The Problem of Holiness

Alan Mittleman
Jewish Theological Seminary

Abstract: Holiness is an important but problematic concept for religious discourse. It is unclear what it means, both in classical texts and in contemporary usage. Holiness seems to signify a property in some cases and a relation in others. The Bible itself preserves a range of usages. Some of these are ontological: holiness as a would-be property inheres in objects, places, persons, or times. Other uses are imputed: holiness connotes a status that human beings ascribe to things. The range of use can be explicated by the concept of a social or institutional reality developed by Searle. Social facts entail valuations, intentions, and practices; they presuppose a basis of brute fact. A plausible contemporary view of holiness will link ontological and axiological commitments in such a way as to express the underlying goodness of being.

Holiness constitutes a problem for contemporary Jewish thought. The concept of holiness seems crucial to religious discourse in general and to Jewish discourse in particular. *Holiness* seems to express an important feature of religious thought and of the ways of life coordinate with religion. Yet the concept is ill defined. What does *holy* mean? How do most people use the word? Do the people who use it know what they are talking about or is it a vague verbal gesture? How is holiness related, if at all, to goodness? The latter is of particular concern here.

To get a sense of the stakes, consider the following quote from Abraham Joshua Heschel. In a moving reminiscence of the intellectual struggles of his student days at the University of Berlin, Heschel both opposes and relates holiness to goodness. "The problem to my professors," he writes "was how to be good. In my ears the question rang: how to be holy." He continues:

> To the philosophers the idea of the good was the most exalted idea, the ultimate idea. To Judaism the idea of the good is penultimate. It cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base; the holy is the summit. Man cannot be good unless he strives to be holy.[1]

---

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Meaning of Observance," in Jacob Neusner, ed. *Understanding Jewish Theology: Classical Issues and Modern Perspectives* (Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001), p. 95

But what does this really mean? How should holiness be distinguished from goodness and what precisely does it add to goodness?

On the surface, holiness seems to indicate a mysterious quality or property of special objects, times, places or beings. In biblical religion, the ground on which Moses unwittingly stood prior to his encounter with God was holy (Exodus 3:5). The wilderness tabernacle was holy (Exodus 29:42-46), as were the two temples erected in Jerusalem, as well as, in concentric rings, the innermost chamber of the Temple, the outer courts, the city of Jerusalem, its environs, and ultimately the entire Land of Israel. The priests are holy (Leviticus 21:6). Indeed, the entire people is bidden to be holy (Leviticus 19:2). Animals vowed to be given in sacrifice to God are holy (Leviticus 27:9). Already in these examples we find different senses of *holy*.

For some of these texts, to call something holy is analogous to calling something solid or wet or red. *Holy*, that is, seems to name a property, requiring an underlying physics that makes the property what it is. Holy ground would be, on this understanding, qualitatively different from ordinary ground. A holy place such as the *mishkan* or later the Temple has something qualitatively distinct about it. If one enters it in an inappropriate state (Leviticus 10) or if an unauthorized person touches its contents (Numbers 4:15) severe consequences may follow. A holy object, such as the Ark of the Covenant, can wreak death and destruction on those who treat it inappropriately (I Samuel 5-6). We might call this an ontological view of holiness.[2] Yet already in the Bible the ontological view is not the only view. (Nor is there one single construction of the ontological view.[3])

The case of taking an animal and designating it for an offering, upon which it becomes *kadosh* does not seem to imply an overt ontological claim. Nor does the sanctification of donated objects put to use in the construction of the *mishkan* (Exodus 25:1-7). *Holy* here functions more like *mine* than *red*; the object is now in God's possession. *Holy* indicates a status, condition, relationship or circumstance, that is, it marks the result of an intentional action more than it names a quasi-physical property. Nonetheless, the physical existence of an object is required in order for that object to take on a status.

The ontological view, fundamental to both naïve religious belief and such theoretical approaches as that of Yehuda Halevi, is highly problematic but it cannot be easily shed.[4] Wherever there is a theology of divine immanence, wherever it is believed that the divine has a substantial presence (*kavod*) and can assume a position in space, some version of an ontological view will gain traction. Such a view, from my unapologetically rationalist perspective, is deeply problematic. To speak of God whether *in illo tempore* or now as embodied and locatable is no longer to speak of God—at least of a God in Whom I can believe. The view of holiness as the imputation of status by means of intentional action, such as performative utterance,

---

[2] Although I came to this terminology independently, I was delighted to discover that Menachem Kellner uses it as well. See Menachem Kellner, "Spiritual Life," in Kenneth Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 275

[3] Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 83

[4] Eliezer Schweid, *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny*, Deborah Greniman, trans. (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985) p. 62

is more congenial to a rationalist perspective and, I would argue, offers a more adequate explanation of holiness in its various contexts. Yet it too is problematic as it is not clear what warrants ascribing holiness to any given object. Is it purely arbitrary, voluntaristic, and positivistic? How is that status to be distinguished from other normative states such as excellence, preciousness, or exclusivity? Or, if the imputed status of holiness is not predominantly valuative but merely possessive (a holy x = an x that belongs to God) or restricted (a holy x = an x kept separate) why not say so? What does *holy* add to more prosaic ways of speaking?

Both traditional and modern Jewish thought have been alive to these somewhat discrepant trends. The ontological view persists in strong claims, since the Middle Ages often emanating from perspectives informed by kabbalah, about the intrinsic holiness of the Jewish soul or of the Land of Israel or of the Jewish people (vis-à-vis the gentile nations). Some Jews continue to take such claims seriously, often with political consequences. Even during the Middle Ages, however, Maimonides countered the ontological view with a metaphysically deflated alternative. He saw holiness not as an inherent property but as "the significance that man, by his thoughts and actions, ascribes to… things in relation to himself."[5] The problem for the unfiltered ontological view is plausibility – does it not violate Occam's razor by multiplying entities, in this case an occult property, which seem to run afoul of the laws of nature? The problem for the imputed status view, I have suggested, is that the ascription of holiness to places, persons, times, or objects, seems either adventitious or redundant. Unless these items have some special feature, prior to the intentional act of ascription, which warrants or supports the ascription, then what justifies imputing holiness to them?

One way of resolving these difficulties—the way favored by modern Jewish thinkers in the rationalist tradition—is to construe that "special feature" as goodness. To impute the status of holiness is to recognize the quality of goodness. Pursuing justice or treating others with compassion is holy just insofar as it promotes the good. Goodness provides the base; holiness fixes its status.[6] This move works well for (at least some) actions but what does one do with times, places and things? One would have to claim that a time, place or thing is holy insofar as it conduces to human goodness; it serves the good. The appurtenances of the *mishkan* are holy because they serve God; the service of God is ultimately good, therefore whatever is involved in the service of God is good. But this is forced. In the efforts of modernist thinkers such as Hermann Cohen to ethicize the holy, no room is left for acknowledging those aspects of holiness best analyzed by the ontological view. To ethicize the holy has benefits and costs.

What we need is a way of thinking about the imputation of status that does some of the work of the ontological view, without conceding its most implausible metaphysical features. In what follows, I will argue that the ontological view and the imputed status view are compatible. I want both to honor the naïve perspective that holiness is in some sense *real*, as well as to construe its reality in a way that doesn't

---

[5] Schweid, *The Land of Israel*, pp. 62-3
[6] For the idea that holiness serves the good by lending goodness stability and direction, see Lenn E. Goodman, *Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 56-58, 66-67

commit us to the existence of occult properties or substances. I will argue that a rich analysis of the imputation of status *requires* ontological commitments. The relevant ontological commitment here is the existence of God. But that existence is not a matter of brute facticity; it is a matter of radical axiology. *God* is Israel's way of acknowledging and affirming ultimate value. The ontology in play here is that of the goodness of being. *Holiness is that designation by which the underlying goodness of being is asserted, stabilized, and protected in Jewish life and thought.* The argument will endorse the ethicizing move of the moderns but will also preserve, I hope, the ontological sense of the ancients.

Some Logical Considerations

Let us take a closer look at the ontological view. Although it appears to gain traction in some biblical cases, it doesn't work well even within the ancient context. On closer inspection, it is not any inherent property of ground (*admat kodesh*: Exodus 3:5), Ark, *mishkan*, etc. that warrants holiness but the *Divine presence in proximity* to these objects that makes them holy. Sinai is holy just as long as God dwells upon it but not afterward. The Holy of Holies in the *mishkan* is holy because God dwells there.[7] The ontological view in its strongest form is conceptually dependent upon the idea of divine presence. As presence departs, holiness declines. When we move from divine presence to divine possession, the ontological view weakens. Here, God's designation of certain places, times, or objects as His own is what makes them holy. These items have potency not because of some seemingly empirical presence or property but because of their relation to God. He owns them. Finally, the human designation of some objects, such as sacrificial animals, as God's property makes them holy. Once again, holiness emerges from a relation not from an inherent property. Holiness is *endowed* rather than intrinsic. The precincts of Sinai are holy because God's presence endows them with a numinous quality. God creates the Sabbath and then declares it holy (and subsequently declares that Israel should declare it holy); Israel builds the *mishkan* according to divine specifications (Exodus 25:8-9) and then God ratifies its holiness (Exodus 29:42). Holiness is not therefore a matter of noticing a property (such as solidity, wetness, or redness) but of being alert to a meaning, of noticing a sign. *Holiness is to material objects what semantic content is to sounds or marks on a page.* It is an aspect of reality which is related to empirical facts but is not reducible to them. No less than the meanings of words, holiness has reality of a distinctive kind.

From a naturalistic point of view, to call something holy is to create what John Searle calls a *social or institutional fact*.[8] Let us briefly explore Searle's view and then relate it to holiness. Social or institutional facts, on Searle's analysis, are as real as observer-independent natural or brute facts. They differ from brute facts in the following way. A brute fact (There is snow and ice on the summit of Mount

---

[7] In Benjamin Sommer's words, there is an "unceasing and ever available theophany." Sommers, *Bodies of God*, p. 81

[8] John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), passim.

Everest.) is both ontologically objective and epistemically objective. That is, brute facts exist whether human minds know them or not, conceive of them or not, perceive them or not—they are not observer-relative. Hence, they are "ontologically objective." They also constrain our epistemic encounter with them. They have mind-independent features that affect what we can truthfully say about them. For statements to represent brute facts truthfully, they must satisfy truth conditions that are implicit in the statement itself. For "there is snow and ice on the summit of Mount Everest" to be true there must be snow and ice on the summit of Mount Everest. Hence, they are epistemically objective.

Social and institutional facts, while no less real, impute a status to brute facts such that brute facts take on a function and meaning that they did not have before. The brute fact of a piece of wood joined to a piece of metal takes on the function of a tool as it acquires the status of *screwdriver* or *hammer*. A tool is ontologically objective (it exists just as much as snow and ice on Everest) but it is epistemically subjective. That is to say that its existence qua tool depends on the agreement of human subjects to endow it with a certain status and to maintain that status. (It is not to say that its status is in any way imaginary or illusory.) It is to say that the existence of tools (or money, or laws, or games, or literature) or any set of social and institutional facts depends on a web of other, background social and institutional facts, which arise along with human consciousness, social existence, and the use of language. How do social and institutional facts get going? At least initially, they reflect biological needs. They make use of the possibilities of human social life for their instantiation and development. Given that human beings are by nature tool users, for example, tools are both rooted in biological nature and subject to conventional development. Social facts such as the existence of tools may require conventions but they are not purely happenstance. They reflect certain constraints imposed not only by human biological nature but by the underlying physics of the objects that are endowed with status. Only objects well suited to the purpose could be screwdrivers (or screws, for that matter). On the other hand, many kinds of objects (slips of paper, shells, digital code) could be money. The relationship of an object, endowed with meaning and function, to the underlying physics of the object is not one size fits all. The interplay between the imputation of status and the physical, empirical characteristics of objects may help to explain the ambiguity of holiness as a concept that seems to indicate *both* an empirical property *and* the designation of a status.

We have already seen how, on Searle's analysis, the truth of statements of brute facts entails a disquotational criterion of truth. (That is, "the cat is on the mat" is true if and only if the cat is on the mat. The truth condition that the statement must satisfy is just that fact that is indicated by the removal of quotation marks from the sentence under analysis.[9]) This is the case with the truth conditions of social and institutional facts as well, albeit with an important difference. We can say that "This piece of paper is a five dollar bill" if and only if this piece of paper is a five dollar bill. But what it means for x to be a five dollar bill is different from what it means for x to be warm-blooded or animate or carnivorous. Squirrels, gazelles, and lions, let us say,

---

[9] W.V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 12

would continue to be what they are even if there were no humans left to think about them. That is not the case with five dollar bills. Social and institutional facts are *self-referential* in a way that brute facts are not. Their existence depends on shared and sustained belief in them—on a web of background social and institutional realities. And this in turn gives rise to worries about infinite regress or vicious circularity. If we designate x as holy because we believe it to be holy but holiness bottoms out to nothing more than our belief that x is holy then what warrants our ascription of holiness in the first place? Our belief that this piece of paper with President Lincoln's likeness on it is a five dollar bill is warranted by a whole system of institutional economic practices which give plausibility and significance to such a belief. We would have to make the same kind of claim for holy objects, times, and persons as well—and we would be correct to do so. A whole ramified system of symbolic categories (such as *tumah* and *taharah*), interactions, practices, and institutions supports the claims of holiness vis-à-vis objects, persons, and places.

Another feature of social facts to which Searle draws our attention is that the ontologically objective conditions which constitute social reality are brought into being by epistemically subjective, that is, agent-dependent performances. To say "the meeting is adjourned" produces a social fact through an agent's performative utterance. Thus, social facts are dependent upon speech acts in a way that brute facts are not. In a performative utterance, we are not trying to represent a fact about the world; we are trying to change the world. Whether our utterance in fact changes the world, whether someone follows an order, keeps a promise, or departs from an adjourned meeting, will constitute the condition in terms of which the utterance is judged a success or failure. (These "felicity conditions" stand to performative utterances as truth conditions stand to statements of fact; both comprise criteria for the success or failure of utterances.) The performative dimension of holiness is readily apparent. It is language, whether divine or human, that generates the status of holiness. God declares the Sabbath holy. Jews sanctify the Sabbath day, instantiating holy time through a ritualized linguistic performance (*kiddush*). Once ritual performances inaugurate the Sabbath, a whole train of practical consequences follow. Similarly, when a man gives a woman an object of appropriate value and declares that she is sanctified to him (*harei at mekuddeshet li*) pervasive legal consequences ensue. Social and institutional facts proliferate from the declaration of holy status. As in the case of the self-referentiality of social and institutional facts, performative utterance seems to constitute its own ground. Is holiness simply and completely an artifact of an agent's performance? Is there anything antecedently holy, anything "brute," to which performative utterance responds?

An answer to this question is hinted at in a further relevant feature of social and institutional facts to which Searle draws attention. It is that they are charged with value; they are deontic, in Searle's term. To say that x is a promise or x is a duty is not like saying x is solid, wet or red. The social and institutional facts produced by speech acts and other vehicles of human agency have immediate normative implications. For fully competent language users, "x is a promise and promises ought to be kept" is redundant. To know how to use the word, to know what the concept of promising means, is already to stand within an ethical point of view. If holiness is a kind of social fact then it bears a relationship to fully deontic social

facts such as rules, rights, duties, orders, or promises. When we use *holy* we ascribe value to an object, person, time or place; we mandate certain actions and omissions. To impute the status of holiness is to assert value. The question now is whether that imputation is arbitrary or warranted.

On Searle's account, the imputation of status which constitutes the genesis of a social or institutional fact is always somewhat arbitrary. True, many such facts—as in the case of tools—require an "underlying physics." But others—as in the case of money—do not. At any rate, he assumes a kind of fact/value distinction in terms of which it would be mistaken to look for grounds, beyond empirical constraints or biological needs, which underwrite status ascriptions.

I would like to take what is useful from his account (vis-à-vis the problem of holiness) but to break with it, in terms of metaphysics, and seek a richer underlying axiology. For Searle, a social and institutional fact such as money acquires reality due to the social, cooperative nature of human beings. Insofar as humans are political animals, they need one another to survive or, better, to flourish. Division of labor and trade become features of settled societies. Increasingly reliable devices for exchange relations are needed as social groups develop. Money fills this need. At first money is constituted by an object of value such as gold (itself endowed with value only due to agentive intentional action), then it becomes a token of that object of value, finally it becomes entirely symbolic. The paper itself is accepted as possessing value purely by consensus. At every step here, value is endowed through conscious agency and intentional action. But can such an account suffice? Searle assumes an ongoing chain of instrumental expressions of value without anything having intrinsic value. Even human biological nature, which is enhanced through the creation of the social fact of money, is treated as a bare existence condition for social reality, not as a locus of value in itself.

To be sure, holiness, like money, has instrumental features. The elaborate rules in *Numbers* about which personnel can handle which holy objects, for example, bespeak a system in which holiness has become routinized and abstract. Just as no one would say of a validly issued five dollar bill "but is it *really* money?" no one need ask metaphysical questions about the deep nature of holiness once the system is up and running. A holy life—although surely not the life which Heschel intended—need not be reflective. Perhaps a life of unreflective religious observance would qualify as a holy life. But that is an unattractive view. Holiness should not be merely stipulative; it should not simply reflect the mechanics of some system of symbols and rules. One wants holiness to have depth; to have a source in what is most real. What is most real, from the point of view of personal existence, is the value of that existence as such. Being itself is felt to have value—this is the intrinsic basis from which instrumental claims of value are launched. *Holy*, I want to suggest, cuts very close to this ontological-axiological bone. To use *holy* properly is to discern the depth and presence of value. To ask "But is human life *really* holy?" implies confusion. It is a category mistake to think that holiness applies intrinsically to something else and only derivatively or instrumentally to the personal existence of human beings.

By "personal existence" I mean to discriminate a mode of being that takes seriously first person consciousness, that is, selfhood in both its phenomenological

and moral-agentive dimensions, and to distinguish that mode from perspectives that reduce persons to natural or physical systems without remainder. Whatever else consciousness is, it is an awareness of its own astonishing uniqueness—consciousness comes with a recognition of its own significance.[10] Religious Jews and others affirm that this value derives from and points toward a transcendent source. That is, human life is holy because it shares in God's holiness. That affirmation, it seems to me, is not ineluctable; it is not given with the primordial experience of conscious, personal existence but is, to some extent, the achievement of reflection on the meaning of that existence.

For the Bible, the holiness of God occupies the foreground. God is the paradigm of holiness; the holiness of human life is derivative. That may still be the best way to look at it. But one wants to avoid being a custodian of holiness as a religious legacy; one wants, like Heschel, to be a practitioner. And that requires reappropriating holiness in a manner suitable for an age in which the presence of God is at best a metaphor.   We must work within a naturalistic, albeit personal, frame of reference. Let us then return to the sources and consider in somewhat more detail biblical and Judaic views of holiness to see whether we can link a radical sense of value, of the goodness of being, with God as the paradigm of holiness.

Biblical Perspectives on Holiness

In biblical thought, as we have seen, *holy* sometimes seems to designate a property that exists in the world as if in an observer-independent, empirical way. As Baruch Schwartz puts it, "Holiness is a fundamental, if undefined, attribute of God; it is synonymous with divine power and presence. Neither good nor evil; it is pure force that must be kept free of impurity when it manifests itself in cultic settings."[11]   *Holy* describes God in a manner analogous to how *red* describes a colored ball.

God is "empirically" holy. Holiness is God's property. In application to the non-divine, however, *holy* indicates either a sign or trace of God's presence or that something is the possession of God. *Holy* designates divine ownership and hence separation from other, ordinary things. Thus, *holy* functions somewhat like a possessive adjective such as *mine.* It indicates a relation; in this case, the relation of possession. It indicates as well a normative (or "deontic") evaluation. To judge something holy is to discern and assert its value; holiness contra Baruch Schwartz and others, is not a value-free zone. (Even if Schwartz, like Rudolf Otto, wants to segregate holiness from moral value—"neither good nor evil"—there are other forms of value, such as epistemic and aesthetic value. There is, we have claimed following Lenn Goodman, ontological value: the value of Being per se. Value is indicated by the presence of claims; beings make claims by virtue of their

---

[10] Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), see especially Part III.
[11] Baruch Schwartz, "Israel's Holiness: The Torah Traditions,"] in M.J.H.M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz, eds. *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 2000)

existence.[12] The holy makes a claim to special treatment or consideration. This, contra Baruch Schwartz, indicates value.)

But *holy*, when it designates status and value, does not lose its sense of designating a property, of intending an empirical description. It continues to function like *red* or *solid* or *wet* insofar as it is thought to denominate a property. Holiness falls prey to our propensity to reify.[13] Such a property is often thought to resemble a material property while not quite four-square with the ordinary material world. We are wont to call such a quality "spiritual" (although I think that we are led astray by so doing). The spiritual is thought to have some of the traits of the material with none of its negative consequences. The spiritual is mysteriously apart from, yet a part of, the material world. The spiritual thus entails a substance dualism, along the lines of the weather beaten notions of matter and spirit. The spiritual makes claims that sound as if they are about entities (e.g. Descartes's non-extended substance) but imply no materiality. Such dualism is rightly thought today to be incoherent. It contributes to the implausibility of an ontological view of holiness.

Holiness is related to a kindred Jewish conceptual system, that of impurity and purity/*tumah* and *taharah*. The binary oppositions, holy/unholy and pure/impure are not identical. To be holy is to belong to God or to be in the realm or presence of God. But things cannot belong to God or come into God's realm unless they are pure. Purity is a condition for holiness; it is not synonymous with it.[14] Purity and impurity are physical states; contact with corpses, with sexual and bodily fluids, and other materials render persons impure. This is not originally a moral category. (Although as Jonathan Klawans has shown, the priestly system evolved a moral understanding of purity and impurity over time. Grievous sins of a moral nature such as idolatry, incest, and murder came to render one impure.[15]) Impurity is removed and purity is restored by performative ritual practices, such as lustration. The presumptive physicality of the system of purity and impurity lent concreteness to holiness. Purity and impurity, conceived as status designations with

---

[12] Lenn E. Goodman, *On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy* (Portland: Littman Library, 2008)

[13] Although the phenomenologists of religion posit God's holiness (given an immanent divine presence) as the basis from which other expressions of holiness derive, naturalistically considered it is possible that *kadosh* began its conceptual life as a relation and, through a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, became a property construed in an empirical way. Scholars are in broad agreement that the root meaning of *k-d-sh* is *separate from*. The idea of the holy gains intelligibility as a marker of status: x is holy insofar as it belongs to (=is related to) God; that relation separates x from all other objects, times, places, persons, etc. The concepts of status and relation, however, are hard to maintain as abstractions. Human beings have an innate drive to concretize, perhaps because they believe, as Frege thought, that only thus can matters of truth be ascertained. *Holy* may have shifted from indicating a relation of possession *by* God to indicating a property *of* God and then a property of objects and persons *proximate to* God. It is as if *mine* were transformed into the pseudo-quality of mineness, a conceptual casualty of the human tendency to reify.

[14] Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), Lecture 9: The Priestly Legacy: Cult and Sacrifice, Open Yale Courses accessed at: http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/introduction-to-the-old-testament-hebrew-bible/content/class-sessions/transcripts/transcript09.html

[15] Jonathan Klawans, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible," in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2041

an ontological basis, provided an "underlying physics" for holiness. Holy/unholy and pure/impure wove a self-referential, deontic web of social and institutional facts grounded in a presumptive material reality.

Holiness in the Priestly writings, as Israel Knohl has shown, was originally concerned solely with ritual. "Before Isaiah's time," Knohl writes, "the concept of holiness is mentioned in the Priestly Torah only with regard to ritual matters: the Holy Temple, the holy days, the priests as holy people. Not once in the Priestly Torah is holiness tied to moral behavior, to upholding social justice, and to behaving righteously."[16] An ethicizing development, he argues, arose in priestly circles in response to prophetic activity, most notably that of Isaiah, in the eighth century. The priestly circle which scholars now call the Holiness School—whose document is our Leviticus, chapters 17-26—interposes ritual and moral injunctions in a dense, mutually supportive manner. Holiness, within Priestly thought was expanded to include moral evaluation. To "love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is as much a demand of holiness, as is the avoidance of eating anything "with its blood" (Lev. 19:26).

But ritual matters are never categorically distinct from moral ones, as anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre remind us. Using Searle's analysis, we might say that the performative, deontic, and descriptive uses of *holy*—as generative and designative of a social reality—are typically coeval. The development of various ontological views, as well as views that pick out the status imputing function of holiness-utterances were conflated early on. Already in the course of biblical civilization, holiness was a fluid, adaptable concept, defined and constructed differently by various groups of religious thinkers. The ambiguity which we sense with respect to the concept is arguably ancient. If Searle is correct about the way social and institutional facts become real, i.e. their ontological basis depends upon the agreement of agents but once that agreement is in place they are no less real than brute factual features of the world, then such ambiguity is to be expected. "That rock is solid" does not invoke a social fact. "That solid rock is a paperweight" does. Just as the epistemically subjective judgment about the significance of the rock as a paperweight requires an epistemically objective claim about the brute existence of the rock, so too utterances about holiness conjoin empirical and evaluative (that is, status imputing) language.

Some further examples of this juncture: In the priestly writings, holiness is held to inhere, in a virtually physical way, in objects. Objects can become holy automatically through proximity to God's presence (*kavod*). In Exodus 29:43-44, the presence of God in the *mishkan* eo ipso renders the objects and persons therein holy (*nikdash*). That is an empirical claim about an ontological property but it is also has deontic force. In Leviticus 21:8, the priests are holy because they offer God his food (empirical description) and they must be treated as holy persons due to their proximity to the holy God (deontic force). These objects and persons were not originally holy. They acquired the property through physical proximity to the divine, which is holy in itself. Early priestly thought, according to Schwartz, "confined holiness to...the priests, the tabernacle and its appurtenances, holy days, offerings,

---

[16] Israel Knohl, The Divine Symphony (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), pp. 63-69

and the Tetragrammaton."[17] With H, the Holiness document, the people Israel as a whole are rendered holy by God's effusion of his holiness upon them. Holiness becomes an ontological property of the people. God has designated them as holy through a speech act (Lev 20:8). Here, a performative utterance, using a declarative *piel* verb, continuously alters their status. God is in the midst of Israel, through his holy Sanctuary, and radiates holiness in a quasi-physical way upon them.

In contrast to this "empirical" use, the priestly writings also envision holiness as an imputed status; it requires human agency and effort, intention and performance. Israel as a whole can become holy, but it is up to Israel to gain this status. Israel is not a priori holy but is commanded to be holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2). The holiness that Israel is commanded to achieve is not—later readings aside—like God's holiness in a substantive, ontological sense. Rather, it is functionally analogous to it. Israel should relate to its human milieu in a manner analogous to how God relates to the cosmic milieu, that is, with pronounced separation. On this account, Israel responds to the presence of divine holiness in its midst in a way such that it models divine holiness and reflects it to the world. God's own holiness depends on Israel's reflection of it in the world (Lev. 22:31-32).

In non-priestly texts, such as Exodus 19:6 and Exodus 22:30, Israel becomes a holy people through entering into a covenantal relationship with God. Israel becomes God's special possession. Just as the priests form a *kodesh*, a holy object possessed by the divinity; the people as a whole become a *kodesh* vis-à-vis the gentiles. Here *holy* has the sense of a relation (*kadosh* is similar to *mine*, when God is the speaker, or *yours*, when Israel is the speaker and God is the reference of the indexical term) rather than on a material property. However, the relation of possession needs to be sustained by distinctive practices, laws, taboos, attitudes, etc. (See Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 14:21) Holiness is a matter of status deriving from relationship (Deut. 28:9), conditioned by a web of background social realities.

Searle worries about whether social reality, on his analysis, hangs in the air, whether its self-referential character is purely circular. This worry might also infect ascriptions of holiness, but at least on the Bible's own telling, this does not seem a danger. Whether holiness is thought to derive from God's immediate presence or the lingering aftereffects of that presence, or from God's possession, or from Israel's performative utterances which ratify the realm of the divine, *there is no holiness without God*. God is either the source or the telos, an actual presence or an idealized one. In every case, however, the concept of holiness, as a Jewish concept, is incoherent without the concept of God. God provides the non–arbitrary basis on which the imputation of status rests. God constitutes the ontological commitment or the transcendent ideal that lends holiness a reality other than self-referential stipulation. Holiness cannot be constituted without God but—and this is the question for modern Jewish thought—can it be constituted in such a way so as to avoid ontological inflation, to avoid the more mythological representations of the divine? Can this be done within the metaphysical constraints of the modern scientific worldview, while at the same time avoiding reduction to a moral category

---

[17] Baruch Schwartz, "Israel's Holiness: The Torah Traditions,"] in M.J.H.M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz, eds. *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 2000)

alone? Can holiness still add value without relying on an implausible ontology? Let us now consider two texts which illustrate different approaches to this problem. The first, by the eighteenth century Italian Jewish kabbalist and moralist, Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1707-1746), ties holiness to ethics but extends holiness beyond ethics as well. His version of holiness entails a distinct ontological view but embeds that view in a system of social, imputed meanings. The second text, by the nineteenth and early twentieth century figure Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) seeks to reconstitute holiness within the ontologically deflated but ethically rich framework of Kantianism.

Luzzatto on Holiness

Luzzatto's classic, *Mesillat Yesharim* (*The Path of the Just*), comprises a detailed analysis of a famous baraita in B. Avodah Zarah 20b. In this rabbinic source, R. Pinḥas ben Yair proposes a "ladder of virtues": "Torah leads to watchfulness; watchfulness leads to zeal; zeal leads to cleanliness; cleanliness leads to separation; separation leads to purity; purity leads to saintliness; saintliness leads to humility; humility leads to fear of sin; fear of sin leads to holiness; holiness leads to the holy spirit, and the holy spirit leads to the revival of the dead."[18] Luzzatto develops each stage of moral-religious achievement in depth, first characterizing the valuable trait in general, then analyzing   its implications, giving practical guidance as to how to acquire the trait as well as how to circumvent the obstacles, typically engendered by our weakness of will, against progressing in virtue. It is a masterpiece of synthesis, piety, and moral psychology.

The last stage, holiness, is exceptional. Unlike the other traits, which may be acquired through focused, disciplined, and constant human intention and action, holiness requires the cooperation of the divine. "Holiness is two-fold," Luzzatto writes. "Its beginning is labor and its end reward; its beginning is exertion and its end, a gift. That is, it begins with one's sanctifying himself (*mikadesh 'atzmo*) and ends with his being sanctified (*mikadshim oto*)."[19] Substantively, holiness consists in continuous adhesion to the Divine (*devekut*), a well-developed theme in Jewish mysticism with roots in Maimonides's theory of prophecy. But it is impossible for a human being, no matter how accomplished in his lifelong training in the virtues, to live continuously in this manner. For the end of the matter is that human beings cannot fully transcend their material (*ḥamri*) nature; they are flesh and blood who need divine intervention to sustain communio dei. Human beings *can* persevere in thought and action, constantly directing their will toward the sanctification of action (*kedushat ha-ma'aseh*). After which, God may let his holiness descend and dwell upon them (*yashreh alav kedushato*).[20]

---

[18] This translation is from Luzzatto's translated text. See Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, *The Path of the Just*, Shraga Silverstein, trans. (New York: Feldheim, 1990), p. 13. All subsequent references to Luzzatto are from this edition.

[19] Luzzatto*, Path of the Just*, p. 327

[20] Ibid., p. 328

Luzzatto advances a subtle moral-religious vocabulary, full of careful distinctions. Holiness, he tells us, is distinct from purity—a distinction, as we have seen, already made in the biblical period although somewhat difficult to sustain. For Luzzatto, the pure one (*tahor*) does not let his necessary human actions (eating, drinking, sexual conduct, etc.) become infected by lust. The evil inclination is not allowed to gain a foothold as one pursues one's inevitable human engagements. *The holy one, however, transcends the negative condition of earthliness altogether*: "One who is holy...clings constantly to his God (*davek tamid l'elohav*), his soul traveling in channels of truth, amidst the love and fear of his Creator—such a person is as one walking before God in the land of the living, here in this world."[21] The holy man is as the altar; his eating and drinking are as the sacrifices. His very body becomes the divine Chariot. "It is as if he were united with the celestial angels while yet in this world."[22]

The entire system of virtues which Luzzatto has developed over hundreds of pages leads to holiness. Although holiness requires the active intervention of the Divine, one can make oneself worthy of it. Luzzatto's vision is austere and ascetic. Constant diminution of the value of the entanglements of this world, cultivated separation from casual company with other human beings, intense mental directedness toward the ultimate are all requisite. Arduous commitment to the path of the righteous will evoke divine assistance (*'ezer ha-elohi*) such that the highest element of one's soul will be strengthened within one (*titgaber nafsho bo*). At this point, one transcends one's earthly nature and the Holy Spirit (*ruaḥ ha-kodesh*) is infused in the soul. Such persons are able to raise the dead (Elijah and Elisha, e.g.), so strong is the state of their communion with divine power.[23]

Here we have a full theory of holiness which integrates elements from the distant Priestly past with tropes of ancient and medieval rabbinic piety. The embeddedness of the holy into a system of virtues well illustrates Searle's model of the self-referential, performative, and deontic dimensions of social reality. Holiness acquires meaning through contrasts with background concepts such as humility, purity, and separation, all of which are anchored in practices and attitudes. Like the ancient Priestly writings, Luzzatto does not decouple holiness from an ontological commitment to divine presence. Holiness, unlike the other virtues, cannot be acquired through human effort alone. An active, agentive divine movement is necessary. Luzzatto's view honors the ancient ontological one, while also employing holiness as a status term.

Luzzatto's system is centrally concerned with the relation between holiness and ethics without in any way collapsing holiness into ethics. It therefore stands at a remove from the modern liberal translation of holiness to ethics, which has not diminished in any way its popularity among contemporary traditional Jews. But what sense can Luzzatto's presumed ontology make if one wishes broadly to hold to the modern scientific worldview? Can holiness be sustained as a concept having its own integrity once the fantastic dimensions of Luzzatto's world picture are

---

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., p. 333
[23] Ibid., p. 334

bracketed? Can we have an ontological view, working together with an imputed status analysis that is not implausible? That is what Hermann Cohen attempts to do.

Cohen on Holiness

Cohen's approach, developed in Chapters VI and VII of the *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, tries to completely eliminate the possibility of holiness as an empirical property. Cohen constructs the concept of holiness both in terms of value (especially the value of goodness) and in terms of relation (i.e. his unique reformulation of divine-human reciprocity). Following standard 19th century biblical scholarship and anthropology, Cohen takes *holy* to designate, first, the relation—a relation of separation between holy objects, etc. and profane ones. This is available in polytheism as well as monotheism (*Religion* VI:4).

For Jewish monotheism, however, holiness means morality. It means a task. This makes it sound as if the holy is identical to the (merely) moral, but Cohen builds in a significant theological dimension. Holiness is the *being* of God, but the task and action— the *becoming*— of man. Yet even here Cohen's use of *holy* to describe God's being should not be taken on the model of a descriptive statement. Even for God, holiness does not mean a static, inherent property but a mode of action—Cohen references here God's "attributes of action," Maimonides's term of art for the attributes enumerated in Exodus 34:6-7. Holiness refers not to God's "metaphysical causality"—something about which we cannot have any knowledge— but to his "purposive acting". Holiness is the ensemble of all the attributes of action which form the purposes of God and hence of humanity.

Cohen draws from this a surprising, paradoxical implication: *God's holiness only exists because of man's task*. He thus takes to an extreme the theme of God's own holiness depending on man's instantiation of it in the world. Morality is a "correlation" of God and man (*not* a separation). Holiness qua morality is correlation; the exact opposite of the originally crude sense of *k-d-sh* as separation. In either case, the root still designates a form of relation but Cohen turns the tables on the anthropologists, seeing the correlation with God, the transcendent ideal, as the primary meaning of *holy*, and separation as a degenerate form of the concept.

Correlation is a central philosophical term for Cohen. It is not immediately clear what it means. In my view, the concept of correlation (*Religion* VI: 8) functions for Cohen like God functions for Kant. That is, God glues together the order of causality (nature) with the order of freedom (morality). Kant needs God to give some grounding to the law of freedom. Similarly, Cohen needs correlation to keep ethics from being merely conventional, suspended by a sky hook. For Cohen, however, we don't get beyond ideas. Therefore, what correlation designates is *a logical relationship between ideas* (here the ideas of God and man), rather than an ontological relationship between nature and freedom, as in Kant. Correlation is a way of imparting logical necessity to morality.[24]

---

[24] Unfortunately, Cohen often departs from a purely logical use of *correlation* and speaks of it as if it were a form of material relation between actual individuals, rather than a purely logical concept. This

Cohen devotes an entire chapter of *Religion of Reason* to the holy spirit. He equates the holy spirit with a capacity for continuous renewal within man such that man can overcome sin and progress infinitely in morality. *This continuously renewing will to the infinite task is the holy spirit*. It is precisely that which correlates man and God. "The holy spirit is fully as much the spirit of man as the spirit of God" (*Religion* VII:5). Holiness is reciprocal (correlated): God is made holy through man; man is made holy through God. This is not about substance and property; it is about relation and status, becoming, not being. The logical relation is biconditional; each term is necessary for the existence of the other (*Religion* VII:10).

Cohen eschews any neo-Platonic, Christian, or mystical mediation or substantive connection between God and man through holiness. Cohen would find Luzzatto's system, as desirable as its ethics might be, deeply confused. Correlation (when he is being consistent) has a purely conceptual sense. The link between the divine and the human is an idea; an idea of value. Any sensuous or experiential (especially "spiritual" in that sense, discussed above, where the spiritual is parasitic on the physical) link is polytheism and pantheism. Judaism, like Kant, entails the discovery of practical reason—of reason as the revelation of morality, which is categorically different from reason applied theoretically to nature (*Religion* VII:12). Knowledge of God = knowledge of ethics (*Religion* VII: 16). The knowledge of nature has no share either in the knowledge of ethics or of God.

Holiness becomes human, as the holy spirit is the spirit of moral action, which is the constitutive spirit of man (*Religion* VII:16). All conceptual problems of the divine become problems for ethics, for practical reason. God and man are unified, as it were, in the correlation that is holiness/ethics. Holiness is, in a way, completely mundane, one might even say profane. It is not an elevated state of knowledge or action (*Religion* VII:19); it is only the task and ideal of action, to be pursued in patience and humility daily. Cohen writes long after the age of miracles has passed. His work is premised on a thoroughly rational disenchantment of the world.

Cohen's account has real strengths and significant weaknesses. He demystifies holiness, ontologically deflating the concept and rendering it compatible with the modern scientific worldview. His view does not require positing occult entities or properties in the way that Luzzatto does. Holiness describes the human will striving to fulfil its infinite moral task in correlation with God, who serves as a conceptual backstop, convincing us that ethics is not a labor of Sisyphus. Cohen's account renders holiness democratic as well: holiness is possible for everyone. As radical a reconstruction of holiness as he offers us, he does so through an interpretive engagement with traditional texts, working in a methodologically

---

comes out in his discussion of the "holy spirit". The problem is less the clarity of Cohen's thought than the plurivocity of his style. He is writing both in a highly abstract philosophical mode *and* trying to use traditional religious language, only intermittently translating from one voice to the other. On Cohen's style, see Daniel H. Weiss, *Paradox and the Prophets: Hermann Cohen and the Indirect Communication of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For the classic study of the meaning of correlation in Cohen, see Alexander Altmann, "Hermann Cohens Begriff der Korrelation," in Hans Tramer, ed., *In Zwei Welten: Siegfried Moses zum Fünfundsiebzigsten Geburtstag* (Tel Aviv: Verlag Bitaon, 1962), pp. 377-399

disciplined, philosophically constructive way. He picks up genuine trends in the history of Judaism, principally Maimonides's rationalist account of God's attributes, and advances them in a plausible way.

Cohen's identification of holiness with morality has the additional strength of providing a check against the promiscuity of the sacred; against an idolatry of putative sacralities. Going beyond Searle's account of what motivates social and institutional facts, theorists such as Emil Durkheim and Edward Shils thought that human beings instinctively ascribe holiness to central features of a social system; where power is thought to lie, it is adorned with holiness. If this is the case, then we can never be free of the compulsion to sacralize rulers, states, authoritative institutions, etc. Idolatries of power are coded into our genes, as it were. A highly ethicized reduction of the holy would militate against this tendency and provide standards inherent to holiness, as redefined, that could curb its excesses. Moralized holiness is less compatible with idolatry than is quasi-physical, ontological holiness.

For all of Cohen's Kantianism, however, he does try to avoid the complete reduction of holiness to ethics. The attempt at avoidance is signaled by Cohen's emphasis on individuality, that is, on the struggle of the individual to free herself from guilt and an oppressive sense of sinfulness through the discovery of the correlation with God. Franz Rosenzweig early remarked that Cohen's *Religion* departed from the universalizing Kantianism of his system through the focus on the concrete individual, a focus that Kantian ethics cannot assume. Later scholars dispute whether Cohen's thought indeed took such a turn or whether his systematic philosophical work is compatible with, or even calls for, this personalizing dimension. Whatever meta-moral significance Cohen ascribes to holiness, there is no doubt, however, that the dominant framework is that of ethics, and ethics of a universal, rational sort. It is questionable, then, whether Cohen really avoids a complete reduction of holiness to ethics.

Holiness beyond Ethics

Let us take Luzzatto and Cohen as two related but opposing possibilities for understanding holiness within our own intellectual milieu. Both relate holiness to moral value; both relate holiness to God. One is concerned to construct and defend the concept in broad agreement with the metaphysical constraints of scientific thought; the other does not share that concern. Contemporary Jews might be thought to opt for one of these two alternatives. The Cohenian option makes no room for ontological holiness; the traditional-mystical option compartmentalizes Jewish belief and conviction vis-à-vis all other beliefs and epistemic commitments. A Cohenian view is taken to be a form of capitulation or defection by traditionalists. The traditional view is taken to be an elaborate flight of fancy by modernists. If we are to get beyond this impasse, it seems to me that we must proceed along two paths. The first is that of a metaphysics which is more plausible than Luzzatto's but richer than Cohen's. Cohen's segregation of practical from theoretical reason, of nature from ethics, consigns holiness largely to ethics. A more adequate concept

would bridge nature and ethics and thereby open a wider field to which holiness might apply. With all due caution about re-ontologizing holiness, we need a language in which to give expression to our apprehension of the holiness of being as such. This will include the holiness of being as it is situated in space and time, in the natural order, in the unique strangeness of consciousness and the achievement of integration that is personhood. Cohen is unable to talk of the holiness of nature, for example. One wants to avoid finding holiness, Wiccan style, in rocks, trees, and fundamental life processes. But one should not want to avoid finding holiness in the phenomenon of life as such. Conceiving of the cosmos as being grounded in value (order is a value) would move us beyond Cohen's dichotomization. The aim here would not be to restore holiness as a property of things on the model of *red*, but to conceive of the relations that constitute holiness against a comprehensive background of being—not simply against a restricted field of moral action. If holiness works, as I suggested above, vis-à-vis objects in a way parallel to how semantic meaning works vis-à-vis marks and sounds, then there is no restriction on what can count as a sign. Holiness can be read off nature, off anything that can be taken as a sign. Such signs need not be arbitrary. Typically, they will reflect what we take to be valued and central to our interests, ways of life, and highest concerns. Holiness is ascribed against a ramified background of social and institutional facts where it picks out what is crucial to the system of social reality.

Second, Cohen's account lacks the performative dimension of the use of *holy* that we noted is central to Jewish religious practice. In a sense, Cohen's entire use of *holy* is performative—holiness has to do with the human performance of moral action. This is not the precise philosophical sense in which we have been using "performative," however. In that sense, performative utterances do not describe the world; they make worlds. Performative utterance is a way of world-making, of engendering facts. Performative utterances do not so much state facts, as bring new facts into being. Nonetheless, these new facts ride on the backs of old ones, whether earlier social facts or original brute facts. As Nelson Goodman puts it "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking."[25] The sanctifying of a marriage through performative utterance requires a whole world of relevant pre-conditions: a couple, a commitment, promises, families and other institutions. So too our talk of holiness does not invent a world ex nihilo, crudely imposing imaginative fantasies onto a putatively neutral, passive reality. The ascription of holiness brings into focus what is already there; organizing, composing, focusing, and integrating it in ways that educe the inherent value of the world, its rock bottom goodness. Holiness helps to develop the world, helps a new world to emerge, in which human action and contemplation are intensified. The proclamation of the Sabbath through Kiddush brings into heightened actuality an incipient set of norms, concepts, and values. Ideas such as rest and renewal, already ambient in social reality, are synthesized into powerful, coherent wholes—new worlds—by the performative utterances and ritual performances of Shabbat.

Finally, both Luzzatto and Cohen are correct to tie holiness to God, whether as an active agent, in Luzzatto's dialectical reading of *devekut*, or as a principle of

---

[25] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 6

correlation in Cohen's fully abstract, logical approach. There is no holiness without God. Whether the imputation of holiness to an object, time, place, act, person, interest, practice or project is warranted will then turn on how it accords or fails to accord with everything we claim to know about the divine. Imputing holiness is a hermeneutic act. We must decide what an object (time, place, etc.) means; what we take it to signify. We must then describe or declare its significance through attributing a property or ascribing a status to it. That attribution will have to cohere with everything else we claim to know and value. The integration of that knowledge intends an ideal of perfection; that is a principal role of God in the life of the human mind and will. The holy aims at the highest. We should keep that aim in mind and forbear endowing lower things with a holiness they do not deserve.