

## **Dirt and Cleanliness, and the Dialectics Between Facts and Practices**

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### *1. Remarks on Why, and How, to Investigate Dirt-Related Concepts*

Those who read philosophical literature about dirt and cleanliness will probably associate the theme with poststructuralist thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva, who in turn are indebted to psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan, and anthropologists such as Durkheim and Douglas. This is, however, a qualified truth. The poststructuralists have mostly been interested in *ritual* pollution and purity (while discussion of dirt in the familiar environment is brought in as an application of points made about ritual pollution). On the other hand, dirt is quite old as a philosophical topic; almost as old as Western philosophy itself. I will give my reasons for thinking that the topic is not odd at all but, on the contrary, quite important and a helpful avenue to general questions about our being in the world.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, the concepts of dirt and cleanliness illustrate the fact that questions framed in terms of ontology (supposedly dealing with what really exists) may often more helpfully be seen as, in a broad sense, ethical ones; i.e., as questions about how we live. I see this also as an important lesson that can be derived from Wittgenstein.

Finally: I am not saying it is *a priori* impossible ever to find cases of dirt where the descriptions in the present paper are irrelevant. The present aim is not to work out definitions of what it *must* mean to describe something as clean or dirty. In that sense I do not want to provide ‘essentialist’ descriptions. But I do hope to capture something of the ‘essence’ of dirt and cleanliness; that is: something about what is essential about them and our active involvement with them.<sup>2</sup>

Our theoretical understanding of the material world has largely been shaped by physics and chemistry. On the other hand, our relations to the ordinary environment with which we are familiar are to a large extent informed by

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper takes up themes also discussed in my book *Smuts. En bok om världen, vårt hem* (Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion, 2006) [Dirt. A Book on the World, Our Home]. The book includes a fuller discussion of the extant literature, especially of Douglas and some work influenced by her.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), I: §§371, 373: “Essence [Das Wesen] is expressed by grammar. [...] Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is.” – In these paragraphs, Wittgenstein is undermining the usual distinction between merely linguistic rules and intrinsic necessities raised in I: §372.

concepts that cannot occur as theoretical explanatory concepts in physics or chemistry (at least, as currently understood).<sup>3</sup> The concepts of dirt and cleanliness are a central case. Comparatively little has been written in philosophy about these topics – or about such concepts as, for instance, *damage, thing, or place*. – Wittgenstein remarks,

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.)

Something like this applies to the host of concepts that belong to everyday life as an omnipresent background. Wittgenstein is not only making the familiar point that we get used to things and forget about them. He continues,

The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.<sup>4</sup>

It is not only that we are blind to what always lies before our eyes. More significantly, a certain background of everyday, 'normal' life is the point of departure from which we appreciate the value of theoretical, *non-everyday* perspectives on things. Indeed it is what gives the theoretical enterprise its point, since the aim of the theories is to explain or clarify the reality with which we *are* already familiar. Thus for instance, a theoretical approach to heat (describing heat, say, as a movement of particles) is developed in order to explain and describe the various phenomena that we already recognise as heat.

Conversely, philosophical interest in everyday life concepts connects to the tendency to investigate the *role* of theoretical approaches to human life, and to question the hold that they often have on our thinking – especially, to challenge reductionist approaches.

For this reason, it seems to me that dirt and cleanliness are not only interesting as philosophical curiosities. They highlight some central and neglected aspects of our relation to our physical environment. Conversely, they have not been neglected simply out of reluctance to touch a dirty topic. Our dirt and cleanliness concepts are, instead, something of a blind spot in philosophy. This neglect is a direct consequence of the hold that certain metaphysical views have on our theoretical thinking – perhaps most obvious in realism *vs* antirealism debates. What makes the concept of dirt problematic

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<sup>3</sup> Hence the famous dictum ascribed to Justus von Liebig: "*Für die Chemie gibt es keinen Dreck*".

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I 129

is the fact that it in some ways crosses the traditional facts-and-values gap, as well as the distinction between the subjective and the objective.

In this paper, there will be few direct textual connections to Wittgenstein. On a methodological level, however, I think there is an obvious relation. One of the fundamental things that we learn from Wittgenstein (and which, for instance, Peter Winch has instructively and repeatedly spelled out) concerns the internal relation between our concepts and the lives we are living; and the internal relations between our lives and the *world* in which we live.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the general question, *what is X?* We might say that to address such questions philosophically and not, e.g., in terms of chemical analysis, is to examine the *concept of X*. We learn from Wittgenstein that to examine the concept of *X* is to look into our *use* of the concept. Thus the question should be spelled out as, *What are the situations that we handle by invoking the concept of X? And what are, on the other hand, the new situations that will be created precisely by our applications of this concept?* In other words, what do we do with this concept – and what does *it* do with us in return?

Here it emerges that the investigation of the concept of *X* is *not* a search for a *definition* of the word '*X*'. It is also clear that descriptions of 'our use of the concept of *X*' will not just be descriptions of how specific words occur in sentences. Instead, we need to examine the lives in which the concept makes a difference. Thus the examination of 'the concept of *X*' will be an examination of our lives with *X*.

Furthermore: To examine our lives with *X* is at the same time to describe a *world* where such life makes sense. Again connecting to Wittgenstein, our concepts relate to our 'natural history', and one cannot make sense of them without it.

One more thing: In the Wittgensteinian tradition, it is usually said that this kind of inquiry (conceptual investigation) is descriptive rather than normative. But while in one sense non-evaluative, such descriptions are nevertheless made for a purpose. The point of the philosophical description is not to arrive at a general answer to the general question of 'what is *X*', regardless of why anyone is asking the question. Their point is, rather, to address specific misconceptions and prejudices that *prevent us from doing justice* to our concepts.

## 2. *The Idea of a Disenchanted World*

Ideas about the subjective and the objective have a central role in current theoretical work about dirt, pollution, cleanliness, and purity. The authors

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<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (RKP, London 1958); Peter Winch, *Understanding a Primitive Society*. Included in Winch, *Ethics and Action* (RKP, London 1972), 8-49.

tend to agree that our descriptions of things as clean or dirty are expressions of subjective or symbolic attitudes towards them. This is obvious in the most visible theoretical treatments of the topic, including works by *Mary Douglas*, *Julia Kristeva*, and *Martha Nussbaum*.<sup>6</sup>

This approach will involve a background assumption, sometimes implicit. The world as such is devoid of purposes, strivings, and meanings. Pollution concepts are human ways of projecting meaning onto a basically meaningless world.

Kristeva connects her discussion of pollution and dirt to claims that *Sigmund Freud*, in his *Totem and Taboo*, made about the concept of the 'uncanny'. Freud writes:

The projection outwards of internal perceptions is a primitive mechanism, to which, for instance, our sense perceptions are subject, and which therefore normally plays a very large part in determining the form taken by our external world. Under conditions whose nature has not yet been sufficiently established, internal perceptions of emotional and intellectual processes can be projected outwards in the same way as sense perceptions; they are thus employed for building up the external world, though they should by right remain part of the *internal* world. [...] It was not until a language of abstract thought had been developed, that is to say, not until the sensory residues of verbal presentations had been linked to the internal processes, that the latter themselves gradually became capable of being perceived. Before that, owing to the projection outwards of internal perceptions, primitive men arrived at a picture of the external world which we, with our intensified conscious perception, have now to translate back into psychology.<sup>7</sup>

For Freud, the world of reality is a disenchanted world<sup>8</sup> in contrast with the *enchanted* world inhabited by children, primitives, poets, dreamers, and neurotics. To see the world as it is, is to recognise the dividing line between the contributions to perception made by the objects themselves and those that

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, London 1966); Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. (Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1980); Martha Nussbaum, *Secret Sewers of Vice: Disgust, Bodies, and the Law*. In Susan Bandes (ed.), *The Passion of Law* (New York University Press, 1999, 19 – 62).

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*. The Standard Edition (W.W. Norton, New York 1989), p 81. Kristeva (1980) quotes the passage, starting from the second quoted sentence, p 84 (Swedish trans.).

<sup>8</sup> The description of the modern world as 'disenchanted' (*entzaubert*) was, above all, given currency by *Max Weber* – see, for instance, Max Weber, *Vorbemerkung zu den gesammelten Aufsätzen zur Religionssoziologie*. In M. Weber, *Soziologie – Weltgeschichtliche Analysen – Politik*. Hrsg. von J. Wickelmann (Kröner, Stuttgart 1956).

issue from the subject's internal emotive states. And Freud takes it to be obvious that things and events cannot be *uncanny* as such. This is, instead, a quality that we project onto the world. – Thus Freud is also expressing a view on the emotions according to which emotions are not our ways of discerning things and qualities, but, on the contrary, they are complications that stand in the way of clear perception.

Here I would like just to be bloody-minded and ask *why* things cannot be uncanny as such. Shouldn't their uncanny qualities be the very reason why we react to them as we do?<sup>9</sup> However, obviously the real philosophical question is not whether things are uncanny as such, but rather *how* we are supposed to draw the line between reality 'as such' and reality as it appears to us. This is, however, not a question that Freud is discussing. He is a medical man, and he simply writes on the assumption that the real world *is* the world of theoretical natural science.

We should not be saying, instead, that the world *is really* 'enchanted' as opposed to 'disenchanted'; nor that philosophy must put enchantment back to the world. It is not clear to me what such statements would mean in this connection; though they might, in the best case, furnish useful stepping-stones for a general discussion of our various ideas of objectivity.

I take these points to be an illustration of what Peter Winch means in his (arguably somewhat obscure) remark: "Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has."<sup>10</sup> In other words: We do not start our inquiries about reality by first registering a reality and then looking around to see what concepts there are to correspond to it. The meanings of the critical concepts that we use – such as reality, objectivity, or truth – are themselves determined in the context of the inquiries in which they are used as critical tools. In other words, the word 'reality' is not a metaphysical term but a tool for problem solving. The question, "What elements are included in reality as such?" has no answer until we know more about the specific concern that the speaker wants to address.

A paper by Jakob Meløe includes a helpful discussion of the relation between the subjective and the objective.<sup>11</sup> He looks into the concept of *harbour*. A harbour is a natural or a man-made formation where land meets water. There are good and bad harbours, depending on the prevailing winds,

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<sup>9</sup> Sartre says this in so many words in his early writings on the emotions. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl : l'intentionnalité*. In J-P Sartre : *La transcendance de l'ego, esquisse d'une description phénoménologique* (J. Vrin, Paris 1981, Appendice V, 109-113).

<sup>10</sup> Winch 1972, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Jakob Meløe, *The Two Landscapes of Northern Norway*. *Inquiry* 31 (1988), 387–401. (This paper was originally presented at Åbo, at the symposium *Perspectives on Human Conduct*, in honour of G. H. von Wright in 1986.)

the depth of the water and other factors – and, on the other hand, depending on the size and type of the vessels one has in mind. You can discover a natural harbour. And you can be mistaken about this too. So the harbour *is there* independently of what *you* think. Yet at the same time, the *concept* of a harbour is dependent on a form of life that involves seafaring vessels that are too large for their crew to draw ashore. In a world without such forms of life there will be no harbours, just as there will be no *shelters* in a world where no one needs a shelter.

It is only within (the world constituted by) this practice that this slice of matter (wherein a slice of liquid stuff has been adjoined to a slice of solid stuff) will present itself as one object, that is, as this harbour. Its manner of presentation derives from this practice.

The method of investigating *the concept* of a harbour, therefore, is this: Situate yourself within the practice that this *object* belongs to, and then investigate *the object* and *its* contribution to that *practice*.

If an object belongs essentially to a practice, as a harbour does, and a hammer, a coin, a cheque, a king's sceptre, etc., then the concept of that object is our understanding of that object's contribution to the practice within which it is that object (...).<sup>12</sup>

Neither the practice, nor the object or thing that contributes to the practice, must be let out of one's sight. The object or thing is individuated by the concept, which is constituted by the practice.

A harbour is a *place*. In another article, Meløe discusses the general concept of a place.<sup>13</sup> For instance, he asks how many places there are on a chessboard, and under what conditions it is meaningful to individuate places in the sea. The general point he is making is that a given practice – for instance, fishing or chess – will open up the world in a certain kind of way for us, and it will constitute a world that consists of given places and things that belong to the practice in question.

Meløe should not be read as simply saying that our different concepts carve out different parts of an underlying, independently existing world as such. What we need to understand here is that nothing is objective or subjective 'as such'. For instance, a geometrical description is not, in itself and for whatever purpose imaginable, more objective than the fisherman's description. This dichotomy is not a metaphysical one but it is used for problem solving purposes.

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<sup>12</sup> Meløe 1988, 393.

<sup>13</sup> Jakob Meløe, Steder. *Hammarn* No. 3 (1995), 6 – 13.

In many contexts, the fact that an object is dirty is a simple fact about that object – for instance, it may be a fact that someone needs to wash up – just as it may be a fact that an object is circular, or damaged, or dangerous.

On the other hand, the fact that an object is dirty cannot be understood in abstraction to human ways of relating to that object. For instance, it is important in some cases (but not in others) that we feel disgust at dirty things. – To apply a striking expression by Simone Weil, our relations to dirty objects involve “a sort of dance”<sup>14</sup> where our attitudes are shown in the movements that our bodies make. They also inform our cleanliness practices more generally, for instance the fact that we typically try to minimise the contacts between clean and dirty objects.

On the whole, neither the facts nor our attitudes toward those facts can, in this case, be described in abstraction from one another. Our ideas of dirt and cleanliness are only intelligible against the background of what we *do* with dirty objects. Conversely, those activities are only intelligible because they are our ways of relating to facts that are already there. This is a bit like discussing what is more fundamental in soccer – the players or the ball. One cannot make sense of the movements of soccer players on the field unless the ball is included in the description; nor, of course, of the movements of the ball unless the players are included.

The concepts I have been discussing in this section (dirt, harbour, the uncanny, etc.) may be called practical concepts. That is: they presuppose certain ways of acting and thinking, or certain forms of life, *and* a *world* in which these forms of life make sense. We might also say that these concepts make a certain world visible, which is a world in which these ways of acting make sense.

Unlike the concept of a harbour, the concept of dirt is not bound up with a *specific* practice (or group of practices). While our concern for cleanliness is in a general way connected to various practices, there is no one practice of which its sense is dependent. Thus the task here is not to describe *a* practice, but to identify some general aspect that belongs to a large number of practices.<sup>15</sup>

Here we may ask the question: what kind of a world is the world where something can be clean or dirty? I will suggest this is a world that involves *things*, understood as identifiable individual objects, beings or artefacts.

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<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil, *Lecons de philosophie* (Paris: Plon, 1959), 49 – 50; quoted in Peter Winch, *Simone Weil – The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 45. – Weil is not specifically applying this expression to our reactions to dirt.

<sup>15</sup> The practices of hygiene are related to cleanliness, but they are in any case distinct from cleanliness practices. They have developed for specific tasks in specific milieux (e.g., hospitals and some kitchens). All dirt is not unhygienic and not everything hygienic is clean.

### 3. Varieties of Badness

Parmenides, in Plato's dialogue of the same name, brings up "things of which the mention may provoke a smile" and asks the question whether "hair, mud, dirt, or anything else that is vile and paltry" have Forms.<sup>16</sup> The young Socrates of the dialogue is claiming that each thing partakes of a Form by virtue of which it is the kind of thing it is.

The present paper will not dwell on the theory of Forms; but there is an important reason why Socrates was reluctant to acknowledge a Form of dirt. The Forms are in some sense connected with perfection. To grasp the Form of the circular is to understand what would make something into a perfect circle. However, there are concepts that essentially involve falling short of perfection. The concept of damage is an obvious case ('damaged' – indeed, 'completely damaged' – does not describe a possible species of perfection but a shortcoming).

Dirt belongs to this group. Grammatically speaking, 'dirty', like 'damaged', implies a shortcoming. There is an implicit reference to an ideal, unblemished state plus a deviation from that state.<sup>17</sup> (Thus, there is a difference between calling a liquid *dirty* and calling it *mixed*. 'Mixed' (=non-homogeneous) does not imply value judgment.) It is certainly possible for us to *wish* for an item to be dirty or damaged; but that will always presuppose an explanation of some kind. The opposite wish is not supposed to need an explanation. (Rock musicians sometimes say they want a dirty sound. This must be understood against an acknowledged background where tidiness is the *general* norm.)

In a paper on 'everyday surface aesthetic qualities', Thomas Leddy discusses the dirty and the clean in terms of the Scholastic distinction between substance and accident. He describes 'dirty' as 'a *surface* quality'.<sup>18</sup> By this he does not just mean that dirt collects on the surfaces of objects. A liquid may be dirty through and through. In the case of fat hair, one typically cannot point to dirt on a particular surface; it is the hair's general condition that counts. But these judgments nevertheless involve the general idea that one should distinguish between a substance as such – a windowpane, water, hair – and an additional disturbing element. Thus, dirt is a surface quality insofar as it can be kept analytically distinct from the fundamental 'underlying form or substance' of the host item.

Among 'everyday surface aesthetic qualities', Leddy includes 'neat', 'messy', 'clean' and 'dirty'. These qualities require an underlying structure

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Parmenides*, 130d.

<sup>17</sup> Also see Jerzy Faryno, Nieskol'ko obščih soobraženij po povodu konceptov "grjaznyj/čistyj". Utopia czystości i góry śmieci – Utopija čistoty i gory musora. *Studia Litteraria Polono-Slavica*, 4 (Warszawa: SOW, 1999, 59 – 62).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Leddy, Everyday Surface aesthetic Qualities: "Neat", "Messy", "Clean", "Dirty". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995), 259 – 268. P. 259, italics added.



that is tidied up, made a mess of, cleaned, or soiled.<sup>19</sup> 'Dirty' as a surface quality also implies that the underlying object is in principle possible to clean, and in some sense *needs to* be cleaned, or is *worth* cleaning.<sup>20</sup> (Perhaps this is the reason why bits of toilet paper are typically not described as dirty but as *used*. We do not think there is an underlying substance that is worth cleaning.)

In sum, our relations to our normal environment seem to be informed by concepts that are, in a sense, value-laden, teleological, indeed Platonic. They involve an element of concern for the ideal state from which dirt, damage and various other forms of deterioration are deviations. We recognise the deviations as shortcomings, not simply as neutral facts. – Applied ethicists sometimes discuss the question whether various non-human beings 'have a welfare'. In the light of the present discussion, it may be said that our relations to our ordinary physical environment involve an attitude towards things as beings that 'have a welfare'. The fact that we recognise the 'welfare' of an object is shown in the fact that we recognise the meaningfulness of questions about what is good or bad *for* the object, not only good or bad *in* it and *about* it. A window *needs* cleaning, just like a plant needs watering. This is part of our understanding of, what kinds of items we are dealing with.

It seems to me, furthermore, that our concept of dirt implies a notion of someone being 'in charge' of the relevant items. *Someone* (not necessarily any identified person) has *failed* to maintain the ideal state from which dirt and decay are deviations.

#### 4. *Dirt and Its Host Item*

The previous section indicates that dirt cannot really be discussed in abstraction from the particular items that are described as clean or dirty.

Dirt implies contact between an alien substance and an item that is soiled or polluted. Thus 'dirty' is like 'wet'. An object is wet when water makes contact with it and stays on as moisture. *Moisture* consists of a substance, namely water; but water only becomes moisture in a specific environment. Moisture is water in contact with something else. Similarly, dirt consists of matter – but only of matter in contact with an item soiled by it. For brevity, I will call these elements *the contact substance* and *the host item*.

Here the grammatically primary concept is that of things being *dirty*, as a quality – not *dirt*, as a substance. Dirt may be called a substance, but it is never a specific substance with an independent definition (unless we mean 'earth', as in 'road dirt'). Without the host item, no dirt exists in the relevant sense. Thus there is a grammatical difference between dirt and, on the other

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<sup>19</sup> Leddy, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Leddy, 260.

hand, refuse, garbage, faeces, and other unwanted substances.<sup>21</sup> For instance, one cannot purposely produce dirt and save it in heaps or cardboard boxes for later use.<sup>22</sup>

Our judgments will be dependent on our ideas concerning the *objects* that are said to be clean or dirty. In order to know whether a thing is clean or dirty we need to know what kind of a thing it is. The more we understand about an item the more will we be in a position to tell when it is dirty.

This is in many ways similar to assessing damage in objects. In a sense, each thing has its own ways of being damaged. What should qualify as damage in a CD will not necessarily be so in a windowpane. Similarly, the characteristics of each thing will determine in what ways we go about finding out whether they need cleaning. We smell the T-shirt. We look through the windowpane. We open the refrigerator and check the inside, not the outside. This is not only to say that there are different *methods* of finding out in these different cases, but also that 'dirty' *means* different things depending on the object. This is connected to our understanding of what kinds of objects these things are, and of what it is to lead a life in which these objects have a place.

Sometimes our judgment depends entirely on pragmatic considerations – for instance, a CD may need to be cleaned before it is played. But in most cases, it has more to do with aesthetics in a broad sense. It reflects our ideas about what naturally belongs to the host item and what is alien and disturbing.

Anna Magdalena Midtgaard, working at the Rare Books section of Copenhagen Royal Library, brings this out in a paper on the conservation of books.<sup>23</sup> Some librarians think it is important to remove stains and dust from old volumes. Others would take a more conservative approach. Grains of pollen and sand may actually be seen as parts of the volume's history. They sometimes contain useful information about its provenience. This variety of attitudes not only reflects variations of taste and sensibilities, but also differences in ideas about the identity of the item itself. A stain may either be seen as a blemish or as *patina*, either as external to the volume or as a natural feature of it.

However, sometimes when we call an item dirty we are not mainly concerned about the fact that this particular item falls short of an undisturbed ideal state. Rather are worried that it might soil something *else*. This is typical of our concern for dirty hands. Your judgment of whether your hands are

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<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, a distinction not honoured in a number of influential accounts of the concepts of dirt and impurity (e.g., Bataille, Douglas, Kristeva, Nussbaum).

<sup>22</sup> Also see Christian Enzensberger, *Grösserer Versuch über den Schmutz* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Magdalena L. Midtgaard, The Dust of History and the Politics of Preservation. Paper for the *Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium*, Circle 4: Information, Technology, Aesthetics. 3-5 March 2006, Helsinki.

dirty will be dependent on your ideas, not of what you generally see as a desirable state for hands, but about what it is to handle a thing with care. And your understanding of what 'care' involves will reflect your views about the particular thing that you are going to handle.

Thus your *primary* concern in this case is about the rare manuscript volume (or whatever); and the state of your hands is judged in relation to that primary item. Your hands are, as it were, not judged 'in their own right' but in relation to what you are going to handle. Furthermore, your judgment that something might make your *hands* dirty is dependent on your understanding of what kinds of soiling would be unacceptable on the manuscript volume that you are going to handle later on.

One can sum this section up by saying that our judgments about dirt imply ideas about what it is to *care for* the item that is soiled or might be soiled. And such care implies an understanding of the thing in terms of its teleologies, i.e., in terms of what we require of the thing and what that thing requires of *us*.

### 5. Contextuality

My discussion has highlighted many similarities between dirt and damage. There is, however, an important difference here. Judgments by competent observers about whether an item is damaged will be roughly the same regardless of the situation (even if the implications of the damage will depend on the situation at hand). Typically, the damaged artefact will be damaged 'once and for all' until someone fixes it. In contrast, dirt will be dependent on the host item's role *in a situation*.

Plates and cutlery during and after meal are the obvious example. As Jerzy Faryno puts it,

The already empty plate at the unfinished dinner, with the guest still holding on to his knife and fork, is still 'clean'; while the same plate at the same dinner, but with the guest waiting for the next course, is already 'dirty'.<sup>24</sup>

Should we say the plate suddenly changed from clean to dirty? But no chemical transformation took place. – Or was the plate really dirty all the time? – Or finally, should we say that these are simply conventional expressions, not descriptions of real, factual conditions? It looks as if the choice was forced on us. And these kinds of example incline philosophers and anthropologists towards the view that dirt is really just a symbolic cultural construct.

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<sup>24</sup> Faryno 1999, 60. Translation OL.

The apparent dilemma is created by the assumption that the question, 'Is that plate dirty?' would mean the same in the two situations. But these things are asked for a reason, not out of a general wish to survey the state of the world. And in fact we do *not* feel confused. We understand quite well what the question might mean in the two situations.

This is a consequence of our general knowledge of the role of plates and other kitchen utensils, the paths that they describe on their way from the pantry to the table and back again. Their use involves the alteration between employment, cleaning, and storage. We judge their present condition with reference to their current position in this circulation. These, and many other, items can only be used at all if they periodically engage with potentially soiling materials. Something similar is true of our bodies. We cannot do anything meaningful, indeed live, without such engagement.

Consider the question, 'Are your hands clean?' A typical context for this particular question is that you may be required to *handle* some item. The *meaning* of the question, and hence its answer, will depend on *what* you are expected to handle. Can you sit down for a meal; can you shake hands with a guest; can you go on mixing the dough you just started kneading with your hands?

The fact that judgments about dirt are context dependent is perhaps obscured by the fact that we have relatively fixed ideas about the kinds of situation in which various items are used. On the other hand, with some items, the situational variation is extremely obvious. Consider the question whether a *tree* is clean or dirty. Just like that, say, written on a slip of paper, the question could have any number of meanings; in other words, no definite meaning at all. But normally these things are uttered in a context, for a reason. For instance, perhaps I have to decide if I can let my children climb it.

What we need to appreciate here is that our judgments about dirt are context dependent and yet objective; in other words, not arbitrary. In each case our judgment depends on our appreciation of the situation (the character of the item, its current state and its current role), and we may be right or mistaken about it. – The bottom line is that we understand what it means to care for the things in our environment.

#### *6. Our Stewardship of Objects*

To summarise the analysis, the concepts of the clean and the dirty are internally related to a teleological understanding of the things that physically surround us. And this understanding is, in turn, related to our ways of living with things. Our relations to objects are determined by care and responsibility, in other words by the attitude that the historian *Susan Strasser*

calls our *stewardship of objects*.<sup>25</sup> – Thus the concept of dirt presupposes a world of culture, a world where human beings are in charge. Conversely, this also means that the things in our environment have claims on us. A window must be cleaned, a shoe must be repaired, and so on.

The Genesis, which may be said in some ways to give us the cosmology of a Christian culture, including its view on the relation between nature and culture,<sup>26</sup> has expressed this as follows:

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.<sup>27</sup>

The position of man in the world is described as one of stewardship. Wittgenstein strikes a more sombre note on the theme in his posthumous remarks:

“The cussedness of things”. – An unnecessary anthropomorphism. We might speak of the *world* as malicious; we could easily imagine the Devil had created the world, or part of it. And it is *not* necessary to imagine the evil spirit intervening in particular situations; everything can happen ‘according to the laws of nature’; it is just that the whole scheme of things will be aimed at evil from the very start. But man exists in this world, where things break, slide about, cause every imaginable mischief. And of course he is one such thing himself. – The ‘cussedness’ of things us a stupid anthropomorphism. Because the truth is much graver than this fiction.<sup>28</sup>

The world is our home. It is placed in our charge, for us to take care of. But the world refuses to comply with our will. Dirt is a visible expression of this.

I take these quotes to include descriptions of the attitude that underlies the life in which dirt and cleanliness make sense. This is not to say that we explicitly think this whenever we deal with dirt. Nevertheless they are verbal expositions of a perspective that makes our lives with dirt and cleanliness intelligible.

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want. A Social History of Trash*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 21 – 67.

<sup>26</sup> On this theme, see Yuval Lurie, *Cultural Beings. Reading the Philosophers of Genesis* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), esp. 27 – 56.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis, 2.15.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value. Vermischte Bemerkungen*. Ed. Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman. Trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 71e.

In this paper, I have been addressing the question how dirt is possible, or in other words, the question what else should be said about a world where dirty and clean things exist. To describe the *world* of dirty and clean things is at the same time to describe the lives in which the relevant concepts make sense.

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My book *Smuts: En bok om världen, vårt hem* will be available for sale during this Conference ☺ .