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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The apple of God's eye: a biblical account of holiness

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Abstract

In this article, an exercise in Jewish philosophy, I propose a taxonomy that can account for and organize all of the many species of holiness that we find in the Hebrew Bible. Each species admits of precise definition. Moreover, the genus as a whole can be unified by a guiding metaphor, suggested by the Bible itself. Holiness, according to this metaphor, is bestowed by a certain type of gaze, and ultimately by occupying the centre of the field of God's attention.

Keywords: holiness; Bible; awe; attention

Introduction

According to Rudolph Otto (1958), holiness is associated with the presence of something at once fascinating and terrifying, tremendous and mysterious. While contemporary philosophy of religion hasn't dedicated much time to an investigation of holiness, the most promising recent attempts continue to proceed in broadly Ottonian terms.[1] Since holiness, or *kedusha* (in Hebrew), enters the western mindset as a *biblical* concept, I contend that our account of holiness should be rooted in an analysis of the relevant biblical data.[2] Taking my lead from that data, I present, in this article, an alternative account of holiness, thought of less in terms of God's transcendence, fearsomeness, or mystery, and more in terms of his *involvement* in, and *care* for, the world.[3]

More specifically, I shall propose a taxonomy of various species of holiness. Each species will admit of precise definition. Admittedly, the genus as a whole won't submit to straightforward analysis, but it can instead be unified by a guiding metaphor, suggested by the Bible itself. Accordingly, my account of holiness is an account rather than an analysis. An analysis of holiness would provide necessary and sufficient conditions for partaking of holiness. An *account*, by contrast, need only provide us with a metaphor that allows us to unify and organize the underlying phenomena. Ultimately, my account will boast more explanatory power, especially in terms of the ways in which the Bible uses the concept of holiness, than competing analyses.

Constraints on the project

Before we dive into the project at hand, I should identify a number of constraints within which my investigation will proceed. I intend to make a contribution, in this work, to what we might call constructive Orthodox Jewish philosophy.

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Just as Christian philosophers are entitled to assume the truth of various Christian doctrines, to explore their ramifications, or to formulate philosophical theories that can be rendered consistent with their faith, I shall be working under the assumption of the key doctrines of Orthodox Judaism.[4] I will be assuming, as do many works of religious philosophy, that God exists. Indeed, I have great sympathy for Alan Mittleman's claim: 'God and holiness are mutually implicated' (Mittleman 2018, 10). That is to say, without some sort of theistic commitment, the notion of holiness becomes easily dispensable. Accordingly, the holiness '"language game" is mostly played by theists' (Mittleman 2018, 10). To the extent that one isn't willing to entertain the assumption that God exists, this project will be of less burning importance. Having said that, it may still be of *some* interest, since atheists might want to understand what theists are talking about.

I will also be relating to the Pentateuch as something like the unmediated word of God. Non-Orthodox approaches to biblical scholarship tend to assume that the Pentateuch is the product of multiple human authors. Under that assumption, one might try to identify competing notions of holiness within the Five Books of Moses – associating each notion with a different author or school.[5] Orthodox approaches to the Bible, by contrast, tend to treat only what contemporary biblical scholars regard as the final redaction of the Pentateuch as religiously significant. They relate to the Pentateuch as a cohesive whole. Moreover, to the extent that later books of the Hebrew Bible are thought to be the product of veridical prophecy and divine inspiration,[6] the Orthodox scholar will be committed to a hermeneutic of reconciliation, finding ways to unify, rather than to further divide, the perspective of the Bible on any given issue.

Although this investigation takes place under the above-mentioned constraints, my hope is that its findings will be of interest to many thinkers who don't share the same background assumptions. Since the Hebrew Bible is a constituent part of the Christian Bible, and since Christians and Jews share a belief in God, my hope is that the project will be of immediate interest to Christian readers. Indeed, even if it's only rooted in the Hebrew Bible, a Christian can still relate to my account of holiness as a *biblical* account, notwithstanding the fact that they may want to search for further evidence in the New Testament.

Similar things could be said about Muslim readers. Moreover, non-Orthodox theologians who are happy to entertain heterodox views about the authorship of the Bible might still find the unified explanatory power of my account of holiness attractive, without having to commit themselves to the theoretical constraints within which I was working when I discovered and formulated the account.

The biblical data and the threat of family resemblance

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously suggested that some words don't admit of a strict definition but should be treated as a so-called *family resemblance term* (Wittgenstein 2009, §§65–71). Just as the different members of one family may all look alike, even if there's no one feature shared by them all, and only by them, he would suggest that some words name a family of things that are all somehow alike, even though there is no one feature shared by all of them, and only by them. His example of a family resemblance term was the word 'game'.

Try to think of what it is that all games have in common. Some of them have well-defined rules; some don't. Moreover, some activities have well-defined rules without being games. Driving, for example, has rules but isn't a game. Some games have multiple players; some don't. Some involve balls, boards, or cards, but some involve nothing of the sort. Whether or not 'game' really is a family resemblance term is beside the point.[7] Wittgenstein was clearly onto something important. It's almost inevitable that *some* meaningful words are meaningful only in virtue of a network of family resemblance

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that they pick out. And yet a theory of a phenomenon will always be more satisfactory, and indeed more explanatorily powerful, if it can avoid reliance on the inherent fuzziness of family resemblance. An account of a phenomenon will have more explanatory power if it can provide unambiguous necessary and sufficient conditions for being an instance of that phenomenon – such an account I would call an *analysis*. That's what we should *ideally* like to provide for holiness.

When, however, one looks at the distribution of 'holiness'-talk over the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, one sees it applied to a dizzying array of things, in a dizzying array of contexts. This creates an inevitable temptation to abandon our theoretical ambitions, and to view '*kedusha*' as a family resemblance term. Indeed, here is a non-exhaustive list of things that the Bible would call 'holy': animals put aside for sacrifice;[8] a candle, some money, or a humble wrench, if put aside for the running of the Temple;[9] the *kohanim*;[10] God's name;[11] God Himself;[12] the land of Israel;[13] tithes;[14] a person who takes a Nazarite oath;[15] the Temple[16] (and the Tabernacle before it);[17] the Jewish people,[18] the Sabbath;[19] and the festivals.[20]

If we are to resist the temptation to adopt a family resemblance account, I think we must, at least, recognize the existence of multiple *species* of holiness, even if they all fall under one unifying genus. That's the sort of structure that will allow us to organize this otherwise discordant array of data.

The Bible's treatment of the Sabbath provides us with extra reasons for thinking in terms of multiple species of holiness. On the one hand, the Torah commands the Jewish people to *sanctify* the Sabbath.[21] Indeed, Jewish liturgy for the Sabbath proudly proclaims that the Jews are 'the nation that sanctifies the Sabbath'. And yet the fifth-century Babylonian Rabbi, Ravina, asks, almost sarcastically, 'Is the Sabbath sanctified by Israel?!'[22] After all, we know from the Book of Genesis that *God* established and *sanctified* the Sabbath, long before the emergence of the Jewish people.[23] The best way to make sense of the fact that the Sabbath day is holy and that Israel is nevertheless commanded to sanctify it, is to distinguish between two species of holiness that attach to it. There is a species of holiness that the Sabbath has with or without us, and another species that Israel is commanded to bestow upon it.

Likewise, the Bible would seem to suggest that God Himself enjoys (at least) two species of holiness. God explicitly says: 'I shall be made holy in the midst of the children of Israel.'[24] That would imply that His holiness comes from Israel, and their sanctification of Him. In other verses, by contrast, God's holiness is described as being conceptually *prior* to the holiness of His people.[25] Once again, we're forced to distinguish between different *species* of holiness. God enjoys *absolute* and *relative* holiness.[26] God's absolute holiness is the holiness He has in and of Himself. His relative holiness, by contrast, can only be bestowed upon Him by others. The Sabbath, in comparison, seems to enjoy two forms of *relative* holiness: the holiness that it has in virtue of God's act of sanctification, and the distinct form of holiness that it can have in virtue of Israel's weekly act of sanctification.

Mittleman denies that Israel plays a role at all, in sanctifying the Sabbath. He doesn't recognize the existence of any such commandment. 'The human imperative', he says, 'is not to consecrate the Sabbath de novo – God has already done that – but to remember its status. "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy . . ." (Exodus 20:8–11).' But what does he think the Bible means by *keep it holy*? Isn't it holy without us? Moreover, a more literal translation of the verse in Exodus would be, 'Remember the sabbath day in order to sanctify it', which directly implies that the Jews, at the very least, *can* add a new layer of sanctity to the day.

Mark Murphy (2021) defends a conception of holiness according to which God enjoys *primary* holiness, and other things can exhibit a *secondary* holiness, generally when they

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act as vehicles to help us appreciate the primary holiness of God.[27] In establishing this structure, Murphy also denies the notion that there is any robust sense in which things can have a totally subjective or relative holiness (Murphy 2021, 20). It seems to me that the biblical presentation of God's holiness, and the holiness of the Sabbath day, speak against both of these elements of Murphy's overall picture. First of all, it seems to follow from Murphy's account that God can only have one type of holiness. And yet, we've seen the biblical implication that God has (at least) two: one type of holiness that can be supplemented by another, when the Jewish people sanctify Him. We've also seen that the Jewish people are called upon, seemingly, to make the Sabbath day (and, indeed God) holy *to them* in some sort of relational or subjective way.

How many species of holiness can we discover, as we try to organize the biblical data, and what might they all have in common?

Holiness and awe

Howard Wettstein suggests that in day-to-day speech, we commonly use language associated with sanctity when we discuss things that leave us awestruck. He writes:

> For many people, and not only those who would consider themselves religious, there is something holy about the objects of awe experience – childbirth, a great symphony, the Grand Canyon. There is, moreover, a feeling of horror associated with the thought of destroying such objects, events, and so on. To do so – even to allow such a thing – would be sacrilege.
> (Wettstein 2012, 33)

Wettstein's suggestion is that, since we use sanctity language when talking about objects of awe, there may be some deep relationship between awe and holiness.[28] Instead of awe, Mittleman talks in terms of 'cherishing'. Things are holy when they are cherished by us. 'Cherishing the newborn baby', he says, 'is as close as we come to experiencing goodness and holiness as value-properties of an "object" in the world' (Mittleman 2018, 16). These insights resonate with me, and they are probably what make Otto's account of holiness as attractive as it is.

But note that Wettstein's awe and Mittleman's cherishing have very little of the negative valence of Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. There's plenty of the *fascinans* in Wettstein and Mittleman's examples. Much less of the *tremendum*. And yet Murphy argues that it's an adequacy constraint on a theory of holiness that it should explain why the bearer of (primary) holiness has just the phenomenological signature that Otto associates with the holy; that it should explain why the bearer of (primary) holiness should be at once attractive and repulsive (Murphy 2021, 33). But I don't see any biblical necessity for this constraint.

It's true that God's immediate presence, in the Bible, is often associated with danger and tremendous fear. Nadab and Abihu get burnt to a cinder when they approach the holy of holies, unbidden, and with a spontaneous fire-offering, which hadn't been commanded.[29] Mittleman (2018, 8) beautifully summarizes much of this data in the following words:

> Indeed, God . . . seems to trade in terror. He reveals himself to Abraham, only to demand that he sacrifice his son. He reveals himself to Moses and Israel in a theophany so dreadful that God warns Moses to keep the people away. Mount Sinai is covered in fire and smoke, trembling as if in an earthquake; mere physical contact with it will incinerate the very people that God had just liberated.

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But this data shouldn't be taken out of context. First of all, the sort of terror of which Mittleman talks is just as often associated with the presence of God's *glory* (in Hebrew *Kavod*) as it is with His holiness. Moreover, we shouldn't forget that God isn't *always* experienced in these ways. To Elijah, God appeared in the 'still, small voice', and not in the mighty wind, or the earthquake, or the firestorm that preceded it.[30] Moses got to a stage in which his prophecy was somewhat routine, such that he spoke to God 'face to face', as two friends might converse.[31] And so, even if experiences of God are often presented as fearsome, such that one might want to recoil, the Bible is clear that this doesn't *always* have to be the case. Sometimes God's presence is more like the presence of a beloved friend or adviser. Sometimes His presence is a comfort,[32] as the Rabbis interpret His appearance to Abraham in the plains of Mamre.[33] As they interpret that episode, God had come to visit Abraham, as he recuperated from His circumcision.[34]

So, first of all, I would argue that experiences of the holy don't always have to include a negative or repellent valence. They can sometimes be associated with the less fearsome sort of awe described by Wettstein, or the cherishing of Mittleman. Moreover, our holding something in awe, or cherishing it, only seems relevant to relative, rather than absolute, forms of holiness – and not even to every form of relative holiness.

God's absolute holiness seems to be assured irrespective of whether anyone personally holds God in awe. Moreover, it isn't clear that God's ultimate holiness needs to be, in addition to God's glory, or God's presence, that which explains our tendency to be awestruck by Him. Moreover, if one dedicates a goat to the Temple, that goat becomes holy. Its holiness is certainly relational. The holiness isn't intrinsic to the goat. The holiness was bestowed upon it when it was put aside for sacrifice. However, the goat's relative holiness certainly doesn't require (legally or logically) anybody to be awestruck by the goat. They *might* be awestruck by it, if they really internalize what it has become, in the eyes of the law. But there's no necessity for such a reaction. *Pace* Murphy, the holiness of this goat doesn't even require that it be a vehicle for anybody coming into contact with the awesomeness of God. It remains holy even if the sacrifice never occurs, and its holiness, once acquired, is a legal status that's insensitive to anybody's actual or potential attitudes.

Accordingly, considerations of awe only seem pertinent to a *sub*-species of relative holiness, which I shall call subjective holiness. A thing will be subjectively holy to a person when, and only when, that individual holds it in awe (or cherishes it). The relative holiness that attaches to a goat, by contrast, isn't subjective holiness, but *legal* holiness. The *law* treats it as holy, so it's holy.

Subjective and personal holiness

In the book of Leviticus, the Jewish people are commanded to be holy themselves.[35] Let's call the type of holiness that they're commanded to attain 'personal holiness'. There is a famous dispute between two medieval Jewish Bible commentators, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (more commonly known as Rashi) and Nachmanides, on this verse, regarding the nature of personal holiness.

For a Jew to be holy, according to Nachmanides, is for her to transcend the dry letter of Jewish law – to ensure that, in addition to her formal observance of the other commandments, she strives more generally to act as a good person.[36] Personal holiness, in Nachmanides' approach, is centrally about being ethical. A goat, by contrast, doesn't have to be ethical to be holy!

Rashi equates personal holiness with the scrupulous avoidance of sins of the flesh.[37] To put it cynically, Rashi says that prudishness and personal holiness are synonymous. The more of a prude one is, the more holy one is. This, I admit, is a caricature of Rashi (which we'll refine as we proceed). But notice, once again, that a goat doesn't have to be prudish to be holy!

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One of Rashi's source-texts is a *midrash* that asks why Elisha was called 'holy' by the Shunamite woman:

> Rabbi Joshua, son of Levi, brought a proof from the case of the Shunamite woman. This is what is written: 'And she said to her husband: "Now I know that he is a holy man of God."'[38] Rabbi Jonah said: ['He is a holy man' implies that] he was a holy man, but his servants were not holy, as it is written: 'Gechazi [Elisha's servant] came near to push her away'[39] – [but] in pushing her away, he touched her breasts.[40]
> (*Leviticus Rabba*, 24:6)

According to this *midrash*, the Shunamite woman calls Elisha 'holy' essentially because he didn't grope her. This seems to place the bar for personal holiness absurdly (indeed, offensively) low. Perhaps we can remove the appearance of absurdity by quoting the whole of the *midrash*, which begins with these words:

> Rabbi Judah ben Pazi said: Why are the commandments concerning illicit sexual relations[41] juxtaposed with the laws of holiness?[42] Only to teach that wherever you find people erecting barriers against sexual licentiousness, there too will you find holiness. This goes along with the saying of Rabbi Judah ben Pazi: Anyone who erects barriers against sexual licentiousness is called a holy person.
> (*Leviticus Rabba*, 24:6)

Not only will we remove the apparent absurdity of this *midrash*, but we'll also discover an underlying synergy between the positions of Rashi and Nachmanides, if we concentrate on the relationship between subjective holiness and personal holiness.

Subjective holiness is associated with awe. It's associated with an attitude or a posture towards the world. If you could bottle the feeling you have when you're at the Grand Canyon, or holding a newborn baby, and adopt that attitude towards all people, objects, and events, then you would see subjective holiness all around you. My suggestion, developed over the next few paragraphs, is that for Rashi, personal holiness is achieved in just that way: by an individual making the things around him or herself subjectively holy.

Awe is the key to making things subjectively holy. But awe is a relatively easy bubble to burst. It's easy to make any situation feel absurd, simply by standing outside the situation for a moment. You're sitting in synagogue listening to a beautiful piece of liturgical music. As you're swept away by the emotion, you're struck by the notion that the music is nothing more than a wave of air passing through wobbly chords of flesh, and the moment is ruined. This is something that has fascinated existentialist philosophers: the ease with which a situation can be made to feel absurd. In fact, John Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, pays a great deal of attention to this phenomenon. It follows a character, Antoine Roquentin, who has the uncanny ability to make any experience feel absurd. We can do it too, by trying, for a moment, to stand outside a given situation.

What we do in those moments of perceived absurdity is to treat things merely as objects, stripping them of their social statuses and their socially constructed properties. If one regards a baseball bat just as a stick of wood, or a soccer ball as a latex bladder surrounded by panels of polyvinyl chloride, then the whole surrounding social structure that is baseball or soccer just seems to collapse under the pressure of its own absurdity. Why do I want to put a latex bladder into a net?

Sexual sins are the cardinal example of objectifying something that shouldn't be turned into a mere object. This happens on two levels. The first is the most obvious: when an individual sees someone they find sexually attractive, they may start to relate to them as a desirable object rather than as a person. In the cases of sexual sins that

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the Torah mentions, the objectification often happens on a second level too. When a brother and a sister sleep with each other (an example I choose because most of the illicit relationships listed in Leviticus are incestuous), not only might they objectify one another – treating each other as objects – but they also pollute the relationship of siblinghood. It's impossible to maintain a sibling relationship if the brother and sister are involved with each other as lovers: they would have shattered the familial nature of their relationship.

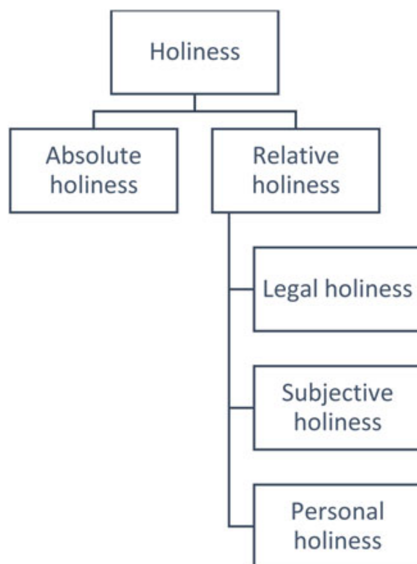
Rashi's idea might be this: the key to personal holiness is an attitude. The attitude is related to awe and is thus the antithesis of the attitude of objectifying things. This helps us to make sense of our *midrash* too. Elisha didn't simply refrain from groping someone. The idea is that he was constituted such that no such intention could have occurred to him. I recognize that my interpretation of Rashi goes much further than anything he explicitly says. But note: Rashi *doesn't* say that barriers against licentiousness give rise to or constitute holiness. He merely says (as does his midrashic proof-text) that where you find one phenomenon, you'll tend to find the other. Jewish life needn't encourage prudishness. Indeed, Judaism seems to have a central, positive space for sexuality and physical intimacy. Rashi is only saying that where you find people who don't objectify others, you're likely to find holiness.

I would suggest that the kind of person who could never objectify another, not even in the realm of sexuality, where the temptation is greatest, views the world through a prism of awe, through which other people – and the entire created world, as creations of God – deserve to be viewed. One who adopts this posture towards the world cannot fail – as long as this posture is held, to be an ethical person. That's why I would say that Rashi's position encompasses the position of Nachmanides – indeed, it goes further.

Following Rashi, I would suggest that personal holiness is achieved when people make things around themselves subjectively holy. They do this in those moments when they refuse to objectify anything, treating all creatures with reverence and respect.

A partial taxonomy

So far, we have a taxonomy of holiness that looks something like this:[43]



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At the first level of this taxonomy, holiness divides into two species:

1. Absolute holiness only inheres in God.
2. Relative holiness is had by any entity (including God) that others have sanctified.

Relative holiness then subdivides into (at least) three subspecies:

1. Any object, animal, person, place, or stretch of time that is regarded as holy for legal purposes will have legal holiness.[44] This form of holiness is generally relative to God, in that God's law is what bestows the holiness – although sometimes legal holiness is also relative to a given human. In marriage, for example, two people become legally sanctified to one another, and thereby sexually forbidden to anyone else.[45]
2. Any object, animal, person, place, or stretch of time, *x*, will have subjective holiness for a different person, *y*, so long as *y* holds *x* in awe.
3. A person has personal holiness by virtue of her habitually bestowing subjective holiness upon the objects, animals, people, places, and/or times in her vicinity, causing God to regard them in a new and positive light.

These different holinesses can overlap. God has absolute holiness, and we add a layer of subjective holiness to Him when we hold God in awe. The Sabbath has legal holiness bestowed upon it by God's law. In addition to that, the Israelites are commanded to make it holy relative also to them. If they observe the Sabbath robotically, then they will have done little more than to recognize its independent legal holiness – but that might nevertheless be enough to add to it a distinct dimension of legal holiness, one that is relative to *them* rather than only to God. Moreover, and to the extent that Jewish law calls for more than robotic compliance, it seems as if Jews are also called upon to hold the Sabbath in awe. If they do so, they will make it subjectively holy too.

This taxonomy allows us to impose some order upon the otherwise jumbled data that we find in the Bible. The structure it discovers is more faithful to the data than a simple distinction between primary and secondary holiness. But we shouldn't confuse a taxonomy of a phenomenon for a philosophical account or analysis of that phenomenon. What we need to know is what all of these species have in common. We want to understand what characterizes the genus to which they all belong.

God's gaze and the essence of holiness

The first time that holiness appears in the Hebrew Bible is in the book of Genesis. Each day of the creation, except for the second day (an exception that demands explanation, but not here), God is described as looking at what He has created that day and pronouncing it good. Accordingly, God's gaze is associated with His ability to see things as good.

The sixth day contains two instances of God's looking, pronouncing something good. First, He looks at what He has created that day, the animals that live upon the land, and pronounces His work to be good.[46] Then, having finished all of the work of the six days of creation, He performs a different sort of inspection: 'And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.'[47] This final inspection and proclamation differs in two ways from the ones that came before it. First, instead of looking at individual creations of a given day, He adopts a wider perspective, and regards 'all that He had made' – namely, the universe as a whole. Second, He doesn't merely pronounce it good, but *very* good.

The next thing that happens is that 'God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy . . .' I want to suggest that God was only able to proclaim the seventh day *holy* once He had

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been able to regard the universe as a whole. Instead of focusing on the instrumental good of any one creation, God was able to take a step back – so to speak – at the end of the six days, and to regard the intrinsic good of the whole.[48] Only then was God able to sanctify anything. He sanctified the first stretch of time in which He was able to regard 'all of the work . . . that God had done'. The hint here is very subtle, but once we run with the hypothesis, we will find more biblical data to back it up. The hypothesis is that sanctity has something to do with a certain type of looking; a special type of *gaze*. Not the looking that God performed on the earlier days, but the looking that God was only able to perform on the eve of the first Sabbath.

In the next section, I flesh this hypothesis out by applying it to the case of legal holiness, Then I will provide more (and hopefully more compelling) biblical data to support the hypothesis.

God's gaze and the law

God knows all things at all times. There is nothing of which God is unaware.[49] Nevertheless, Jewish law might be thought to hold a special place in God's gaze, so to speak. More accurately, one might be tempted to say that Jewish law somehow *structures God's gaze*. After all, Jewish law is thought of as the manifestation of God's wisdom – the eternal Torah with which God created all that exists.[50] Accordingly, to give something legal holiness might be to bring it somehow more centrally into God's field of attention. That's what happens, for example, when you sanctify something to the Temple. A simple wrench, once consecrated for use in the Temple, moves into a more central space within the gaze of God.

But what do I mean, when I say that Jewish law *structures* God's gaze? Here's an analogy that might help. When you look at some people playing baseball in a park, what you see is a park, and some people, and a bat, and a ball, etc. When you do this, you're not conscious of the fact that, in a sense, all you're really seeing is a wash of colours. That's what your visual field gives to you: blobs of colour. But you cut those colours up into various shapes. You don't do this consciously. But you do it. This process allows you to see that there's a park, and to distinguish the park from the sky, the people from one another, and the bat from the person who's holding it. All of this is done in conformity with a conceptual scheme that you've inherited, largely from the language that you speak, and the words that you know.[51] If you had no concept of a park, or a person, or a baseball bat, then you'd experience the scene very differently. So too, if the Torah represents something like the structure of God's mind, then the Torah will play a role, so to speak, in structuring what God sees.[52]

That is, of course, a metaphor – and it is perhaps a disturbing metaphor– can God's attention really have a foreground and a background, or be 'structured' through 'sight'? – but the metaphor keeps appearing in the biblical text.

Consider the land of Israel. What makes it holy? Could it not be the fact that 'the eyes of the Eternal your God are continually on it, from the beginning of the year to its end'?[53] After all, this is presented as the feature that makes the land of Israel different from other places. It's as if God pays more attention to it. It lies at the centre of His gaze. The same is said to be true for the holiest place in the holy land, namely the Temple in Jerusalem, of which God says, 'And now I have chosen and consecrated this House, that My name be there forever. My eyes and My heart shall always be there.'[54] Clearly, then, there is a connection between what God looks at, so to speak – where He focusses His gaze, where His 'eyes' are – and what counts as holy.

The Jewish people are said to be holy.[55] But they are also described as the apple of God's eye.[56] The Hebrew phrase that Moses uses to describe the Jewish people, which I translated as the apple of God's eye, more literally means, the *pupil* of God's eye. The

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Hebrew word for 'pupil' here is *ishon*, which – more literally still – means a little person. The idea is that if I were to look right into the pupil of your eyes, I would see a little person there. That little person, of course, would be my own reflection. My daughter used to love the fact that she could see her reflection in my eyes. I tried to convince her that, even when she wasn't looking, her reflection was still there in my eyes. What I was telling her, in so many words, is that she is the apple of my eye. She has my attention. So too, Moses tells the Jewish people that, if they could look into the eyes of God, they would see that their reflection is always in His pupil. They occupy the centre of His attention.

What seems to unify all of our species of holiness, and to characterize the genus to which they all belong, has something to do with God's gaze.

Remaining species of holiness

We've seen how legal holiness – including the holiness of the land of Israel, and of the Jewish people, and even the holiness of a concentrated goat – can be described in terms of God's gaze. The same can be said about God's own absolute holiness. We said that God's absolute holiness was bestowed upon Him by no one external to Him. But perhaps it is best understood as *self*-bestowed.

God is holy, in and of Himself, because He constantly regards Himself. This is, of course, highly evocative of the Aristotelian notion that God is the *ens intelligens*, the *intellectus*, and the *ens intelligibile* – namely, the knower, the knowledge, and the thing known.[57] This entails that God is always regarding Himself. Even without Aristotle, it seems right to say that God would appreciate, without any hint of egotism, that He really is perfect. All I mean by this is that, being infinitely powerful and totally perfect in every way, He would recognize His own value. If He didn't, then there would be something important in the world that He'd be missing. Accordingly, He should both know Himself, and greatly value Himself. Indeed, He should cherish Himself. There is a sense in which He would quite naturally be, so to speak, at the centre of His own attention – since there is nothing in the universe more valuable than Him. This self-directed gaze might, then, be the source of His absolute holiness.

Subjective holiness will be defined not in terms of God's gaze, but in terms of our own. When *we* hold something in awe, we are, in some sense or another, seeing the Godliness in it. It also becomes, in that moment, the very centre of our attention. We recognize that it is a creation of God. It is as if we are bringing God more squarely into our own field of attention. Indeed, just as Israel is the apple of God's eye, the Israelites are explicitly told to make God's Torah, and His law, the apple of their eyes.[58]

On my Rashi-inspired account of personal holiness, when a person is adept at bestowing subjective holiness on her surroundings, God, so to speak, reciprocates and regards her, and the things that she values, in a new light. She becomes, so to speak, the centre of God's attention, which is the source of her personal holiness. It's as if, when we make things subjectively holy, God reciprocates by taking special notice of us, which makes us personally holy. Indeed, the Psalmist explicitly says that 'the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him'.[59] In other words, the righteous have a special place in God's gaze.

Even the etymology of the word *kedusha*, which carries a notion of separateness and distinctness, can fold into this metaphor of standing at the centre of God's attention: to be in the centre of someone's attention is to stand out from the background, to be distinct in the field of her visual or mental field.[60] To use the language that emerges from our account of the creation story, bestowal of sanctity requires a special sort of gaze, and the occupation of a special place in one's field of attention. This language can also make sense of the notion that holiness might come in degrees[61] – just as one can be or more less centre-stage in the visual field of another.

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Even the controversial notion, hinted at by various passages of the Bible,[62] seemingly renounced by other passages,[63] and consistently downplayed by the Rabbis,[64] that holiness – or some forms of it – might be contagious, even that notion can be folded into this account. Touching a holy item, on this view, can render one holy. This needn't entail that holiness is a property that's directly transmitted by physical contact. It could be that to touch a holy item – an item which already lies at the centre of God's gaze – is, for better or for worse, to bring yourself also more directly into the gaze of God, by mere proximity to the antecedently holy.

An account, but not an analysis

What do I take my account of holiness to have achieved? First of all, our taxonomy has imposed order upon the otherwise messy array of biblical data concerning *kedusha*. Mittleman, for example, claims to discover three forms of holiness in the Bible, each with its own logical form. He identifies holiness as a relational status (e.g. a status bestowed upon *x* by an act of consecration); holiness as an intrinsic property (e.g. the holiness of God Himself); and holiness as some sort of ideal, such as a responsiveness to the good.[65]

My account, by contrast, sees just one logical form, shared by every species of holiness. Every species of holiness, even the holiness of God Himself, is a relational status, even if – in God's case – the relation is reflexive (which is what justifies our calling it *absolute*, since being relative only to God is as absolute as a status can be). The status of holiness is bestowed when a person sees that which is worthy of awe, or cherishing, in an object, person, time, or place; or when a legal system's provisions bestow the status. In those cases in which holiness requires a person to hold something or someone in awe, or to cherish it, there's a sense in which, as Mittleman rightly insists, holiness tracks a responsiveness to the good. And thus, the account on the table can boast a type of explanatory unity not often found in accounts of biblical holiness. Indeed, one of the pitfalls of searching for the multiple alleged authors of Scripture is that, in looking for multiple perspectives, one sometimes obscures the beautiful unity and conceptual coherence of the so-called final redaction.

Second, my account stays true to the biblical data. Murphy's stark dichotomy between the primary and the secondary bearers of holiness flattens a more complex biblical terrain. Even God Himself can exemplify multiple forms of holiness. Moreover, Murphy ties himself to an Ottonian phenomenology of holiness that the Bible doesn't necessitate.

Finally, we have escaped the threat of a family resemblance account. Each species of holiness can admit of clear-cut definitions. Biblical or Rabbinic law, for example, will be able to specify, in a systematic fashion, for any given *x* whether *x* partakes in legal holiness or not. Absolute holiness can be defined as the consequence of being held in God's self-regard; a consequence that can befall God and nothing else. Subjective holiness is defined as the quality that any object *x* has, relative to some person *y*, as a consequence of *y* holding *x* in awe. Personal holiness is defined in terms of subjective holiness. It is the quality held by people adept at bestowing subjective holiness upon the people and things in their vicinity. At the level of the individual species of holiness, there is no obvious threat of fuzziness.[66]

Other attempts to define holiness in the Bible have sought to situate it within a constellation of other biblical terms. There is certainly a value in trying to situate holiness in the larger conceptual framework of the Bible. But we also find that if one never drills down into holiness on its own, the threat of fuzziness is quick to assert itself. For example, Lenn Goodman writes, in a chapter entitled, 'Holiness in its Constellation':

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> Holiness is how we name that Place where generosity unites with wisdom, bestowing beauty on the works of nature and energizing the work and play by which they point, like compass needles, toward God's Unity, revealing the holiness immanent in nature.[67]

I don't know what to do with such a definition, or how to resolve its seeming circularity. The account that I have to offer, perhaps precisely because it doesn't yet look to the constellation of related concepts, can boast both a unity and a clarity that other biblically based accounts of holiness tend to lack.

In fact, armed with our new account of holiness, I think we might be better placed, in future studies, to enter into the question of how holiness relates to other concepts. It has often been pointed out that holiness is more often contrasted, in the Hebrew Bible, with impurity, rather than with the profane or mundane.[68] Impurity itself, in the Bible, is a property that scholars have rightly identified as dividing into various sub-species including ritual purity, ethical purity, and maybe more.[69] Ritual purity is often thought to be associated with life and health, and impurity with death and ill-health.[70] To come into contact with death is to become ritually contaminated. There is no suggestion that the contraction of ritual impurity is an ethical issue at all. On the contrary, there are times when a person is commanded to become impure, to bury the dead, for example. It would be strange to relate to such commandments as unholy. In future studies, armed with our account of holiness, one might hope to trace a unified narrative arch in the book of Leviticus, in which a culture is taught, via the notions of ritual purity and impurity, to become extremely sensitive to the value of life, which in turn trains them to be receptive to that which should be treasured, which in turn allows the culture to become one that seeks after ethical purity, and learns to sanctify times, places, people, and things.

But what I haven't given us is an *analysis* of holiness. That is to say, I haven't provided a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to the overriding *genus*, even if I can do that for each *species* of the genus. Instead, we have something like a guiding *metaphor* that helps us to make sense of what unifies the genus. That's why I would say that I have provided an *account* of the genus rather than an *analysis*. And it *is* just a metaphor. An omniscient God sees all things at once and can pay attention to any number of things simultaneously, such that it might not make much sense to talk literally of God's field of attention having a centre. But the metaphor is rooted in the language and narrative of the Bible itself. Moreover, it's a metaphor that makes sense of our informative taxonomy and guides us towards sharp definitions of the various species of holiness. Unlike other accounts of holiness, it can explain – even if only by assimilation to a guiding metaphor – what the holiness of a wrench in the Temple, and the holiness of a saintly individual, have in common one with the other.

This understanding of holiness can also help us to make sense of the biblical notion of a holy nation – salvaging it from some of the negative, even racist, connotations that can accrue to it. If individual people become holy by making things around them holy, then a holy nation is only holy by virtue of the fact that it sees all other people in their vicinity as holy too. In this way, a holy nation brings more and more of God's creation, so to speak, back into the centre of His attention – until, in the eschaton, His temple becomes a house of prayer for all peoples.[71] God's attention flows down upon Israel, but only when and to the extent that Israel redirects God's attention to all of His other creatures, by venerating them. When a person or a community fails to do that – when they fail to see the holiness in others – they fail to be holy themselves.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Murphy (2021) and Fleischacker (2023a).
2. Note that I didn't claim that *kedusha* is a biblical word. In the Bible, one finds the adjective, *kadosh*, and the verb, *lekadesh*, and the noun *kodesh* (used to refer to holy things). The abstract noun, *kedusha*, is a later innovation, but one that clearly gives a word to a concept already present in the Bible.
3. Here I echo Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits (2002).
4. The doctrines I have in mind would be those identified as the principles of the Jewish faith in Lebens (2020).
5. See, for example, Jenson (1992); Knohl (1995, 2003); Milgrom (2004).
6. As to why a contemporary Jew could still find herself committed to these pre-modern ways of relating to the Hebrew Bible, see Lebens (2020, ch. 7) and Gellman (2016).
7. For opposition to Wittgenstein on that front see Suits (2005).
8. Leviticus 27:10 (discussing animals pledged to the Temple, but see also Leviticus 22:21 and Exodus 29:37).
9. Leviticus 27:26–28.
10. Leviticus 21:8.
11. Leviticus 22:32.
12. Leviticus 19:2, Isaiah 6:3.
13. Zecharia 2:12.
14. Leviticus 27:30 and 32.
15. Numbers 6:8.
16. Psalms 5:7.
17. Exodus 26:33–34.
18. Deuteronomy 7:6.
19. Genesis 2:2–3.
20. Leviticus 23:4.
21. Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11.
22. Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Beitza* 17a.
23. Genesis 2:3.
24. Leviticus 22:32.
25. Leviticus 19:2, Isaiah 6:3.
26. Absolute holiness is what Murphy (2021) and Fleischacker (2023a) call 'primary holiness', but relative holiness isn't merely 'secondary holiness' – that is, the holiness that attaches to creatures – since relative holiness also attaches to God.
27. Despite their differences, Fleischacker adopts the same basic structure in terms of primary and secondary holiness (Fleischacker 2023a).
28. Robert Adams defines holiness in terms of things that are subject to violation (Adams 1999, ch. 4, §§2–3). To violate something is, on this suggestion, to offend against something that should be sacred. Fleischacker (2023a) builds his account of holiness upon Adams' suggestion. I prefer Wettstein's starting point. God's holding Himself in awe is an intuitively plausible notion, for reasons that I will explain. This notion will then allow me, later in this article, to make sense of God's absolute holiness. The notion that God is respecting His own boundaries by not violating them, by contrast, wouldn't be an easy notion to unpack.
29. Leviticus 10:1–2.
30. 1 Kings 19:12. Mittleman (2018, 9) insists that this experience still filled Elijah with fear. His basis for that reading isn't clear to me.
31. Exodus 33:11.
32. See, for example, Psalms 23:4.
33. Genesis 18:1.
34. Babylonian Talmud, Sota 14a.
35. Leviticus 19:2. I developed the basic idea of this section in Lebens (2013), but it wasn't yet part of the sort of systematic account of holiness that I seek to offer in this article.
36. Nachmanides on Leviticus 19:2, s.v. *ve-ha'inyan* and s.v. *lefikhakh.* There is something of a paradox here. According to Nachmanides, supererogation apparently becomes obligatory. See Lebens (2023). See also the classic paper Lichtenstein (2004).
37. Rashi on Leviticus 19:2, s.v. *kedoshim tihyu.*
38. 2 Kings 4:9.
39. 2 Kings 4:27.
40. The verb used in 2 Kings for 'pushing away' is *l'hodfah*. The *midrash* reads it as *hod she-b'yofyah*, which means 'the majesty of her beauty'.

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41. Leviticus 18.
42. Leviticus 19.
43. I first presented this partial taxonomy in Lebens (2019). But there, it wasn't yet buttressed in the biblical data, and the explanatory power of the model was left uninvestigated.
44. Accordingly, it was natural for the Rabbis to view marriage in terms of *kedusha*.
45. Of course, in biblical law, because a man could have more than one wife, the woman became sanctified to a man in marriage, without the man becoming sanctified to his wife. But since, by Rabbinic law, a man is forbidden to marry multiple women, there is a sense in which, today, a married couple both become sanctified, one to the other. It should also be noted that marriage isn't described in the Bible itself in terms of sanctity, though the Rabbis do, and the extension of *kedusha* to marriage was natural for all sorts of legal and conceptual reasons.
46. Genesis 1:25.
47. Genesis 1:31.
48. I'm grateful to Cole Aaronson for conversation on this point. I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that Samuel Fleischacker (2023b) adopts a similar reading of the relevant verses in Genesis. He notes that God only proclaims the creation to be *very good* when the work has been completed (Fleischacker 2023b, 302), and he speaks about the sanctity of the Sabbath emerging only once God, so to speak, takes a step back from creation, to view it from a distance (Fleischacker 2023b, 301).
49. Psalms 44:21; 147:5, Proverbs 15:3; 1 Chronicles 28:9.
50. For more on the notion of God's eternal Torah – with its roots in the book of Proverbs, chapter 8 – see part II of Lebens (2020).
51. For a survey of the scientific literature on the relationship between language and vision see Vulchanova et al. (2019).
52. It's not obvious to me that, to make sense of the claim that our vocabulary plays some role in shaping our experience, or influencing the focus of our attention, that I'm required to make use of the sort of thick notion of a 'conceptual scheme', the intelligibility of which Donald Davidson (1973–1974) attacks. On the other hand, if I am so committed, it's not clear to me that that would be a tremendous cost.
53. Deuteronomy 11:12.
54. 2 Chronicles 7:16.
55. Deuteronomy 7:6.
56. Deuteronomy 32:10, Zecharia 2:12.
57. This idea, popular in medieval theology, is rooted in Aristotle's *De Anima* iii.5. It is investigated by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* I.68.
58. Proverbs 7:2.
59. Psalms 33:18. Indeed, one might even translate this verse to read that God's eye is on those who hold God in awe.
60. The guiding metaphor of God's gaze also enfolds Fleischacker's insight about the relationship between distance and holiness (Fleischacker 2023b). See note 48 above.
61. See Jenson (1992).
62. For example, Leviticus 6:11 and Ezekiel 44:19.
63. For example, Haggai 2:11–13.
64. See Mittleman (2018, 45–48) who cites Levine (1989, 257).
65. Mittleman (2018, 55).
66. Although that threat might emerge if we try to give a thorough analysis of *awe*.
67. Goodman (2019, 2).
68. Dan (1998, 14) and Jenson (1992, 43–45).
69. See, for example, Hayes (2002).
70. Milgrom (2004, 12) although see Klawans (2006, 57–58).
71. Isaiah 56:7.

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