

Religion and Embodied Cognition

with Fraser Watts, “Embodied Cognition and Religion”; John A. Teske, “From Embodied to Extended Cognition”; Daniel H. Weiss, “Embodied Cognition in Classical Rabbinic Literature”; Léon Turner, “Individuality in Theological Anthropology and Theories of Embodied Cognition”; and Warren S. Brown and Kevin S. Reimer, “Embodied Cognition, Character Formation, and Virtue.”

EMBODIED COGNITION IN CLASSICAL RABBINIC LITERATURE

by Daniel H. Weiss

Abstract. Challenging earlier cognitivist approaches, recent theories of embodied cognition argue that the human mind and its functions are best understood as intimately bound up with the human body and its physiological dimensions. Some scholars have suggested that such theories, in departing from some core assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition, display significant similarities to certain non-Western traditions of thought, such as Buddhism. This essay extends such parallels to the Jewish tradition and argues that, in particular, classical rabbinic thought presents a profoundly nondualistic account of the body–soul relation in its connection to cognition, action, and embodiment. Classical rabbinic texts therefore model the possibility of engaging with ‘Western’ conceptions such as God and the soul, while doing so in a manner that resonates strongly with many aspects of contemporary scientific theories. Thus, beyond their value as historical documents, insight into the texts and concepts of classical rabbinic Judaism can contribute to the further development of new theories of intellect and cognition.

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In critiquing accounts of human functioning that posit a ‘disembodied’ relation between mind and body, many recent expositors of embodied cognition have argued that our contemporary conceptual frameworks have been profoundly influenced by a long-standing intellectual heritage, tracing back to streams of Greek philosophical thought in antiquity. Competing present-day theories about mind and brain can thus be viewed not as arising

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automatically or inherently from scientific data; rather, such theories may be structurally linked to earlier historical traditions about the relation between soul and body, and the relation of each of these to knowledge of truth and of the divine. These earlier traditions have tended to take the position that it is the mind or soul alone, and not the body, that cognizes; a more recent and more materialist permutation holds that it is the brain alone, and not the rest of the body, that cognizes. In both versions, however, the body as a whole (as distinct from the mind/soul/brain) is specifically *not* where cognition is to be located. Thus, while recent scientific studies have highlighted the seemingly significant role that the body plays in shaping modes of thought and judgment, the prominent historical trend in Western thought of disembodied mind has made it more difficult to successfully formulate new theoretical accounts of embodied cognition that can properly take account of this observed scientific data. In other words, we cannot fully or easily step outside of our longstanding inherited linguistic and conceptual frameworks.¹

In light of these challenges, some writers, such as Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) in their seminal work, *The Embodied Mind*, have suggested that a fruitful alternative approach might be found through drawing upon conceptual frameworks lying outside the 'Western' tradition of thought. To this end, they engage with Buddhist tradition, which, they argue, provides robust tools for thinking about self and cognition in a nondualistic and embodied framework (see Varela et al. 1991, xvii–xviii, 21–23). Taking inspiration from their endeavors, I seek in this essay to explore the potential resources for embodied cognition that might be drawn from engagement with the texts of classical rabbinic Judaism.² However, in contrast to the specifically 'non-Western' appeal of Buddhist thought, classical rabbinic texts represent an alternative approach that can be situated within the broader 'Western' tradition itself.³ The rabbinic texts specifically engage with various competing accounts of body–soul relation within the context of late antiquity, and can be seen as putting forth a philosophical or theological configuration of embodiment that can function as an interlocutor to Aristotelian, Platonic, and Stoic accounts of the self.

At the same time, the rabbinic texts simultaneously relate themselves to the formulations and content of the Hebrew Bible, another core cultural text of the Western intellectual tradition. While scholars have often pointed to the Hebrew Bible as itself conveying a more 'embodied' conception of the human self (see, e.g., Green 1998; Wyschogrod 1996; Murphy 2006), the Bible's largely nontheoretical approach to the topic means that its direct relevance for contemporary scientific and philosophical debates has been somewhat limited. By contrast, classical rabbinic texts continue the basic embodied conceptuality of the biblical texts, while doing so in a more self-conscious and theoretically reflective manner. As such, the embodied

accounts of self and cognition that are put forth in the rabbinic texts can serve as potential models for contemporary attempts at putting forth accounts that resist mind–body separation without having to abandon the language of self, God, and soul, or the biblical heritage to which these concepts are linked. That is to say, whereas talk of a soul that survives bodily death has often been associated with a dualistic conception that seems incompatible with modern scientific modes of investigation, the rabbinic formulation of body–soul relations breaks with such associations by remaining in a nondualistic framework, thus creating greater possibilities for simultaneously engaging with scientific and with biblical-religious thought in a noncompetitive and nonreductive manner.⁴

Before delving into the textual material, a few comments about the specific scope of my claims and analysis are in order. First of all, I focus specifically on the texts of classical rabbinic literature, namely, the texts in the period bounded essentially by the Mishnah on the one end and the Babylonian Talmud on the other, with an historical time span from around 200 until around 600 CE. These texts, alongside the Hebrew Bible, form the crucial canonical core of the religious tradition that today is sometimes referred to simply as ‘Judaism.’⁵ However, my claims about the embodied conceptions found in these classical rabbinic texts do not expand beyond this specific scope, and should not be taken as a claim about embodiment in ‘Jewish’ or ‘Hebraic’ thought in any general or decontextualized sense. The label of ‘Jewish’ could be equally applied to Philo, a late antique writer not part of the rabbinic tradition, or to Maimonides, who later becomes a prominent inheritor of the classical rabbinic tradition. However, both Philo and Maimonides have conceptions of the human self and soul that can be described as quite sharply disembodied.⁶ As such, no assumptions should be made about how the features of classical rabbinic literature analyzed here may or may not apply to other periods or streams of ‘Jewish thought.’ To be sure, many of the themes may indeed recur in the writings of a number of later Jewish thinkers, but separate studies would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.⁷

In addition, the texts of classical rabbinic literature themselves represent collections of material drawn from various temporal and geographic locations over multiple centuries. They often contain multiple differing or even contradictory opinions—particularly with regard to nonempirical matters such as the nature of the soul—and so it can often be problematic to assign any particular conception to ‘the rabbis’ in a unified sense. However, I posit that the specific topics of embodiment that I examine here stand out as displaying a pattern of conceptual consistency across the various texts of classical rabbinic literature. Thus, without making a claim of perfect systematicity, my account seeks to illuminate a dominant and distinctive trend within the classical rabbinic corpus.⁸ This trend, in turn, can set

the stage for further investigations of possible relations between rabbinic Judaism and contemporary scientific theories of embodied cognition.

EMBODIED SELF AND EMBODIED COGNITION IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Before turning specifically to rabbinic texts, however, I will begin by putting a brief overview of the ways in which action and embodiment are presented in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in connection with relation to and knowledge of the divine. Because the rabbinic texts specifically aim to relate themselves to the biblical texts, an initial examination of the latter can highlight the ways in which rabbinic Judaism continues key aspects of biblical conceptuality while simultaneously expanding and refracting it through different terminology. Moreover, by seeing the places in which biblical formulations are vague or lacking in explicitness, we can discern the specific interpretive paths taken by the rabbinic readers of Scripture, particularly where alternative interpretive paths could also conceivably have been taken. Thus, while my account of biblical thought seeks to orient itself in accord with contemporary biblical scholarship, my primary aim is to foreground the particular elements of the biblical text that would later be emphasized by classical rabbinic literature.

One core biblical element for framing the rabbinic conception of embodied cognition lies in its portrayal of creation. In the opening chapter of Genesis, the material creation, including stars, planets, plants, and animals, is repeatedly described as being perceived by God as “good.” This stands in sharp contrast to a view that would treat ‘the material world’ as threatening or impeding spirituality and would instead seek ‘true goodness’ in a spiritual or immaterial realm beyond the physicality of creation. In contrast, in Genesis 1, not only is the created world not portrayed negatively, but it is not even neutral or indifferent: it is specifically linked with a divine judgment of goodness.⁹ There is no division or hierarchy between material and spiritual in this assessment; rather, creation as a whole is treated in a nondivided manner. Importantly, there is likewise no indication that ‘temporal’ or ‘perishable’ elements are judged as distanced from the divine or as inferior to supposedly ‘unchanging’ or ‘eternal’ elements of the world (cf. Wyschogrod 1996, 176–177). That is to say, there is no indication that one needs to rise above temporality, physicality, perishability, or finitude in order to relate to the divine. Goodness and “true value” are to be found within the created temporal order, not in any posited realm beyond it.

Similarly, in the creation of human beings in particular, there is no designation of any special cognitive or intellectual qualities that set them apart from plants or animals. While some later interpreters would read “the image of God” in Genesis 1:26 in terms of intellectual or rational faculties, most contemporary scholars of the Hebrew Bible link it not with a faculty

of thought or mind, but with the human task of serving as God's vice-regent in governing the other animals.¹⁰ Thus, if anything, the element that sets human beings apart is the fact that they are given a specific command and task, with an expectation of response and responsibility.

In Genesis 2 and 3, the creation of the human being involves God forming the first man from "the dust of the ground" and breathing into him "the breath of life," *nishmat hayyim*, so that he becomes "a living being," *nefesh hayah* (Gen. 2:7). Here, as elsewhere in the Bible, the notion of *nefesh*, which can be translated as person, self, soul, being, life, or creature, thus corresponds to the union of a body formed from the earth with the animating breath given by God. That is to say, while there are two elements here—the 'dust of ground' and the '*neshamah* breathed by God'—the living person as a whole, the *nefesh*, is identified not with either one of the two elements, but with the union between them. Again, this stands in contrast with a notion that would identify the 'true self' with the soul or mind in contradistinction to the body.¹¹ Likewise, there is no indication that one could talk about the *nefesh* or the 'self' apart from the body: the self is linked with God's breath *in* the body. But, conversely, one cannot talk about the 'self' apart from God's animating breath: the self is linked to the body specifically when it is animated by the *neshamah* from God.

Moreover, this animating breath or *neshamah* is again not linked specifically with any intellectual or rational faculties; as we see in Genesis 7, the phrase "the breath of the spirit of life" is said also to animate fowl, beasts, and swarming creatures (Gen. 7:21–22; see also Gen. 6:17; Ps. 104:29–30; Job 34:14–15; Eccl. 3:19). That is to say, it is characteristic of every living animal, and the life of every animal is also held to be a *nefesh*, a dynamic union of earthly dust and God's animating breath (see, e.g., Gen. 9:4–7). Thus, there is no indication that *nefesh* or *neshamah* are linked to any distinctive human intellectual capacities; rather, they are linked to the living animation that is common to all animals.¹²

Now, it is the case that in the Hebrew Bible, human beings do differ from animals. Again, however, this difference is not framed in terms of human possession of intellectual or theoretical-rational faculties. Rather, what predominantly distinguishes human beings is their ability to judge right from wrong—and hence their status in which they can be held to account for failure to keep God's commandments. Thus, it is specifically "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" that Adam and Eve partake of, and not "the tree of the knowledge of mathematical axioms and eternal propositions of reason." It is in relation to moral responsibility before God that human beings are indeed separated from the rest of 'material nature.' But there is no indication that the human capabilities of intellect or cognition, however notable they may be, represent a *qualitatively* different faculty that would distinguish humans from other embodied creatures.

Thus, with regard to the biblical term used for knowing or knowledge, we read in Isaiah 1:3 that “the ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people does not consider.” Here, the same term, *yada*^c, is used for the ox’s act of knowing and for the human being’s act of knowing or failure to know. As such, knowing, in the biblical context, does not seem to be sharply distinguished from the faculties shared with animals. Another important aspect of knowledge in the biblical context is its strong connection with action. This connection can be brought out clearly by considering the use of ‘knowing’ in the ‘biblical sense,’ as in Genesis 4:1: “And the man knew [*yada*] Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.” Here, the “knowing” refers to the act of sexual intercourse. It is not stated that he first acquired knowledge of his wife and then subsequently engaged in sexual intercourse as an application or externalization of his knowledge. Nor is it stated that he first engaged in sexual intercourse and then subsequently acquired knowledge of his wife as a deduction from his action. Rather, the knowledge is conceptually bound up with the action and neither precedes it nor follows it in priority or in sequence. And in the case of this particular action, the “knowledge” is certainly not separate from physicality or from embodiment! The knowledge is not acquired by or stored in a ‘mind’ that is separate from the ‘body’—rather, it is the whole person, the combination of breath and dust, who gains knowledge.

The connection between knowledge and embodied action in the Hebrew Bible applies equally to knowledge of the divine. One striking instance of this can be seen in God’s criticizing of King Shallum for not following in the righteous ways of his father Josaiah. God asserts of Josaiah: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not—to know me [*ha-lo’ hi’ ha-da’at ’oti*]?” (Jer. 22:16). In other words, the text does not say that Josaiah judged the poor and needy with justice *because of* his knowledge of God. Nor does it state that he gains knowledge of God as a consequence of his righteous action. Rather, it indicates that the very *act* of upholding the rights of the poor ‘is’ itself knowledge of God. Thus, because knowledge of the divine is not conceptually separated from action, it is also not conceptually separated from the body. In this sense, there cannot be any ‘purely theoretical’ knowledge *of* the divine, since in the Bible all knowledge of God is bound up with a person’s active and engaged relation *to* God and *to* creation.

Finally, another core feature of action and embodiment in the Hebrew Bible is the central role played by the *mitzvah*, the commandment. The primary form of knowledge of God is found in faithfully and actively heeding God’s commandments. In this conception of service of and relation to the divine, there is no intellectual or spiritual faculty separated from the body that engages in such service and relation. That is to say, the act of linking oneself to the divine is not achieved through the grasping of rational intelligibles via an incorporeal soul or mind. Rather, the action of

serving and relating to God is instead an act of the whole person, including the body. Moreover, these actions are themselves deeply interwoven with specifically physical and bodily elements. Thus, among the various obligations that are put forth, prominent biblical commandments relate to circumcision of the flesh, to the types of food that one puts into one's mouth, to the obligations to cover the physical bodies of the poor and naked and to alleviate the physical hunger of the hungry. While some forms of service of God, such as prayer, may be more private and inward, there is no indication that they are centered around any separate, noncorporeal faculty. Thus, the various commandments cannot be classed into categories of bodily-and-not-spiritual or spiritual-and-not-bodily; rather, all of the biblical commandments cut across such an imposed conceptual divide. They can therefore be described as *both* 'bodily' *and* 'spiritual,' or, alternatively, as *neither* (separately) 'bodily' *nor* (separately) 'spiritual,' as all of them are performed by living human beings who are themselves dynamic combinations of earthly dust and breath from God.

CLASSICAL RABBINIC TEXTS AS CONTINUING BIBLICAL CONCEPTIONS ON A SELF-CONSCIOUS LEVEL

However, while the Hebrew Bible appears to portray human action and knowledge in a manner that is bound up with and not separate from embodiment, there are limitations in the resources that it can provide to modern attempts to construct theories of embodied cognition. That is, although the Hebrew Bible certainly does not assert a separate self or mind that is removed from physicality, it also does not explicitly deny the possibility of a separate self or mind. That is to say, the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly *theorize* the relation of knowledge, action, and embodiment, and instead presents its ideas implicitly, primarily in the context of narrative, law, prophetic exhortation, and poetry, as opposed to abstract propositional formulations. While the inherent vagueness and evocative-ness of the biblical forms of expression can have multiple communicative benefits, an additional and potentially less desirable consequence is that the biblical texts, despite their seemingly holistic conceptions, also can be and have been interpreted along more dualistic lines that move away from embodied understandings of the human self.

It is in this regard that classical rabbinic texts can be particularly helpful, since they preserve many of the basic biblical orientations while doing so in a more explicit and self-conscious manner. Thus, they can provide greater theoretical resources for how to conceive of embodied cognition in a biblical vein, and can illuminate the conceptual resources that are implicit in the Hebrew Bible itself. In particular, the rabbinic texts develop ways of employing the linguistic pairing of 'body' and 'soul,' while simultaneously avoiding the conceptual dualism that has frequently been associated with

those two terms in other historical streams of thought. Indeed, we might view the rabbinic texts as deliberately taking the language of body/soul dualism that was prevalent in late antiquity and refashioning that same language in order to remove its dualistic conceptuality. That is to say, they take what functions elsewhere as dualistic language and adapt it to embodied biblical conceptuality, rather than merely adapting biblical language to dualistic conceptuality.¹³ As such, the rabbinic texts provide models for modern attempts to reconfigure inherited dualistic language and to reshape it in the context of a nondualistic conceptuality.

Before looking at some key rabbinic passages that address notions of body, soul, action, and knowledge, let us first recall that, while many modern scholars have portrayed the Hebrew Bible as presenting a 'monistic' account of the human person, there are elements in the Hebrew Bible itself that present aspects of duality, while steering clear of metaphysical dualism.¹⁴ In particular, as we have seen, Genesis 2:7 describes the first human being as created through the combination of two distinct components: God first shapes the human being from the dust of the earth, '*afar min ha-'adamah*, but the 'earthling,' *ha-'adam*, is not yet living. It is only when God adds "the breath of life," *nishmat hayyim*, that the man becomes a living being, *nefesh hayah*. Thus, we have the element that comes 'from below,' namely, the earth, and the element that comes 'from above,' the divine breath. Neither of these on its own corresponds to 'the living person,' and hence the living person, the *nefesh*, can be conceived of a duality of earth and breath.¹⁵ But, importantly, once the human being is created, all of his *actions* are described in a unitary manner: we do not hear about certain faculties that are the result of his earthly-dustly dimension and other faculties that are a result of his divine-breathly dimension. Thus, there is a conceptual distinction between the two elements, but no functional or practical distinction.

The rabbinic texts preserve this basic approach, while also adding certain elements not explicit in the biblical text. For instance, the biblical text generally does not talk about the dust/breath duality of composition apart from Genesis 2:7, and, after its account of the first human being, it also does not generally talk about subsequent human beings as being created through a similar insertion of God's breath into dust. By contrast, the rabbinic texts talk specifically of *ha-guf*, the body, which is paired alongside *ha-neshamah*, the soul or breath.¹⁶ Likewise, for the rabbis, each individual human being is composed of a combination of bodily elements with an animating *neshamah* or soul that is placed into the human being *in utero* by God:

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in man [*ba-'adam*]: the Holy One, blessed be He, his father, and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews,

nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye; his mother supplies the semen of the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye; and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him spirit and breath/soul [*ruah u-neshamah*], and brightness of countenance, and the seeing of the eye, and the hearing of the ear, and the speaking of the mouth [*dibbur peh*] and the walking of the feet [*billukh raglaim*], and understanding [*binah*], and discernment [*baskel*]. When his time to depart from the world arrives, the Holy One, blessed be He, takes away His share [*helgo*] and leaves the share [*heleg*] of his father and his mother with them. [Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 31a]

Here, each new human being is not simply a direct derivation of what came before—the person’s parents contribute the bodily elements, sinews, bones, flesh, and skin, but the aspects of animation and ‘livingness’ are given directly by God. Thus, every new human being represents a new and unique act of creation, re-enacting the creation of the first human being. As Daniel Boyarin points out, we can also note a difference from Aristotelian accounts of human development, wherein the father contributes the form, while the mother contributes the matter (Boyarin 2003, 142–43). Here, by contrast, the mother and the father play parallel, nonhierarchical roles and both contribute equally ‘physical’ and ‘fleshly’ elements. At the same time, there is an additional element that comes from a realm ‘beyond the human,’ namely, from God, who transcends the created physical world. There is thus a transcendent element in the functioning of the living human being, a ‘remainder’ that cannot be reduced to identifiable physical or natural causes.¹⁷

At the same time, there is no indication that the soul has any distinctive functions that could be separated from physical embodiment. There is no metaphysical opposition between body and soul, but rather an active functional unity: the soul’s function is to provide animation and dynamic movement to what would otherwise be static and lifeless bodily components. As Alon Goshen-Gottstein puts it, in the rabbinic conception, “[T]he soul is like a battery that operates an electronic gadget. It may be different from and originally external to the gadget, but the difference is not one of essence” (Goshen-Gottstein 1994, 177). Thus, the soul provides dynamic functions that are linked to bodily parts—the static elements of the eye are provided by the parents, but the eye’s active seeing comes from God’s giving of the soul, by completing the circuit, as it were. Moreover, the dynamic functions are not separate from the bodily organs: God, by giving the soul, provides the seeing *of* the eye, the speaking *of* the mouth, the hearing *of* the ear, and the walking *of* the feet. It is not that the soul sees ‘through’ the eyes, or that the soul speaks ‘through’ the mouth, wherein the body would simply be a tool of the soul; as Jonathan Schofer argues, the soul in rabbinic literature need not be understood as a “superior controlling

center” (Schofer 2010, 175).¹⁸ Rather, it is the living eyes that see, and the living mouth that speaks—by virtue of the soul’s animating capacity.¹⁹

Also, note that a wide series of activities are all linked together, without any separation into qualitatively different categories: what we might call sense perception (sight and hearing), as well as verbal and motor activity (speech and walking), as well as cognitive activity (understanding and comprehension), are all grouped together. In contrast to a thinker such as Aristotle, who treats ‘intellect’ as a capacity that is specifically separable from and unmixed with the physical body,²⁰ there is no sense here that the elements of intellectual cognition are any less bound up with the body than are the elements of gross physical motion.²¹ Yet, conversely, none of these features can be reduced to mere bodily elements, as they are all dependent on the soul’s animation: the dynamism of walking is just irreducible to ‘the body alone’ as is the dynamism of thinking and intellectual grasping.²²

A particularly fascinating inclusion in this list is “brightness of countenance.” There is certainly a clear sense in which the dynamic energy and “brightness” of a living person’s face differs from the lifeless face of a dead person, even though there is no detectable ‘physical’ difference between the two. In this context, “brightness of countenance” may not contribute any explicit ‘action,’ but it nevertheless stands out as a living, dynamic presence that points strikingly to the irreducible ‘excess’ contributed by the soul’s activation of the body.

In addition, the ‘subject’ who is described here as “the human being,” *ha-’adam*, is not identified with the soul, nor with the body, but with the two precisely when and insofar as they are dynamically bound up together. When God takes away His share, namely, the soul, is when the human being also disappears from the world. Thus, to separate the body from the soul—whether physically or conceptually—is to dissolve the human being: the “human being” is present only when both components are joined together. In this passage, the body and the soul are each only a *heleg*, a portion, a fraction, of the human being, *’adam*. One portion may come from God, and the remaining portions from one’s parents, but the part that comes from God is not portrayed as the supposed ‘essence’ of the human being. Rather, the human being *per se*—and so likewise the various ‘human functions,’ including perception and cognition—is to be found only in the whole that is formed from the joining of the different portions.

SERVICE OF GOD AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AS BOUND UP WITH EMBODIMENT

Furthermore, it is also the case that the living human being’s relation to God is also bound up with the animated bodily whole, and not with the soul in isolation. The human being is conceptually designated by the dynamic combination of body and soul, and it is this same dynamic combination

that stands in loving relation with God. This is underscored by the fact that in rabbinic literature, the concept of the “image of God” corresponds not to a special faculty of intellect, rationality, or spirit but precisely to the living, physically embodied human being as a whole, as illustrated by the following passage:

“The pious man does good to his own soul/self [*nafsho*]” (Prov. 11:17). This is Hillel the Elder, for when he would take leave of his students, he would start walking and he would walk with them.

His students said to him: Where are you going?

He said to them: To carry out a commandment [*la'asot mitzvah*].

They said to him: And what is this commandment?

He said to them: To wash in the bathhouse.

They said to him: Is this a commandment?!

He said to them: Yes! If it is the case that for statues [*iqonin*] of kings that they place in their theaters and their circuses, one who is appointed over them polishes them and washes them, and they even pay him a salary for doing so, and not only that, but they exalt him among the great ones of the realm—how much more in the case of me, for I was created in the image and likeness [of God], as it is written, “For in the image of God He made the human being” (Gen. 9:6). [Leviticus Rabbah, 34:3]

Here, washing and cleaning one’s ‘external’ flesh is precisely part of caring for one’s ‘self’ (*nefesh*) as the image of God, since the status of “image of God” encompasses both body and soul together. While the biblical text does not explicitly link the body with the notion of the image of God (although such thinking seems quite in keeping with the Bible’s embodied conception), the rabbinic text makes an explicit and self-conscious philosophical point, wherein Hillel deliberately flouts the apparent expectations of his interlocutors. His students are surprised that washing one’s body would count as a commandment, an act of divine service. They may be thinking that the service of God and the enactment of commandments that relate one to God may be more typically exemplified, for instance, by the act of prayer, which could seem less directly linked to the physical body, and might be seen by some primarily as an act of the intellect or of isolated soul. In contrast, Hillel maintains that I relate to God precisely through the skin of my flesh. In making this point, he does not deny that acts such as prayer also constitute relation to God—indeed, given his students’ assumptions, he must previously have emphasized such acts in his teaching, but he is concerned to emphasize that relation to God is always an action of body and soul together, and he does so by highlighting an action that cannot in any way be taken as an act of ‘the soul alone.’

Moreover, by specifically highlighting the living body as the image of God, the text may be seeking to combat other understandings of “the image of God” that were prevalent in late antiquity.²³ For instance, Philo identifies the image of God with the notion of incorporeal mind and rational intellect, and he specifically contrasts this to physical and embodied aspects of the human being (Lee 2010, 111–12; van Kooten 2008, 48–69). Thus, for both Philo and the rabbis, a person’s relation to divine truth takes place via “the image of God.” However, for Philo such a relation is enacted via an intellect that is separate from the body, whereas for the rabbis, the relation is found specifically via the physically embodied self.²⁴ Thus, far from entailing a dualistic conception of mind, the rabbinic duality of body and soul functions specifically to reinforce the embodied nature of knowing, acting, and relating. Indeed, one can even argue that the rabbinic duality places a greater emphasis on living embodiment than would a claim that knowledge arises purely from the body. An emphasis on ‘the body alone’ would simply be a static flip side of ‘the soul alone,’ whereas the rabbinic duality preserves an active conceptual tension that keeps knowledge bound up with the dynamic and temporal nature of physical *life*.

The emphasis on embodied action as the means of knowing and relating, as exemplified by the *mitzvot*, can be pushed even further. Not simply is the physical body not excluded from knowledge of God; rather, in terms of knowing and relating to the transcendent, the body is crucially necessary for human beings. Commenting on Psalm 115, the Talmud expounds:

As to what David said: “The dead do not praise the Lord” (Ps. 115:17), this is what he meant: Let a human being [³*adam*] always engage in Torah and commandments [*mitzvot*] before he dies, for as soon as he dies he is restrained from [the practice of] Torah and commandments, and the Holy One, blessed be He, finds nothing to praise in him. [Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30a]

Here, it is specifically during the time when the human being is physically embodied and alive that she is able to connect to God. In this sense, the body is not at all a prison in which the soul is trapped. Rather, the body is, from God’s perspective, the proper place of the soul, the place where the soul and body in cooperation are able to serve and to know God in a humanly full manner. While some conceptual systems might view the soul as longing to be freed from the hindrance of the body so that it can most fully relate to God, the rabbinic texts present a starkly contrasting view: it is precisely when the soul *is* ‘freed’ from the body that it can no longer fully serve and relate to God in the most fitting manner!

Part of this contrast may be linked to differing views of what ‘divine knowledge’ or ‘true knowledge’ consists of. If ‘true knowledge’ seeks to grasp timeless, eternal, and unchanging intelligibles, then it does indeed make sense that the seeker of such knowledge must strive to distance himself

or herself from the body. The body's inescapably temporal, changing, and finite nature would stand in the way of such forms of knowing. Likewise, physical action, which is even more specifically characterized by movement and dynamic change, would likewise represent a distancing from the divine, which is instead to be engaged through a stance of purely contemplative *theoria*. And, in such a framework, death, as liberation from the body, would properly represent a longed for goal, and embodied life would be seen as something that is ultimately to be overcome. Such accounts of 'true knowledge,' moreover, can be seen as playing a key role in shaping conceptions of disembodied mind down to the present day.

However, the example of the rabbinic texts calls forth the question for us: why should we consider timeless, disembodied knowing as the true relation to the divine in the first place? Instead, such texts put forth an alternative assumption: the true relation to and knowledge of the divine is to be found precisely through embodied action, in the form of *mitzvot*. Conversely, an attempt to 'liberate' knowledge from relation to the body would, in the rabbinic portrayal, result not in true knowledge but rather in a flattened and partial form of knowing.

Moreover, since *mitzvot* involve dynamic relation to God, to other human beings, and to physical elements in the world, from food and sexuality, to the bodies of the poor and the sick, to the mundane elements of pots and pans, then it is precisely in such embodied relations that knowledge of God is preeminently to be found. Indeed, one could even say that the body is not merely included in the means of knowing the divine, but it is also included in the site of divine knowledge: through such action, one comes to know God 'in' the body, and the knowledge of the divine that is gained is likewise situated and located in the body as well as the soul. The emphasis on both elements remains crucial, for while the body remains crucial for knowing, it is specifically the *living* embodied person that can come to know God—neither the dead body, emptied of the soul, nor the disembodied soul, can properly praise the Lord in a truly human sense. Hence, in the classical rabbinic framework, knowledge and cognition remain closely tied both to embodiment and to dynamic enactment.

ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION OF EMBODIMENT

A final element of the rabbinic conception of knowledge, self, and embodiment is to be found through a consideration of its eschatological vision. If God is to be praised specifically by the embodied human being, it could appear as though death would be the tragic but unavoidable end of the story. However, a central and dominant element of classical rabbinic Judaism is its conviction of and insistence upon a resurrection of the dead in the messianic future, wherein the soul will be restored to the body in order for the human being to be judged by God and thus to enter the world to

come in a re-embodied form.²⁵ In this framework, one's current bodily life is not the ultimate state of affairs, since otherwise the self would be lost upon the death of the body in the present era. However, the disembodied state of the soul after death is also not the ultimate state of affairs. Instead, the 'ideal' state of affairs is a restoration of embodiment, thus upholding the notion that the body is indeed the proper place of the soul, and conceptually enabling embodied action to maintain its status as the proper means of knowing and relating to God. If eschatological accounts convey a culture's conceptions of what is 'really real,' then the classical rabbinic account resists the apparent finality of death and of separation of body and soul, and upholds embodied life as the 'true' mode of human existence before God.²⁶ Rather than death representing a liberating overcoming of embodiment, the rabbinic texts portray eschatological re-embodiment and revivication as a liberating overcoming of death.

Moreover, the rabbinic texts display a keen awareness of competing approaches to body and soul, and seek explicitly to counter them and to highlight their problematic nature. Such alternative frameworks, moreover, present not merely conceptual or theoretical risks, but, even more significantly, practical and moral ones. Consider the following Talmudic staging of a dialogue between Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, and Antoninus, a stock figure of a philosophically minded Roman emperor, whom some scholars, somewhat speculatively, have hypothesized may be a representation of Marcus Aurelius:

Antoninus said to Rabbi [Judah ha-Nasi]: "The body [*ba-guf*] and the soul [*ba-neshamah*] can both free themselves from judgment. Thus, the body can plead: The soul has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave [powerless to do anything]. Whilst the soul can say: The body has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird [and commit no sin]."

He replied, "I will tell you a parable. To what may this be compared? To a human king who owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. Now, he appointed two watchmen therein, one lame and the other blind. [One day] the lame man said to the blind, 'I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon your shoulder, that we may procure and eat them.' So the lame bestrode the blind, procured and ate them. Some time after, the owner of the orchard came and inquired of them, 'Where are those beautiful figs?' The lame man replied, 'Have I then feet to walk with?' The blind man replied, 'Have I then eyes to see with?' What did he do? He placed the lame upon the blind and judged them together.

So will the Holy One, blessed be He, bring the soul and replace it [lit. "throw it," *zorqah*] in the body, and judge them as one [*ke-'ehad*], as it is written, 'He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people [*'amo*, but can also be read as *'imo*, "with him"]' (Ps. 50:4). 'He shall call to the heavens from above'—this refers to the soul; and 'to the

earth, that he may judge with him'—this refers to the body." [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91a-b]²⁷

Here, Antoninus puts forth two potential configurations, each of which, notably, treats body and soul as functionally separated from one another. The emperor's two posited arguments here can, moreover, be viewed as representing, in the first instance, a form of spiritualism, in which the it is 'really the soul,' as a disembodied intellect, and not the body, that is the true agent and represents the 'true self.' In the second instance, we can see a form of materialism or physicalism, in which it is the body that is identified with human action, will, and agency, relegating the soul to a mere inessential epiphenomenon. Moreover, because each of two arguments are presented as 'equally convincing,' with no real way of legitimating one of them over the other, the result is that both of them function as two sides of the same coin, with the shared consequence of undermining moral responsibility and accountability. Here, then, a disembodied or dualistic account of the human being is not merely theoretically incorrect but is profoundly morally detrimental.

In contrast, Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi's parable and response emphasizes the moral and functional unity of body and soul. It is not simply the fleshly body that is the source of sin; rather, body and soul both share culpability for transgression of God's commandments. It is precisely through this combination that the human being is able to be morally judged for his or her deeds, and thus, from a different perspective, it is through this conceptual configuration that the rabbinic texts uphold and ground the truth of human ethical responsibility. To be sure, the observed phenomena of human life naturally give rise to a certain type of duality—after all, the living body before death certainly looks and acts differently from the body after death, indicating that the animating role of the soul cannot merely be equated with the body itself. However, this conceptual duality, while legitimate as a means of conceiving of human life, must not be allowed to bleed over into a practical or essentialized form of metaphysical dualism. Rather, while human beings might try to make use of dualistic conceptions in order to avoid moral responsibility, the Talmudic text emphasizes that from God's perspective, the two apparently different components are viewed and judged "as one," as a functional and practical unity.²⁸ Thus, all forms of human agency and action, including knowledge and cognition, remain inextricably bound up with the physicality of the body alongside the animating capacity of the soul, both in this world and in the eschatological future.²⁹

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that the texts analyzed here can serve as a fruitful initial survey of the resources that classical rabbinic literature may provide for

contemporary attempts to reconceptualize embodied cognition in a religious, and particularly a biblically-connected, context. Perhaps, most significantly, these sources show that a linguistic or conceptual duality of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ need not imply a disembodied or metaphysically dualistic conception of self or of cognition. Rather, self and cognition are bound up with the ‘body’ no less (but also no more) than with the ‘soul,’ precisely through the dynamic union of these two elements. Thus, despite their often unsystematic appearance, these texts, with their particular configuration of soul, body, and self, can function, perhaps surprisingly, as very useful conceptual interlocutors for philosophical and theological accounts of embodiment and its relation to thought, worship, and religious enactment. Likewise, because the rabbinic texts are able to incorporate a conception of the soul while simultaneously understanding all human faculties and functions as embodied, they demonstrate that contemporary cognitive theories need not automatically reject the idea of the soul in order to affirm the idea of embodied cognition. Indeed, the nondualistic duality of the rabbinic approach may serve as a fruitful alternative to both physicalism and dualism. As such, while dialogue between Jewish tradition and theories of embodied cognition is only beginning, the further expansion of such dialogue can add distinctive elements that stand alongside engagements from Christian, Buddhist, and other traditions, in our shared attempts to come to grips with the often challenging relation between received theological tradition and modern scientific theories and formulations.

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NOTES

1. For a critique of the persistent undesirable effects on philosophical thought of ancient Greek (and later Cartesian) mind–body dualism, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (2008 [1979]). Rorty’s text is very useful for highlighting the problems that arise from mind–body dualism, though some of the specific solutions that he proposes may themselves be problematic in other ways.

2. I have not discovered any previous studies of connections between rabbinic Judaism and embodied cognition. While a number of studies highlight the general rabbinic emphasis on embodiment, the specific aspect of cognition has not typically been emphasized. One partial exception is Jonathan Boyarin’s statement that nondualism of mind and body, as highlighted in

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), might be quite compatible with certain forms of Jewish conceptuality. However, he mentions this only in passing and does not pursue the suggestion in depth (Boyarin 2008, 17–18).

3. The prevalent assumption that the 'Western' tradition is generally lacking in resources for thinking about embodied cognition may in part reflect a trend that Daniel Boyarin has described as "the occlusion of the Jew and Jewish hermeneutic discourses" from narratives of the history of "Western thought" (Boyarin 1993, 80). Notably, Jonathan Boyarin makes a similar point specifically with reference to the subtitle of Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (Boyarin 2008, 18).

4. For an account of the challenge of reconciling religious notions of 'soul' with contemporary scientific accounts of embodied selves and embodied cognition, see Murphy (2006).

5. Except where otherwise noted, the translations in this essay from biblical and rabbinic texts are my own.

6. For passages that display Philo's anthropological dualism, see Lee (2010, 107–15). For Maimonides, see Leaman (2009, 163–75).

7. For example, I have elsewhere suggested that Hermann Cohen's late religious-philosophical work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1995/1929), puts forth a sophisticated conception of an embodied self that is very much in keeping with biblical and classical rabbinic concepts of *nefesh* or soul (Weiss 2012, 108–09).

8. For the consistent and prevailing emphasis throughout classical rabbinic literature on an 'embodied' conception of the human self, see, for example, Urbach (1979, 224); Goshen-Gottstein (1994, 174); Boyarin (1993, 33–35).

9. Moreover, later rabbinic interpretation specifically emphasizes that embodiment (including 'bodily' functions such as sexuality) was part of the original goodness of creation, and was not simply a consequence of Adam and Eve's subsequent sin—that is to say, the classical rabbinic texts do not hold to a notion of a "fall into embodiment" (cf. Boyarin 1993, 31–33, 45–46, 79–83).

10. For a good overview of "the image of God," comparing contemporary biblical studies with previous Jewish and Christian interpretations of Genesis 1, see Middleton (2005).

11. As Nancy Murphy points out, even if one wants to translate *nefesh* as 'soul,' it is not said that God provides a *soul* that turns man into a living being, but rather that God provides the breath of life that turns man into a living *soul* (2006, 18). Thus, in a certain sense, one *could* identify the self with the 'soul' in the sense of *nefesh*—however, this self/soul/*nefesh* does not stand apart from body but is rather *composed of* the body alongside the breath of life.

12. In classical rabbinic thought, by contrast, the human being's capacity for understanding *is* linked to the soul and is presented as something the human being shares in common with the angels and but not with the animals. However, this development still remains within the framework of an 'embodied' conception of the human self. See the texts discussed by Urbach (1979, 220–21).

13. To be sure, it would be difficult to claim that the prevalent systems of dualistic thought had *no* effect on rabbinic conceptuality. However, the overwhelmingly dominant trend is that of preserving the biblical view of a unified self, which stands in notable contrast to the more apparent adoption of the language of 'body and soul' (see Urbach 1979, 224–27).

14. For critiques of uncomplicatedly 'monistic' scholarly readings of the Hebrew Bible, see Cooper (1989). (I thank Caleb Cohoe for pointing out the relevance of Cooper's book in this regard.) Cooper's own proposed reading of "holistic dualism" (applied to both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) has some parallels to the dynamics that I argue for here with regard to the Hebrew Bible and classical rabbinic literature. However, his retention of the term 'dualism' (even of a "holistic" variety) still seems to buy into the supposedly inescapable choice between metaphysical dualism and metaphysical monism, whereas I argue that the classical rabbinic approach sidesteps the metaphysical binary of 'dualism *versus* monism' as a whole, and should not properly be classed with either of the two.

15. Thus, a statement such as Ephraim Urbach's is misleading: "In the Bible a monistic view prevails. Man is not composed of two elements—body and soul, or flesh and spirit" (Urbach 1979, 214). While it is true that there is no mention of a body/soul duality or a flesh/spirit duality, there *is* an account of a earthly dust/divine breath duality, and this can be viewed as a precursor to the rabbinic perspective.

16. Also, note that classical rabbinic texts often use *neshamah* and *nefesh* interchangeably. See, for instance, Visotzky (2003, 90).

17. Note that the soul is given by God and comes ‘from above’ but is not described as itself possessing divinity or as being ‘part of God.’

18. In this regard, one can contrast the rabbinic conception with the Stoic notion of the soul as *hegemonikon*.

19. On such ‘independence’ of bodily organs in biblical conceptuality, see Levenson (2006, 110–11).

20. On the unmixedness of intellect for Aristotle, see *De Anima* III:4, 429a24–29. For an account that highlights Aristotle’s similarities to Plato in this regard—and particularly in connection with the way that Aristotle was widely and influentially understood in antiquity and the Middle Ages—see Gerson (2005).

21. While in the present passage no specific organs are explicitly linked to the capacities of “understanding and discernment,” the embodied nature of such faculties is brought out more prominently in statements such as, “The kidneys prompt [*yo’atzor*], the heart understands [*mevin*], the tongue shapes [the words], the mouth articulates, the gullet takes in and lets out all kinds of food, the wind pipe produces the voice, the lungs absorb all kinds of liquids, the liver is the seat of anger, the gall lets a drop fall into it and allays it, the milt produces laughter, the large intestine grinds [the food], the maw brings sleep, and the nose awakens” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 61a-b; translation drawn from Epstein 1961, with slight modifications). Here, the kidneys and the heart are linked to cognitive functions of prompting (i.e., advising for decision-making) and understanding, and these organs are listed in an undifferentiated manner alongside organs the more ‘obviously’ bodily functions of digestion and voice articulation. On the rabbinic conception of the involvement of the body in the faculty of thought, see Hirsch (1947, 205–06, 211–12).

22. While the different functions described in the present passage, including the function of intellect, fit well with Goshen-Gottstein’s account of the soul as “battery,” as a general animating force, there is another aspect of the soul for which “battery” may be an insufficient analogy. As Hirsch has pointed out (1947, 156–62), the soul, due to its heavenly origins, may also play a specifically moral role of orienting the human being toward service of God. That is to say, while all human actions still require both body and soul, the soul can be viewed simultaneously as an animating battery and as a magnetic compass needle.

23. For relevant treatments of the rabbinic conception of the image of God, see Goshen-Gottstein (1994) and Lorberbaum (2001; 2004).

24. Note that while I use the term ‘self’ here, as elsewhere in this study, the rabbinic texts do not generally say that ‘the self’ relates to God—rather, their formulation is that the “human being” (*‘adam*) relates to God. The language of ‘self’ can too easily be taken to indicate an independent ‘substance’ that is separated from ‘the body,’ and so my use of the term in this study should be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, there is a sense in which, if the “human being” as a whole is identified with the dynamic union of body and soul, and if the body is constantly undergoing change, then this can mean that in the rabbinic conception, there is no permanent or stable ‘self’ that can be identified. Yet, while not positing a stable ontological self, the rabbinic texts nevertheless treat each individual as capable of being commanded and held responsible for his or her actions, and so there is certainly a *functional* sense of individual ‘selfhood.’ It would be fruitful, in future studies, to explore ways in which this rabbinic phenomenon might be compared to Buddhist notions of ‘no-self,’ which Varela et al. (1991, 21) emphasize can have important connections to embodied cognition.

25. As Jon D. Levenson argues, while the notion of ‘resurrection of the dead’ does not appear in the Hebrew Bible in the explicit manner in which it is found in rabbinic texts, the biblical texts nevertheless contain many elements that serve as closely related precursors to the subsequent rabbinic conceptions. As such, the rabbinic conception of resurrection need not be seen as a break from biblical conceptuality, and can, in fact, be seen as reinforcing the biblical conception of God as the master of life and death, whose promise of future restoration and redemption will overturn the structures of death and oppression and establish a reign of justice and life (Levenson 2006, ix–xiii).

26. Again, it should be emphasized that the account given here is specifically of classical rabbinic literature, and that other forms of ‘Jewish conceptuality’ in the Second Temple period, as well as later forms of kabbalistic and philosophical Jewish thought in the medieval period,

assigned great 'independent value' to the soul in itself, as distinguished from the body, in accord with a more neo-Platonic orientation. This orientation also tended to place comparatively greater emphasis on immortality of the soul, and comparatively less emphasis on resurrection of the dead. As Kimelman (2006, 952) puts it, "The link from Philo to Kabbalah forms a Jewish neo-Platonic continuum that circumvents rabbinic Judaism." With regard to similar Maimonidean prioritizing of immortality of the soul over resurrection of the dead, see Levenson 2006, 17–20.

27. Translation drawn from Epstein 1961, with slight modifications.

28. There are some rabbinic passages (e.g., Leviticus Rabbah 4:5) that present the soul, due to its nobler heavenly origins, as bearing greater responsibility for sin—that is, the soul is more blameworthy because, as it were, it should have known better. However, as Visotsky argues (2003, 93–96), placing greater blame on the soul may, in fact, serve primarily as a way of *opposing* a view that would place blame for sin on the 'carnality' of the body. Thus, even in such passages, identification of the human self with the dynamic union of body and soul is still affirmed and denigration of or dissociation from the body is still resisted.

29. Levenson (2006, 18) notes that passages such as Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 17a, which portray the world to come ('*olam ha-ba*') as one in which "there is neither eating nor drinking," nevertheless still describe the righteous as sitting "with crowns on their heads." According to Levenson, such descriptions of "crowns" and "heads" "imply some bodily reality even in the World-to-Come."

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