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## HOW IS DIRT POSSIBLE?

### ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF DIRT, CLEANLINESS AND REFUSE

To ask *how is dirt possible* is to ask: what are the conditions of human thought and life that make it meaningful to use the concept of dirt at all? When attempting to answer this question, related concepts like those of refuse, soiling and cleaning will also have to be addressed. What is involved in applying these and similar descriptors to material objects, and what does the fact of their application imply about our ordinary relations with our physical surroundings? As Hans Peter Hahn pointed out<sup>1</sup>, it has to do with what it means to *assign value* to objects, or perhaps, as I would prefer to put it, with what it means to *recognise* the values that objects already have.

The question, ‘how is dirt possible?’, is of course an allusion to Immanuel Kant who framed some of his central enquiries in this form. He asked, among other things, how synthetic truths were a priori possible, how mathematics and pure natural science were possible, and how the categorical imperative was possible.<sup>i</sup> These questions assume that a certain phenomenon or practice, such as mathematics, clearly exists. There is, however, something about our other philosophical or intellectual commitments that implies that it somehow ought not to be possible. Given that this thing, which so to speak should not exist, does in fact exist, how should we revise our intellectual commitments?

It seems to me that dirt is in a similar kind of predicament. Given some of our present intellectual commitments – typical, especially, of academic culture – some of which go quite deep in us, it may seem that dirt does not fit in. Existing debates on dirt, soiling and impurity are, to a great extent, attempts to come to grips with a perceived incoherence between the phenomenon and our commitments. The crucial idea was expressed concisely by Justus von Liebig more than a hundred years ago: ‘Für die Chemie gibt es keinen Dreck’ (for chemistry, no turd exists). Our descriptions of things as dirty, soiled, clean and the like imply *a dimension of meaning or value* which seems incompatible with science as we today understand it.

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<sup>1</sup> In his opening remarks for the conference for which this essay was written

*Scientific realism, culturalism and Aristotelianism: a first approximation*

The structure of my argument is as follows. In theoretical analyses of pollution we find three positions, described here for short as scientific realism, culturalism and – less prominent today – a kind of Aristotelianism. These positions represent different ways of making intellectual sense of the phenomenon of dirt, or of claiming that the phenomena themselves are illusory.

Historically, scientific realism emerged when natural sciences were enthroned as the preferred model for rational inquiry of reality. The purported ideal of this general model is to present descriptions of reality independent from a subjective point of view. To quote Thomas Nagel, this perspective attempts to present ‘a view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1986). For realism, objective reality exists, but our subjective ability to establish contact with reality in everyday life is exposed to skeptical challenges. Some key aspects of reality are *inaccessible* to the untrained mind and liable to be misconstrued by it. Therefore, theoretical natural science is presented as the best approximation to a true and completely subject-less account of reality. In such accounts, dirt tends to disintegrate, sucked up into the general category of physical or chemical substance.

Culturalism, at least in the form discussed here, comes across as a predictable expansion of approaches whose real centre lies in natural science. Culturalism mops up the aspects of our experience that still seem to require the explicit inclusion of the constructing activity of the subject. Material reality as such is handed over to science while its subjective aspects are presented as the business of psychology and cultural anthropology. In culturalism, dirt becomes, in the words of Mary Douglas, a result of ‘the differentiating activity of the mind’ (Douglas 1970: 190). It is viewed as something that the mind imposes on an essentially neutral reality. Thus, both scientific realism and culturalism are reductionist about dirt. The idea is that our understanding of dirt as an ordinary part of the material environment is based on misleading judgements on what kind of entity it is.

Aristotelianism, in the loose sense described (and ultimately recommended) here, is an attempt to side-step the dichotomy between realist and culturalist points of view. In Aristotelianism, dirt can be described in terms of the distinction between substance – consisting of matter and form – and accident.

What is involved in the choice between these three general approaches? As I understand the choice, it is not simply a matter of choosing between competing ontologies. The fundamental choice is between different ways of doing philosophy – between *revisionary* and *descriptive* metaphysics (Strawson 1959: 9). Descriptive metaphysics aims to analyze the conditions and presuppositions of knowledge and understanding as they appear in various contexts of enquiry. Revisionary metaphysics, in contrast, is not content with conceptual analysis but aims to uncover the true ontological structures of reality as such. In the anglophone philosophical discourse of today, the role of metaphysics is almost universally perceived as revisionary both by its defenders and its detractors (D’Oro 2012).

Both realism and culturalism are attempts to determine whether dirt really exists, and in that case, what it objectively *is*. Both approaches are open to the possibility that our everyday understanding of material reality ultimately assumes entities and qualities that are not really there. In that sense, both realism and culturalism are species of revisionary metaphysics; attempts to revise our concepts in the light of a more informed view of the objective structures of reality. It is also possible to understand Aristotelianism in this way. I suggest, however, that Aristotelianism is better understood as an attempt to articulate our everyday engagement with material reality. It is an articulation of the engagement that *now*, as things stand, *is* characteristic of our thinking and acting in a dirty and clean environment. Thus the crucial question is not, ‘do the words “dirty” and “clean” correspond with real qualities of the world?’ but rather: *given that* this is how we relate to the material environment, what are we able to learn about the the implicit assumptions made of this environment that guide our thinking and acting?

In sum, the question of choosing between the three approaches is not one of picking an ontology that corresponds with the real ontology of the world. Realist, culturalist and Aristotelian perspectives are all completely ‘true’ in the sense that it is possible to shoehorn one’s descriptions into these schemes. For instance, Aristotle believed that his matter versus form distinction was applicable to any physical object. In that sense, it is unsurprising that we can also apply it in the present case if we want to. That is not in question. The question in the present context is rather: what aspects of our lived experience are highlighted or obscured by our choices of perspective?

Aristotelianism is not the only possible articulation of our life world in a way that side-steps the ‘subjective vs. objective’ dichotomy.<sup>ii</sup> Such a striving is present, for instance, in the

constructivism put forward by Bruno Latour. Read as a species of revisionary metaphysics, Latour appears to put forward the outrageous thesis that objective reality does not exist. However, he can be read as simply presenting the descriptive point that the idea of objective reality is a thinking tool (for instance, in science). As such, its functions are to be articulated in exactly the same way as other critical concepts. It is not an ontological master concept.

Work remains to be done in order to clarify the relations between different alternatives to realism and culturalism. This task will not be attempted here. For now it is enough to say that, in addition to science, there are other ways to approach material reality. It is legitimate to look at material things also from what one might call the perspective of human existence.

### *The idea of dirt as projection*

‘Dirt’ is not a concept of natural science. To put it bluntly, dirt doesn’t exist in physics or chemistry books. So does dirt exist at all in reality? Scientific realism naturally inclines one to think that the concept of dirt is mind-dependent and hence cannot mirror any real quality of things. Material objects in themselves are neither clean nor dirty, but there are human beings who *project* their emotions and normative expectations on those objects. That is the starting point of culturalism.

This way of conceptualising our relation with material reality is evident, for instance, in Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. In that book, Freud attempts to account for our perception of ‘the uncanny’ (*das Unheimliche*). Our perception of the uncanny, he says, is due to what he calls *the outward projection of inner perceptions*. He describes it as a process where ‘inner perceptions of ideational and emotional processes are projected outwardly, like sense perceptions, and are used to shape the outer world, whereas they ought to remain in the *inner* world’ (Freud [1913] 1946: 85-86). When we ascribe the property of uncanniness to an object, we are in the grip of a kind of magical thinking. We incorrectly expect our psychological states to somehow directly modify the environment. It is a subjective colouring of an originally colourless world.

*Totem and Taboo* was written in 1913. More recently, Julia Kristeva in her book *The Powers of Horror*, quotes this passage from Freud with approval (1982: 60). She applies it to the human perception of dirt and pollution. At the centre of Kristeva’s discussion of dirt lies the concepts

of ‘abjection’ and disgust. Dirt is defined by our reactions of rejection and disgust, the ultimate aim of which, she believes, is to safeguard the integrity of the subject as a separate individual and a separate body.

Let me just note in passing that there are certain risks about placing too much emphasis on the role of disgust – or of any emotion – in our perception of dirt. ‘Dirty’ and ‘disgusting’ certainly do not mean the same thing. It is safe to say that, for most people, disgust is not a universal or even dominant reaction to dirty objects.

It would be odd to characterize Kristeva as an adherent of scientific realism even though that description might be applicable to Freud. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Kristeva takes up this very same idea of dirt as an expression of an emotional state, a state which we project upon an *essentially neutral* world. This is rather usual in the theoretical debate.

#### *‘Shoes in themselves’*

To put it briefly, the idea of dirt as a human emotional projection is this: if dirt is not physical, then it must be a projection. The most famous example of this approach comes from Mary Douglas, originally from 1966. In a passage that has become a *locus classicus* in the research, she contrasts ‘shoes on the floor’ with ‘shoes on a dining table’:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing-room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing where over-clothing should be; and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. ([1966] 1970: 48).

Douglas draws the conclusion that dirt, like beauty, is ‘in the eye of the beholder’. She defines dirt as ‘matter out of place’; and what *is* out of place in a given case is determined by a *symbolic world order* characteristic of the culture in question. Anything that seems to challenge the physical and moral order of the world or deviates from it, will risk being perceived as impure and dangerous. Douglas has been (and still is) enormously influential upon research related to pollution taboos and cleanliness in culture. In theoretical debate, taking a cue from Douglas,

descriptions like ‘dirty’ and ‘soiled’ are typically associated with social categories like ‘the forbidden’ rather than with material qualities like ‘wear and tear’, ‘wet’, ‘rusty’ or ‘damaged’.

Is that a good approach? A lot could be said about the example of ‘shoes on a table’. First of all: when Douglas states that ‘it is dirty’ to place shoes on the table, we are easily convinced because, on hearing the example, we naturally think of *dirty* shoes on a table, not of clean shoes straight out of the box. *Clean* shoes on a table may certainly (sometimes) count as ‘matter out of place’ and hence as messy or untidy, but we would not typically see them as dirty – and certainly not treat them as *dirt* even if they satisfied the definition of ‘matter out of place’.

On the other hand, something of central importance is certainly brought out by Douglas in the quoted passage. When we think of dirt we must also think of human involvement – or at least, of some kind of conscious animate involvement (considering the fact that many animals clean themselves and their nests). In the words of Edwyn Bevan, ‘in an uninhabited world moist clay would be no more dirty than hard rock; it is the possibility of clay adhering to a foot which makes it mire’ (quoted in Ashenburg 2007: 279). And we must think of a culture, in this case a culture where shoes are used to protect one’s feet when walking. Our understanding of what counts as soiling on a shoe, and our understanding of how shoes are ruined, are connected with our understanding of the characteristic situations in which shoes are used.

However, the contrast which Douglas makes between shoes ‘in themselves’ and shoes ‘on the dining table’ may be misleading. Shoes in themselves, she says, are not dirty. But to this one could reply: if there indeed is such a thing as a ‘shoe in itself’, then this already implies the human practice of walking. An object outside of those practices is not a shoe. We will then not be speaking of a shoe but of an undefined material object of rubber and leather. And a culture where shoes are used for walking inevitably involves practices of caring for one’s shoes, protecting them against damage and soiling, as well as tending to their repair and cleaning. All of which implies a richer and more context-bound conception of material things than is allowed by any clear-cut dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. The rest of this essay is meant to outline what this richer conception of material things might amount to.

### *Substance and accident*

Objects around us bear the stamp of human needs and values. Consider the fact that almost everything in our everyday physical environment, as it now exists, is the result of conscious

modifying efforts. That is true, more or less, for any element of a normal indoors milieu. This fact also means that we can easily imagine different kinds of disturbances, ways in which artefacts around us might deviate from their proper conditions. Any adequate description of a man-made environment is likely to involve the kind of meaningful perspective where the contrast between the ideal case and deviations naturally comes in. Soiling is one such deviation.

When, during the early Modern Age, Galilean and Newtonian physics replaced the earlier Aristotelian conception, one central change was that differences between *kinds* of material things were no longer respected. There is no difference of principle, in Galileo's thinking, between living and lifeless objects, nor between natural objects and artefacts. For Aristotle, in contrast, different concepts of causation were appropriate for accounting for different types of object. Ultimately, Galileo's physics proved to be more conducive to scientific development, but Aristotle's view has, in the present context, the advantage of being more closely modelled on everyday understanding.

For a more in-depth analysis of the concepts of dirt and soiling, it will be helpful to hark back to the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident. For Aristotle, a substance is any self-sustained thing such as a stone, a cat, a teacup or a human being. (Thus, the Cartesian definition of material substance as simply extended in an otherwise unspecified matter is foreign to the Aristotelian conception of substance.) Furthermore, an accident is a quality not essential to the identity of the substance. For instance, the colour of a teacup is an accident. The teacup, as a substance, can exist without any (specific) colour. On the other hand, a colour cannot exist without an underlying substance. The colour of a human being is also an accident, whereas her essentially human qualities, such as rationality and two-legged body structure, make up the human form that constitutes her as the specific substance she is.

The original distinction of substance and accident highlights the difference between qualities that essentially belong to an object and those which are somehow added onto it. The identity, essence or substance of the object may be summed up in the description of its 'normal state', which here means its rightful, normatively correct state. Accidents like dirt, damage, wear and tear are secondary. They do not change the essence of the underlying substance.

Philosopher Thomas Leddy ([1995] 2012) makes use of precisely this contrast between substance and accident in his paper on what he calls 'everyday surface aesthetic qualities'. He

describes 'dirty' as 'a *surface* quality'. By this he does not just mean that dirt collects on the surfaces of objects. For instance, a liquid may be thoroughly dirty. Similarly, in the case of greasy hair, you cannot typically point to dirt on a delimited part of its surface; it is the hair's general condition that counts. Nevertheless these judgements involve the general act of distinguishing between a given substance as such and whatever is added to it. Here we are implying a relation between two unequal factors: a master object – a shoe, for instance – and an additive – clay, for example. For Leddy, 'dirty' is a surface quality insofar as it can be kept *analytically distinct* from the fundamental 'underlying form or substance' of the master object. To clean an object or tidy up a space is to reveal the underlying essential form which has been clouded by unessential additions.

Thus the background assumption in our judgements about soiling must be that the master object is in principle *possible* to clean, that it in some sense *needs to* be cleaned and is *worth* cleaning (Leddy 1995: 260). Perhaps this is the reason why bits of toilet paper are not typically described as dirty but simply as 'used'. We do not think there is an underlying substance worth cleaning; cleaning would in any case hardly be practically possible. Used toilet paper is called dirty mainly when there is a danger that it may soil *other* objects. The normative position outlined here implies a judgement concerning the relative values of the (valuable) master object and the (worthless) additive. On the other hand, it does not always require a fixed set of priorities. Consider another example: food falling on a carpet. If food falls down it may ruin the carpet, but at other times we say, conversely, that food is ruined when it falls on the carpet.

These descriptions imply a hierarchical relation between the master object and the additive, between substance and accident. The master object is treated as valuable or interesting in its own right while the additive is reduced to its role as a disturbing element. In a sense, dirt in this scheme is not a substance at all, but a kind of disturbance that affects an existing substance. If you isolate a sample of dirt and analyse it on its own, it becomes something else: a chemical substance in its own right. In this sense, being 'dirty' or 'soiled' is like being 'wet'. 'Wetness' occurs when an object makes contact with water. Water certainly exists as a substance, but it becomes 'wetness' only in contact with a master object. One does not say water is wet except in connection with the idea of something or someone making contact with water.

Considerations of this kind distinguish dirt from certain other unwanted elements such as trash, refuse, rubbish, garbage and faeces. Unlike dirt, these elements are substances in their own



right. They are discarded, not because they make contact with some other object and ruin it, but because of what *they* are. A ‘trashy’ object *is* trash or it is *like* trash, but a dirty object is not itself dirt. On the contrary, the implication is that the dirty object needs cleaning precisely because it is something *different* from dirt. This is, incidentally, a distinction not honoured in a number of influential theoretical accounts of the concepts of dirt and impurity (see Bataille 1970; Douglas 1970; Kristeva 1982; Nussbaum 1999). For instance, Julia Kristeva writes of the dead human body: ‘[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection’ (Kristeva 1982: 4). Her description contrasts starkly with traditional practices of washing the dead. The body is washed, indicating precisely that a human corpse is valuable. It *may* be cleaned and it is *worth* cleaning.

### *Caring for objects*

The upshot of the Aristotelian argument, as presented so far, is this: the key to our conception of dirt consists in our ability to recognise the ‘everyday’ *identities* of given objects. This recognition includes our ability to understand differences between what belongs to the object and what should count as an alien, accidental or disturbing feature added to it. This is, in a sense, a normative conception of dirt because it involves an understanding of what it is for the object to be in the *right* way and in the *wrong* way. We can say: to know a kind of object is, among other things, to understand what would count as an unacceptable kind of soiling of it. In this respect, the concept of soiling is analogous with, for instance, the concept of damage. To understand what an object is, is to understand what should count as damaging the object and how one should protect it against damage.

In some cases, an object is called dirty not out of concern for the object itself, but because of the need to protect other objects. This is typically the case with human hands. When you ask me, “Are your hands clean?”, what is usually of interest is not the state of my hands as such, but that I should adequately handle an object you care about. The right answer to your question will be dependent of the character of the object in question. My answer is an expression of my idea of what it means to handle that specific object with care.<sup>iii</sup>

It seems to me that disagreements about what constitutes soiling in a given case may be quite often traced to differences about the nature of the master object. The interesting case of the conservation of books is relayed by Anna Magdalena Midtgaard (2006) whilst working at the Rare Books section of the Copenhagen Royal Library. Major libraries today have custom made

vacuum cleaners for books, and there are also techniques for washing and ironing book pages. Some librarians find it important to remove stains and dust from old volumes, thinking of the *new* volume as the ideal. Others would take a more conservational approach. Grains of pollen and sand may be seen as belonging to the volume's history. They sometimes contain useful information about the volume's place of origin and the hands through which it has passed up to its present location. This is in many ways similar to a typical situation in archaeology, as highlighted by Ulrich Veit (this volume). At the excavation, the archaeologist faces questions about what to clear away and what to keep as part of the archaeological findings. The variety of existing attitudes among librarians not only reflects differences in taste, but also ideas about the identity of the item itself. A stain on a book may either be seen as a blemish or as patina: either as something external to the volume or as a natural feature of it. Technically speaking, patina is impossible to distinguish from wear and dirt, but the description of it as 'patina' implies that it would be barbaric to remove it. The old manuscript volume should convey the message, "I am 500 years old"; but it must not necessarily cry out, "I was *new* 500 years ago".

The challenges of maintaining a book collection highlight one more aspect of our understanding of the concept of soiling: the idea of a responsible attitude to one's environment. This is the idea that not only *we* make requirements on our environment but, conversely, that the objects around us make requirements on us. This occurs by virtue of their identities as the objects they are. To understand what kind of object an old manuscript volume is involves understanding what kind of proper care and handling it requires. In this way, the world unfolds itself to us as a set of possibilities and requirements. The volume requires being handled with caution; my shoes require cleaning; and these requirements exist independently of us as individuals (Sartre 1962: 39).

## **Conclusion**

Our everyday concepts of dirt and soiling are meaningful because they belong to our ongoing interaction with a humanly shaped environment. Through this interaction, material elements reveal themselves not only in the form of neutral physical entities but as things with distinct identities. The identities of everyday objects are made manifest through the various ways in which things can go wrong with them.

In moral philosophy, living beings are sometimes described as entities that ‘have a *welfare*’. Living beings have needs that call for attention; they can be treated ill or well. The fact that living beings have a welfare is perhaps seen most clearly when they suffer. We can, for instance, immediately tell when a potted plant has been neglected. The plant must be watered, not because someone wants it that way but because, as a living thing, the plant has a welfare. One way to sum up the argument in the present essay is to say that so-called ‘lifeless’ objects also may have a welfare. Things can go well or badly for them, and they require attention from us. It is thus plausible to say that human thinking, in addition to specifying the categories of living beings and ‘mere’ objects (as in physics), also counts on a third category: that of objects with a purpose built into their identities. This creates the framework for a language and a life in which objects can be described as damaged and mended, disheveled and tidy, dirty and clean.

One will note that this analysis can be generalized beyond just the question of soiling. The general intellectual consensus in the global West has been that the world ‘in itself’ is mute and empty of meaning – its magic is gone, it is ‘disenchanted’, as Max Weber famously put it. However, the disenchantment thesis does not correspond to our experience as human individuals. We are born into a world where objects always already have purposes, waiting for us independently of any ideas that we might personally have about them.

In the everyday experience of an individual ordinary objects are purposeful as a matter of course. Our everyday perception of the material environment contains an Aristotelian element: that of a distinction between substance and accident. Without contradicting the previous point, it also contains elements of Platonic ideas. Our experience of the world is shaped by ideas of perfection and of falling short of that perfection. Our experience is internally structured by a notion of value or of the Good — not in opposition to facts but itself a condition of the meaningful perception of facts.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Kant’s answer in all these cases was, roughly, that they involved synthetic a priori truths. I would say, similarly, that the possibility of dirt-related conceptions involves the synthetic a priori.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, Bruno Latour and Helmuth Plessner explicitly strive to overcome similar dichotomies. This point was raised by an anonymous reader of this chapter. See Latour 2013, Plessner 1975.

<sup>iii</sup> I was once asked what is the dirtiest object in the world. This is, of course, an impossible question, but since a child was asking, I felt obliged to come up with an answer. I said, “the human hand”, because it is the object that most frequently needs washing.

<sup>iv</sup> Thus, according to Nora Hämäläinen (2014), our understanding of facts includes or points towards a hierarchy of value; a ‘dynamic principle of our lived, everyday experience’ (p. 217), which ‘is not of our own making, and which places demands on us’ (p. 215).