

# God's Things: An Essay in Secondary Holiness

Samuel Fleischacker  
University of Illinois-Chicago

**ABSTRACT:** This response to Mark Murphy's *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* constructs an account of what Murphy calls "secondary holiness" — the holiness of everything other than God — oriented to the Jewish tradition. On the theory that differences come out most sharply against a background of similarities, an initial section lays out what the author shares with Murphy methodologically. The essay then offers a reading of the aesthetic and ethical significance of Jewish ritual practices that delimit holy objects and times. Central to the ethical aspect of this account is an analysis of what it might mean, in interpersonal relationships, to respect certain things as "sacred" to another; this leads to the suggestion that regarding certain things as sacred to God may be a basis on which to develop a personal relationship with God.

I'm honored to have been asked to participate in this symposium on Mark Murphy's work, which I admire greatly. Mark and I initially met at a conference in which we both gave papers on holiness, moreover, so I am especially pleased to have an opportunity to respond to his book on that subject (Murphy 2021).<sup>1</sup> That said, our ways of thinking philosophically about God differ considerably. So while my main purpose in this essay is to develop a Jewish account of what Murphy calls "secondary holiness" — the holiness that God's creatures can attain, as opposed to the holiness of God Godself, which Murphy calls "primary holiness" — I will begin with some thoughts on methodology. That will itself help explain, I hope, why I prefer to try to get at primary holiness via secondary holiness, rather than developing an account of primary holiness first, and moving from there to secondary holiness.

## 1.

Differences come out most sharply against a background of similarities, so let's start with what Murphy and I share, methodologically.

First, we both love Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. Both of us think that Otto was absolutely right, above all, to identify holiness as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* — something simultaneously fascinating and repellent or terrifying — although we understand the source of that fascination and terror rather differently.

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to Murphy come from this book.

Second, we both take the proper method in philosophy of religion to be a movement between independent philosophical argument and the authoritative sources of our religious traditions. Murphy tells us at one point that he is defending the idea of a populated Hell because it is “a datum of Christian revelation” (212), and elsewhere describes beliefs he is trying to explain or defend as arising from “scriptural testimony” (182) or “authoritative Christian sources” (231). He also appeals at one point to the teachings of early Church councils (164) and often takes doctrines defended by Catholic philosophers — Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus — as starting points for his discussions. I endorse this way of proceeding and similarly work out from authoritative Jewish texts, and teachings central to the Jewish tradition.

Third, Murphy and I are both supernaturalists about God. Neither of us is drawn to naturalistic accounts of holiness — to attempts to explain why human beings have come to such an idea via our biology, say.<sup>2</sup> We believe that God is radically and necessarily *beyond* the natural world — present to it but not contained within it — and holiness pertains to God, and to us insofar as we stand in the presence of God. So holiness must also transcend the natural world, and pertain to us only insofar as we too can somehow transcend it.

Finally, Murphy and I are both analytic philosophers, at least in the broad sense by which Bernard Williams once characterized that way of doing philosophy:

What distinguishes analytical philosophy from other contemporary philosophy ... is a certain way of going on, which involves argument, distinctions, and, so far as it remembers to try to achieve it and succeeds, moderately plain speech. ... The aim of analytical philosophy, as it always says, is to be clear (Williams 1985, viii).<sup>3</sup>

This is worth stressing because my work, unlike Murphy's, largely abjures the abstract metaphysics characteristic of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. But unlike a significant number of contemporary theologians, neither of us does philosophy by way of wordplay, loose literary associations, or obscure ruminations on Being. And we both, like Williams, take clarity to be a supreme philosophical virtue.

Against the background of these commonalities, the differences between us begin with the fact that my starting points are Jewish rather than Christian. That means, for one thing, that I don't need my account of holiness to help explain the Incarnation of God in Christ, the Atonement of Christ for our sins, or the possibility of a populated Hell: I don't believe in any of those things. It is a mark in favor of Murphy's book, as an exercise in Christian theology, that it does shed light on these points — that shows its explanatory reach. But as a philosopher working within the Jewish tradition, I need to explain quite different things: the fact that Jewish law (*halakha*) is supposed to help Jews achieve holiness, for instance.

As already indicated, my authoritative texts are also different from Murphy's. Even when Murphy turns to the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanakh*), he leans heavily on texts from Isaiah and the Psalms, and on the story of Uzzah in the Book of Samuel, who is struck dead for touching the Ark of the Covenant. For Jews, the five books that constitute the Torah have a

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<sup>2</sup> For one such account, see (Mittleman 2018).

<sup>3</sup> It's worth noting that Williams goes on immediately to say, about analytic philosophy's aim to be clear, “I am not altogether sure of its title to that claim, still less of its unique title to it” (Williams 1985, viii). But he endorses the aspiration, at least, and expresses a hope that his own book will achieve it. I share that aspiration and that hope — and the same must be true of Murphy, since every page and sentence of his book manifests supreme clarity.

qualitatively higher authority than anything else in the Tanakh, and although the Torah contains a parallel story to the one about Uzzah (the death of Aaron's sons, in Leviticus 10), that story is generally regarded as an anomalous and mysterious one, yielding little insight into the nature of holiness. The *loci classici* for the notion of holiness in the Jewish tradition are the very first appearance of the root *qdsb* ("holy") in Genesis (2:3) — "And God made [the seventh day] holy" — and the declaration, near the middle of the Torah, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Notably, the second of these verses explicitly invites Jews to participate in God's own holiness; given that Jews are supposed to keep the sabbath and make it holy, the same is true, implicitly, of the first verse as well. Take that as one major reason why the idea that human beings are unworthy of sharing in God's holiness — a central element of Murphy's account — is implausible, for Jews.<sup>4</sup> God seems in these verses to *welcome* human beings to share in God's holiness. And this invitation to a shared condition, with its implication that God considers us eminently worthy of standing in God's presence, runs through much of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isaiah 1:18: "Come, let us reason together ...") and the Jewish tradition as a whole. Jews therefore need a different explanation of the dual *tremendum/fascinans* quality of God's holiness.

Now at this point the obvious move might seem to be to develop an alternative metaphysical framework for explaining God's holiness in Jewish terms, with much the same form as Murphy's but different content. And I am tempted to do that. I might for instance say that, before reading Murphy's book, I had always taken the central attributes of perfect being theology to be omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence<sup>5</sup> — perfect goodness, at least — as opposed to Murphy's omniscience, omnipotence, perfect rationality and perfect freedom (86-7). I might add that God's being the paradigm of goodness should lead us to doubt the adequacy of all our limited conceptions of goodness.<sup>6</sup> And it would seem to follow from these two points that if God is perfectly good, and the source of whatever for us is our highest good, then God is certainly fascinating (desirable, attractive, worthy of unconditional love), but God is also terrifying: since this highest good may at least in principle require us to abandon or reject any and all of the finite goods that we ordinarily pursue. I could indeed bring in the almost-sacrifice of Isaac as an illustration of this point. In principle, God could demand of us even our beloved sons. In *fact*, God will not do that, but the mere possibility of such a thing, the possibility of "a teleological suspension" of all that we hold dear, makes the supreme goodness that God represents terrible, repulsive, to be fled from, every bit as much as it is desirable, attractive, and to be loved. From here, I could perhaps arrive at an account of God's "motivational structure" (compare Murphy 87, 98, 108 ff), and of how God relates to us.

But I am going to resist the temptation to do any of this. For another of the commitments that I have, which I think is at least partly due to my placement in the Jewish tradition — with its elusive, remote God rather than a God who came down to earth to interact with us — is that figuring out what God is like, in any detail at least, is impossible. To some extent, Murphy agrees. The "divine essence ... is beyond our powers to know more than dimly in this life" he says (155), and elsewhere he tells us that "our grasp of [the divine perfection] is fragmentary, piecemeal, notional" (223). But I do not see how to square these remarks with his apparent confidence that God is omnipotent, omniscient and

<sup>4</sup> It seems to me an excellent reading of the Christian doctrine of original sin, on the other hand.

<sup>5</sup> As does Kant, among others: see for instance, §86 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Ak 5:444).

<sup>6</sup> For which reason calling God "perfectly good" does not ally me with what Murphy describes as the "morality framework" or "love framework" (2021, 80-108): on the contrary, it leads me to doubt whether we really know what "morality" and "love" are.

perfectly free, that these terms are all intelligible (as opposed to God's being "perfectly or maximally loving," which Murphy thinks is unintelligible, 2021, 100-101),<sup>7</sup> and that we know enough about what they entail to figure out God's "motivational structure." To me it seems that knowing how God's motivational structure works would *be* to know God's essence, and a counsel of ignorance, or a very dim grasp of God's ways, should lead us to shy away from such claims.

My reasons for shying away from these claims do not arise solely from my Jewish commitments, however. They also have roots in a rather different philosophical orientation from Murphy's: in a Kantian and Wittgensteinian suspicion of metaphysics, which Murphy does not, I think, share. I am skeptical in particular of how much we can extend the words that we use in the language games of ordinary life — in Kantian terms: the concepts that we use to make sense of experience — to a Being the nature of which, *ex hypothesi*, must transcend and yet underlie all these limited contexts, and all the experience they reflect. I do not deny that the idea of God as a perfect Being can be valuable. Among other things, it helps fend off the limited, anthropomorphic conceptions of God that pop up all too often in everyday religious life. But perfect Being theology gains its significance *purely* from its critical relationship to everyday religious life, on my view, and serves there simply as an ethically valuable guide, not an item of metaphysical knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Take these methodological remarks as my excuse for trying to achieve a glimpse of God's holiness only by way of the holiness that we attribute to objects or activities in our religious and ethical lives — and in particular by the way that my own, Jewish community comes up with and views such attributions.

## 2.

How does holiness show up within Jewish language games and practices? Well, the Hebrew word for holy, *qadosh*, first and foremost means "set apart" or "distanced," so we might start by thinking about what might be valuable about simply holding things apart from ourselves (*pave* Murphy 2021, 12-14),<sup>9</sup> keeping a distance from them. In an earlier piece on holiness (Fleischacker 2022), I used an aesthetic model for exploring the value of distance, suggesting that even God may appreciate the beauty of God's creations only from a distance — that is the function, I argued there, of God's creation of the sabbath, and the reason why it is holy — and that we imitate God by doing something similar. Here I'd like to add an ethical dimension to that aesthetic model: to explore the role that distancing plays in our relationships with other persons. But I'll begin by summarizing the results of my earlier paper.

One thing often missed about Genesis 2:1-3 is that the sabbath (*shabbat*) is *part* of creation and not just a day of rest after creation has been completed. Verse 2 begins, "And God completed His work *on* the seventh day." Of course it goes on to say that God *ceased* (*va'yishbot*: the root is the word for shabbat) to work on the seventh day. So what did God

<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that the arguments he employs here apply *mutatis mutandi* to omnipotence and omniscience as well. But I won't pursue that issue here.

<sup>8</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A 814-15=B 842-3, *Critique of Practical Reason* Ak 5:140 and *Critique of Judgment* §86b (Ak 5:444) on how perfect Being theology can arise *from* the moral reasons we have for belief in God.

<sup>9</sup> I take Murphy's point, however, that not just any kind of separation will yield an account of holiness. Minimally, we need an explanation of what the separation is *for*.

add to creation on the seventh day? I suggest: the very process of ceasing to create, of actively resting. And why is ceasing, or active rest, such a good thing that it deserves divine creation? Because it provides a frame for everything else that has been created. Artworks are traditionally thought to need completeness in order to be beautiful, and completeness requires a frame, something marking the edges of the completed thing, which allows its maker, as well as others, to step back from it. Shabbat provides that sort of frame to creation as a whole — a position, somewhat removed from everything God made in the process of creation, from which their goodness can be appreciated: from which they can be seen as beautiful.

This proposal fits in well with what observant Jews experience in keeping shabbat — making it holy — on a weekly basis: they too are provided, thereby, with a frame by which they can appreciate the goodness of the work they do during the other six days. It also fits the language of the creation chapters in Genesis. God calls what God creates on days 1, 3, 4 and 5 “good” in Genesis 1, and the whole of creation, on day 6, “very good.” What then does God mean by declaring the 7<sup>th</sup> day, in Gen 2:3, to be “holy”? How does this day of ceasing from creation add to, or transcend, the “very goodness” of everything that has been created? By establishing a position from which that very-goodness can be seen, can be appreciated. In Alan Mittleman’s felicitous terms, “Holiness ... make[s] manifest the ultimate source of goodness” (Mittleman 2018, 38).

And this gives us a clue as to what holiness may mean in the rest of the Torah, and the system of *halakha* to which it gives rise. The holiness of the festivals provides a position from which to appreciate the beauty of the seasons, and the events with which they are associated in Jewish memory. The holiness of the sacrifices and first-fruit offerings elevates food in general, calling on us not to take it for granted. The holiness of the sanctuary provides a position from which the quiet wonders of homes in general, of dwelling, can be appreciated. The holiness of the marital relationship — hinted at by the laws constraining sexual intercourse in the Torah, and made explicit in later Jewish marriage ceremonies, where bride and groom are said to be *m'qudesb(et)* (sanctified) to one another — calls on us to regard sexuality with awe, not to take it for granted. Clothing, shelter, food, sex, work: in each of these basic realms of human life, Jewish law establishes distinctions, modes of restraint, that provide them with a position from which to appreciate the “very-goodness” of these realms. Holiness on this model consists in a process of distancing oneself from particular objects and activities in order better to perceive what is good about them: to see them as divine creations. The model for this appreciation from a distance is given by God Godself in the creation of shabbat, and realizing the “image of God” within us involves taking up, or at least approximating, that position.

### 3.

Let’s turn now to the different model for the importance of distancing that I’d like to explore here — an ethical rather than an aesthetic model, based on the role that maintaining distance can play in establishing respectful human relationships.

We say that a beloved childhood toy, or picture of his mother, is sacred to Jim, even if we don’t see its worth ourselves; we try hard, therefore, not to harm or throw away that toy or picture. We know that attending certain events (Verdi operas, Star Trek conventions) is sacred to Jane, so we do all we can not to interfere with her plans for these events. Robert is

an especially modest person, uncomfortable with displaying his body even to his doctor, so we consider barging in on him even when he is just trying on a new sweater to be a violation of his privacy: a crossing of boundaries that are sacred to him.

These everyday experiences capture something important about the sacred or holy,<sup>10</sup> I think, which Robert Adams elaborates wonderfully in his *Finite and Infinite Goods*. Adams gets at the sacred via the notion of “violation,” which he in turn understands as an action that arouses “moral horror.” We feel moral horror at a violation of the sacred, he says, so if we understand what sort of violation evokes moral horror in us, we can better understand the sacred (cf. Adams 1999, Chapter 4, sections 2 and 3). And he takes the paradigm example of this sort of violation to be violations of a person: rape, murder, or torture, especially. This fits common usage well, of course — we often talk of people being “violated” in such circumstances, and regard such violations as horrifying — as well as the Kantian notion of the sacredness of each person, which lies behind much of Adams’s thought.<sup>11</sup> Adams also argues astutely that violations of these kinds transgress both the will and the body of a person (1999, 109, 110). Invasions of our body are not violations if they are carried out with our consent (in surgery or mutually agreeable sex, for instance), and offenses against our will alone — deception or fraud, for instance — while seriously wrong, do not amount to violations of our personhood. Only acts like rape and torture, which transgress both our wills and our bodies, cross, sometimes even obliterate, the boundaries that enable us to be a self at all. “[T]he meaning of selfhood, if not the substance of the person,” says Adams, “is partly defined by social structures, and ... certain boundaries between distinct selves are a crucial part of those structures. Prohibitions and permissions about touching and viewing other people’s bodies play an important part in defining such boundaries” (108-9). Control over one’s boundaries is therefore essential to maintaining one’s distinctness as a self. Given this account, Adams says that theft, while “an infringement of [a person’s] rightful sphere of voluntary control, ... in most cases does not infringe the interpersonal boundaries that are most important for selfhood” (110). Theft, and other acts “that mainly damage a person’s possessions,” cause harm to “what she *has* as distinct from what she *is*,” and therefore “will typically not violate *her*” (108). I agree with this, and think that Adams’s account of personhood and its boundaries makes for a nice distinction between acts that inspire moral horror — violations of personhood — and other kinds of wrongdoing.

But note that Adams describes theft and other harm to property as “in *most* cases” or “typically” not involving a violation of personhood. I’m not sure what he has in mind by these qualifications, but let me propose that theft or damage to a material possession *in which one has invested much of one’s self* might count as a violation of personhood. If someone steals or slashes a painting on which I have worked for months, I may very well consider that an infringement of my personal boundaries; the theft or destruction of a precious heirloom that I identify with my parents or grandparents might similarly count. Even worse would be the disclosure, against my will, of writings I have tried to keep private. A young woman I once knew had her diary stolen by her mother and read aloud as evidence in a courtroom, during a custody battle. She felt gravely violated, and rightly so, I would say. Adams remarks that the boundaries relevant for defining selfhood must in general “be seen as a tighter perimeter” around ourselves than the realm of our material possessions: “defining more of

<sup>10</sup> These are terms that I am treating interchangeably, *pace* (Murphy 2021, 19-20). Both words are used to translate the one family of Hebrew terms with the root *qdsb*.

<sup>11</sup> For the Kantian elements in (Adams 1999), see Chapter 4, section 5, pp. 284 and 290 of Chapter 12 and the whole of Chapter 16.

an inner sanctum” than the things that belong merely to the “rightful sphere of our voluntary control” (Adams 1999, 108, 110). But a painting I have long worked on, or an heirloom, or, something I have written about my life with every expectation of privacy, does belong within the “inner sanctum” of my personhood, and infringing my control over one of these things does seem, consequently, to be a violation of who I am.

Why is the maintenance of our distinct selfhood so important? Why regard what defines our selves as an “inner sanctum”? A standard answer to that question, one that was given by Kant and that Adams considers seriously (1999, 115-6), is that what matters most to our lives is rational agency: our ability to run our own lives, where that means, for Kant and for many philosophers before and after him, running them in accordance with reason. But Adams suspects there is something more to the sanctity of our selfhood than this, noting among other things that it is not otherwise easy to explain why coerced sexuality seems so much worse a violation of our personhood than other forms of coercion (116). I agree with this, and would spell out that extra something — here departing somewhat from Adams — by suggesting that we each believe we have, and take as extremely important, some degree of *mystery* about ourselves, which we want to share with others, if we do, only as we see fit. A hint of this can be found in the very idea, stressed by Adams, that what we want to preserve is our *distinct* selfhood: not just our rational agency, but what makes us *distinctive*, *different* from other rational agents — marks of our thoughts and hopes and tastes that others do not share, and need not know about us unless we reveal them: cannot figure out simply by knowing, for instance, that we are rational agents.<sup>12</sup> Another hint may be found in the fact, also stressed by Adams as we have seen, that we regard sexuality as an especially central expression of our “inner sanctum.” What is sexuality if not a realm — ideally, at least — in which partners disclose to one another aspects of themselves that they want to disclose *only* to those with whom they choose to be intimate? The violation involved in taking, destroying, or making public without permission the art or private writings of another is also well explained by supposing that we want to control how expressions of our most distinctive selves are shared with others.

*Do* we in fact each have a distinctive self, let alone one that remains something of a mystery unless and until we disclose it to others? I see no way of proving that there is — but also no way of disproving it. And if we do have such distinctive, mysterious selves, they will surely be tied to our free rational agency: they will be qualities that we shape by our decisions and actions. But we can neither prove nor disprove that we have free rational agency (again: in the Kantian tradition at least). So we should not be surprised if we can also neither prove nor disprove that we have distinctive selves that are somewhat obscure to one another. Just as, in the course of ethical deliberation, we assume that we are free, so, I submit, in the course of treating one another as sacred we can assume that each of us has a distinctive self, different from other selves in ways that are mysterious to others unless we choose to reveal them. Moreover, we can assume that at least part of what distinguishes each of us from the others is something *good*, something we can shape in ourselves by aiming at the good — thus something *worth* sharing with others should we choose to do so. This idea gives rich content to the thought that each of us is of absolute and intrinsic value, and that we can learn from every other human being. An ancient Jewish text declares that to be wise is to learn from

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<sup>12</sup> Adams (1999, 120) says at one point that “[t]he primary value of persons” — which he has identified in the previous pages with their sanctity — “is ... intrinsic to [them] as individuals, and ... is best appreciated in focusing on them individually.” This points to a value that we have as distinctive beings: monads, each with its own distinctive essence, to use the language of Adams’s beloved Leibniz.

everyone (“Sayings of the Fathers” (*Pirkei Avoth*), 4.3), and goes on to say, “Despise no person . . . , for every person has his hour” (Ibid., my translation); a chapter in Mishnah *Sanhedrin* says that unlike coins, which when created from a single mold are all similar to one another, God created all people from a single seal (Adam) but they are all different from one another (*Sanhedrin* 4:5). In philosophy, perhaps the best known version of this idea is Leibniz’s vision of us as different monads, each expressing a unique perspective on God and the world, and each created by God only because we have something uniquely good to add to the other perspectives.

But if something like this is true, then violating the boundaries that enable us to maintain our distinctive selves may either destroy (literally “desecrate”) part or all of what is mysteriously good in us or take from us our right, which we regard as supremely precious, to unveil that mystery when and to whom we want. Insofar as we exercise control over what makes us distinctive, these two things go together: the mysteriously good qualities we are talking about *cannot* be revealed as such unless the person they characterize reveals them. They lose what is special about them otherwise; they become reduced to qualities anyone might have, explicable in public terms that rips the mystery from them. Your nakedness conveys a special intimacy to your lover only if *you* unveil it to him or her, not if you are stripped bare, unwillingly, by others (including your lover); the painting or diary you have thus far kept to yourself will not reveal something lovely about your personality unless *you* disclose it as and when you see fit. Or at least: that is how you feel about these qualities when you identify them as features of yourself. That is how they form an essential part of your personhood.

Indeed, if I violate the boundaries that allow you to preserve an “inner sanctum” of yourself, I make it impossible for me to see that you *have* such an inner sanctum. I strip you of your mystery, make it impossible for you to be mysterious to me — hence for me to learn from what is mysterious about you. No longer can you show me a new side of the good that I had not recognized before; I have not treated you with the reverence that would allow me to learn something new from you. By contrast, when we do treat one another with the sacred regard that maintains boundaries between us, our disclosing of our mysteries to one another is the greatest gift we can give each other. Maintaining those boundaries, maintaining a certain separation from one another, is therefore a condition for entering into relationships of intimacy with other people, paradoxical as that may sound. Both the respect that allows each of us to be distinctive persons — not just rational agents but rational agents with different perspectives, with an identity that cannot be replaced by anyone else — and the overflowing love or grace by which we can, if we wish, share our full personhood with others, require treating the boundaries that mark us off from one another as sacred.

#### 4.

Let’s now transfer this picture to God, and our relationship with God. It is of course standard on virtually every account of holiness to say that the realm of the holy or sacred represents a boundary we should not cross, or cross only gingerly and with special preparation and permission, and that it is in some important sense mysterious: a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. But I don’t think it has been commonly suggested (at any rate, I never thought of this until recently) that we need boundaries around the holy because they *make possible a respectful yet potentially intimate relationship to God as a person*: they make it possible for us



to regard God as having the sort of unique, mysterious qualities that we attribute to other people when we regard them as sacred, and for God to unveil some of God's mystery to us as and when God sees fit. On this view it is precisely God's personhood, the aspect of God that most resembles us and to which we can most closely relate, and not God's distance from us, that holiness captures or protects. But that personal, intimate aspect of God is necessarily shrouded in mystery, not openly available to us. And it will be a gift from God, an expression of God's love, if God discloses some part of this mystery to us: an insight into the Good more powerful and newer to us than we could get from any of our fellow human beings, yet at the same time precisely the sort of intensely intimate offering that marks the height of human love.

But of course God has no body with boundaries we can violate. Nor is it conceivable that anything we do could interfere with God's agency — violate God's will. So what sense can we possibly make of the idea of violating the boundaries of God's selfhood? What should count as "God's things," which we need to respect if we respect God's personhood? What would be the analogy to the artwork that a person might create, and not want made public without her permission, or the diary she might keep and wish to keep private?

Well, the obvious answer to that last question is *everything*, if God is the world's Creator: all the natural world and everything we make as well. And this might seem to mark a sharp difference from the human case, and an insuperable obstacle to playing out the analogy between personhood among human beings and the personhood of God that I have been exploring. But the obstacle is not insuperable. For "the meaning of [distinctive] selfhood," as Adams says, "is partly defined by social structures" and "a crucial part of those structures" is the fact that societies draw certain boundaries between selves (1999, 108-9, quoted above). So if we are to see anything as especially "belonging" to God, or revelatory of God's personality, then our societies need to draw boundaries around it that enable us to see it that way. But we cannot draw boundaries around everything: that will be tantamount to drawing no boundaries at all. (If everything is sacred, then nothing is sacred.) So if we want to see all things as in some sense invested with God's personality — as God's creation — then what we need to do is draw boundaries around *some* things and hold them up as exemplary of everything else. We need to sanctify some things, set them off as sacred to God and to some degree or other off limits to us, while simultaneously letting them stand in for everything else. Only then can we open ourselves to the possibility that what is mysterious and unique about God can be disclosed in everything.

This, I suggest, sheds a new light on the work of *halakha*, and perhaps of similar ritual systems in other religions. *Halakha* calls on us to sanctify some items or moments in each major area of our lives — some kinds of food, some kinds of clothing, some moments of leisure, some times for engaging in or refraining from sexual relations — in order to appreciate the divine createdness of the whole of our lives: in order to allow God's personal presence to be disclosed to us in everything we encounter and do, rather than taking these things for granted. Since God has no physical boundaries — no body — this is indeed the *prime* way by which we can appreciate God's sacredness. Of course to violate God's sacred things does not offend against God's agency — nothing, presumably, can do that. But such violations do have the other cost I attributed to violations of sacredness in the human case: they make it impossible for God to appear to us as a distinctive person. By ignoring or blithely crossing over the boundaries that mark certain things or activities as sacred to God, we block off the avenue by which God could grant us the gift of self-disclosure in these things, by which God can enter into an intimate relationship with us. Just as we cannot learn anything new, anything we did not already know, from someone whose distinctness from us

we do not respect — someone we do not treat *as* in some sense a mystery to us — so we cannot learn anything new, cannot have anything mysterious disclosed to us, from God unless we treat “God’s things” with respect. But since every thing is one of God’s things, we can arrive at this sort of personal conception of God, and enter into this sort of personal relationship with God, only if we draw boundaries around some of God’s things, and from there open ourselves to seeing the rest as ultimately God’s as well. The work of *halakha*, then, is to open a space for God’s personal presence to become manifest in the things of this world: for God to “dwell amongst us.”<sup>13</sup>

With these thoughts in mind, let’s return to the holiness of *shabbat*. In my earlier paper on holiness I proposed that what *shabbat* adds to creative work is the frame that allows an agent to appreciate the beauty of that work, and that holiness in general consists in a position from which goodness can be properly seen: can be appreciated. Now we can put this point in ethical rather than aesthetic language: in giving us a position from which to appreciate God’s creations, *shabbat* also helps us establish a personal relationship with God. When something good about the things that God has made appears to us from the position of holiness — when I have a sudden insight, say, into the beauty of work or leisure on, and because of, *shabbat* — I can now take that as a communication from God to me: a disclosure, by God, of something special about one of God’s things and therefore, indirectly, about Godself. In stepping back from certain things, we make room for God to disclose to us beautiful mysteries in both them and the other things, of that sort, that we do not step back from. We refrain from work in order to allow aspects of the ineffable, mysterious goodness in both leisure and the work that we are currently not doing to be disclosed to us. We refrain from eating certain things; that makes what we do eat mean more to us. We avoid certain kinds of clothing (Leviticus 19:19, Deuteronomy 22:11); that brings out what is divinely good about other clothing. We keep our camp free from certain kinds of uncleanness (Deuteronomy 23:9-14); that allows the beauty of the clean camp to shine forth to us. By drawing boundaries around certain particulars, we appreciate both them and the things, in the same category but not sanctified, that lie outside those boundaries: we appreciate an entire class of things as God’s creations. And we come to appreciate the whole of God’s creation, or to approximate such an appreciation, only by moving, class by particular class, around its various contents: those of its contents, at least, that bear directly on the main activities of human life (work, food, clothing, sexuality, birth, illness, and death). The rituals of *halakha* thus turn every type of object that we make use of into God’s things for us: things that have been created by a perfect Being that transcends the natural world, rather than elements of a value-free nature. By way of the boundaries it draws, *halakha* re-enchants the world, enables us to see it as *verzaubert* rather than *entzaubert*. And in so doing, it establishes the conditions that make it possible for God to speak to us, person to person — for God to disclose God’s personal mysteries to us.

On the Jewish view, there is no other way for God to enter into a personal relationship with us. *We* need to make space for God to appear among the things of this world, otherwise that appearance will be impossible: we will not be able to see God, as a person, anywhere. We might still be able to worship God as a perfect Being, a distant source of the rest of reality. But we will not be able to worship God as a being who can come into

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<sup>13</sup> Exodus 25:6: “Let them make Me a sanctuary (literally “holy place”: *miqdash*) and I will dwell amongst them.” Note that (a) human activity is essential, according to this verse, for God to dwell among the people, and (b) God says in the verse that God will dwell *among* the people, not in the sanctuary.

intimate relationship with us. God needs us to open ourselves to the mysteries of God's presence, else we will be unable to recognize so much as the fact that there are any such mysteries. And we open ourselves to this possibility precisely by drawing sacred boundaries around some things and standing back from them. By designating certain things as God's special things, what is special — Godly — about all things can appear to us.

To recap: When we tried to apply the model of human sacredness that Adams offers us to God, we ran up against the problem that God has no body. From there, we considered the possibility that God can be regarded as embodied in every thing — they are all God's creations, after all. But if everything is sacred, then nothing is sacred. The sacred marks a distinctive realm, a realm of things that are special — and special *to* a particular person, in the human case — so it is incoherent to see all things as sacred. What we needed, then, was some way of recognizing certain things, or things in certain contexts or at certain times, as sacred to God and set off from our use, while simultaneously taking these things as representative of everything else, of God's creation as a whole. This, I suggested, was the work of *halakha*. That gives *halakha* a role to play, not just in helping us to appreciate the very-goodness — the beauty — in the various things of this world, but in building a personal relationship between us and God: enabling us to appreciate the things of this world as gifts from God, and modes in which the mysteries, the intimacies, of God's goodness can be revealed to us. We come into the warmest and most rewarding of relationships with our fellow human beings when we respect the things that are sacred to them, and allow them to reveal mysteries about themselves to us, as much as they wish to, via those things. We come into a relationship with God as a person, the warmest and most rewarding relationship we can have with God, when we respect the sacredness of God's things and allow the mysterious personal goodness — the holiness — of God to be revealed to us, insofar as God wishes to reveal it, via those things.

## 5.

A word, finally, on what it might mean to be a “holy nation/people.” If we look at the context of Exodus 19:6 and Leviticus 19:2, where Jews are summoned to that status, it makes sense to link the holiness promised to and/or expected of them to the laws they are supposed to keep. And in that case, if *halakha* is indeed supposed to establish boundaries in our world by which God's personhood can be expressed, we can say that the Jewish people is or can be holy just insofar as it respects God's holiness and makes that evident to others: just insofar as they draw lines that make it possible for God's holiness to enter into the finite world. In Exodus, the phrase “holy nation” is coupled with “kingdom of priests”: like priests within a particular people, the Jewish people is supposed to be an agent of holiness to other peoples. If they carry out this task well, their example will help everyone see God as a Person with distinctively wonderful characteristics that She/He can disclose to each and all of us. If they carry it out badly — if they either fail to draw the distinctions mandated by their laws or draw those distinctions while acting unjustly or cruelly — they in effect tell the rest of the world that God either has no personality or has an ugly, unjust and cruel personality. Either way, they desecrate God's things and profane the Name — the personal aspect — of God. And indeed the Jewish tradition speaks of not keeping the sabbath as “profaning” it, and using one's religious commitment as a tool or cover for injustice or cruelty, especially in the presence of non-Jews, as “profaning the Name of God.”

Which brings us to the relationship between holiness and morality. If the things, and body, of a person can be sacred, that is because the person herself is sacred: we owe her the distance, the respect, that enables her to live a life of her own choosing. This thought is at the heart of many conceptions of justice, and the idea that God's things are sacred can enrich it. In the first place, people themselves are of course *among* God's things, God's creations, for followers of all the Abrahamic traditions. In the second place, according to those traditions each of us is not just one among the many divine creations but a creation made "in the image of God." But being made in the image of God can be readily understood both as 1) having a distinctive personality, just as God does, and 2) drawing the lines around certain things that enable us to understand everything as fundamentally God's. People are holy, that is, both in having a distinctive personality that should be respected and in being the agents who bring God's holiness into the "body" of the rest of the world. This gives every human being a mission that we should not profane — we should not drain the things around us of their capacity to inspire awe and wonder, nor on the other hand worship them instead of the God who made them — and calls on each of us to show a special respect to all the others: to give respectful, freedom-preserving treatment of one another priority over everything else we do to bring holiness into the world.

So when the Jewish tradition calls upon Jews to take on an enhanced version of the general human mission to bring holiness into the world — to alert and remind all other human beings that this is our task — it is essential to that mission that they treat their fellow human beings as especially sacred: especially dear to God and especially capable of revealing God's personality. It follows that when Jews, especially Jews who otherwise strictly observe *halakha*, fail to show respect for their fellow human beings, they fail in their mission more drastically than when they commit any other sin. According to Deuteronomy, the Jewish way of life is supposed to inspire others to say, "Surely this is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6). If non-Jews, looking at the Jewish way of life, have good reason to think quite the opposite, then the specialness of God, the goodness of God's personality, is called into question. That is why the Jewish tradition rightly calls injustice committed by observant Jews "profaning the name of God," and regards it as the worst possible Jewish sin.

## 6.

The picture I have drawn of holiness — secondary and primary — is clearly different from Murphy's, but I am not sure how different. On a very general level, we both see holiness as keeping God firmly separate from us, and therefore something that shows what a marvel it is if God can nevertheless be intimately disclosed to us. For Murphy, in line with the Christian tradition, that latter marvel comes about through God's own becoming human. On my view, in line with the Jewish tradition, God puts into human hands the ability to infuse the world with God's presence. These differences do not reflect any deep philosophical disagreement, I think, but cashing out holiness in terms of a condition that makes it possible for God to enter into a personal relationship with us, rather than in terms of a status we are unworthy to approach, does suggest such a disagreement. And the modes of argument I have used, drawing on common intuitions about interpersonal relationships rather than on perfect Being theology, are very different from Murphy's. I have a feeling there may be other respects in which we get to similar conclusions from different starting points, but I can't put

my finger on them. Perhaps Murphy can, and will in his response. Or perhaps he can bring out more clearly than I have done where we differ, and why.<sup>14</sup>

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