affliction and suffering of his patients as
images that damage the heart. These images, incited and insinuated by jinn, become habitual and cloud a person’s perception, sealing the heart from knowledge of God. The Imam’s characterizes his therapeutic practice, in which Qur’anic recitation occupies a central place, as a pedagogical intervention aimed at the repossession of the imagination, the cultivation of an “affirmative imagination.” For the Imam, as for Brahim and Fatma, affliction by jinn is a trial, the overcoming of which brings a person closer to God and true perception.

Again, my intention is not to uncover an Islamic ontology with which I can make sense of Fatma and Brahim’s experiences. Rather, I want to develop a conceptual language to respond to them. I think of recognition as responding to the call of the other, accepting that the other has something important to say to me. Much within the accounts of jinn possession, and the thought of Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī, remains other to me, but they open up a space for what Ingold has written about as possibility. It is precisely the alterity of the other that is the grounds for creativity and knowing that draws me outside myself (Rasanayagam 2018). This is what moves recognition beyond simply bracketing out the experience of the other. Recognition is an ethical relation rather than an act of description, and demands an active engagement with both the experiences of Fatma and Brahim and the Islamic tradition on which they draw. Kahn presents post-secular anthropology as a mutual transformation of self and other. When the anthropologist encounters “ontological construals” other to their own, rather than suspending disbelief, the engagement should generate for Kahn “a shifting of the horizons of both self and other as a common horizon is created out of the encounter” (2011: 82). The common horizon, as I see it, need not be defined by a mutual sharing of perspective or a taking up of one another’s position, but by recognition. A post-secular anthropology would be a relational mode of knowing that is oriented to self-transformation and critique through recognition of the other and that does not insist on ontological coherence or agreement. In my conversations with Fatma and Brahim, and my reading of the wider Islamic tradition, I can allow my concepts of reality and fantasy, of knowledge and belief, which are rooted in a modernist secular frame, to be challenged and decentered, to open up a space for possibility.

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**Note**

1. Research in Morocco was conducted between 2014 and 2019, in three trips that in total amounted to a period of eight months. The research was conducted in the city of Fes and in a town in Middle Atlas mountains. The language used was Moroccan Arabic. All names are pseudonyms.

**References**


