

Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology

James M. Nelson*, Jonah Koetke

Why We Need the Demonic: A Phenomenological Analysis of Negative Religious Experience

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0041 Received June 13, 2018; accepted September 20, 2018

Abstract: An enduring feature of Christian religious life has been the experience of the *demonic*. This experience can be found in the New Testament, most obviously in reported encounters with demons, but more centrally in the language of spiritual warfare that pervades much of the Pauline literature. In the Patristic period, these ideas were cemented in the Christian tradition in the writings of the Desert Fathers. A phenomenological understanding of experience holds that percepts have qualities that are inherently given as part of the experience, and that these qualities can be observed through the use of phenomenological concepts. An examination of the writings of the Desert Fathers suggests that one inherent quality of some religious experiences is their externality. Thoughts or feelings within the person are perceived as having an external source, and external threats can take on an embodied quality in perception, as in visions of demonic beings. These experiences have their initial constitution in an Otherness centered in the body. On reflection, it is not surprising that we would find a quality of externality in religious experience. Religion and spirituality deal with our relationship to the broader world around us. Recent phenomenological writings by Levinas and Marion have begun to recover the importance of externality, however, they neglect aspects of *demonic* experiences such as their negative valence. Critics of the demonic have tried hard to expel the idea from Western consciousness, pointing to tragic experiences in early modern history and the apparent need to posit the existence of immaterial entities. However, a careful phenomenological and historical analysis casts serious doubt on this modernist picture. The abandonment of the demonic in much of Christian religious thought and practice carries negative consequences, as it invalidates the external quality of many difficult religious experiences. A recovery of the concept of the demonic would help us better understand the phenomenology of religious life.

Keywords: phenomenology, possession, demon, evil, theodicy, mystical experience, embodiment

1 Introduction: Discovering the demonic

In our contemporary culture, a mention of the word "demonic" in conversation will be rewarded by expressions of discomfort or distaste. This is truly unfortunate, as the concept of the *demonic* offers a unique window to an important aspect of human experience. Contrary to this generally-held but unfortunate aversion, in this paper we will be using the tools of phenomenology to argue that:

- 1. The experience of the *demonic* is a powerful phenomenon with its own structure
- 2. This structure is different from that of demon possession, which is its own kind of experience with different phenomenological characteristics

^{*}Corresponding author: James M. Nelson, Valparaiso University, United States of America; E-mail: Jim.Nelson@valpo.edu Jonah Koetke, Valparaiso University, United States of America

- A key part of the phenomenology of the demonic is its externality, a feature that recent phenomenologists are particularly well poised to appreciate although they do not capture it in their work
- The externality of the demonic allows the experience to be used in positive ways in the life of the individual
- The experience of the *demonic* has largely been invalidated, depriving individuals not only of an important tool for spiritual growth, but also removing a key phenomenon on which the intersubjective world is built.

1.1 What we are not doing

Initially, it may be helpful to clarify what we are not doing in this paper. One use of phenomenology is as a doorway to discover something essential about the world, as the structure of phenomena surely tells us something about existence in general or some feature of the world in particular. This of course was part of Heidegger's project, as in *Being and Time*, where he attempts to make the move from phenomenology to ontology and "the meaning of being." There is nothing wrong with projects such as this, although they have their limitations. Husserl himself evidently believed that phenomenology could reveal evidence that could provide grounds for knowledge.² A phenomenology of the demonic certainly has ontological implications, perhaps providing hints that would lead us to a better understanding of the nature of evil, with which it is surely connected. This would also be a way of approaching the veridicality of these experiences. However, here we are interested in the phenomenology of the demonic qua demonic; that is, what is the phenomenological structure of the experience of the *demonic* without regard to veridicality?³

Another thing we are not doing is attempting to construct a universal phenomenology of the *demonic*. Certainly the *demonic* in various forms has made its appearance in cultures and religious traditions all over the world. Constructing a phenomenology that covers these experiences in all different settings is to make an *a priori* assumption that these are at some foundational level the same kind of experience. This assumption is often made by scholars writing about aspects of the demonic.⁴ Perhaps this assumption is warranted, but it is more helpful to take a skeptical stance and focus on the experience of the demonic within a particular religious and cultural environment before trying to build some greater structure.

1.2 What we are doing

The positive project we are attempting is to build a phenomenology of the *demonic* as it was experienced by early Christians, particularly those in the early spiritual communities of the Egyptian desert.⁵ This

¹ Heidegger, Being and Time, ¶2; cf. ¶7. A similar move is to attempt to use phenomenology of specific experiences to illuminate a more general phenomena. This is how I see Ricoeur's attempt to journey from phenomenology to the nature of evil by way of symbolism (see Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, especially 25-46).

² Husserl, Logical Investigations, Prologue §6.

³ On the general issues involved in veridicality of religious experience, see Steinbock, Phenomenology and Mysticism.

⁴ Examples of this would be works dealing with demon possession in the late Medieval and Early Modern period, as in Levack, The Devil Within; Clark, Thinking with Demons; or Sluhovsky, Believe not Every Spirit.

⁵ As soon as we state a positive project, we run across the question of how to think about human experience in general or religious experience in particular. When considering experiences we tend to take a weak or strong view of the subject. In a weak view of experience, our object of study is a phenomenon that manifests itself in only a few people in the community and it is not a relevant category for most. For instance, we might consider "mental illness" as a lack of mental health in an unfortunate few, so that it is property that is predicated of only a few individuals, or in the case of religious experience we might view "mystical experiences" as a particular type of phenomena that only certain people are privy to, which is how William James in works like Varieties of Religious Experience and Essays in Radical Empiricism seems to have thought about the subject. A stronger view of experience argues that everyone within a particular community—or perhaps all communities—will encounter a phenomenon in one way or another. With regard to the previous example, "mental illness" can be thought of as an "illness of the soul" and thus a matter for everyone—in fact, this view of mental health and illness predominated in early Christian communities.

is particularly attractive because within these groups, the *demonic* was not something thought of as a problem for a few individuals, but rather something that everyone in the Christian community must confront at some point; the "demonic" extended beyond the phenomenon of "demon possession," with which it is often confused. This strong perspective on the *demonic* holds that not every experience is one of the *demonic*, but that everyone in the community may or will have an experience of it.

2 Approaching the demonic

2.1 The nature, scope and importance of the demonic

The investigation of any phenomenon always contains an element of paradox. We wish to understand a phenomenon by bracketing out things, but unless we have things in mind we can't identify the phenomenon and thus, have nothing to bracket. If we want to study cats, we must have some preliminary understanding of what a cat is (furry, four legs, tail, etc.) and where to look for it. Some kind of pre-understanding is thus built in to the beginnings of the phenomenological enterprise. That is why phenomenology and hermeneutics with its concept of the hermeneutic circle are so closely tied together.⁶

A phenomenology of the *demonic* must begin with a prior understanding of it, but not be limited by this pre-understanding. A place to begin forming this initial understanding lies in *language*, in this case the Greek language used by early Christians to talk about their experiences. Here we see two clusters of terms and meanings used to refer to the demonic. Most commonly, the words found are *descriptive predicates*, either substantives like $\delta\alpha\mu\dot{\nu}$ 000 or $\delta\alpha\dot{\mu}\omega\nu$ 000 that refer to a divine power or inferior divine beings, or adjectives like $\delta\alpha\mu\dot{\nu}$ 000 that refer to a miraculous or divine quality of power. The "being" aspect of meaning appears to refer to a perceived intelligence or sentience behind the beings or forces. On the other hand, other words for divine in Greek like $\theta\epsilon$ 100 or $\delta\alpha\mu\dot{\nu}$ 100 have a *causal meaning*, indicating that a being or source of power came from a superior, nonhuman realm. We could combine these to derive an initial definition of *demonic* experience something like this: *The experience of a being or power that is* (1) divine or semi-divine in origin, (2) intelligent in quality and (3) quantitatively or qualitatively superior to the human. Here (1) is causal and interpretive, while (2) and (3) are descriptors applied to qualities of an encounter.

These meanings are helpful, but they mix descriptive and causal language, a frequent problem in the development of categories. When we take the natural attitude toward the world, experience becomes blurred with interpretive concepts and language related to our beliefs about cause or the usefulness of the object of our experience (e.g., whether or not something is "ready-to-hand"). However, phenomenology tries to not be controlled by this starting point, but rather to explore the phenomenon as it presents itself independent of causal interpretation, maintaining a kind of skeptical stance. Descriptive and causal terms for the *demonic* both reflect phenomenal characteristics of the experience as a power or being as quantitatively greater or qualitatively more excellent than the human, but causal terms contain more interpretive baggage about the source of an event or state of affairs. If we remove causal clause (1) from the above, we arrive at a starting definition: *The demonic is an experience of a power or agency that is (1) intelligent in quality and (2) quantitatively and/or qualitatively superior to the human*.

⁶ Cf. e.g., Gadamer, Truth and Method, 265-271.

⁷ Liddell & Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, and Lampe, A Greek Patristic Lexicon, passim.

⁸ For instance, in classical medical descriptions of mental illness, the phrase μέλανια χολή is used with reference to a particular condition (a type of depression) and is thus a descriptive term, but also refers to the cause of the problem (an excess of black bile). See e.g., Hippocrates, "On Regimen in Acute Diseases," Pts. 5, 8; and "On the Sacred Disease," Sec. 1. For a general description of this problem of description vs. causation as a basis for categorization, see e.g., Wikforss, "Are Natural Kind Terms Special?" and Chakravartty, *A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism*.

2.2 Traditional explanations of the demonic

Many scholarly works on the demonic, both thoughtful and dismissive, seem to analyze it as a kind of belief about supernatural beings which lacks veridicality. This treats the subject from a logical basis—the demonic is seen as a collection of propositional statements. However, from a phenomenological point of view this explanation is not satisfactory, for while "demon" is a term that describes a particular kind of metaphysical being that one may or may not believe in, the term "demonic" describes a kind of experience, or a property that can be predicated of certain kinds of experiences, perhaps some that possess a universal character. In this case, a phenomenological approach to the problem may tell us much that a propositional or doctrinal approach will fail to notice.

Rudolf Otto appears to recognize the experiential nature of the demonic in his work The Idea of the Holy. In his definition of the numinous or non-rational component of the Holy he includes the feeling of mysterium tremendum, which includes a sense of mystery, "that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and familiar" that is combined with combined with a sense of religious awe or dread, a feeling of an overpowering and consuming presence with great power.¹⁰ He argues this feeling of *mysterium tremendum* could be incorporated in a variety of experiences, including "sudden eruptions from the depths of the soul" that could be described as "wild and demonic forms" of the numinous experience. He was somewhat dismissive of the experience of the $\delta\alpha$ ($\mu\omega\nu$ as "the numen at a lower stage, in which it is still trammeled and suppressed,"12 seeing it as an earlier and more original expression of the numinous.¹³ However, it is important to not overread his statements in reference to the demonic. His references are generally to $\delta\alpha$ ($\mu\omega\nu$, i.e., to metaphysical beings rather than to the more general concept of the *demonic*, and his judgment of the δαίμων as some kind of "lower stage" is likely in part a comparison of how demons and the Other appear in earlier non-Christian religions. 4 So his approach appears to offer little specifics in building a phenomenological understanding of the demonic.

2.3 Sources of information

The demonic has been an enduring feature of Christian religious life and thus there would seem to be many potential sources of information about it. In early Christianity, one of the main set of texts relevant to this topic are the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, 15 which provide a rich source of information on the demonic.

Interestingly, in this period we possess no first person accounts from those who were possessed by demons, or accounts of people who spoke with them about the experience. Narratives involving these situations describe the behavior of the possessed person and the experience of the individuals around them, but not the direct experience of the possessed person themselves. Furthermore, there are no accounts of monks struggling with the *demonic* becoming possessed, or a former demoniac entering the monastic life. Monks are pictured as trying to avoid situations where they must confront a person who was possessed. As a result, we have very limited access to the phenomenal structure of such an experience. On the other hand, encounters with the demonic that do not involve possession are frequent and appear to include first, second and third-person accounts. This strongly suggests that in the thought of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, demon possession and the demonic were distinct phenomena, with the demonic a more broadly relevant experience.

⁹ Otto, The Idea of the Holy, 13.

¹⁰ Nelson, Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, 127.

¹¹ Otto, Idea of the Holy, 13.

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Watson, "To sketch an essence."

¹⁴ E.g., Otto, Mysticism East and West, 143.

¹⁵ Key texts would include the Ward collection of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, and Russell's edition of the Lives of the Desert Fathers, as well as in works by Evagrius Ponticus such as the Praktikos and writings in the Greek Ascetic Corpus collected by Sinkewicz. Since the Evagrian texts are more explicitly interpretive, we depend mainly on Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Lives of the Desert Fathers in our analysis.

3 Phenomenological reflection

3.1 The approach

A phenomenological understanding of experience holds that percepts have qualities that are inherently given as part of the experience, and that these qualities can be described using the language of phenomenology. Several are of particular importance in a reflection of demonic experience.

3.1.1 Intentionality, presence and absence

A core concept in phenomenology is *intentionality*, the idea that a fundamental aspect of consciousness is that it is consciousness of something, "an object" but not necessarily "a thing." This was a fundamental insight of Brentano, and has been a deeply imbedded but sometimes contentious focus within phenomenology. However, as Solokowski notes, intentionality need not be a *filled* intentionality, but can be *empty*, targeting something that is "intended in its absence." Experience is a blend of presence and absence. The *demonic* may thus be a phenomenal object even when not present, especially if traces in consciousness suggest the activity of an object that has no immediate sense of presence.

3.1.2 Levels of intentionality

Solokowski also notes that intentionality occurs at various levels. An assumption that can be made is that intentionality always involves the direction of thought to an object of sensory perception. So, I notice the cat sitting on my lap, or the individual sitting next to me in the room. These can be valid instances of intentionality. However, higher levels of intentionality founded on perceptions are part of specifically human mental life, and these levels can involve things like language (*signitive intentionality*) or states of affairs and propositions (*categorical intentionality*). This occurs through a process of successive passive views of an object, highlighting features of the object and presenting it as a unity with whole and parts distinguished.

3.1.3 Modes of intentionality and embodiment

While the visual is a key mode of perception, other modes may also contribute to things presented to us in perception. The manifold of perception is multimodal, and this plurality of modes provides a clearer picture of the object. Given the importance of language in phenomenology, it would be surprising if auditory events were not frequently the objects of intentionality. Contributions from visual and kinesthetic perception are also possible. While no doubt our experience of our own body is different than our experience of other things in the world, "yet the body is also a thing in the world and is presented as such." The boundary is in some ways blurred, so that perceptions of the world can become embodied experiences. These observations on embodiment suggest that intentionality can involve a physical experience of objects. Furthermore, higher

¹⁶ Brentano, Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint, 68-69 and passim; cf. Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology, 4.

¹⁷ Solokowski, Introduction to Phenomenology, 35.

¹⁸ Solokowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 77-93. Note here that categorial intentionality does not refer to something completely divorced from sense perception; Husserl thought that objects could be "categorical in type" but that the idea they existed complete divorced from any foundation in sense perception was "a piece of nonsense." See the Sixth Investigation in the *Logical Investigations*, §§60-62.

¹⁹ Solokowski, Introduction to Phenomenology, 124.

²⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 81-83.

levels of intentionality may not only involve perceptions of the body, but unified objects that draw on multiple sensory modes.21

3.1.4 Intersubjectivity

As others perceive the same phenomena we gain insight into their subjectivity as well as an enhanced understanding of the world. This process is maximized when people share their experiences of certain phenomena,²² A phenomenology of the *demonic* should consider how perceptions of it might be shared among people, and how this sharing might heighten knowledge of the object as well as deepen the level of intersubjective understanding between the participants.

We will keep the core concepts of intentionality, multisensory embodiment and intersubjectivity in mind as we attempt to construct a phenomenology of the *demonic* in the Desert Fathers.

3.2 A phenomenology of the Desert Fathers

We can begin by considering two stories from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, one of an older person that turns out poorly, the other a young man with a positive outcome:

'For example, there was a monk,' he said, 'who lived in a cave in the nearer desert and had given proof of the strongest ascetic discipline. He obtained his daily bread by the work of his own hands. But because he persevered with his prayers and made progress in the virtues, he came eventually to trust in himself, placing his reliance on his good way of life. Then the Tempter asked for him, as he did with Job, and in the evening presented him the image of a beautiful woman in the desert. Finding the door open she darted into the cave, and throwing herself at the man's knees begged him to give her shelter since the darkness had overtaken her. He took pity on her, which he should not have done, and received her as a guest in his cove. Moreover, he asked her about her journey. She told him how she had lost her way and sowed in him words of flattery and deceit. She kept on talking to him for some time, and somehow gently enticed him to fall in love with her. The conversation became much freer, and there was laughter and hilarity. With so much talking she led him astray. Then she began to touch his hand and beard and neck. And finally, she made the ascetic her prisoner. As for him, his mind seethed with evil thoughts as he calculated that the matter was already within his grasp, and that he had the opportunity and the freedom to fulfill his pleasure. He then consented inwardly and in the end tried to unite with her sexually. He was frantic by now, like an excited stallion eager to mount a mare. But suddenly she gave a loud cry and vanished from his clutches, slipping away like a shadow. And the air resounded with a great peal of laughter. It was the demons who had led him astray with their deception rebuking him and calling out with a loud voice," "Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased. (Luke 14:11; 18:14) You once exalted yourself to the heavens but now you have been humiliated and brought down to the depths." 'In the morning he got up, dragging behind him the miserable experience of the night. He spent the whole day in lamentation, and then, despairing of his own salvation, which is something he should not have done, he went back to the world. For that is what the evil one generally does: when he overcomes someone he makes him lose his judgment, that afterwards he should no longer be able to raise himself up.'23

The second narrative is a story about a young man in the city who sinned and fled to a cemetery to repent:

After a week had gone by, some of the demons which earlier had done such great harm to his life appeared to him in the night, calling out and saying, "Where is that abominable fellow? Now that he has really satiated himself with his debaucheries, he has, at an inopportune time for us, suddenly turned chaste and good But what good does he expect to attain, laden as he is with our vices? Will you not get up and leave this place at once ...? Will you not come and indulge your desires, since every other hope has been extinguished for you ...? You belong to us; you are bound to us; you have practiced every kind of lawlessness; you have become subject to us all and do you dare to escape ...?' Since they gained nothing by repeating the same things over and over again, the wicked demons seized hold of him and tortured his whole body savagely. And having lacerated him and tormented him cruelly, they went away leaving him half dead On the third night the demons came very near to killing the man altogether. They fell on him mercilessly with tortures and maltreated him

²¹ Cf. Dahl, Phenomenology and the Holy, 139-149.

²² Husserl, Crisis, §§47-54.

²³ Lives of the Desert Fathers, 1.32-1.36, 56-57.

to his last breath. When they saw that he would not surrender, they withdrew, leaving him, however, senseless. As they departed they cried out, saying "You have won; you have won, you have won." And nothing frightening ever happened to him again. On the contrary, he dwelt in the tomb as a pure man without any defilement ... [he] also gave such striking proof of the power to work miracles that he excited admiration in many and stimulated zeal in them for good works. As a result of this, a great number of those who had utterly despaired of themselves pursued good practices and lived a virtuous life. 24

These stories carry within them the phenomenal structure of the *demonic*. Some of the major structural themes might be as follows.

3.2.1 Externality

Many experiences of encounters with the *demonic* can be found in the literature of the desert, remarkably in every case the *demonic* is perceived as something beyond the individual. This externality is one of the most consistent features in the phenomenology of the *demonic*.²⁵ Thoughts or feelings within the person are perceived as having an external source, and external threats can take on an embodied quality in perception as with other perceptions of external objects. Sometimes this could involve an experience of something that is *literally external*, as in a vision of a demon at a distance, but it also could be a perceived *intrusion of something other than oneself into one's thoughts and feelings*. In the literature, demons could be bound and kept at a distance;²⁶ rulers of darkness come against us from the outside, accusing us, as do the divine powers that present our good deeds.²⁷ The *demonic* can also exercise external influence through the implantation or "stirring up" of thoughts in the monk.²⁸ This perception of externality allows the monk to focus their efforts on struggle without feeling internal division, helping them to be whole people as they seek to overcome barriers to spiritual progress.²⁹

On reflection, it is not surprising that we would find a quality of externality in religious experience. Religion and spirituality deal with our relationship to the broader world around us, so it would be remarkable if religious experiences did not have a component of externality. Modern neuroscience research also suggests that the brain is hardwired to detect and attend to external perceptions as external to us. For instance, Posner has developed a widely-accepted theory of attentional systems in the brain that includes an exogenous or bottom-up system that is driven by external events.³⁰ The brain is actually weighted toward the operation of this external system rather than internal control. The endogenous system directs consciousness toward external events, especially those of a novel or threatening character.

In early Christianity, distinguishing internality and externality in experiences from each other was a difficult matter. From a Hussrlian perspective, it is not surprising that the boundary between the two could be porous, and that such experiences might be experientially indistinguishable from each other. Husserl thought the body to be a kind of two-way meeting place between the internal and external, ³¹ so that from a natural standpoint a given bodily experience might be perceived as coming from either source, and from a phenomenological standpoint the difference between "internal" and "external" did not make sense as these do not constitute experience. The question then becomes, how did early Christians view the constitution of experiences marked by externality versus those that were not?

²⁴ Ibid., 1.37-1.44, 58-59.

²⁵ The term *externality* here is used to distinguish this category from that of *exteriority*, a term used by Levinas that has a slightly different meaning. Exteriority in Levinas is associated with alterity and thus is a universal quality of being outside us that is perceived as Other (see *Totality and Infinity*, 194-197).

²⁶ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 78.

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ "... observe your thoughts, and beware of what you have in your heart and your spirit, knowing that the demons put ideas into you so as to corrupt your soul by making it think of that which is not right, in order to turn your spirit from the consideration of your sins and of God." (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 71; cf. 234-235).

²⁹ On the issue of struggle in the context of desert monasticism see Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk.

³⁰ Posner, "Orienting of attention."

³¹ Ales Bello, "The language of our living body;" cf. Behnke, "Edmund Husserl's contribution to phenomenology of the body in Ideas II," Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment*, and Tani, "The ego, the Other, and the primal fact."

3.2.1.1 Externality and Otherness

In order to look at constituting structures, we must go beneath the natural attitude to the phenomenological stance.³² The natural attitude as it appears in Descartes is that all thoughts are our own and thus can be clearly demarcated from the external world. The *cogito* in his work is a statement of personal ownership of cognition, which provides a kind of basic proof for personal identity and an epistemological foundation for perceiving the outside world. The thoughts themselves are internal to the person but clearly demarcated from the body.³³ However, from a phenomenological standpoint the "external" cannot provide a constitution for "externality" because the difference between the internal and external is dissolved. What can take its place?

One strong possibility for a constituting structure is the concept of Otherness found in phenomenology. The concept has a rich history, both in the work of Husserl and in its later elaboration by writers like Levinas. In the natural attitude sense of internal and external, Husserl seems to deny the idea of otherness, as internal and external meet in the body and thus have no clear demarcation. On the other hand, a fundamental constitutive category for intersubjectivity in Husserl is the experience of the alter ego who is other than myself and separated by an irreducible gap.³⁴ An alternative possibility to Husserl is that of Levinas, for whom the Other is a general expression of alterity. Depending on the specific French term used in his writings and the context, Other (Autre, Autru, Autrui and Autrui) might refer to an object or a human, something that can be an object of intentionality, or not, an Other that can be in a kind of Hegelian negation of the Same, and may have a dimension of height or transcendence that allows it to present a face to us.³⁵

An important aspect of Otherness is that it is not necessarily tied to experiences that are perceived as either external or internal. As the external and internal meet in the body, an embodied experience of otherness might be seen as a phenomenon of the external world, as in a vision, or something in the internal world, such as a thought or emotion. Thus, conceiving of externality as Otherness rather than the external leads to coverage of a different range of phenomena.

3.2.1.2 Externality and otherness in the Desert literature

In the natural attitude of Descartes, externality and the external are interchangeable terms, both involving extended objects outside of ourselves. However, in the desert literature, this assumption is absent. Externality can be felt in the thoughts and feelings that were internal to the person as well as in "external" experiences such as visions. It is apparent that externality requires a different kind of constituting structure from simply a perception of external, extended existence. This attitude is challenged in early Christianity, as when the Desert Fathers and Mothers seem ready to step back from the natural attitude to the more fundamental category of Otherness. At the constitutive level, the demonic is something that is Other than me. It confronts and represents a challenge to me. When a thought is identified as Other it becomes an "alien" thought (λογισμὸς): "... if an alien thought [λογισμὸς] arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at once to your help."36 The structure of Otherness, then, is a candidate for the formal constitution of the experience of externality.

What constituted signs of externality and thus of Otherness for early Christians? The Desert Fathers and Mothers did not find that to be an easy question to answer, as like in Husserl the boundary between internal and external is porous in their writings. There could be reasonable doubt about whether a particular thought or vision was demonic.³⁷ Indications of otherness certainly included the presence of unusual sensory qualities in the experience, such as visions, 38 voices, 39 or sensations of touch. 40 The kinds of things

³² Cf. Louchakova-Schwartz, "Qualia of God," especially 259-260.

³³ Descartes, "Treatise on the Passions," I.17; "Meditations on First Philosophy," Second Meditation, 18.

³⁴ Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, 94, 110-118; Geniušas, "Self-consciousness and Otherness: Hegel and Husserl."

³⁵ Galetti, "Of Levinas' 'structure' in address to his four 'others'."

³⁶ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 127.

³⁷ Ibid., 68.

³⁸ Ibid., 135, 138.

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁰ Lives of the Desert Fathers, 1.32-1.34.

described by Otto as *mysterium tremendum* can be found in the desert literature, but were not a routine part of the experience of externality for them. Nor was there a particular content to the experience, which could involve verbal, visual or more substantive temptations like riches or poverty.⁴¹

3.2.2 Negative valence

Experiences of the *demonic* carry a negative valence, as the object of perception offers an important threat to the individual. In some cases the experience carried a sense of *evil* with it, visually represented by darkness or blackness in the figures. ⁴² Monks are "burned by the venom of evil demons," and need "to be purified from the bitterness of the evil one." ⁴³ However, the most important way that writers expressed this negative valence was not to speak of evil or darkness, but to use language associated with *fighting* or *warfare*, as in military combat, wrestling or ambush—words like π 0λεμέω or π p0σβ0λή are common. ⁴⁴ This is particularly the case as the monk recognizes the *demonic* and so can strive against it. For instance, according to Amma Syncletica:

We must arm ourselves in every way against the demons. For they attack us from the outside, and they also stir us up from within; and the soul is then like a ship when great waves break over it, and at the same time it sinks because the hold is too full. We are just like that: we lose as much by the exterior faults we commit as by the thoughts inside us. So we must watch for the attack of men that come from outside us, and also repel the interior onslaughts of our thoughts.⁴⁵

Note that the "interior onslaught of our thoughts" does not refer to *demonic* thoughts but to *thoughts native to us that have been triggered by the demonic attack*. A sense of the externality of the attack is maintained, while its interior effects are acknowledged. When a thought was identified as being "from the demons" then it has the quality of externality and can be fought against: "... if an alien thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at one to your help."

The *demonic* is not simply a matter of an encounter with the Other for early Christians. Rather, it is evil and can be contrasted with the *angelic*. What governed perceptions of this contrast? There were no particular characteristics, some features were thought to be especially important were sensory qualities of the experience like blackness,⁴⁷ or the appearance of certain animal shapes such as a snake or dragon;⁴⁸ the presence of emotions such as fear, uncertainty, shame or discouragement rather than more positive qualities was thought to be significant,⁴⁹ as well as the negative effects of the experience on the life of the monk.

How is this experience of negative valence constituted? The concept of Otherness as alter ego as in Husserl seems inadequate here. The *demonic* is not simply alter ego but *anti ego*, posing a fundamental threat to the Christian identity of the monk. The demonic Other is a creature of hatred.⁵⁰ If the work of the *demonic* is successful, the ego disappears as a Christian ego; in the literature of the desert, their narrative ends as part of the desert story.⁵¹

⁴¹ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 231.

⁴² The chief terms here are standard language related to evil (πονηρός) but also terms related to darkness (ἀχλύς) demonic gloom (Greenfield, 23-26).

⁴³ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 171.

⁴⁴ Greenfield, Traditions of Belief, 129-133.

⁴⁵ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 234-235.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 127, cf. 125.

⁴⁷ Blessed Abba Paul the Simple, (disciple of Abba Anthony) could "see the state of each one's soul, just as we see their faces." He observed a monk coming into church who was dominated by fornication: "I see one who is black and his whole body is dark; the demons are standing on each side of him, dominating him, drawing him to them, and leading him by the nose, and his angel, filled with grief, with head bowed, follows him at a distance" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 205).

⁴⁸ Greenfield, Traditions of Belief, 86.

⁴⁹ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 81, 97.

⁵⁰ μισόκαλος, μισάνθρωπος, or μισόθεος; Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 29.

⁵¹ Lives of the Desert Fathers, 1.36.

3.2.3 Absence

Sometimes the demonic is absent yet perceived. This sense of absence yet presence can be found in the trace phenomenology of many experiences. The demonic that manifests itself as demonic is often a trace experience, not seen directly but as "something that disrupts the present." Its trace nature might encourage belief that it has no substantial reality and is immaterial in nature.

3.2.4 Intelligence

The demonic was perceived as possessing a kind of intelligence, in part because it appears as thoughts or λογισμοί. For our purposes we can define intelligence as the condition of an individual in which the following can be predicated:

- (1) the ability to think
- (2) the ability to convey thoughts in language.

Can the demonic think? While avoiding the ontological question, we can answer affirmatively from a phenomenological point of view. As Turing noted in his "game" now known as the Turing Test, if one can converse with an interlocutor and be unable to tell the difference between it and a human in terms of ordinary language, then it must be considered "intelligent." ⁵³ Reported experiences of such conversations abound, so that the *demonic* passes the Turing test and can justifiably be perceived as a "thinking" thing able to use language.

The deceptive nature of the demonic was a key phenomenal feature that probably enhanced this sense of intelligence. Deception (ἀπατάω) is a key feature of the *demonic* in Biblical documents, such as the story of the Garden of Eden. Stories of deception through subtle perversions of virtue or obfuscation of the differences between good and evil were also common in the desert literature.⁵⁴ Even when the demonic revealed itself visually, its form could be deceptive, appearing as an animal.⁵⁵ This deceptive quality meant that the demonic could be described as "cunning," 56 and one should flee from the "wicked ruse of the demons."⁵⁷ The phenomenal characteristic of presence in absence also probably enhanced this sense of deceit.

While the demonic is a phenomenon of thought and perception, it is questionable whether we can describe it as sentient. Typically, a designation of sentience would require two further predications:

- (3) the ability to feel
- (4) the ability to be self-aware of thoughts and feelings,
- (3) certainly appears in some accounts, as when the demons would become frightened of monks who gained control of passions like anger. 58 However, (4) is less certain. There is a kind of automacy to the demonic that sits uneasily with a judgment of full self-awareness.

⁵² Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology, 331.

⁵³ Turing, "Computing machinery."

⁵⁴ Greenfield, Traditions of Belief, 122; Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses, Discourse IX, 158.

⁵⁵ Greenfield, Traditions of Belief, 86.

⁵⁶ Cunning: δράκων ὂφις σκολιός δόλιος πολύμορφος (Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 45).

⁵⁷ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 110.

⁵⁸ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 96. On confronting Abba Macarius on one occasion, and being successfully rebuked by him, it is reported that "the devils began to cry out with all their might, 'You have overcome us.' Filled with confusion, they fled" (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 130).

3.2.5 Fragmentation

The experience of the *demonic* is chaotic. There is no particular expected pattern although some are more obvious and common. The *demonic* can appear in many ways. For instance, according to Amma Syncletica:

'Many are the wiles of the devil. If he is not able to disturb the soul by means of poverty, he suggests riches as an attraction. If he has not won the victory by insults and disgrace, he suggests praise and glory. Overcome by health, he makes the body ill. Not having been able to seduce it through pleasures, he tries to overthrow it by involuntary sufferings.'⁵⁹

Key attacks were attempts to provoke fear and uncertainty. 60

This fragmentation gives the *demonic* an impersonal or incomplete character, contributing to the sense of *automacy* as well as an impression of intelligence and deception. While each monk was thought to have a personal angel who accompanied them and could help in many ways, demons were indiscriminate in their attacks and limited in the range of weapons they could bring to bear. For instance, Abba Pityrion, the disciple of Abba Anthony said, "If anyone wants to drive out the demons, he must first subdue the passions; for he will banish the demon of the passion which he has mastered. For example, the devil accompanies anger; so if you control your anger, the devil of anger will be banished. And so it is with each of the passions."

3.2.6 Derailment

Demonic attacks were not perceived as random. Rather, they targeted individuals who were making progress in the spiritual life. Hence they had the quality of *derailment*, a temptation to turn aside from a desirable path that a person was following: The point is to distract and lead astray, like following the sound of a whistle.⁶²

Abraham, the disciple of Abba Agathon, questioned Abba Poemen saying, 'How do the demons fight against me?' Abba Poemen said to him, 'The demons fight against you? They do not fight against us at all as long as we are doing our own will. For our own wills become the demons, and it is these which attack us in order that we may fulfill them. But if you want to see who the demons really fight against, it is against Moses and those who are like him.'⁶³

The *demonic* is thus an opponent as the individual follows their spiritual path, trying to prevent them from reaching their goal, working through temptation and trial.⁶⁴

3.2.7 Multisensory manifold

The phenomenology of the *demonic* is multisensory, as is clear from the two stories from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* previously mentioned. Assault could be through dreams, false visions; it could also be an embodied experience, where the demon can grab or even physically assault the monk, as in the case of Antony in the desert graveyard.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 231.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁶¹ Ibid., 200.

⁶² Ibid., 89.

⁶³ Ibid., 176.

⁶⁴ Common terms for opponent include ἐχθρός, ἀντίδικος, πολέμος, and ἀντικείμενος (Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 30); this opponent works through temptation and trial (πειράζω).

⁶⁵ Athanasius, Life of Antony, §§8-10.

3.2.7.1 Visual

Many stories convey the potentially visual character of a perception of the demonic. For example, Macarius the Great reports the following about a visit with two monks:

When they were settled, I prayed God that he would show me their way of life. Then the roof opened and it became light as day, but they did not see the light I saw the demons coming like flies on the younger one, some sitting on his mouth and others on his eyes. I saw the angel of the Lord circling round about him with a fiery sword, chasing the demons far from him. But the could not come near the elder one.66

In addition to directly perceiving the demonic in a visual form, encounters with it could involve visual illusion, as in another story about Macarius:

Some time after this, the devil found Macarius in the desert physically exhausted and said to him, 'Look, you have received the grace of Antony. Why not use this privilege and ask God for food and strength for your journey?' Macarius replied, "The Lord is my strength and my song." (Ps. 118.14). As for you, you shall not tempt the servant of God.' The devil then conjured up a mirage for him, a baggage camel lost in the desert and laden with all kinds of useful provisions. When she saw Macarius she came and crouched in front of him. But realising that this was a phantasm, which indeed it was, he began to pray. And immediately the camel was swallowed up into the ground.⁶⁷

3.2.7.2 Auditory

The ability to "hear" the *demonic* in the form of language has already been noted in our first two stories; dialogue with the demonic was a frequent structuring theme in accounts of encounter. Other kinds of sounds could also be heard, noises that often signaled the onset of an attack.⁶⁸ Like the visual experience of the demonic, the auditory experience could also be illusory. "Abba Poemen said, 'If you have visions or hear voices do not tell your neighbour about it, for it is a delusion in the battle."69

3.2.7.3 Somatic

Physical and tactile experiences of the demonic were also common, as is reported in the following story told by Abba Apollo:

"Apollo said, 'Take from me, Lord, the sin of arrogance, in case I become overbearing towards the brotherhood and deprive myself of every good.' The divine voice said to him again, 'Put your hand on your neck and you will catch hold of arrogance,

66 Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 135. Another good example is a a story about Blessed Abba Paul the Simple, (disciple of Abba Anthony), who could "see the state of each one's soul, just as we see their faces." He observed a monk coming into church who was dominated by fornication: "I see one who is black and his whole body is dark; the demons are standing on each side of him, dominating him, drawing him to them, and leading him by the nose, and his angel, filled with grief, with head bowed, follows him at a distance." During the service he man renounced it, coming out Abba Paul saw him "previously black and gloomy, coming out of the church with a shining face and white body, the demons accompanying him only at a distance, while his holy angel was following close to him, rejoicing over him" (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 205-206).

67 Lives of the Desert Fathers, 21.3, 108. Cf. also a story told by John of Lycopolis: "If either demons or men seek to deceive you by flattery and praise, do not believe them and do not become conceited. As for me, the demons have often tried to deceive me in this way in the hours of darkness, and have not allowed me either to pray or to rest, raising up images before me throughout the night. And in the morning they have mocked me, falling at my feet and saying, "Forgive us, Abba, for having troubled you all night." But I said to them, "'Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity;' (Ps. 6.8; Matt. 7.23) for you shall not tempt a servant of God." (cf. Matt. 4.7) (Lives of the Desert Fathers, 1.60-61, 62).

68 "It happened that Abba Moses was struggling with the temptation of fornication. Unable to stay any longer in the cell, he went and told Abba Isidore. The old man exhorted him to return to his cell. But he refused, saying, 'Abba, I cannot.' Then Abba Isidore took Moses out onto the terrace and said to him, 'Look towards the west.' He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. The Abba Isidore said to him, 'Look towards the east.' He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba Isidore said, 'See, these are sent by the Lord to the saints to bring them help, while those in the west fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are.' Then Abba Moses, gave thanks to God, plucked up courage and returned to his cell." (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 138). 69 Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 187.

and thrust it into the sand.' He quickly put his hand on this neck and grasped a small blackamoor, and thrust it into the sand as it cried out, 'I am the demon of pride.' 70

On another occasion, Abba Elias told the following story: An old man was living in a temple and the demons came to say to him, "Leave this place which belongs to us," and the old man said, "No place belongs to you." Then they began to scatter his palm leaves about, one by one, and the old man went on gathering them together with perseverance. A little later the devil took his hand and pulled him to the door. When the old man reached the door, he seized the lintel with the other hand crying out, "Jesus, save me." Immediately the devil fled away. The old man began to weep. Then the Lord said to him, "Why are you weeping?" and the old man said, "Because the devils have dared to seize a man and treat him like this." The Lord said to him, "You had been careless. As soon as you turned to me again, you see I was beside you." I say this, because it is necessary to take great pains, and anyone who does not do so, cannot come to his God. For he himself was crucified for our sake."

3.2.7.4 Effects

The varied sensory manifold of demonic experience had a number of important consequences. For instance, it meant that there could be reasonable doubt about whether a particular thought or vision was demonic.⁷² Because it is a multifaceted experience and one that may be hidden and deceptive, any aspect of one's perceptions and thoughts must be subjected to scrutiny. The development of awareness thus becomes a key to the spiritual life. For instance, Abba Elias told a story about a man who through demonic illusion thought he was carrying a skin of wine. He said: "... observe your thoughts, and beware of what you have in your heart and your spirit, knowing that the demons put ideas into you so as to corrupt your soul by making it think of that which is not right, in order to turn your spirit from the consideration of your sins and of God."⁷³

3.2.8 Warping of intentionality

Under normal conditions, the objects perceived by the intentional consciousness are of a wide variety, and the ego has some control over the selection of those objects—a phenomenon termed *executive function* in contemporary neuroscience. However, these conditions of intentionality change in interaction with the *demonic*. As in the story of failure, the monk becomes increasingly dominated by thoughts of a particular object, and loses a sense of control over their thoughts. This works through the agency of the passions, where normal human needs and experiences like hunger or sadness ($\lambda \dot{\nu} \pi \eta$) become inordinate attachments for the monk. As a result, intentional consciousness becomes narrowed and the monk gradually falls under control of the passion. This warping is remarkably similar to the kind of cognitive pattern seen in people with addictions. Pace Dickson, evil not only causes us to act to remove the freedom of others, it also costs us our own freedom in the process.

⁷⁰ Lives of the Desert Fathers, 8.3, 70.

⁷¹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 71-72. Somatic manifestations can also be seen in later Christianity, e.g., during the Medieval period. See Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, especially 42-61.

⁷² Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 68.

⁷³ Ibid., 71. Macarius the Great to a brother who had fallen into sin: "Examine yourself, then, my brother, and see if you have not been the sport of the demons, for you have lacked perception in this matter. But repent of your fault." (Ibid., 132).

⁷⁴ Another example: Abba Paul the Great, the Galatian, said, 'The monk who possesses in his cell some small things which he needs and who comes out to busy himself with them, is the plaything of the demons. I have experienced this myself.'" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 204).

⁷⁵ Nelson, Psychology, 360-362; May, Addiction and Grace.

⁷⁶ Dickson, "Phenomenology of evil."

3.2.9 The demonic as intersubjective

Throughout the desert writings one gets the strong sense that the *demonic* was a shared experience, and that the sharing of these experiences with each other was essential to their spiritual progress. We have the desert narratives of the demonic because they were shared with others. Monks seldom lived alone, rather they lived with an Abba or Amma with whom they could share their thoughts, looking for traces of the demonic. So a brother goes to Abba Poemen and says:

'The demon wars against me to make me blaspheme God and I am ashamed to say so.' So he told him all about it and immediately he was relieved. The old man said to him, 'Do not be unhappy my child, but every time this thought comes to you say, "It is no affair of mine, may your blasphemy remain upon you, Satan, for my soul does not want it." Now everything that the soul does not desire, does not long remain,' and the brother went away healed.⁷⁷

This intersubjective quality certainly reinforced the sense of externality of experiences. In phenomenology, intersubjectivity is one of the most important factors of the lifeworld, the presence of the world through our body as we share it with others. The fact that experiences of the *demonic* were shared experiences, either on specific occasions or through stories told in the community, acted to help constitute the Otherness of the experience, and shared wisdom about the demonic helped the individual identify the negatively valenced qualities of the experience.

3.2.10 The demonic as necessary

While the *demonic* is an enemy and can be seen as evil, its actions do not necessarily produce evil effects. While the conflict was difficult, spiritual seekers in the desert expected it and perhaps even sought it out:

It was related of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of fornication. She never prayed that the warfare should cease, but she said, 'O God, give me strength.'78

Some monks thought that the struggle with the passions and the demonic was good. One lectured John the Dwarf, saying: "Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress."⁷⁹ The struggle with the *demonic* thus propelled the individual toward their goal.

3.3 Demonic possession as a different phenomenological experience

It is routine for people to conflate the experiences of the *demonic* and demonic possession. However, there are many indications that these two are phenomenologically distinct from each other. In the desert accounts, several things immediately stand out:

3.3.1 Accounts of the demonic and demon possession

There are many unique features to accounts of possession experiences. Stories about demon possession and exorcism in this early literature are not told to reveal the nature of demons or their presence—the latter was almost universally accepted in the classical world-but they are told as signs of the power of Christian holy men or women, demonstrating their superiority over magicians and pagan priests. This is

⁷⁷ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 180.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 87-88.

3.3.2 Possession experiences

The experience itself, as best we can tell, is also different. For one thing, it lacks the quality of externality that is characteristic of the *demonic*. In possession, the demon instead is *within the person* affecting their behavior and capacity for rationality. The latter is impaired but never lost in experiences of the *demonic*. Levack⁸¹ for instance gives a list of externally-observed characteristics of possession states, based on classical and medieval literature:

- 1. convulsions
- 2. stiffening of limbs
- 3. display of great physical strength
- 4. facial distortion
- 5. swelling in body parts, e.g., stomach
- 6. loss of sensory ability or speech
- 7. vomiting of pins or nails, other materials
- 8. change in voice to deep, animal sound quality
- 9. eating disorders
- 10. self-mutilation
- 11. ability to converse in new languages
- 12. violation of social conventions, e.g., uttering of blasphemies
- 13. experience of trances
- 14. able to see the future or have knowledge of secrets
- 15. levitation

Virtually none of these are characteristics of the *demonic* as described in the desert literature.

It should also be noted that the experience of possession was clearly distinguished from another phenomenon, that of mental illness. This was true in the Byzantine world as well as Western Christianity. This distinction persisted through the Middle Ages and the early Modern period, although for various reasons of theory and practice the line between "possession" and "mental illness" was drawn differently than we would construct it today. This did not mean that Christians thought they were unrelated, for the believed that possession could lead to mental illness through the intermediary of the body. However, they were thought to be different; in the Medieval period for instance, official policy held that individuals thought to be possessed needed to be examined by a physician to rule out medical problems including mental illness before exorcism was undertaken. At the property of the body.

⁸⁰ Greenfield, Traditions of Belief, 90.

⁸¹ Levack, The Devil Within.

⁸² Horden, "Responses to possession."

⁸³ Gregory Palamas, for instance, thought that possession could affect the brain, which in turn could then affect the rest of the body (*Homilies* 12, 87-93; Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 90-93).

⁸⁴ For examples of this see de Certeau, The Possession at Loudun; Menghi & Paxia, The Devil's Scourge.

3.3.3 Exorcism

While the struggle with the *demonic* was a universal concern among monks, this was not the case with possession. The ability to cast out demons was thought to reside with certain people in particular and was not commonly used, sometimes out of a sense of humility. For instance, Bessarion had to be tricked into exorcising a spirit from a man who had come to Scetis.85

Another time, they brought him [Longinus] one possessed by a demon, he said to those who were escorting him: 'I can do nothing for you; but go instead to Abba Zeno.' So Abba Zeno began to put pressure onto the demon to cast it out. The demon began to cry out: 'Perhaps, Abba Zeno, you think I am going away because of you; look, down there Abba Longinus is praying, and challenging me and it is for fear of his prayers that I go away, for to you I would not even have given an answer.'86

4 Reflections on the demonic and the passions in early Christian authors

4.1 The internalization of the demonic

In the scheme of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the trace of the *demonic* was to be found in the passions. The passions were seen as a universal phenomenon that was problematic, and that external agencies could attempt to trigger thoughts or inflame the passions, derailing the seeker in their quest. So while not every problematic thought or passion was connected to the demonic, many were or could be, making the conflict one between the inner life of the monk and the outer influence of the demonic. The derailment of a monk could thus be blamed in part on these external attacks. However, as the thought of the desert migrated to the West, this phenomenological structure was challenged by other authors. Even as early as John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435), some writers began to argue that the real problem lay not in the external demonic that was leading the monk astray, but in internal issues and in the moral conduct of the monk. The eight deadly thoughts—a phenomenology focused on the perception of external threat, became in Cassian the eight vices, 87 and then eventually the seven deadly sins in the formulation of Gregory the Great, 88 setting the stage for Medieval understandings of religious struggle. The phenomenological framework disappears, and is replaced by a moral one.

While this position has merit, it does terrible things from a phenomenological point of view as the interpretation begins to obscure the phenomenon as it is perceived by the individual, a difficulty that is inherent in the interpretive process.89

4.2 The normalization of the passions

In the framework of the Desert, the passions are to be expected but are not "normal." They are hindrances to the spiritual life, and their disturbance shows the trace of the *demonic*. The passions offer no benefits to the spiritual seeker who instead desires a state of ἀπάθεια.90 This understanding changed as Eastern Christian thought was modified by Western writers. The change can certainly be seen in Augustine, who found

⁸⁵ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 41-42, 51-52; cf. 159.

⁸⁷ Cassian, Conferences, Conference 5, 183-196. On Cassian see also Driver, John Cassian.

⁸⁸ Migne, Patrologia Latina, 76.620-623, especially 621.

⁸⁹ Cf. Marion, Being Given, 16.

⁹⁰ See e.g., Driscoll, Steps to Spiritual Perfection, 22-24. This Christian concept of ἀπάθεια has obvious connections with Stoicism. There is an extensive literature on this, see e.g., Garver, Stoicism and Emotion, 35-60.

numerous cases where the passions were of benefit to the individual.⁹¹ The exact reasons for Augustine's shift are complex, and may well be connected to the distance he wished to place between himself and Stoic thinkers. The Augustinian line of thought persists into the Medieval period where it was extensively developed by Aquinas.⁹² It also can be seen in Eastern theology of the later patristic period, as in the work of John of Damascus.⁹³

5 Reflections from modern phenomenology

What about modern phenomenology? Certainly a very central idea of phenomenology offers a chance to recover a sense of the *demonic*. A crucial emphasis in Husserl's thought is the need to be able to accept "whatever presents itself in "intuition" in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality) … though only within the limits in which it then presents itself." However, with possibilities there have also been shortfalls. Modern phenomenology has developed concepts that skirt the phenomenon of the *demonic* but fail to penetrate to its heart.

5.1 The problem of subjectivity

Subjectivity in phenomenology provides a potential problem to reflections on the *demonic*. In Husserl, phenomena are constituted by a transcendental ego, and the Self forms the center of reference. Given these essential elements of Husserlian phenomenology, it is easy to make the mistake and view phenomenology as primarily about the internal or subjective, whereas a key feature of the *demonic* is its externality. This would be a misreading of Husserl, but it is easy to do. Certainly early psychologists such as Wundt were eager to read the idea of phenomenology this way and reject it. Phenomenology has often been thought of as another form of *introspectionism*, a mistake that has been encouraged by "sloppy talk" even among the best phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, who implied that phenomenology replaces scientific empiricism and objectivity. Thus, Western phenomenology has sometimes been guilty of an overly subjective, internalist focus, perhaps because of the influence of Cartesianism. However, later phenomenologists have corrected this (mis)reading and offer a less conflicted path to the *demonic*.

5.2 The emptying of evil in early phenomenology

Perhaps a more significant problem is the view of evil in phenomenology. Early writers seem to empty the concept of evil and the *demonic* from their writings. In some ways, Heidegger appears to follow the

⁹¹ E.g., Augustine, City of God, 14.9.

⁹² Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ia-IIae, Q24; Milner, Thomas Aquinas, 88-99.

⁹³ John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, 3.20, 323. Descartes follows this path by defining the passions of the soul as "perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits" (*Passions*, Art. 27). There appears to be little difference between passions and emotions in his treatment (see Clarke, *Descartes Theory of Mind*). He also clearly links the passions of the soul to bodily activity, a stance that is somewhat unexpected given his reputation for dualism.

⁹⁴ Husserl, Ideas, § 24.

⁹⁵ Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology, 172.

⁹⁶ Wundt, *Folk Psychology*, 3. William James work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* seems to accept introspection as a valid means for elucidating a structure of experience, as he does in his treatment of mysticism. Many early 20th century psychologists were eager to reject James for this (and other) reasons.

⁹⁷ Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology, 14.

⁹⁸ The connection between internalism and Descartes generally focuses on his "first principle" of philosophy, "I am thinking, therefore I exist" (*Philosophical Writings*, 1.126-128). On this point, see also Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, especially §§8-10, 30-36.

path of Augustine and sees evil as something that has no real existence. 99 His project has been criticized as eliminating the possibility of the ethical in his move from phenomenology to ontology, a situation that seems quite at odds with the phenomenological experience of desert monks dealing with the demonic. However, as Dalton notes, Heidegger engages with Schelling who is actually closer to understanding the demonic, seeing evil as perhaps a "twisted" expression of the good. 100 So while Heidegger's phenomenology has not been exploited as a way of understanding perceptions of evil, there may be potential for such use.

Karl Jaspers seems to touch on evil but misses some key qualities of the *demonic* in his main works. Jaspers deals with the reality of trace experiences in his concept of ciphers, glimpses or expression of the transcendent found in symbols "inseparable from that which it symbolizes" but not the thing itself. 101 He also discusses what he calls boundary or limit situations (Grenzsituation).102 These situations involve a confrontation on the edge of one's old reality and a new reality. "For reality's sake-that is, for the sake of a chance to rise out of such existing unreality—man is driven to his limit and made to say what he is in essence."103 However, these experiences lack many qualities of the demonic. While it is external it is silent, unable to be an interlocutor, and while hidden it is not deceptive, although individuals and cultures may try to deceive us about its reality.

5.3 Levinas and Marion

Recent phenomenological writings are perhaps more promising as they have begun to recover the importance of externality. In the mid-20th century, Emmanuel Levinas wrote about the experience of the Other, and more recently Jean-Luc Marion has developed the theme of giftedness in perception. Could the *demonic* be considered a kind of experience of the face of the Other as in Levinas?¹⁰⁴ The demonic can be an experience of inequality and foreignness that are characteristics of the Other. It resists our power. It can appear in language and be an object of discourse. However, these similarities are superficial. For Levinas, the face has a kind of neutral valence. When the face is presented to us, it gives an ethical call to respect the Other. However, in the demonic there is no call for respect, and any gifts we might give in response cannot be reciprocated. There is only ridicule. The call is only to obey our own desires, a refusal of responsibility to the Other and perhaps even to the self.¹⁰⁵ Instead of uniqueness, the demonic calls us to faceless homogeneity; rather than individual uniqueness, we become one of the crowd overcome by the demonic. 106 Also, is the demonic really infinitely foreign as is the face? As perceived by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the demonic is fragmentary and sometimes frighteningly similar to our own base desires. At best, the *demonic* is a kind of pseudo-face that at first contact offers a call but in the end has nothing at all to give. It is instead a mask that appears to be something, but when the mask is removed there is nothing there to receive from or give to. There is inequality but no asymmetry.

The phenomenology of the gift in Jean-Luc Marion helps us appreciate this difference. The experience of the Other has the quality of givenness—it is unasked for and is undeserved. The face calls on us to give, and in theory the Other is able to respond to our gift in some way, although it may not do so in every circumstance. However, the *demonic* is unable to respond to our gift. In the story of the old man, giving the gift of response to the entreaties of the demon leads only to ridicule and ruin, while in the case of the young

⁹⁹ Both authors would probably emphasize the role of human choice in evil. On Augustine, see Vink, "In the midst of our sorrows."

¹⁰⁰ Dalton, "Otherwise than nothing."

¹⁰¹ Jaspers, Philosophy, 3.124.

¹⁰² Jaspers, Philosophy, 3.87.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3.87.

¹⁰⁴ On this point see especially Totality and Infinity, 187-219.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Duyndam, "Girard and Levinas."

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Goux, "On the trace."

man, restraint and not asking the demons to leave leads only to defeat and withdrawal. Marion names this situation: the "givee incapable of reciprocity is named 'the enemy." ¹⁰⁷

If the *demonic* is not an experience of the face of the Other, what is it? Perhaps it is an experience of the impersonal that appears in the light that illuminates the Other, the $il\ y\ a$ or "there is," a space that is not nothingness but is devoid of meaning. This is closer, as the *demonic* does provide a space in which the monk can more clearly see the object of his or her strivings. However, this seems to be something different as well. The exteriority of $il\ y\ a$ has an impersonal quality which does not fit with the intelligence that is perceived as part of the demonic. So these views also miss the mark, in part because they do not capture the negative valence and sense of warfare found in the perception of the *demonic*. So

6 Implications

Looking back, we have succeeded through our attempt at phenomenological reflection by describing key parts of an important experience. We have seen that:

- 1. the *demonic* is a powerful phenomenon with its own structure distinct from demon possession
- 2. a key part of the phenomenon is its externality, which allows the experience to be used in positive ways in the life of the individual, including the development of an intersubjective basis for community
- 3. there are many resources for understanding the *demonic* within phenomenology, although to date the essence of the *demonic* is not captured in phenomenological writings.

A very important corollary to our phenomenological analysis is a need to rehabilitate the concept of the *demonic* and reject dismissive attitudes toward it. Rejection is often based on a confusion between descriptive and causal language, as well as an inappropriate equating of the *demonic* with demon possession, which is clearly a different category from a phenomenological point of view. Critics have also ridiculed the *demonic* as it typically posits the existence of entities that are rational but immaterial, a belief ruled out *a priori* by much of Western thought. How could the λογισμοί of Evagrius and the desert monks be taken for living beings? However, a careful phenomenological analysis casts serious doubt on the modernist picture. Here it is useful to consider the concept of *meme*, developed by Richard Dawkins. In his thought, memes are powerful "unit of cultural transmission" such as ideas that replicate. According to some suggestions, these memes would qualify as "living" as they can reproduce and maintain their existence across time. ¹¹¹ In addition, many meme-ideas would pass the Turing Test, a modern standard for whether something is thought to be "intelligent." Thus, Patristic authors would be justified in treating phenomenal experiences of the demonic as encounters with entities that are living and intelligent.

The rejection of the *demonic* as merely a primitive view does a great disservice to those who believe in such entities. In the ignoring or discounting of these experiences, one discounts an aspect of the religious experience as it is known to some. Claiming that this aspect of the religious experience as primitive is no different from the positivist movement in science, claiming the same thing of the remainder of the religious. In discounting this aspect, we validate those who discount the rest of beliefs in external religious entities. The abandonment of the demonic in much of Christian religious thought and practice also invalidates the external quality of many difficult religious experiences. Imagine what would happen if Paul removed all references and concepts of spiritual warfare from his epistles? Or if Jesus had failed to use such language? A recovery of the concept of the demonic would help us better understand the phenomenology of religious life.

¹⁰⁷ Marion, Being Given, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 187-193.

¹⁰⁹ On Levinas and the il y a see also Sealey, "Levinas and Blanchot."

¹¹⁰ Ricoeur is not listed here because he seems to lack the sense of the personal demonic, as in the *Symbolism of Evil* where he claims that defilement is something we have gone beyond. In *Figuring the Sacred* he seems more open to personal encounter with evil, but argues that this cannot be expressed in ordinary language, it requires poetry as in the Psalms of the Old Testament. For an analysis of Ricoeur's view of evil see Ely, "Revisiting Paul Ricoeur."

¹¹¹ Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, 192, 245-260; The Extended Phenotype, 109.

References

Ales Bello, Angela. "The language of our living body." In A-T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, Volume LXXXIX: Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos, Book Two, 3-14. Dordrecht, NL: Springer; 2006.

Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologiae (8 vols.) (L. Shapcote, Tr, J. Mortensen & E. Alarcon, Eds). Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

Athanasius. Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus (R. Gregg, Tr.). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980.

Augustine, St. The City of God, 11-24 (W. Babcock, Tr.). Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013.

Behnke, Elizabeth. "Edmund Husserl's contribution to phenomenology of the body in Ideas II." In T. Nenon & L. Embree (Eds.), Issues in Husserl's Ideas II,135-160. Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 1996.

Brakke, David. Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Brentano, Franz. Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint (O. Kraus & L. McAlister, Eds., A. Rancurello, D. Terrell & L. McAlister, Trs.). London: Routledge, 2009.

Caciola, Nancy. Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

Cassian, John. John Cassian: The Conferences (B. Ramsey, Tr.). New York: Paulist, 1997.

Chakravartty, Anjan. A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism: Knowing the Unobservable. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Clark, Stuart. Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Clarke, Desmond. Descartes's Theory of Mind. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

Dahl, Espen. Phenomenology and the Holy: Religious Experience after Husserl. London: SCM Press, 2010.

Dalton, Drew. "Otherwise than nothing: Heidegger, Levinas and the phenomenology of evil." Philosophy & Theology, 21 (2009), 105-128.

Dawkins, Richard. The Selfish Gene (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Dawkins, Richard. The Extended Phenotype (rev. ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

de Certeau, Michel. The Possession at Loudun (M. Smith, Tr.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Descartes, René. "Discourse on Method." In J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoxh (Trs.), The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume 1 (pp. 111-151). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch (Trs.), The Philosophical writings of Descartes, Volume 2, 3-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Descartes, René. "Passions of the Soul." In J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch (Trs.), The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume 1, 326-404. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Dickson, Paul. "The phenomenology of evil." Journal of Value Inquiry, 29 (1995), 5-17.

Dorotheos of Gaza. Discourses and Sayings (E. Wheeler, Tr.). Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977.

Driscoll, Jeremy. Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus. New York: Newman Press, 2005

Driver, Steven. John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Duyndam, Joachim. "Girard and Levinas, Cain and Abel, mimesis and the face." Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, 15-16 (2008/9), 237-248.

Ely, Peter. "Revisiting Paul Ricoeur on the symbolism of evil: A theological retrieval." Ultimate Reality and Meaning, 24 (2001), 40-64.

Evagrius Ponticus. The Praktikos: Chapters on Prayer (J. Bamberger, Tr.). Spencer, MA: Cistercian Press, 1972.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Truth and Method (2nd rev. ed.) (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trs.). New York: Continuum, 1989.

Galetti, Dino. "Of Levinas' 'structure' in address to his four 'others'." Continental Philosophy Review, 49 (2016), 509-532.

Garver, Margaret. Stoicism and Emotion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Geniušas, Saulius. "Self-consciousness and Otherness: Hegel and Husserl." Santalka: Filosofija, 16 (2008), 27-36. DOI: 10.3846/1822-430X.2008.16.3.27-36.

Goux, Jean-Joseph. "On the trace of Emmanuel Levinas: The face of the Other at the risk of the incommensurable." Philosophy Today, 55 (2011), 386-391.

Greenfield, Richard. Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1988.

Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trs.). New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1962.

Hippocrates. "On Regimen in Acute Diseases." In W. Jones (Tr.), Hippocrates, Volume II: Prognostic, 57-126. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.

Hippocrates. "The Sacred Disease." In W. Jones (Tr.), Hippocrates, Volume II: Prognostic, 127-184. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.

Horden, Peregrine. "Responses to possession and insanity in the earlier Byzantine world." Social History of Medicine, 6 (1993), 177-194.

Husserl, Edmund. Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology (W. Gibson, Tr.). London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931.

Husserl, Edmund. The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy (D. Carr, Tr.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

Husserl, Edmund. Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology (D. Cairns, Tr.). Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1973.

Husserl, Edmund. Logical Investigations (2 vols.) (J. Findlay, Tr.). Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000.

James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York: Collier, 1961.

James, William. Essays in Radical Empiricism. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Jaspers, Karl. Philosophy, Volume 2 (E. Ashton, Tr.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Jaspers, Karl. Philosophy, Volume 3 (E. Ashton, Tr.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

John of Damascus. "The Orthodox Faith." In F. Chase, Jr. (Tr.), St. John of Damascus: Writings, 165-406. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958.

Lampe, Geoffrey William Hugo (Ed.). A Greek Patristic Lexicon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Levack, Brian. The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority* (A. Lingis, Tr.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Liddell, Henry. & Scott, Robert. (Comp.). *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* (9th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Louchakova-Schwartz, Olga. "Qualia of God: Phenomenological materiality in introspection, with a reference to Advaita Vedanta." *Open Theology*, 3 (2017), 257-273.

Marion, Jean-Luc. Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness (J. Kosky, Tr.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

May, Gerald. Addiction and Grace. New York: HarperCollins, 1988.

Menghi, Girolamo. & Praxia, Gaetano. The Devil's Scourge: Exorcism During the Italian Renaissance. York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2002.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phenomenology of Perception (C. Smith, Tr.). London: Routledge, 2005.

Migne, Jacques-Paul. (Ed.). Patrologia Latina, Cursus Completus. Paris, 1844-1865.

Milner, Robert. Thomas Aquinas on the Passions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge, 2000.

Nelson, James. Psychology, Religion and Spirituality. New York: Springer, 2009.

Otto, Rudolf. The Idea of the Holy (J. Harvey, Tr.). London: Oxford University Press, 1936.

Palamas, Gregory. The Homilies (C. Veniamen, Ed. & Tr.). Dalton, PA: Mount Tabor Publishing, 2014.

Posner, Michael. "Orienting of attention: Then and now." Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 69 (2016), 1864-1875.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (D. Pellauer, Tr., M. Wallace, Ed.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

Ricoeur, Paul. The Symbolism of Evil (E. Buchanan, Tr.). Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

Russell, Norman. (Tr.). The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monarchorum in Aegypto. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981.

Sealey, Kris. "The 'face' of the *il y a*: Levinas and Blanchot on impersonal existence." *Continental Philosophy Review*, 46 (2013), 431-448.

Sinkewicz, Robert. (Tr.). Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Sluhovsky, Moshe. Believe not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism & Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Sokolowski, Robert. Introduction to Phenomenology. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Steinbock, Anthony. *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Taipale, Joona. *Phenomenology and Embodiment: Husserl and the Constitution of Subjectivity*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014.

Tani, Toru. "The ego, the Other, and the primal fact." Continental Philosophy Review, 41 (2008), 385-399.

Turing, Alan. "Computing machinery and intelligence." Mind, 59 (1950), 433-460.

Vink, Andrew. "In the midst of our sorrows: An existential-phenomenological analysis of evil." *Heythrop Journal*, 56 (2015), 15-31.

Ward, Benedicta. (Tr.). The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection. Trappist, KY: Cistercian Press, 1975.

Wikforss, Åsa. "Are natural kind terms special?" In H. Beebee & N. Sabbarton-Leary (Eds.), *The semantics and metaphysics of natural kinds*, 64-83. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Wundt, William. Elements of Folk Psychology: Outlines of a Psychological History of the Development of Mankind (E. Schaub, Tr.). London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916.