

## Dirt and Refuse in a World of Things

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### 0. Introduction

This essay is an exploration of the concepts of dirt and refuse.<sup>1</sup> The main contention advanced here is that these concepts are intimately connected to the concept of a thing. ‘Things’ are here understood as recognisable, everyday familiar items, to be contrasted with the abstract category of ‘(material) objects’ of theoretical science. Thus the notions of ‘things’ and ‘material objects’ are expressions of two distinct ways of conceptualising one’s environment. To understand the identity of a particular thing, to see it as the kind of a thing it is, is also to understand the ways in which that thing may be damaged or soiled. Conversely, ‘damage’ and ‘dirt’ can only be identified in relation to particular, identifiable things. The connection between the concepts of dirt and refuse on the one hand, and that of a thing on the other, is due to the fact that our understanding of things in this sense is essentially *teleological* in character. This is also the obvious reason why such concepts cannot be accommodated in a purely scientific account of material objects. They presuppose teleology, while scientific theory, since Galilei, has eschewed teleological explanation.

### 1. The Teleologies of Things

In our ordinary physical environment, things surround us. Perhaps a table, with a plate and a sandwich on it; a teacup; a window, and a dead fly on the windowsill. Outside the window, there is a lawn and a large boulder in the middle of it. In the parlance of science

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<sup>1</sup> A very early version of this paper was presented at the *Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium*, Circle 4: Information, Technology, Aesthetics, 3 – 5 March 2006, Helsinki. The workshop participants are acknowledged for helpful comments. I have previously published (in Swedish) a sustained discussion of dirt, refuse, and related concepts; see the literature list for Lagerspetz.

and the philosophy of science, all these things might also be characterised as material objects. That is *one* possible way of considering them. To call these items material objects may, for instance, be a way of saying that one may meaningfully ask what kind of matter they are made of. But such a purely 'objectivist' view will also miss some aspects of their identities.

Most of the items included in this heterogeneous list also have another feature in common, a feature that is crucial for their character as things. With the exception of the boulder, these items are all in some sense defined teleologically. In other words, our definitions of a window, of a sandwich, etc., are bound up with our ideas of the point, or *telos*, of a window, of a sandwich, etc.. One may also say that to understand what kind of a thing a window is, or what kinds of things a sandwich or a teacup are, is to understand what kinds of qualities one should properly expect to find in a *good* window, sandwich, or teacup. Moreover, this cannot be separated from an understanding of the kind of life that involves the *use* of windows, sandwiches, and teacups.

Thus I am not saying that reality is composed in part of objects and in part of things. Rather, our talk of objects and our talk of things serve different purposes and they open up reality for us in different (and complementary) ways. Yet the fact remains that our *typical* everyday relations to our environment involve relations to things. Everyday human life would be impossible to describe without at least implicitly presupposing things as a category.

Most of the items in my list (and generally, a very large portion of the things that we encounter in our surroundings) are artefacts produced for some purpose. The notion of teleology must, however, not be understood too narrowly in this context. One should not think that the teleologies of everyday items only reflect practical interests in a narrow sense. The demands that we make on things may, for instance, involve aesthetic dimensions. In general, they involve a sense of the 'natural' or 'proper' state of the thing in

question. Even if most of us have no real use for a dead fly, it is nevertheless possible for us to tell whether the fly is whole or damaged (say, with a leg missing). Things thus conceived will either meet the requirements that are made on good specimens of their kind, or they may fail in different respects.

But things will also make demands on *us*. Bioethicists sometimes say that living or sentient beings 'have a welfare'. Similarly it may be said that teleologically defined items have a 'welfare'. In other words, it is meaningful to raise questions about what is good or bad *for* those items as well as good or bad *in* them and *about* them. And our understanding of this is shown in the fact that we see that a thing is soiled, just as we see that it is damaged. In other words, our ability to recognise dirt and damage is part of our understanding of, what the *things* are that are thus soiled or damaged.

Usually we will not be able to give an exact description of the ideal that we implicitly presuppose as a thing's *telos*. The teleologies of things are more easily seen in cases where something goes wrong with them. The descriptions 'damaged' or 'soiled' presuppose an ideal state from which the thing's present state is an aberration. Damage and dirt are recognised against the implicit normative background of an unblemished item.

It is certainly possible for someone, sometimes, to wish for an item to be dirty or damaged; but that will need an explanation of some kind. Perhaps an actor's clothes need to be torn or soiled for a theatre performance. This must, however, be understood against an acknowledged background where tidiness is the general norm.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, we would not speak of dirt and damage but, for instance, of *patina*. Patina constitutes a less clear-cut case. Sometimes we want the marks of time to be visible in vintage clothes and old coins, leather, and furniture. But we do not normally describe such patina as damage or dirt, and

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<sup>2</sup> Rock and jazz musicians sometimes say they want a dirty or cracked sound. 'Dirty' and 'cracked' are here used metaphorically; this discussion will not be directly relevant for the present purposes. Nevertheless it seems that the descriptions imply conscious opposition to a recognised general norm of tidiness.

we distinguish it from damage that *needs* to be fixed. Thus the present thesis is not about what kinds of physical features in things we generally find attractive, but rather about the logical implications of using these qualitative *descriptions*. The descriptions presuppose a certain kind of teleological understanding as their implicit background.

In fact these kinds of consideration lie behind Plato's reluctance, in the dialogue *Parmenides*, to admit that there could be Ideas for 'hair, mud, dirt, or anything else which is vile and paltry' (130E). Platonic ideas constituted in some sense the archetypes or ideals for things in empirical reality. Dirt represents, quite on the contrary, a thing's way of *falling short* of the ideal.

## 2. Things and Practices

Should we then say that things *have* teleologies, or simply that *our descriptions* of things presuppose teleology as a necessary fiction? Modern philosophers have been enormously wary of the concept of teleology. This is no doubt partly due to memories of earlier excesses by Vitalists and Aristotelians. But it is also part of a conscious theoretical drive.

Ever since Galilei, scientific progress has substituted causal explanation for teleology in an ever-increasing number of fields. A celebrated instance of this was Darwin's explanation of animal evolution in terms of causally operating natural selection rather than Lamarckian teleology. (Evolutionary biology also uses the concept of *function*; but functional explanations are assumed ultimately to constitute a species of causal explanation.) Wherever there still appears to be teleology, it is to be shown in the future simply to be a projection of human values and interests. – An important case that might seem to run counter to this tendency is the scientific role of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, predicting the increase of entropy in the universe.<sup>3</sup> However, while that law does involve a statement about a future state of the universe, it is based on an account of causal processes and does not presuppose teleology as a final explanatory principle.

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<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by a reader for this volume.

Indeed it is typical of post-Galilean science, where seemingly teleological processes are in the last analysis explained causally.

Our theoretical understanding of the material world has largely been shaped by physics and chemistry; and 'soiled', 'damaged', etc. cannot occur as theoretical explanatory terms in physics or chemistry as currently understood.

As the anthropologist *Arjun Appadurai* points out in his introduction to an anthology on 'the social life of things', our present Western theoretical common sense has a strong tendency to oppose "words" to "things". Meanings, which are supposedly language-dependent human projections, are opposed to objective reality, which is supposed to be independent of language and human interests (Appadurai 4). At the same time, he notes that our *lives with things* in many cases cannot be informatively described unless one presumes, for methodological purposes at least, that things have inherent meanings. The social analysis of things (say, in economics, art history, or anthropology) cannot do without a measure of "methodological fetishism" (Appadurai 5). Thus the various actions that we perform with windows or teacups cannot be described independently of the meanings and value inherent in those items, including ways in which the items themselves make demands on us. There is such a thing as handling them with care. They can be damaged and soiled in different ways, and it is only marginally up to us as individuals to decide whether we *want to* regard them as damaged and soiled.

However, the question whether things 'really, in themselves' have meanings or teleologies may itself be a red herring. That question would presuppose two independent subjects of inquiry: things as they are in themselves plus our lives with those things. But it is not obvious that these two can ultimately be conceived independently of each other.

The Norwegian philosopher *Jakob Meløe* makes this point in a discussion of the concept of *harbour* ("The Two Landscapes of Northern Norway"). 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, 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. At the same time, the *concept* of a harbour is tied up with a form of life that involves seafaring vessels that are too large for their crew to draw ashore. In a world without this form 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 [...] (Meløe, "The Two Landscapes of Northern Norway" 393).

In the quoted passage, Meløe does not distinguish between things and objects as I have been using these terms. The examples that he cites are instances of what in the present essay are described as *things*. Meløe is emphasising that neither the practice, nor the object (or thing) that contributes to the practice, must be allowed out of one's sight. The object or thing is individuated in terms of the concept, which is constituted by the practice.

A harbour is a *place*. In another article, Meløe discusses the general concept of a place ("Steder"). He asks how many places there are on a chessboard, and under what conditions it is meaningful to individuate places in the sea. His general point is that a

given practice – for instance, fishing or chess – will *open up the world* in a certain kind of way for us. It will constitute a world that consists of given places and things that belong to the practice in question.

Like the concept of a place, the concepts of something being damaged, soiled, cracked, polluted, dishevelled, etc., obviously do not belong to theoretical science. They may be called *practical* concepts. That is: they presuppose certain practices, certain ways of acting and thinking, 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 the relevant practices make sense.

*All* meaningful descriptions are obviously made for a purpose and they *must* always leave out something. Just as one can describe a physicalist world, one can also describe a world where there can be damaged things, and one can describe a dirty and clean world. Then the question is: What else must there be in a dirty and clean world in order for the description to make sense?

One point to keep in mind here is that, while judgments of dirtiness are in a general way connected to our practices, there is no *one* practice of which their sense is dependent, as there was in the case of the 'harbour'. Thus the task here is not to describe *a* practice, but to identify some general aspect that belongs to a large number of practices.

### 3. *Contact Substance and Host Item*

*Dirt* involves contact between an alien substance and an item that is soiled or polluted (also see Faryno 59). These elements might be called *contact substance* and *host item*.

Thus 'dirty' is like 'wet'. Wetness appears when water makes contact with something and stays on as moisture. *Moisture* consists of a specific substance, namely water; but water is only identified as moisture in a specific context. This requires a situation where it is

meaningful to distinguish between two elements: water and an element that becomes moist. A surface is moist when it has been soaked in water.

This distinction between two elements is analytic – it says nothing definite about our factual abilities to isolate the alien element. *Air*, for instance, *consists* in part of (various percentages of) water.<sup>4</sup> When the percentage is high enough we will speak of moist air. The crucial (conceptual) point is that there must be room for making the analytical distinction between water and an adjoining element that, in itself, is not water.

Similarly, dirt consists of matter – but only of matter in contact with a host item. It follows, for instance, that one cannot purposely produce dirt and save it in heaps or cardboard boxes for later use – unless ‘dirt’ here means ‘earth’ (also see Enzensberger 30). Without the host item, there is no dirt in the relevant sense. Thus there is a difference between dirt and, on the other hand, refuse, garbage, faeces, and other unwanted items whose descriptions do not imply a distinction between host item and contact substance. Incidentally, this is a distinction not honoured in a number of currently influential accounts of the concepts of dirt and impurity (e.g., Bataille, Douglas, Kristeva).

The more primary concept is that of *dirtiness*, as a quality – not that of dirt, as a substance. Dirt can certainly be called a substance, but it is never a *specific* substance, unless we mean ‘earth’, as in ‘road dirt’. Dirt is defined as the substance that *renders* the host item dirty. A thing considered in itself is not dirt. Nor is it *dirty*, unless a contact substance makes it so (Faryno 60). (True, we might say, ‘coal dust is a dirty substance’, without implying that coal dust might be washed and made clean. This may be described as a secondary use of the word ‘dirty’. Below, I will return to this.)

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<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by a reader for the present volume.



Because of similar considerations, the philosopher *Thomas Leddy* (259) describes ‘dirty’ as ‘a *surface* quality’.<sup>5</sup> By this he does not just mean that dirt obviously often collects on the surfaces of things, say on windowpanes. A liquid may be dirty all the way through. In the case of fat hair, one typically cannot point to dirt on any particular surface; rather (as in the case of moisture in damp air) it is the hair’s general condition that counts. But these judgments nevertheless involve the general idea that one should distinguish between the item in itself – 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 everyday aesthetic surface qualities require an underlying structure that is tidied up, made a mess of, cleaned, or soiled (Leddy 262; Faryno 59). Dirtiness as a surface quality also implies that the underlying item is in principle possible to clean, and in some sense *needs to* be cleaned, or is *worth* cleaning (Leddy, 260). (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.)

The question whether a given thing is dirty is hence connected to the question *what* constitutes the underlying thing. *Anna Magdalena Midtgaard*, manuscript restorer at Copenhagen Royal Library, brings this out in a paper on the conservation of rare books. She points out that some librarians wish to remove all stains and dust from library volumes. Others wish to keep some. This is because grains of pollen and sand may actually be seen as part of the volume’s history. Often they contain useful information about the provenience of a particular volume. This difference of attitude clearly does not simply reflect variations of taste or sensibility, but rather different ideas about the identity of the item itself. A stain may either be seen as a blemish or as patina – as a feature of the volume itself, part of the underlying host item – rather than external to it.

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<sup>5</sup> Italics added.

Thus our judgments concerning dirtiness will be conceptually dependent on judgments concerning the *things* that are said to be clean or dirty. In order to know whether a thing is clean or dirty you need to know what that thing is.

This is in many ways similar to assessing whether or not a thing is damaged. In a sense, each thing has its own ways of being damaged. What counts 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 try to see through the windowpane. We open the refrigerator and check the condition inside it, not under it or on the back of it. This is not only to say that there are different *methods* of finding out in these different cases, but also that 'dirty' has different *meanings* depending on the thing in question. All this is connected to our understanding of what kinds of things these items are, and of what it is to lead a life in which we use T-shirts, windows and refrigerators.

Authors who write about dirt and pollution in theoretical contexts sometimes subscribe to the view that these concepts are somehow 'relative'; and by this they mean relative to cultural norms, or relative with respect to the sensitivities of the observer (see, e.g., Douglas). But this is problematic in at least two respects. First of all, *all* concepts are, in a trivial sense, relative to the culture in which they are used. This is simply a way of saying that a given concept will be used within a culture; and if so, obviously it will be used in whatever meaning that concept *does* have in the given culture. Secondly, the existence of individual differences of sensitivity does not establish the observer relativity of the relevant quality. On the contrary, saying that we are differently sensitive to some quality is already to presuppose an *independently existing* quality with regard to which we are said to be differently sensitive.

It rather seems to me that, insofar as our judgments of dirtiness are relative to something, they are so in relation to what we take the host item to be.

#### 4. *Situatedness*

There is, however, one important difference between 'dirty' and 'damaged'. Typically, a damaged artefact will be damaged 'once and for all' until someone fixes it, regardless of situation. In contrast, judgments about dirt will depend on how we understand the host item's role *in a specific situation*.<sup>6</sup>

With some things, the situational variation will be extremely obvious. There are things that cannot actually be used unless they periodically engage with potentially soiling substances. This is true, e.g., of most kitchen utensils. To use a fork typically *is* to 'soil' it with food. The role of kitchen utensils involves alteration between use, cleaning, and storage. A fork that is currently in use is not dirty although it has just been in someone's mouth (the mouth of the person who is eating). The situation will be less clearly defined at the end of a meal, with the guest still holding the fork and the knife in his hands (Faryno 60).

Consider the question, 'Are your hands clean?' Just like that, say, on a slip of paper, that question might 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. Metaphorical language aside, the typical context for this particular question is that you are going to *handle* some item. The *meaning* of the question, and hence the answer, will depend on what it is 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 with your hands; can you touch this really rare volume?

In these cases, your judgment of whether your hands are dirty will logically *depend on* your idea of what it means to handle a thing with care, and on your understanding of

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly one might argue that the judgment will, in both cases, be relative to the situation at hand – but that, in the case of 'damaged', more thorough changes in the use of the item will be required before the judgment is changed.

what 'care' means in relation to this particular thing. It follows further that your understanding of what would make your *hands* dirty is dependent on your understanding of what would soil that *other* thing.

The case may thus be analysed as follows. The *primary* target of your concern is the manuscript volume (or whatever); and the state of your hands will be judged in relation to that primary target. Your hands are now, as it were, not dirty 'in their own right' but rather in relation to that other thing. Similarly, there is no *one* obvious way to understand the question whether, say, *a tree* is dirty. The meaning of the question is, however, obvious if someone is going to climb a tree. The condition of the tree is assessed in relation to what would constitute dirt on that person's clothes. (Similarly, coal dust constitutes a dirty substance, not because it needs washing but because it tends to soil other things we wish to protect.)

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

A newly swept floor is clean to walk on, but perhaps not to arrange a picnic on it. This is not simply a case where the criteria of cleanness remain the *same* whilst different *degrees* of cleanness are required. There is no universal scale of the clean and dirty; rather, the condition of a given thing is itself determined by its current role in a situation. This may, for instance, be seen from the fact that the relative positions of two items on the 'scale' might be reversed depending on the situation at hand. The water in a pond may be clean for the fish to live in, but dirty to wash one's shirt in. Chlorinated tap water may be clean to wash one's shirt in, but not for fish to live in.

##### 5. *Our Stewardship of Things*

To sum up the analysis so far, the concepts of the clean and the dirty are internally related to a teleological understanding of the things that make up our physical environment. And this understanding is, in turn, related to our ways of *living* with things. – But how, then, can we characterise this life in a world of things? This is one form of my original question: what else must there be in a world that contains dirty and clean things?

To approach the question *via negativa*, let us look at some cases where distinctions between the clean and the dirty normally do *not* apply. Here are some examples:

(1) A city or a country may be described as clean or dirty, but not an entire planet, or a solar system. On the other hand, things that are extremely small (like atoms) are usually not described as clean or dirty.

(2) The outside of a person's body may be clean or dirty, but the inside is usually not described in this way.

(3) A person may have dirty habits and dirty thoughts, but usually not dirty feelings. (Correspondingly, we may have clean habits while feelings are described as *pure*, not clean.)

(4) Perhaps most importantly of all, we are familiar with the proverbial purity of 'untouched nature'. Nature in itself is not dirty. We describe natural elements, such as clay, as dirty when we fear that they may soil something else, such as our shoes.

This list of limiting cases is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Anyway, at least these cases have a common denominator, which is *the absence of human intervention*. In this connection, 'nature' is defined as the environment insofar as it is *not* subject to human intervention. The word 'human' is not important here, but rather the fact that we cannot

imagine the appropriate cleaning effort. We cannot imagine that anyone could be *in charge* of these things.

Conversely, it seems that the items that we do describe as dirty are almost always *someone's* – someone's country, someone's dog, someone's hair. Thus the description seems to imply that someone – though not always a specified person – is responsible for maintaining the ideal state from which its dirty condition is a deviation.

Now returning to my question – what else must there be in a world where there are dirty and clean items? – the answer is then that this is a world in which our relations to things are informed by care and *responsibility*, or by what the historian *Susan Strasser* calls our *stewardship of objects* (see 21 – 67). – This also brings us to the concept of refuse.

#### 6. *The History of Refuse*

In the law, *refuse* may be described as –

a material or object that the owner has discarded or means to, or is under the obligation to, discard (Avfallslagen 1 kap. 3 §)<sup>7</sup>

or, for instance, as –

any residue of a process of production, transformation or use, any substance, material, product or more generally, any movable goods that has been discarded or is meant to be discarded by its owner (Code de l'environnement, L541-1, II)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "[E]tt ämne eller föremål som innehavaren kasserat eller avser eller är skyldig att kassera".

<sup>8</sup> "[T]out résidu d'un processus de production, de transformation ou d'utilisation, toute substance, matériau, produit ou plus généralement tout bien meuble abandonné ou que son détenteur destine à l'abandon".

The crucial legal point is that the original owner wishes to give up (and in some cases, must give up) his or her right to the discarded item. Legally, the owner has the obligation to see to it that the refuse is collected (Avfallslagen 3 kap. 11 §) transported (8 §, 11 §), and processed and/or recycled (6 §, 12 §). Typically this means that the refuse is transferred to a recipient. After this point, the recipient takes over the owner's responsibilities (Avfallslagen 3 kap. 15 §).

These definitions focus on the *cutting off of the relation* between the thing and its original owner – not on the *actual* impossibility of finding a meaningful use for it. Indeed, completely undamaged items routinely end up in the rubbish bin simply because they no longer have a place in the previous owner's life. This is true, for instance, of holiday photos, once the owner has died or simply forgot who is in the picture. (On the other hand, 'useless' things may still be collected as souvenirs by others.) – In the present Western culture, the concept of *refuse* thus indicates a point where we renounce our responsibility, our stewardship of things. 'Refuse' is understood as an umbrella concept for everything that we throw away.

Historically, this is a new situation and by no means the norm in a global perspective. Strasser points out that 'refuse' is in fact a relatively recent invention. The pre-industrial household did not produce refuse in the modern sense (Strasser 22). Instead of refuse there were various kinds of scraps and leftovers, to be saved for secondary uses or utilised as fuels and fertilisers.

Indeed, this may be universally true of societies living in conditions of scarcity. In the introduction of her Chinese cookery book, *Ningsu Malmqvist* describes her sister's household in the city of Chengdu, which she visited in 1979. There is no dustbin in the house. Nor is there anything to throw away, with the exception of ashes from the fire. Everything else is either used or recycled by itinerant buyers (Malmqvist 12-13). Similarly, a historical study of the sanitary services in Finland in 1830 – 1930 shows that 'refuse' was,

for a long time, supposedly only produced in urban areas (Nygård 23). Dung and household waste were collected and transported to the surrounding countryside for fertilizing purposes. For a long time, the 'waste problem' indeed consisted of the fact that cities were unable to meet the farmers' demand for more fertilizer (Nygård 109).

The emergence of the modern concept of refuse can also be traced in the history of language. The anthropologist and philosopher *Cyrille Harpet* describes the development of the corresponding French word *déchet*. Etymologically, *déchet* (like its German and Scandinavian equivalents, *Abfall*, *affall*, and *avfall*) is connected with something *falling off* or *falling down*; for instance, shavings or scraps falling on the floor when wood, metal or fabric is worked upon. Later the words also acquired the meaning of 'loss in measure or weight', say, in the course of industrial production or storage, as well as 'fall from grace', either religiously or politically (Harpet 50 – 51; "Affall").

Today, a number of related words are used more or less synonymously – such as 'litter', 'trash', 'debris', 'rubbish', 'garbage', 'dirt', and 'junk'. They vaguely stand for whatever is thrown away in a household. Originally, however, the words indicated *specific* materials or *things* that were saved for secondary uses. '*Litter*' (from the mediaeval Latin 'lectus') originally meant 'bed' – such as hay used for bedding. '*Trash*' meant 'loppings of trees' – dry leaves, cut branches, etc., lying about, to be used as fuel. (Possibly the word originally meant material obtained by threshing.) '*Debris*' (from Old French *débriser* – 'break down') stood for material that was broken down or broken off from something. '*Rubbish*' is derived from 'rubble', or 'pieces of undressed stone', used especially as filling-in for walls. '*Garbage*' originally meant 'offal' and was used for food. '*Scrap*' meant 'material produced by scraping'. '*Dirt*' (from Old Norse 'drit') originally means 'excrement'. '*Junk*' stood for 'pieces (chunks) of cable', to be reused for fibre.

In sum, pre-industrial culture had no use for an umbrella concept of refuse. Rather there were specific concepts variously related to what we today vaguely cover by the word



'refuse'. The introduction of a general concept of refuse reflects changes in our relations to the things in our environment – which are in turn connected to increasing living standards, urbanisation, and increased mobility. Imaginably, these concepts will change once more if our lives change. In the law, there is now a tendency again to differentiate between different types of waste, and to enhance the original producer's responsibility (see Avfallslagen 3a kap (4.6.2004/452)).

### 7. Conclusion: A Cosmic Order

Summing up, it appears that the concepts of dirt and refuse imply a notion of someone being 'in charge' of the relevant things. They imply that *someone* (not necessarily an identified person) has failed to maintain the ideal state from which dirt and decay constitute deviations. Thus these concepts presuppose a world of culture, a world where human beings – you and me – are in charge. They imply a situation where conscious effort is needed for the maintenance of a normatively 'natural' state of things (Faryno 60 – 61).

The Genesis, which may be said in some ways to spell out the cosmology of a Christian culture, 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 (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 2.15).

The world is our home. It is placed in our charge, for us to take care of. In this implicit picture, the world is a κόσμος – or cosmos – in the original sense of the word: an ordered whole ruled by law. It has a certain order which requires things to live up to their proper teleologies. And this also means that the things in our environment have claims on us. A window *must* be cleaned, a shoe *must* be re-soled regardless of whether we *want* to do it (cf. Sartre 63).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 'This world is *difficult*. The notion of difficulty here is not a reflexive // notion which would imply a relation to oneself. It is out there, in the world, it is a quality of the world given to perception (just as are their paths

But the world refuses to comply with our will. Things fail to live up to the ideals that lie inherent in their identities as things. Thus the notions of dirt and refuse are indicative of the Sisyphean task that constantly awaits a cultural being.

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to the possible goals, the possibilities themselves and the exigences of objects – books that ought to be read, shoes to be re-soled, etc.), it is the noetic correlate of the activity we have undertaken – or have only conceived' (Sartre, 62 – 63).

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