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Reflections on the Dirty and the Clean

Lars Hertzberg

Olli Lagerspetz's book *A Philosophy of Dirt* (2018) is a pioneering effort to create an overview of the way dirt – the quality of being dirty – enters our thought and language.

More widely, it could be said that the book discusses an aspect of the way human life is vulnerable to the contingencies of our environment, the material world: not only objects being dirty or soiled, but also breaking, malfunctioning, being worn out, disfigured or lost.

This dimension of Lagerspetz's work is brought out in the subtitle of the Swedish edition of the book (2006): *En bok om världen, vårt hem* – "A book about the world, our home." Dirtiness, in this book, constitutes the central form of such contingency. Dirtiness, roughly speaking, is that undesirable condition of objects or people, the recognition of which is expressed as a need to wash or clean them.

Reading the book – originally written in Swedish and later published in an English edition abbreviated, amended and translated by the author[1] – is an intellectual pleasure, its topic notwithstanding.[2] While Lagerspetz pays attention to varying historical and cultural perspectives on dirtiness and cleanliness, the main emphasis is on our own, present-day thinking about these properties. The book is mainly essayistic in form, but it also contains rigorous

1 Translations have also appeared in Estonian, Finnish, German and Mandarin. A Turkish translation is planned.

2 A problem about translating the Swedish word "smuts" into English is that the Swedish noun primarily refers to whatever has actually soiled an object or a person – where there is "smuts" there is a problem – whereas the English noun "dirt" may also refer to some substance which may potentially soil an object, but will actually become "smuts" only when it does.

argument: the author presents an analysis of the meaning of dirtiness, and argues against some of the confused, distorted or reductive ways in which we are inclined to interpret our own thinking about dirt.

Lagerspetz introduces his conception of dirtiness as follows:

> The logically primary notion in this usage [in which 'dirty' is contrasted with 'clean'] is not dirt as a *substance* but the underlying object's *quality* of being dirty or soiled. It is a quality that appears when two elements combine: an unwanted substance makes contact with some item perceived as standing in need of protection. The additive collects on the original item, sticks to it or – as with liquids – blends into it. Dirt in this general sense certainly consists of matter, but it is 'dirt' because of its relation to the master object [i.e. object said to be dirty]. (2018, 46)

An object is dirty because of the presence of an unwanted (alien or foreign) substance. Paradigmatically, the things that may be dirty are what Lagerspetz calls "ordinary objects" – or better: to consider something dirty is to regard it under the aspect of an ordinary object. The concept of an ordinary object stands in contrast to that of a physical object, that is, an object thought of under the aspect of physical investigation. To the physicist or the chemist their objects of research are not dirty as such, at least not in the sense of needing to be cleaned. Natural science does not provide an account of what it means to be dirty or clean, even though some particular case of dirt may be subjected, say, to chemical analysis.

Most ordinary objects are artefacts. In thinking of something as an ordinary object we think of it in terms of its significance in the context of human practices; as I would like to put it, it is an object that *is supposed to be* some way or the other. A knife is supposed, among other things, to be sharp, a graduation dress is supposed to be pretty, a musical instrument is supposed to have a clear and beautiful sound. And in general ordinary objects are supposed to be clean. For an object to be dirty, then, is for it to fall short of what it is supposed to be like in a certain respect – just like its being broken, or worn-out, or discoloured, or decayed. Lagerspetz expresses this

point by saying that dirt-related concepts are defined teleologically – in relation to the *telos* (in Aristotle's sense) of the object in question. Not only ordinary objects but also living organisms may fall short of their *telos*: a dog may lack a leg, the leaves of a tree may be discoloured by a fungus, etc. Physical objects, on the other hand, do not have a *telos*.

Apart from ordinary objects, human beings (and to some extent other living beings) are among the things that may become dirty and be in need of being cleaned, or in need of cleaning themselves.

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For Lagerspetz, the discussion of dirt provides an opportunity to take a closer look at some of the dichotomies that are often unquestioningly adopted in much contemporary analytic philosophy. He writes:

> This kind of study is particularly instructive for one specific reason. Philosophy works with conventionally established dichotomies, such as the mental *versus* the material, factual vs normative, objective vs subjective. The concept of dirt seems to be one that falls between every philosophical stool [sic] imaginable. For instance, descriptions of dirt and how it attaches to objects are quite obviously descriptions of material reality. And yet 'dirt' is not a concept of physics even though physics is supposed to be the science of material reality. Let me simply suggest at this point that we stop trying to force round blocks into square openings. (2018, 15)

Later on he enlarges on this theme:

> Summing up, we get two conclusions. Firstly, dirt exists because certain attitudes and patterns of behaviour exist. Secondly, those attitudes and patterns of behaviour exist because dirt exists. My argument was that neither side of the coin should be explained away, for describing a world as dirty and clean and, on the other hand, describing *life* in a dirty and clean world, amount to the same thing […] But perhaps the reader is still under the impression that there is a

> question unanswered: do objects objectively have teleologies and 'thingness', or is this simply something that human beings read into objects? At this point I must simply hope that the question no longer appears relevant to anyone who has followed my reasoning. For the central aim was precisely to dissolve the question in this general form. As perceiving subjects, our perception and judgement depend on the one hand on subjective aspects (such as human anatomy, our culture and our historically specific individuality) and, on the other hand, on objective aspects having to do with the character of the objects that we encounter in perception. However, what this general distinction amounts to in specific situations is not at all self-evident. How do we distinguish in a concrete case between what belongs to the object as such and what is an addition by us? At this juncture, it is no use to take up positions in an already existing war of attrition between realists and antirealists, a conflict that has produced much heat and confusion in the philosophy of science. (2018, 177–78)

Along these lines, I would suggest that the conventional debates centring around the question of what has independent reality, which judgments are objectively true, which judgments are factual and which are evaluative, etc., rest on a failure to consider language in its actual contexts of use – in fact, on two different levels: on the one hand, to consider the context of a speaker's uttering of a judgment, and on the other hand, to consider the purpose for which someone means to apply one of these labels ("independently real", "objective, "factual", or their opposite) to that judgment.

Another important feature of Lagerspetz's presentation is his emphasis on the idea that our thinking about dirt is not, across the board, to be reduced to a matter of utility, thus resisting the attraction of another line of thought which can be considered characteristic of contemporary culture. We tend to be drawn to the idea that when people hold things to be important in their lives, they do so because those things are taken to be instrumental to one aspect or another of their mental or material well-being or to the maximal fulfilment of their preferences. To this way of thinking, considerations of dirtiness and cleanliness might be thought to have a place within a conceptual hierarchy. An ordinary object has a role in some

human practice in which it is used for certain purposes. Those purposes – its *telos* – determine how it should be constructed and what shape it should be in. For an object to be dirty means that the purpose for which it is to be used will be defeated, or at any rate hampered. On this conception, what counts as being dirty and in need of cleaning are matters that rest on purely instrumental considerations. Where no such foundation can be found, our judgments are thought to be irrational. Lagerspetz claims to find this view expressed, for instance, in Martha Nussbaum's article "'Secret Sewers of Vice'" (1999). He sums up her argument as follows:

> What currently elicits human disgust is largely determined by symbolic associations; but this is a kind of distortion, for the proper objects of disgust are merely the substances likely to be harmful to us. And it is a task for educators and reformers to make people see this. (2018, 75–6)

Now in the first place, Lagerspetz does not take it to be the business of philosophy to pass judgment on the rationality or lack of rationality of human practices. Rather, his aim is to make the reader aware of the rich variety of practices in which dirt and the need for cleaning have a role, and to do so in the face of our inclination to force them into preconceived categories. Second, he argues that in a great many cases, issues of utility do *not* have a decisive role (though in some cases they do have a role) in shaping the cleanliness requirements we apply.

Let us consider a couple of examples (of my choosing, but I believe in line with Lagerspetz's argument). First, consider an object in the case of which cleanliness requirements have a utilitarian aspect: a pair of binoculars. Binoculars are an instrument that was probably initially developed to assist in navigation, but which has also found a use in astronomy, warfare, among theatre-goers, bird-watchers and tourists. What these contexts of use have in common is that the binoculars provide a closer view of things that, for one reason or another, we are reduced to observing at a distance. Here it is obvious what the cleanliness requirements for a pair of bin-

oculars should be: the lenses should be in a state which permits optimal conditions for observation, hence they should be free of dust or any other substances preventing an unobstructed view. (We might call these primary cleanliness requirements; the body of the binoculars should also, preferably, be clean even if this does not have any bearing on vision.)

Now, for a different example, consider the use of national flags. A flag should be highly recognizable and evocative, with clear colours and distinct shapes. A flag (or a flag icon) may have an instrumental function, as when used to mark language choices on a website or in guiding people to the right passport queue, etc. But primarily it is flown as a symbol of national pride, say, on specific occasions or on special days, on certain buildings or ships, or when carried at the head of a procession or march. If a flag were seen to be stained or soiled, this would commonly be regarded as a disgrace (except, perhaps, if the flag were thought to be soiled in battle or stained with the blood of a fallen soldier). In fact, the flag of a hateful regime (as in the case of Belarus) or of an enemy in war (such as Russia during the war against Ukraine) will sometimes be trampled underfoot as an expression of contempt or hatred. Here there is no independently given *telos,* the fulfilment of which is dependent on the flag being clean. Whether the flag fulfils its purpose is not a matter to be tested. Rather, the cleanliness requirement for a flag is fulfilled when those for whom the flag is important judge it to be in the condition that is owed to that for which the flag stands.

In this case, it might be said, the cleanliness requirement is not subservient to some independent purpose which the flag is meant to fulfil, but rather belongs to what constitutes fulfilling that purpose. The way we talk, say, of people or people's clothes or their homes or buildings, streets, cars, etc., being clean or dirty might be considered along similar lines. In these connections instrumental concerns may have a larger or smaller part to play, but on the whole the cleanliness requirement is not reducible to instrumental concerns. What a philosophical account of cleanliness and dirt can do in this connection is not to find a justification for the requirement,

but rather to provide a description of the practice within which the requirement is applied.

As Lagerspetz puts it:

> Consider why we believe cleanliness to be important, and why we engage in specific cleaning operations […] The most immediate explanation might simply be: my white shirt needs to be washed because the collar is not clean. This would be a valid piece of information if you were just asking me why *this particular* piece of clothing needs washing, but it would not explain why clean shirts are *generally* preferred. Sometimes there is a special reason why I want a clean crisp shirt, for instance because I hope to make a good impression at a job interview. But this of course gives rise to almost the same question once again: why do *interviewers* prefer candidates with clean shirts? Why are clean shirts generally taken to be preferable to soiled ones? Here I feel the impulse to cut the conversation short and say: clean shirts just are superior, full stop. But that would invite the renewed question [in] what kinds of *way* clean shirts are superior. […] In the end, these questions would concern the very point of the language game of 'clean and dirty'. (2018, 71–2)

A particularly tempting form of the attempt to find an instrumental justification for our concern with cleanliness is the notion that cleanliness requirements are grounded in our concern with health – what Lagerspetz terms 'hygienic reductionism.' This notion, in fact, seems to offer a way of rationalizing practices which actually existed for a long time before the risks of bacterial contagion were discovered. Lagerspetz writes:

> The assimilation of cleanliness to hygiene is […] less than compelling […] I am certainly not washing my white shirt because I fear infection. On this theme I have consulted a brochure by the National Swedish Board of Health and Welfare. The reader is told that we can be relatively unwashed without any hazard to the skin: 'In medical respect [sic], the removal of dirt is in most cases not of any consequence.' On the whole, 'standards of cleanliness in the home are above all a question of what we are personally comfortable with.' The claim is not that washing serves no health purpose at all, for in many

> situations it is an extremely efficient way to fight contagion. However, cleanliness has obvious additional functions that fall outside hygiene, having more to do with aesthetic and social considerations. (2018, 73)

To my mind, Lagerspetz's argument against hygienic reductionism is fully convincing. I might add one more example. Most of us are naturally inclined to suppose that plastic cutting boards are more hygienic than wooden boards. After all it is much easier to keep a plastic board shining clean. But in fact, it seems to be the other way round: partly because of a difference in texture between the two materials, partly because wood is naturally anti-microbial, wooden boards are possibly more hygienic than the plastic kind (see, e.g., Milan 2018). Here, cleanliness and hygiene part ways.

The upshot of this is that in order to give an account of what dirtiness and cleanliness amount to, we have to consider the variety of considerations – some instrumentally motivated, some not – that bear on the application of these labels in connection with various practices. Cleanliness requirements, we might say, constitute a family, normally bound up with practices of washing or cleaning.

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According to Lagerspetz, for an object or individual to be dirty is for it (her/him) to be soiled by an alien or unwanted substance. We might call this the way in which dirt *manifests* itself. The manifestation is often visual, as when a dress is visibly stained or soiled, but it may also be detected through smell or touch, as Lagerspetz points out. We may decide that a piece of clothing needs washing because it is foul-smelling (say, it smells of fish or of bodily fluids), or because it feels sticky or rough to the touch, even though no dirt can be detected by sight. Indeed, a smell may indicate dirt even if it is not unpleasant in itself. Rather, it simply reveals the presence of a substance "in the wrong place." It is not always clear what will count as a manifestation of being dirty. Thus, the same window will look dirty when the sun is shining through it, and look perfectly in order

when there is no sun. It may be called either clean or dirty depending on one's purpose in labelling it. (It would obviously be a mistake to argue that the window *is* dirty when the dirt is visible and that it *is* clean when it is not – any more than all cats are *actually* grey in the dark.)

There is, however, another aspect of dirt to which Lagerspetz does not pay a great deal of attention. We might call this the "*aetiology*" of dirt: the ways in which an object or person *comes to be* dirty. This will often be held to be important over and above the manifestation as such. First of all, the circumstances in which things or people get soiled may make a difference. Soiling may be part of the normal course of events, or it may occur accidentally. The clothes and body of a miner, fisherman or car mechanic will inevitably become soiled in the normal course of his work. In these cases, it would seem that no embarrassment attaches to being dirty during work or on the way home from work. On the other hand, suppose someone is about to give an important speech, and just as she is ready to step onto the podium, she notices a clearly visible ink stain on her dress. In this situation, the stain would be a source of embarrassment. The speaker may refuse to go on until the situation has been remedied in one way or another, even though it could be thought that the stain has no bearing on the speech she is about to deliver. She will perhaps think of the stain as showing loss of control, but of course that feeling is ultimately grounded in the sense that a person's clothes are supposed to be clean when one performs in front of an audience. Compare Lagerspetz's discussion of the need for a clean shirt, presented above. (Think also of the case of having a speck of food on a tooth, in one's face or beard on a social occasion.)

Second, the source of the soiling may make a great difference. If it is known that a dress was soiled by faeces, urine, vomit or some other bodily fluids (in which case it might be called filthy), this will usually call for immediate cleaning or a change of clothes, as compared to a case in which it is stained by some neutral substance such as oil – regardless of the fact that oil stains are harder to get rid of. This brings attention to another distinction: some forms of soiling

may only be a problem while we appear in public – in being a cause of shame or embarrassment –, while other forms, such as those involving the bodily fluids mentioned, will normally be considered bothersome even in a private context.

In some applications of the clean/dirty distinction the manifestation actually recedes to the background. I am thinking of the practices in which we periodically wash things, or wash ourselves, on the ground that a certain time has passed since the previous wash, independently of noting the presence of unwanted substances. For instance, very many people in our culture will shower daily or at least every other day. Some people may feel a need to shower twice a day (especially when it is hot); in earlier times, one took a bath or went to the *sauna* maybe once a week. The appropriate interval is largely a matter of custom, this, in turn, being shaped by the availability of resources for washing. Analogous considerations go for the periodic changing of clothes, sheets and towels, as well as the cleaning of homes, etc. The periodicity of the cleaning is not contingent on the discovery of patterns of soiling, although the participants in the practice are likely to argue that some undesirable substances are bound to accumulate in the interval. Actually, however, if an object should be found to have been soiled, we will probably clean it right away rather than wait for the next laundry day. Two notions of dirtiness seem to meet here. When it comes to periodic dirtiness, the issue becomes a matter of pure aetiology while the manifestation more or less drops out of the picture.[3]

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[3] It could perhaps be suggested that with respect to the things we wash periodically, not being clean, as it were, is the default state, whereas being newly washed is the exception. In the Swedish version of his book, Lagerspetz has an eloquent description of the way we may relish the smell of freshly washed bed linen (2006, 207). I am thinking also of the way people in the past used to feel almost a spiritual uplift after having had their weekly bath on Saturday night. The ready availability of various methods of washing and cleaning have perhaps bereft those who live in affluent societies today of the sense of enchantment that simple cleanliness may inspire.

The above observations are intended to indicate directions in which a further philosophical study of the concepts of dirtiness and cleanliness might move. Another possible departure would be to explore the "grammar" of the vocabularies of "dirty" and "cleaning," the occurrence of these and related words in conversational contexts. In any case, one great value of a work like Lagerspetz's, in which new areas of human thought and experience are made the object of philosophical inquiry, is that it may challenge us to take a fresh look at the methodological presuppositions customarily taken for granted in philosophical discussion, and thus to open up new perspectives on what may be involved in a philosophical study of human forms of life.

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