

Olli Lagerspetz. *A Philosophy of Dirt*. Reaktion Books 2018. 256 pp. \$24.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9781780239187).

In his recently published volume on the meaning and significance of dirt, Olli Lagerspetz revisits themes and arguments originally developed in his 2006 Swedish-language book on the same subject. As he explains in the introduction, he ultimately rejected the idea of simply translating the Swedish version into English, discovering that his arguments, as originally formulated, were rooted in a specifically Scandinavian experience of dirt and cleanliness and demanded to be reframed within a different linguistic and cultural setting (7).

If dirt seems less than obvious as a subject for philosophical inquiry, it is the burden of Lagerspetz's book to show that it has real philosophical import. His claim, ultimately, is that dirt is an essential aspect of our engagement with the world. Recognizing objects as dirty and clean, he argues, is part of what it means to perceive objects in the first place. In this sense, writing the philosophy of dirt is not like writing the philosophy of baseball, cybersecurity, or even hygiene, in the sense that all three could just as easily be absent from human experience. To think philosophically about dirt, according to Lagerspetz, is to examine human experience at the level of its essential form.

From the perspective of dominant philosophical and anthropological traditions, this conclusion by no means follows. In the first part of his book, Lagerspetz shows that both traditions have tended to deny the reality of dirt, either by erecting a theoretical framework wherein dirt has no place, or by reducing it to a kind of confused subjective projection. Within philosophy, this dismissive posture is a legacy of 17th century materialism (42). For the thinkers of this persuasion, Lagerspetz explains, only the measurable physical properties of objects and the immediate subjective effects of those physical properties have a claim to reality. Being neither a measurable property, nor an immediately given secondary quality like colour or taste, dirt therefore simply *does not exist* for modern philosophers or their successors. Within anthropology, meanwhile, the tendency to deny the reality of dirt does not follow from a lack of interest in dirt and related concepts such as impurity. Indeed, it is precisely within anthropology that these ideas are taken up explicitly. What happens here, rather, is that properties like dirt come to be seen as emanations of human consciousness—as categories that are projected onto an originally neutral, valueless reality, and that are rooted ultimately in human interests and relations (83).

For anthropologist Mary Douglas, to whom Lagerspetz devotes considerable attention, dirt does not even have the dignity of a distinct category. In her 1966 classic *Purity and Danger*, which Lagerspetz regards as foundational in the tradition of 'anthropological reductionism,' Douglas argues that dirt is what escapes—or threatens—human efforts at categorization. We experience the shoes placed on the dining table as dirty because shoes *do not belong* on the dining table (82). They are 'matter out of place,' to cite Douglas' famous definition. Lagerspetz raises some incisive objections to Douglas, suggesting that the just-cited definition functions better as an account of messiness than dirtiness. After all, he notes, dirt very often *has a place* (89). Dirt swept up from the floor belongs in the trash bin, and does not cease to be dirt once it is placed there. This definitional issue is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem, one that afflicts the entire tradition of which Douglas is a part. For Lagerspetz, in short, it is mistake to understand dirt as a kind of ordering principle. Rather than a category that is simply 'imposed' on a neutral, meaningless reality, dirt is part of reality as it is immediately given.

To see what Lagerspetz has in mind, consider the example of a plate. To perceive a plate *as* a plate, clearly, means recognizing that the given object satisfies a certain physical description,

namely, that it is a relatively flat, relatively smooth, probably circular object. However, this is not sufficient since otherwise we would not be able to differentiate plates from frisbees or glass tabletops. What is required, in addition, is an awareness of the *purpose* of the given object. Only to the extent that we recognize that the object in question is intended as a receptacle for food do we perceive it as a plate. This is where cleanliness and dirtiness enter the picture. If perceiving the plate as such means recognizing its purpose, or telos, then it means being able to recognize instances in which the purpose of the plate is frustrated. One such instance occurs when the plate is broken into pieces; another occurs when the plate bears obvious traces of a previous meal or some other unwanted substance. In this latter case, in which the telos of the object is only temporarily frustrated, we describe the plate as ‘dirty.’ When the telos of the plate is able to be realized, conversely, we describe the plate as ‘clean.’

At first blush, this account of dirt seems to have much in common with the one given by the anthropological reductionists. Like the latter, Lagerspetz seems to have made the meaning of dirt relative to human interests. Lagerspetz’s response is that this is generally true of the properties that we ascribe to objects, including putatively absolute properties such as length, width, height, etc. Such properties, he explains, are not simply *there*, waiting to be discovered. Like dirtiness and cleanliness, they present themselves in the context of certain human practices, in this case, practices of measuring (174). This does not mean that the properties in question are *produced* by the corresponding practices. Objects do not have geometrical properties simply because I propose to measure them, any more so than things are dirty because I clean them. Objects *really have* determinate geometrical properties; and things *really are* dirty. The point is simply that our sense of what really exists is bound up inextricably with the practices and priorities that we bring to bear on the world. The objective and subjective are two faces of the same coin (176-7).

Though he does not go out of his way to link them with his overall metaphysics of dirt, Lagerspetz also offers incisive analyses of the way that the concept of dirtiness is employed in everyday life. In general, he suggests, dirtiness is employed in two ways: either we describe things as dirty on the basis of a concern for the things themselves; or we describe things as dirty out of a concern for the threat that they pose to *other* objects. A dirty carpet, for example, is dirty in the first sense of the term. We clean the carpet not because it threatens *our* cleanliness, but because the purpose of the carpet itself is threatened by its dirtiness. Rainboots, on the other hand, tend to be described as dirty in the second sense of the term. Our concern is usually not with the rainboots per se, but the threat they pose to objects like carpets (55). (Objects do not fall absolutely into one category or another: children’s hands are sometimes cleaned for their own sake and sometimes for the sake of furniture and garments). Another very general feature of the concept of dirtiness is that ascriptions of ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’ make sense only when someone has responsibility over the object in question (184). The phrase ‘the plate is dirty’ is natural when applied to a plate that someone owns and uses; it is less natural when it is applied to a plate that has been discarded.

In these parts of the book and elsewhere, Lagerspetz demonstrates an impressive attention to the subtle ways in which dirt does (and does not) become an object of human concern. It is surprising, therefore, that Lagerspetz is entirely silent on what seems to me to be the central fact in our relationship with dirt—namely, the fact that it demands constant, ever-renewed vigilance and frequently exhausting effort. His silence on this point is typical of the philosophical tradition. Despite the lavish consideration paid to the human way of being in the world, there has been scant attention paid to the substantial proportion of time that we spend preserving the world for human habitation. One exception to this trend in Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies the ‘fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice’ as one of

the defining preoccupations of human existence. Another exception is Simone de Beauvoir. Commenting in *The Second Sex* on the condition of the housewife, de Beauvoir underlines the monotony and futility of cleaning:

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.... Eating, sleeping, cleaning – the years no longer rise up towards heaven, they lie spread out ahead, grey and identical.

Although the social facts and gender dynamics to which de Beauvoir is responding in this passage have evolved somewhat, it would be a mistake to regard the situation as having changed in any essential respect. As de Beauvoir notes, ‘the battle against dirt is never won.’

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