

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

---

## How is Dirt Possible?

Lagerspetz, Olli

*Published in:*  
Cleaning and Value

Published: 01/01/2020

*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Document License*  
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Lagerspetz, O. (2020). How is Dirt Possible? On the philosophy of dirt, cleanliness and refuse. In B. Isabel, H. Christina, & K. Felix (Eds.), *Cleaning and Value: Interdisciplinary Investigations* (pp. 55-65). Sidestone Press. <https://www.sidestone.com/books/cleaning-and-value>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# CLEANING AND VALUE



This is a free offprint – as with all our publications the entire book is freely accessible on our website, and is available in print or as PDF e-book.

[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

# **CLEANING AND VALUE**

INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS

edited by

Isabel Bredenbröcker, Christina Hanzen & Felix Kotzur

© 2020 Individual authors

Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Lay-out & cover design: Sidestone Press  
Photograph cover: Robert Schittko

ISBN 978-90-8890-921-4 (softcover)  
ISBN 978-90-8890-922-1 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-90-8890-923-8 (PDF e-book)

# Contents

<b>Contributors</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Editor's note</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>17</b>
Hans P. Hahn	
<b>Paper Abstracts</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>SECTION 1: EDITORIAL</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>We have never been Clean – Towards an Interdisciplinary Discourse about Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>23</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker, Christina Hanzen, Felix Kotzur	
<b>SECTION 2: DISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Archaeology and Cleaning: Some Reflections on the Archaeological Process</b>	<b>41</b>
Ulrich Veit	
<b>How is Dirt possible? On the Philosophy of Dirt, Cleanliness and Refuse</b>	<b>55</b>
Olli Lagerspetz	
<b>SECTION 3: CONTEXTS AND PLACES</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The Last Bath: Cleaning Practices and the Production of 'Good Death' in an Ewe Town</b>	<b>69</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker	
<b>The Cultural Aspect of Cleaning in Archaeology – a Case Study from the late Neolithic Site of Fıstıklı Höyük</b>	<b>89</b>
Georg Cyrus	
<b>CARPE Dirt, Disease, and Detritus: Roman Sanitation and its Value System</b>	<b>105</b>
Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow	

<b>SECTION 4: BODIES, OBJECTS AND PERSONAL HYGIENE</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>A Matter of Representation – Personal Hygiene in Eastern Zhou-dynasty China (771-256 BCE)</b>	<b>129</b>
Catrin Kost	
<b>Why is Death defiling? Considering death-related Pollution and Cleaning in Central Asia</b>	<b>155</b>
Jeanine Dağyeli	
<b>Your Clothes Should Be Clean! Your Head Should Be Washed! Body Cleaning and Social Inclusion in the Epic of Gilgamesh</b>	<b>167</b>
Ainsley Hawthorn	
<b>SECTION 5: SOCIAL PRACTICES AND POLITICS</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Shaking out the Tablecloth – Uzbek Hospitality and the Construction of Boundaries of Belonging</b>	<b>183</b>
Sebile Yapici	
<b>The Cleansing of a Political System: Obliterations, Burials and ‘Reuse’ of Palaces and Seats of Power in Central Italy (Seventh-Fifth centuries BCE)</b>	<b>195</b>
Robinson Peter Krämer	
<b>Cleaning up the Past</b>	<b>213</b>
Mareike Späth	
<b>SECTION 6: ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Growths: Contemporary Art between Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>231</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker	
<b>Mother Tongue (2013) Interview</b>	<b>235</b>
I: Isabel Bredenbröker, C: Chrischa Oswald	
<b>Mehl, Salz und Wasser zu einem Teig verarbeitet und auf die Spiegeloberfläche aufgetragen (2017)</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>Flour, salt and water, prepared as a dough and applied to the mirror surface, size varies (2017)</b>	<b>240</b>
Kerstin Gottschalk	
<b>Duschvorhang (2005/2015)</b>	<b>246</b>
Andreas Koch	
<b>Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>249</b>
Robert Schittko, Nikolaus Kockel	
<b>In between contemporary stones (2016)</b>	<b>251</b>
Wagehe Raufi	

**Contemporary Art and the Gaze of an Archaeologist:  
An Interpretative Attempt of Decay and Lost Evidence** 255

Anna Langgartner

**Bruise 13 (2017)** 257

Mia Bencun





# How is Dirt possible? On the Philosophy of Dirt, Cleanliness and Refuse

Olli Lagerspetz

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, pollution, 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 points out<sup>1</sup>, the role of dirt-related concepts 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 *a priori* truths were possible, how mathematics and pure (*i.e.* theoretical) natural science were possible, and how the categorical imperative was possible. These questions assume that a certain phenomenon or practice, such as pure natural science, clearly exists. There is, however, something about our other philosophical or intellectual commitments that implies that it somehow ought not to be possible. Kant, for instance, argued that a workable conception of laws of nature, and thus of pure natural science, could not be upheld if philosophy remained committed to the then received idea of the relation between *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Given that pure natural science – which so to speak should not exist – in fact is a meaningful undertaking, how should we revise our intellectual commitments?

It seems to me that dirt is in a similar kind of predicament. Given some of the intellectual commitments typical of academic culture at present, 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 of dirt and our commitments. The most important of these commitments is a certain view on the relation between physical reality and culturally determined ideas about reality. Natural science is expected to be the ultimate arbiter of the real and the unreal. Whatever falls outside

---

1 In his opening remarks for the conference for which this essay was written.

its reach belongs to the domain of mere subjectivity. Clearly, 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. 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).

## **Scientific Realism, Culturalism and Aristotle: a first Approximation**

The structure of my argument is as follows. In theoretical analyses of soiling we find two main approaches, labelled here for short as scientific realism and culturalism. Less prominent today, there is the possibility of a third approach, connected with Aristotle. These perspectives represent different ways of making intellectual sense of the phenomenon of dirt or, as the case may be, of claiming that the phenomenon itself is illusory. The bulk of this essay is devoted to developing the last of these three approaches. The two others must, however, be outlined in order to get an idea of the current state of the debate.

Scientific realism as a philosophical position comes in many varieties, but now it is sufficient simply to indicate its general outlook. Its main theses are, firstly, that reality is independent of the mind and, secondly, that the entities and qualities that really populate the world are the ones that would be picked up by the predicate terms of a 'mature' or fully developed (natural) science (see Agazzi, 2017:pp.209f.). Historically, scientific realism emerged when natural science was enthroned as the preferred framework for rational inquiry of reality. The aim of science, according to scientific realism, is to present descriptions of reality independent from any subjective point of view. To quote Thomas Nagel, it is to present 'a view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). For realism, objective reality exists, but adherents of scientific realism argue that everyday experience alone cannot give us an undistorted view of reality (Agazzi, 2017:p.210). Some key aspects of reality are *inaccessible* to the untrained mind and liable to be misconstrued by it. Therefore, in scientific realism, theoretical natural science is presented as the best approximation to a true and completely subject-less account of reality. In such a perspective, dirt tends to disintegrate, sucked up into the general category of physical substance.

'Culturalism' is, for the most part, not a term used by the thinkers who are subsumed in that category. Nevertheless, it may be a good term to describe a tendency that is widely accepted in anthropological approaches to pollution.<sup>2</sup> Dirt is understood as a subjective, symbolic and culturally conditioned product of the mind. In a sense, the approach which is here labelled culturalism can be regarded as the opposite of scientific realism, because it focuses precisely on the experiences of human subjects. On the other hand, culturalism and scientific realism spring from a common root and they can be made mutually compatible. If scientific realism is accepted as the best approach to reality as such, we are left with a 'remainder' of human experience that seems to require treatment of some other kind. Material reality as such is handed over to science while its subjective aspects are represented as the business of psychology and cultural anthropology. In culturalism, dirt becomes, in the words of Mary Douglas (1970), a result of 'the differentiating activity of the mind' (p.190). It is viewed as something that the mind imposes on an essentially neutral reality. Dirt belongs to a layer of symbolic meanings attached to objects.

---

2 The term 'culturalism' was suggested by a reader of the present volume.

If the question is, 'how is dirt possible?', the answer from the perspective of culturalism and scientific realism is, then, that strictly speaking dirt *is not* possible; not as a *real* feature of the world. Dirt falls outside of science and, while *ideas* of dirt exist in culture, they have no objective validity.

There is, finally, a third perspective that promises the chance to side-step the dichotomy between scientific realism and culturalism. This is an approach inspired by the Aristotelian distinction between substance (consisting of matter and form) and accident. In this essay, I hope to make the case for such an approach. The argument is twofold. On the one hand, one can generate an argument based on the shortcomings of the two other approaches. On the other hand, I argue that the alternative approach captures everyday experience where the two others do not.

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 considered. There was no difference of principle, in Galileo's thinking, between living and lifeless objects, nor between natural objects and artefacts. For Aristotle, contrastingly, different theoretical concepts were appropriate for accounting for different types of objects. 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 the immediate human experience of living in a material environment.

### **Revisionary and descriptive Metaphysics of Properties**

The argument in this essay is thus based on the assumption that dirt *is* possible. A philosophy that claims the opposite would self-disqualify, simply because it would not be an analysis of the concept of dirt but a denial of its applicability. This methodological commitment is based on the idea of philosophical analysis as a descriptive enterprise. If philosophy is descriptive, its preferred aim is to make sense of concepts, not to explain them away, hereby getting rid of them. The analysis of a concept requires us to attend to its applications and hence, to start by identifying *meaningful* instances of its use. The crucial question for the descriptive analysis is not, do the words 'dirty' and 'clean' correspond with real qualities in the world, but rather: *given that* we use these words in order to relate to the material environment, what are we able to learn about the implicit assumptions made with regards to this environment which guide our thinking and acting?

My chosen approach involves a choice between what Peter Strawson (1959:p.9) identified as *revisionary* and *descriptive* metaphysics. Descriptive metaphysics aims to analyze the conditions and presuppositions of knowledge and understanding as they appear in various contexts of enquiry. Revisionary metaphysics, instead, is not content with conceptual analysis but aims to uncover the true ontological structures of reality as such. It is treated as an open question whether our most quotidian categories for describing ordinary objects, human action, etc. truly identify anything which exists. In the anglophone philosophical discourse of the last three or four decades, 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 species of revisionary metaphysics because they attempt to determine whether dirt really exists, and in that case, what it objectively is. They are open to the possibility that 'dirt' stands (or is meant to stand) for something that is not really there. It might also be possible to interpret Aristotle's metaphysics as

revisionary. I suggest, however, that it is better understood as an attempt to *articulate* the thinking that is already characteristic of our awareness of the material environment.

‘Aristotelianism’ is not the only possible articulation of our life world in a way that side-steps the ‘subjective vs. objective’ dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> Such a striving is present, for instance, in the constructivism put forward by Bruno Latour (2013). Evaluating constructivism falls outside the present essay, but the generally descriptive stance seems to be a feature that it shares with Aristotle.

## The Idea of Dirt as Projection

The idea of dirt as a projection is the starting point of culturalism as described above. Material objects in themselves are neither clean nor dirty, but there are human beings who project their emotions and normative expectations on objects.

This way of conceptualising our relation with material reality is evident, for instance, in Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1946, 1948). In that book, Freud attempts to account for our perception of ‘the uncanny’ (*das Unheimliche*). Our perception of various objects and chains of events as uncanny, he says, is due to what he calls *the outward projection of inner perceptions*. He describes such a projection as a process whereby

*“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, 1946:p.85f.

When we ascribe the property of uncanniness to an object or to a chain of events, we are in the grip of a kind of magical thinking. We incorrectly expect our psychological states somehow directly to modify the environment. It is a subjective colouring of an originally colourless world.

More recently, Julia Kristeva (1982:p.60) in her book *The Powers of Horror*, quotes this passage from Freud with approval. She applies it to the human perception of dirt and pollution. At the centre of Kristeva’s discussion of dirt lies the concept of ‘abjection’. 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 the idea of *an essentially neutral world*, a real world not captured in everyday perception, is something both Freud and Kristeva *share* with scientific realists. Kristeva takes up this very same idea of dirt as an expression of an emotional state, a state which we project upon a world that is in itself neutral.

---

3 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. Latour can be read as presenting the descriptive point that the idea of objective reality is a thinking tool. As such, the functions of the concept of reality are to be articulated in exactly the same way as those of other critical concepts. It is not an ontological master concept.

## Shoes on the Table and 'in themselves'

To put it briefly, the idea of dirt as a human emotional and cultural 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 (1970), originally from 1966. In a passage that has become a *locus classicus* in the research, she contrasts 'shoes in themselves' 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."*, Douglas, 1970:p.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 appears to challenge order or deviates from it, will risk being perceived as impure and dangerous. Throughout her book, Douglas pursues an argument that assimilates the ordinary concept of dirt to the general concept of anomaly in the context of a symbolic order. Douglas has been (and still is) enormously influential upon research related to pollution taboos and cleanliness in culture. In that research, 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'.

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'. This example, and the other examples in the quoted passage, are (or at least can be) cases of disorder; no doubt. But Douglas has not shown that dirt is a species of disorder. You can tidy up a room without cleaning it, and you can clean a room without tidying it.

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. In the words of Edwyn Bevan, 'in an uninhabited world moist clay would be no dirtier than hard rock; it is the possibility of clay adhering to a foot which makes it mire' (quoted in Ashenburg, 2007:p.279). And we must think of a culture, in this case one 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 can be 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 it 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 milieu, as it now exists, is the result of conscious human efforts to reshape the environment. That is true, more or less, for any element of a normal living space. 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 a perspective where the contrast between the ideal case and deviations naturally comes in. Soiling is one such deviation.

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 simple extension is foreign to the Aristotelian conception of substance.) The substance is essentially a combination of matter and form. In this scheme, an accident is a quality that does not affect the fundamental identity or essence of the substance. For instance, the colour of a teacup may be seen as an accident: if the cup is bleached out, the substance still survives. Colour, in its turn, cannot exist alone without some 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 which, when instantiated in matter, constitutes her as the specific substance she is. We should, however, note that the distinction between substance and accident is open for interpretation. How we specify the distinction in a given situation is dependent on what we perceive to be essential for the identity of the substance. In some cases, colour is an important element of the substance. A painted picture is destroyed if the colour is removed.

Aristotle believed that his 'matter versus form' and 'substance versus accident' distinctions were applicable to any physical substance. In that sense, it is unsurprising that we can also apply them to dirt and soiling.<sup>4</sup> The more interesting question is: what aspects of our lived experience are highlighted or obscured if we do so?

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. Dirt does not change the essence of the underlying substance, which can be made visible again, as when you remove a stain. Damage is a different kind of modification, because it implies that the substance itself is affected. According to Aristotle, it is possible for a substance to be damaged or mutilated

---

4 As pointed out by a reader of the present volume.

if the configuration of its parts is essential to its form. For a human being, having a leg cut off results in mutilation, whereas substances like water or wax can increase or diminish without an essential change in substance (Ross, 1960, 1023b-1024a). The concepts of damage and dirt are similar, however, such as that they imply a contrast between the present state of an object and its underlying form or essence.

Philosopher Thomas Leddy (2012) makes use of precisely this distinction between substance and accident in his paper on what he calls 'everyday surface aesthetic qualities' (1995:p.259 and *passim*). 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 foreign 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 a 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:p.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 coming in 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 touch another object and ruin it, but because of what these elements themselves 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 (1982) writes of the dead human body: '[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection' (p.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 awareness of differences between what belongs to the object and what should count as an alien, accidental or disturbing addition. 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. Words like 'dirt' and 'soiling' belong among a range of words that denote a departure from the desirable ideal state of an object, a milieu or a living being. We may therefore say: to be familiar with an object and to know what kind of object it is involves, among other things, understanding what would count as an unacceptable kind of soiling of it. Sometimes dirt has practical significance, as for example when grime and build-up clog a washing machine drain. Very often, however, our concern with dirt has to do with purely aesthetic considerations.

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>5</sup>

It seems to me that disagreements about what constitutes soiling in a given case may be quite often traced to differences in opinion about the nature of the master object. The interesting case of the conservation of books is described by Anna Magdalena Lindskog Midtgaard (2006) who works 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

---

5 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.

description of it as ‘patina’ implies that it would be an act of vandalism 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’. On the other hand, all librarians would probably agree that it is desirable to remove additions like Sellotape, which actually causes much damage to the paper underneath.

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 – something Susan Strasser (1999:p.21) has called our ‘stewardship of objects’. Not only *we* have demands on our environment but, conversely, the objects around us have demands on us. 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:p.39). In sum, dirt is possible because a sense of *responsibility* is integral to our understanding of what an everyday object is. We recognise the difference between objects in their clean or ideal state and in their disturbed state. And we see that it is someone’s responsibility to restore or protect the ideal state from which soiling is a deviation.

## Conclusion

To ask ‘How is dirt possible?’ is to ask, ‘What are the conditions under which this kind of awareness of the environment is meaningful?’. Our everyday concepts of dirt and soiling 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*’ or a ‘*well-being*’ (Crisp, 2017). Living beings have needs that call for attention; living beings 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 need 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. This is the aspect of reality that neither scientific realism nor culturalism have captured adequately.

In the everyday experience of an individual, ordinary objects are purposeful as a matter of course. Our everyday awareness 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 thinking. Our experience of the world is shaped by ideas of perfection and of falling short of that perfection.<sup>6</sup> 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>7</sup>

## Bibliography

- Agazzi, E. (ed.) (2017) *Varieties of Scientific Realism. Objectivity and Truth in Science*. Cham, Switzerland, Springer.
- Ashenburg, K. (2007) *The Dirt on Clean. An Unsanitized History*. New York, North Point Press.
- Bataille, G. (1970) La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade. In: Bataille, G. *Oeuvres complètes II. Écrits posthumes 1922-1940*. Paris, Éditions Gallimard, pp. 54-72.
- Bevan, E. (1921) *Hellenism and Christianity*. London, George Allen Unwin Ltd.
- Crisp, R. (2017) Well-Being. In: Zalta, E. N. (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2017 Edition. [Online] Stanford, California, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Available from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/well-being/> [Access: 6 July 2020].
- D'Oro, G. (2012) Reasons and Causes: The Philosophical Battle and the Meta-philosophical War. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (2), 207-221.
- Douglas, M. (1970) *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
- Freud, S. (1946) *Totem and Taboo. Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics*. Authorized translation with an introduction by A. A. Brill. New York, Random House.
- Freud, S. (1948) *Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker*. In: Freud, A., Bibring, E., Hoffer, W., Kris, E. & Isakower, O. (eds.) *Sigm. Freud. Gesammelte Werke, Chronologisch geordnet. Neunter Band. Totem und Tabu*. 2nd ed. London, Imago Publishing.
- Hämäläinen, N. (2014) What is a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist? – Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics and Metaphor. *Philosophical Papers*, 43 (2), 191-225.
- Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Latour, B. (2013) *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
- Leddy, T. (1995) Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: “Neat,” “Messy,” “Clean,” “Dirty”. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53 (3), 259-268.
- Leddy, T. (2012) *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary. The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. Peterborough, Ontario, Broadview Press.

---

6 This is independent of whether we want to postulate Platonic Forms as independently existing – the kind of ‘two world theory’ that is traditionally often associated with Platonism.

7 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).

- Midgaard, A. M. L. (2006) *The Dust of History and the Politics of Preservation*. Paper for the Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium, Circle 4: Information, Technology, Aesthetics, 3rd -5th March 2006, Helsinki.
- Nagel, T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1999) "Secret sewers of Vice". Disgust, Bodies, and the Law. In: Bandes, S. A. (ed.) *The Passions of Law*. New York, New York University Press, pp. 19-62.
- Plessner, H. (1975) *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Sammlung Göschen 2002. 3rd ed. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.
- Ross, W. D. (ed.) (1960) *The works of Aristotle. Volume III. Metaphysica*. 2nd ed. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1962) *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet. With a preface by Mary Warnock. London, Methuen & Co Ltd.
- Strasser, S. (1999) *Waste and Want. A Social History of Trash*. New York, Metropolitan Books.
- Strawson, P. F. (1959) *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London, Routledge.

