STS Encounters
Research papers from DASTS
Volume 17 • Issue 2 • 2025

Is Waste Really Dirt?

Some Reflections on Mary Douglas, my iPod, and the Performativity of Partial Understandings

Joren Peeters
KU Leuven Institute of Philosophy, Belgium

STS Encounters is published by the Danish Association for Science and Technology Studies (DASTS). The aim of the journal is to publish high quality STS research; support collaboration in the STS community and contribute to the recognition of Danish STS nationally and internationally.

ISSN: 1904-4372

Is Waste Really Dirt?

Some Reflections on Mary Douglas, my iPod, and the Performativity of Partial Understandings

Joren Peeters

Abstract

This article argues that it does matter in which terms we understand the alarming material reality of surplus-artefacts polluting our planet, because how we understand these artefacts has an impact on their concrete trajectory and how they are organized. For this, the article proposes to salvage Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as "matter out of place". This well-worn understanding of waste lay the foundations of waste and discard studies but is heavily criticized these days. However, contrary to its classic and problematic "symbolic-structuralist" reading, this article argues for a material-semiotic reading of Purity and Danger in which its theory of dirt is not universal, totalizing, and strictly concerned with meaning, but instead situated in concrete empirical exemplars, focussed on the plural processes of socio-technical ordering, and concerned with both meaning, matter and their intrinsic entanglement. Dirt is a specific term that cannot fully capture the complex reality of our contemporary "waste problem". But this does not mean that the concept is irrelevant in the context of these contemporary environmental challenges. By means of the concrete empirical exemplar of a broken iPod, this article argues that partial understandings of waste indeed do not fully capture the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem, but that they nevertheless play an active organizing role in that reality, that they do something. When thinking about our contemporary waste problem, we must thus adjust our theoretical tools: we don't have to think in terms of adequate or inadequate concepts that capture reality or not, but instead in terms of partial understandings that play a more or less prominent role in organizing reality in a specific way. This idea of the performativity of partial understandings will allow to better think the multiplicity of waste that we actually encounter in practice.

Keywords

Mary Douglas, dirt, waste, discard studies, material-semiotics

Introduction

> [T]he yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts.
> (Douglas 1966, 163)

> Méfiez-vous de la pureté; c'est le vitriol de l'ame.
> (Latour 1984, 171)

We all know waste: we wash it off our bodies, we drop it on the street, we see it on the news. Waste is not only a central element of our everyday experience but has also become a key problem of the imminent ecological crisis: increasing amounts of waste and unsustainable waste management cause serious health, safety, and environmental consequences – and according to The World Bank (2023) "annual waste generation is expected to increase by 73% from 2020 levels to 3.88 billion tonnes in 2050". But what *is* "waste"? We know what it is in the sense that we seem to spontaneously know what to do with it – sweep it out or throw it in the right bin – but can we adequately *conceptualize* it? In the relatively young interdisciplinary fields of waste studies (Gille & Lepawsky 2022) and discard studies (Liboiron & Lepawsky 2022) a lot of effort has gone into this endeavour, and the classic "starting

point" (Cohen & Johnson 2005, xi) for any such theory of waste is Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as "matter out of place".

Wait, what? Theory of *waste*, definition of *dirt*? We already sense a difficulty here; waste, dirt… and we can go on: rubbish, trash, junk, discard, garbage, refuse… – a polysemy (and this is only English!) that is almost always relativized away by using the terms interchangeably or choosing one "because in most of the world they end up in the same places anyway" (Franklin-Wallis 2023, 5). This way of going about the unimportance of terms when thinking about our contemporary "waste problem" seems to be a pragmatic shortcut justified by urgency: waste, dirt, rubbish… whatever; we know what we mean right? There is this undeniable and alarming material reality: a rapidly growing amount of surplus-artefacts produced by the industrial production processes of global capitalism polluting our planet. And then there are some terms to describe this material reality. But these terms and the way in which we understand these artefacts do not really matter - just pick one, or do not pick at all. They're just words, right? The real urgent issue is not the words, but the matter.

In this article, I will argue against this general tendency in waste and discard studies to not take the terms seriously. As Donna Haraway puts it: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with" (Haraway 2016, 12). In line with this, I will argue that it *does* matter in which terms we understand the alarming material reality of surplus-artefacts polluting our planet because, contrary to "ending up in the same place," how we understand these artefacts (for example, *as dirt*) has an impact on their concrete trajectory and how they are organized. So, when thinking about our contemporary waste problem, we cannot simply equate all terms or lump them together. The difference matters.

For this, I will critically revisit – or rather, *salvage* – Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as "matter out of place". This well-worn understanding of waste established the foundations of waste and discard studies but is heavily criticized these days. However, contrary to its classic and problematic "symbolic-structuralist" reading, I will argue for a material-semiotic reading of Douglas in which her theory of dirt is not universal and totalizing, but situated and partial. Dirt is thus a specific term which cannot fully capture the complex and contradictory reality of our contemporary "waste problem". However, I will argue that this does not mean that the concept is irrelevant in the context of these contemporary environmental challenges. I will argue, by means of a concrete empirical exemplar, that it is precisely *because* partial understandings of waste do not fully capture the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem that they play an active organizing role *in* that reality - that they *do* something. This idea of the performativity of partial understandings allows us to better think the multiplicity of waste that we actually encounter in practice. I will then conclude by exploring some practical ramifications.

A material-semiotic reading of *Purity and Danger* – salvaging

Mary Douglas introduces her famous (or rather *notorious*) definition of dirt in a much quoted and very short passage in the second chapter of *Purity and Danger*:

> If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (Douglas 1966, 36)

She than continues in the next paragraph:

> It is a relative idea. 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 down-stairs; under-clothing appearing 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 1966, 37).

The core of Douglas argument is thus that dirt is a relational concept: it is not something in the object itself which makes it dirty, but the fact that the object does not fit the way we try to organize and classify our environment. Douglas thus denaturalizes dirt: dirt is not, but is *made* as a by-product of the effort to create order.

Purity and Danger is the key classic text of waste and discard studies. As Gille and Lepawsky (2022, 4) put it: "No other classical text has received more attention than anthropologist Mary Douglas' definition of dirt". Or, more boldly, in the words of Cohen and Johnson (2005, xi): "The starting point for any theory of dirt is Mary Douglas's classic study" – be it as a point of departure or, more recently, as a point of critique. As a point of departure Douglas' dirt is generalized as a frame for analysing a wide array of different contemporary waste problems. Her catchphrase has been used to tackle questions on spatial planning, urbanism, and geography (Campkin & Cox 2007), in questions on subject formation (Kristeva 1980, Laporte 2000), and in literary criticism and aesthetics (Viney 2014). But most recent authors tent to be more critical.

First there seems to be a formal problem with Douglas' dirt: according to most contemporary scholars this "starting point" is repeated so many times that it has been flattened into a cliché. As Alexander and O'Hare (2020, 4) state: "Douglas is almost ritually invoked in waste scholarship". Or, in the words of Mol (2020, 392): "Mary Douglas's assertion that *dirt is matter out of place* is repeated again and again. […] it has become a mantra and I wonder if it deserves to be endlessly reiterated." Thus, a justified question on this point: why do I reiterate it? Why still think with Douglas? If it has become a cliché, why do I then believe it is important? Well, precisely *because* it is a cliché; Clichés, rituals, and mantras are not empty boxes but ways of organizing thought and making sense of our actions and the things we encounter in those actions. The fact that it has become a cliché, that it is "almost ritually evoked" and "has become a mantra", rather than make it empty and meaningless, instead suggests that Douglas' dirt plays an important role in the way we perceive, think about, and handle our contemporary waste problem. It is precisely this performativity of dirt that I will point out in this article.

But besides this formal objection, most recent authors also tend to be critical for more substantive reasons. They stress the problems that arise when generalizing Douglas' dirt as a frame for analysing our contemporary waste problem. A first problem has to do with *the act of generalizing itself* when thinking about waste. In waste and discard studies Douglas is portrayed as *the* paradigmatic example of a "symbolic-structuralist approach" (Alexander & O'Hare 2020, 3; O'Hare 2019, 2), or as Culler (1985, 2) puts it a "semiotic" approach. In this classic reading, Douglas ultimately isn't interested in concrete dirt but in abstract systems of classification. Culler (who believes this is a good thing) puts this in an almost caricatural way: "she argues that dirt is vital evidence for the total structure of thought in a culture" (Culler 1985, 2). What is problematic about such an approach is: **1)** that it is too general and abstract for such a diverse and heterogenous problem as waste – in other words, its "**universalistic** tendencies" (Liboiron & Lepawsky 2022, 77); **2)** that its **totalizing** and reductionist (cf. "the total structure of thought in a culture"); and **3)** that, in its focus on semantic relationality and meaning, it **neglects the material reality** of waste – as O'Brian (2008, 128) puts it: "Douglas' focus on the symbolism of ritual pollution fits awkwardly into discussions of the billions of tons of municipal solid waste that enter the world's landfills every day".

Even though Douglas is portrayed as *the* paradigmatic example of a "symbolic-structuralist approach", I believe that such a reading is an oversimplification and misses the core of Douglas insights. I follow Campkin in his suggestion that "Douglas's work does not fit comfortably in the canon of structuralist anthropology in which we might otherwise place her" (Campkin & Cox 2007, 71). At first glance, we recognize a range of abstract terms (structure, system, order, classification, etc.), which indeed seems to suggest "universalistic tendencies", but these terms are never free-floating to form a coherent conceptual space of universal metaphysics. Douglas' "theory" is instead always grounded in exceedingly concrete and diverse empirical exemplars: from shoes and cooking utensils to bathroom equipment and underwear. As Campkin puts it:

> rather than a grand meta-theory of dirt [...] the reader is presented with what Douglas describes as 'homely' arguments. Emphatically ordinary, often domestic, metaphors are deployed to develop the book's ideas, mirroring the banal matter of dirt itself. (Campkin & Cox 2007, 71).

As we can see in the two paragraphs where Douglas introduced her definition of dirt, these empirical exemplars and the "theoretical" argument are stated in one breath. Throughout the book empirical observations and theory are constantly intertwined and evolve together. They cannot be separated. The empirical exemplars are not just illustrations of the argument, they are instead an integral part of it, the means by which the ideas develop. Dirt is matter out of place *in the sense that shoes are dirty on the table*. This becomes a concrete model to think with. Like the Kuhnian exemplar (Kuhn 2012, 188), Douglas tries to see other cases (for example the "abominations of Leviticus") *as like* shoes which are dirty on the table. Dirt as matter out of place is not the universal, theoretical conclusion of the book, arrived at by making abstraction from a wide range of facts. It is instead a productive tool that allows us to see seemingly distant cases as alike;

not to generalise the differences away, but rather to allow the difference to appear and to better articulate the plurality of the concrete cases. It is a symmetrical approach dedicated to multiplicity: "The right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety, on the differences which makes comparison worthwhile." (Douglas 1966, 78). If there are "conclusions" in the book, they are not abstract theoretical truisms, but instead open and pluralistic typologies, such as a typology of different ways of treating anomalies, or of different forms of interference between moral rules and pollution ideas. So contrary to what the abstract terms and the structuralist context in which she writes suggests, we can read Douglas' analysis of dirt, rather than as a disembodied universal theory, as "theory" in the sense that Mol gives it:

> In this context, the term *theory* does not stand for an overarching explanatory scheme that results from a process of analytically drawing together a wide range of facts. Instead, it indicates the words, models, metaphors, and syntax that help to shape the ways in which realities are perceived and handled. (Mol 2021, 1-2)

Moreover, in the acknowledgments of the book, we get a clou of its empirical groundedness and its situated embeddedness in Douglas' own life, when she states:

> My other source of inspiration has been my husband. In matters of cleanness his threshold of tolerance is so much lower than my own that he more than anyone else has forced me into taking a stand on the relativity of dirt. (Douglas 1966, viii).

This idea of the concrete empirical groundedness and the situated relativity of dirt brings us to the second problem with Douglas alleged "symbolic-structuralist approach". In a classic structuralist reading of

Douglas, her "theory" of dirt is totalizing. Douglas is presented as if she presupposes a "total structure of thought in a culture", a coherent fixed social order of which dirt is merely the by-product. And, if we look back at the above quoted paragraph, such a reading may indeed seem to be justified; Douglas states that defining dirt as matter out of place

> is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (Douglas 1966, 36)

At first sight, the central concept of Douglas' analysis seems to be "order", which sounds quite totalizing indeed, but if we read this paragraph closer - and then also read a little bit further - we see that her analysis is not so much about order as about order*ing*. Contrary to the noun, the verb is not totalizing because it stresses the fact that we are not dealing with a fixed state, but with an always incomplete, ever-ongoing process. Moreover, dirt as "matter out of place", rather than being "evidence for the total structure of thought in a culture", is precisely evidence of the impossibility of any such "total structure". Dirt implies an outside, "a contravention of that order". As a result, what dirt makes manifest is that any semblance of order is only a temporarily fragile artificial construction. Dirt makes us recognise our organizing efforts "for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are" (Douglas 1966, 170 - 171). Or as John Law (1994, 1-2) puts it: "orders are never complete. Instead, they are more or less precarious and partial accomplishments that may be overturned. They are, in short, better seen as verbs rather than nouns".

If Douglas sometimes gives the impression that she is talking about a stable social order, she states in the introduction that this is only for the sake of argument: "In describing these pressures on boundaries and margins I admit to having made society sound more systematic than it really is" (Douglas 1966, 4). In the same paragraph she describes social experience as "inherently untidy" and: "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without […] that a *semblance* of order is created" (my emphasis). Thus, it is only a temporarily artificial construction indeed. Or in other words:

> by social structure I am not usually referring to a total structure which embraces the whole of society continually and comprehensively. I refer to particular situations in which individual actors are aware of a greater or smaller range of inclusiveness. (Douglas 1966, 101)

Dirt then, as that which does not fit in *a particular ordering effort*, is always *also a particular case*: what is experienced as dirt is individually variable (cf. her husband who's "threshold of tolerance" has forced her into "taking a stand on the relativity of dirt"), but always also highly socially and culturally mediated because "no individual lives in isolation and his scheme will have been partly received from others" (Douglas 1966, 40). Dirt is the specific by-product of a specific ordering effort that is individually experienced but socially and culturally mediated. This means that, contrary to a "universal" and "totalizing" theory, we can read *Purity and Danger* as what Law (1994, 2) calls a "modest sociology" in which "the problem of the social order is replaced by a concern with the plural processes of socio-technical ordering".

The word "socio-*technical*" might however seem to be a strange fit with Douglas' alleged "symbolic-structuralist approach" since "technical" may sound too materialist. This brings us to the third problem: in its focus on semantic relationality and meaning (what Culler calls a "semiotic" approach), Douglas' analysis supposedly neglects materiality. But it is not clear how a book whose main argument stresses how concrete materials are constantly mobilized in processes of social organization - and form an integral and active element of such processes - can "neglect materiality". This accusation of a neglect of

materiality implies a strict separation of meaning and matter that does not fit in the frame of Douglas' analysis. Yes, Douglas' analysis is about meaning in the sense that for her matter and space are organized and experienced meaningfully, but it is also about matter since it is about concrete material consequences and spatial organization. In Douglas' analysis matter is meaningful, and meaning is materially and spatially constituted. In such a framework meaning and matter cannot be separated; rather, they are "entangled" (Barad 2007), they form a "material-semiotic node" (Haraway 1988, 595). Thus, rather than a "semiotic" approach, we should read *Purity and Danger* as a "material-semiotic" approach (Law 2019, 1), which understands elements of the social world as "simultaneously semiotic (because they are relational, and/or they carry meaning) and material (because they are about the physical stuff caught up and shaped in those relations)".

So, to recapitulate, contrary to its classic symbolic-structuralist reading, I argue for a reading of Douglas where her analysis of dirt is **1)** not a universal theory, but instead a situated, pluralistic theory developed through concrete empirical exemplars **2)** not a totalizing theory, but instead a "modest sociology" in which the problem of social order is replaced by a concern with the plural processes of socio-technical order*ing*; **3)** not a semiotic approach only concerned with meaning, but instead a material-semiotic approach where meaning and matter are intrinsically entangled.

To make my point more clear: I do not believe this "alternative" reading of Douglas is in fact that "alternative". I argued that, despite a somewhat structuralist vocabulary, the three above points are core sensibilities found in *Purity and Danger* itself. I made these sensibilities more explicit by relating the book to a more contemporary material-semiotic literature instead of placing it in the canon of structuralist anthropology. In this new context, our attention shifts to what I believe is actually already there. To put this differently, and in waste-related terms: I'm not making an argument for recycling *Purity and Danger* (which would imply a process of *transformation*), but instead an argument for *salvaging* it (which implies a combination of conserving and extracting[1]). And I believe this salvaging to be productive because, contrary to its classic structuralist reading, this material-semiotic reading of Douglas allows room for the multiplicity that, as I will argue, is paramount for thinking and handling our contemporary waste problem.

Is waste dirt? – understanding my iPod

In the above reading, however, some problems still remain when we want to think our contemporary waste problem in terms of Douglas' dirt. First, most of the waste generated by the production processes of late capitalism and overconsumption is not really "out of place". Most waste generated today has a place: first the trashcan, then an incinerator or a landfill… Matter thus organized is not "out of place", but instead in a very specific place - that is, "out of sight" (McDonagh et al. 2008, 26). A second problem is that most waste generated today is not a by-product of an ordering effort nor a dirty thread to the symbolic organization of society, but a planned outcome of production and a strategy for generating profit. The fact that the stuff we buy will at some point turn into waste is not a misplaced error, but a calculated result built into the design of the product itself (Packard 1960, Liboiron 2013). Think of the planned obsolescence in electronic devices (Shaikh et al. 2020) or of single use packages (Gilmore 2019). Waste is not the dirty exception of ordering – an anomaly – but the rule.

These two criticisms are in fact two arguments for the same general premise: waste *is not* dirt. Dirt is instead something quite specific, as Furniss (2017, 306) puts it: "many contemporary applications of Douglas pay too little attention to the specificity of 'dirt'". The conclusion that is drawn from this premise is that, since waste is not dirt, dirt is an irrelevant concept in the context of our contemporary waste problem.

1 For an account of this idea of salvaging as conserving/extracting see Santos da Costa & Dalsgaard (2024). I thank one of the readers for drawing my attention to this publication and, more generally, for proposing this distinction between recycling and salvaging to make my point more clear.

I follow the premise, but not the conclusion. I believe waste is not dirt in the sense that Douglas' dirt cannot fully capture the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem. But to conclude from this that dirt is thus an irrelevant concept for thinking about waste implies some sort of correspondence theory and a related passivity of concepts which does not seem to hold – and especially not in the case of waste. If you conclude from the inadequacy to fully capture the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem that dirt is an irrelevant concept for thinking about that problem, the implied idea of the function of concepts is that concepts simply correspond to an outside reality or not, without really touching it. In this vision, concepts are passive boxlike things and, again, meaning and matter are strictly separated: the concepts are only *about* reality, not *in* reality themselves. Accordingly, when waste isn't dirt, dirt is about something else and is therefore indeed irrelevant to thinking about waste.

We saw already that this line of thinking does not really fit in the framework of Douglas' analysis, but to make the same claim more general about our contemporary waste problem, would no longer be a textual argument (about Douglas' frame of analysis), but a metaphysical one (about what *really is*). And as Alfred North Whitehead said: "The recourse to metaphysics is like throwing a match into a powder magazine. It blows up the whole arena." (Whitehead 1920, 29; quoted in Latour 2004, 243-244). So, to avoid getting lost in this eternal metaphysical quarrel about the relation between words and worlds - to not "blow up the whole arena" - I will develop my argument, in the spirit of the above mentioned "situated theory", by means of a concrete empirical exemplar.

What is waste? Well, a couple of weeks ago, while moving, I found this iPod Touch somewhere deep in an old drawer[2]. I originally bought it in 2012; it has a broken screen, runs on completely outdated software… there was no point in bringing it to a repair centre or trying to sell it. For me it was just *valueless stuff*, that is to say, *rubbish* (Thompson 1979).

2 As stated in the WHO (2023) report: "E-waste is the fastest growing solid waste stream in the world".

So, I simply threw my iPod, at the entrance of my local supermarket, in the designated collection bin of the official e-waste recycling company *Recupel*. But my iPod is not only valueless stuff. It contains mercury, lead, and cadmium – notoriously toxic materials which can be released in the environment or in human and non-human bodies if my iPod is not put in the right place so it can be properly processed (WHO 2023). Thus, it is also *a dangerous threat*, a matter out of place, i.e., *dirt*, for which we must set up safe boundaries. That's why, in the EU, there is strict legislation on the processing of e-waste. Therefore one possible trajectory is that, to skip this legislation and the extra costs that comes with it, my iPod (or parts of my iPod) will eventually be reconceptualized as *a possible resource*, some sort of fertilizer or *compost*, so it can be shipped away to the global south via a route of municipal collection centres (for example *Br.E.L*), private recyclers (for example *Renewi*), and retail recyclers (legal or illegal).[3] When thus shipped away to a "recycling" destination it will largely be ignored by most local authorities (because it is just valueless stuff), landfilled, and processed by informal burning practices that severely damage human and non-human health (because it is a dangerous threat) (Little 2019; Song & Li 2014), while at the same time providing an income for people in a very precarious situation (because it is a possible resource) (Little 2022).

In this story, what *is* my iPod *really*? Just valueless stuff, a dangerous threat, or a possible resource? Is it rubbish, dirt, or compost? In the example above we see that it *really is* all these contrasting realities at the same time. This story of my iPod indicates that there is not one way of understanding waste that completely captures its contradictory reality. What we see instead is a constellation of different partial ways

3 Even though the EU has ratified the Basel Convention and the Basel Ban Amendment, and thus has legal barriers to international waste dumping in place, the Basel Action Network report of 2018 showed that, even if I disposed of my iPod in a legal manner, the above would still be a possible trajectory: "GPS tracking has revealed European WEEE export rates moving steadily from West to East and from North to South, away from Europe to their continental neighbors in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia" (Basel Action Network 2018, 104). For a very important nuancing of this "dumping storyline" see Lepawsky (2019).

of understanding waste *that each help to shape its concrete trajectory*. Different understandings of waste come with (or *are*) different practical and material consequences: rubbish is just thoughtlessly thrown away, for dirt we set up boundaries and constraints to diminish the danger, and compost we try to salvage. We thus have to switch our theoretical tools when thinking about waste; we do not need to think in terms of concepts that adequately capture reality or not, but in terms of partial ways of understanding that frame and organize reality in specific ways.

It is important to take into account that "understanding" in this context does not necessarily have to be explicitly or conceptually articulated.[4] I use "understanding" in the pragmatic phenomenological sense, which is informed by the insight that, in our everyday dealings with our surrounding world, we always already have an implicit, practical understanding of the things we encounter and the things we do. This is also very much in line with the above idea of material-semiotics; we do not live in an abstract three-dimensional space, filled with neutral geometrical objects, which we (as subjects) then dress, by means of interpretation, with meaning. "A three-dimensional multiplicity of possible positions which gets filled up with Things present-at-hand is never proximally given" (Heidegger 1962, 136). "Nothing in [...] experience, nothing at all, validates this astonishing reduction" (Latour 2013, 103-104). Meaning and matter are instead always already entangled: we always already inhabit a meaningful world in which the things we (as actors) encounter are *for something* and *do something*; they have a certain purpose, and a certain place that isn't neutral or random. "In each case the place is the definite 'there' or 'yonder' ["Dort" und "Da"] of an item of equipment which *belongs somewhere*" (Heidegger 1962, 136. Emphasis in original). Meaning comes before abstraction and our understanding of this meaning is in the first place implicit, practical, and material. Theory then, is an explicit articulation of these implicit/practical/material understandings.

Thus, "understanding" is not necessarily something explicitly

4 It is also for this reason that I do not just use Haraway's important idea of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988) which clearly informed my wording.

conceptual. Remember the story of my iPod; I do not think about it or explicitly articulate that I understand my iPod as "valueless stuff". I just *do* "valueless stuff"; my iPod is *enacted* (Mol 2002, 32-33) as such. The understanding is in *my practice* of throwing the iPod away. Moreover, the understanding is also in the material and infrastructural organization of my surroundings. Without there being the convenient e-waste recycle bin, a recycle park, curbside waste management… and all these things that enable smooth disposability, "understanding" my iPod as "valueless stuff" would not make sense (McDonagh et al. 2008). But "understanding" can also be very explicitly articulated – think in the case of my iPod for example about the EU-legislation.

Dirt is such a possible partial understanding of waste and Douglas' analysis can be read as an explicit articulation of this possible partial understanding. This understanding indeed does not completely capture the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem (reality can never be "completely captured") but it nevertheless has a concrete practical and material impact; it plays an active role *in* that reality. Douglas wants to give an account of this active role - she is not trying to develop a concept that captures all waste, everywhere; instead, she tries to analyze what it means and which different effects it has *when something is understood as dirt*. So, no: not all contemporary waste *is* dirt, but it can be – and often it is – partially understood as such. And this partial understanding has concrete consequences.

To put this argument in another exemplar: sand in the kitchen is dirty "matter out of place" so I sweep it out. Douglas' critics then point to the fact that the sand *is not* just "out of place", because even when put back "in place", the sand *is still there*. With sand this may not be such a big problem, but with artefacts containing mercury it is. Thus, the critics conclude, dirt is an inadequate and thus irrelevant concept for thinking in the context of our contemporary waste problem. My point then: yes, but the fact that I did *understand it as dirt* resulted in the fact that the sand is now no longer in the kitchen but in front of my door. And this becomes *even more relevant* when it is not about sand but about artefacts containing mercury.

Thus, the partial ways in which we understand our contemporary waste problem, instead of being "inadequate concepts", *do* something; they are performative. Different ways of understanding do different things and materialize in different performances. So, to come back to the question from the introduction: can we adequately conceptualize waste? No. But we don't need to. Instead, we need to investigate different partial understandings of waste and the concrete practical and material consequences of these different understandings. Douglas' dirt, rather than being irrelevant, is one such possible partial understanding – and the fact that it has become a cliché suggests that it is a quite important one. Thus, most substantive critique of Douglas' dirt (or rather: against applying Douglas' dirt in a contemporary context) consists of a right answer to an erroneous question. The right answer: *waste is not dirt*; the erroneous question: *is waste really dirt?* As we saw in the story of my iPod the epistemic horizon against which this question becomes meaningful is problematic – as if the difference does not matter, as if terms just passively capture reality and don't do something. Hence the suggestion I want to make for waste and discard scholars engaging with Douglas: stop asking if waste is really dirt and start asking how this partial way of understanding *is shaping* our contemporary waste problem or *can be mobilized* to change it.

Practical ramifications? – concluding

Above, I first tried to salvage *Purity and Danger* by arguing for a reading where its "theory of dirt" is – contrary to its classic structuralist reading – not universal, totalizing, and strictly concerned with meaning, but instead situated in concrete empirical exemplars, focussed on the plural processes of socio-technical ordering, and concerned with both meaning, matter, and their intrinsic entanglement: a material-semiotic reading. Then, from this salvage-reading, I developed an argument that was not so much an argument *pro*-Douglas, nor an argument *against* those who are critical of using Douglas in a contemporary context, but an argument against a certain metaphysics implied in those critiques,

or rather implied in the fact that those critics understand themselves *as critics* and what they say as a reason to dismiss Douglas. These critics started from the verry justified premise that waste is not dirt. But the fact that they conclude from this premise that dirt is thus an irrelevant concept to think about our contemporary waste problem implies a correspondence theory, which does not hold for waste. The case of my iPod showed that, in our complex and contradictory dealings with it, contemporary waste *is* different things: rubbish, dirt, compost. Thus, when thinking about our contemporary waste problem, we must account for this multiplicity that we actually encounter in practice. This implies that our theoretical efforts should not be aimed at finding the most adequate concept that completely captures the contradictory reality of our contemporary waste problem, nor should we dismiss concepts that are unable to do this. When thinking about our contemporary waste problem, we should instead adjust our theoretical tools: we don't have to think in terms of adequate or inadequate concepts that capture reality or not, but instead in terms of partial understandings that play a more or less prominent role in *organizing* reality in a specific way.

The argument I made was thus an argument *for theory*; Looking at a concrete example from practice provided lessons to better *think* about our contemporary waste problem. A next question would then be if we could somehow turn this fruitful entanglement of practice and theory the other way around: how can my theoretical conclusion help organize practice in a better way? By using practice to learn something for theory, the line between theory and practice is made porous – and porosity goes, in fact, in two directions. As a result, the theoretical argument is also *already* a practical one: the multiplicity I argue for in theory is something we must also account for in our practical interventions. Accordingly, the problem I stressed with the correspondence theory implied by some critics of Douglas is analogous to a central problem also encountered in practice: a disregard of multiplicity. Just as our theoretical efforts should *not* be aimed at finding the most adequate concept or dismissing inadequate ones, our practical interventions should not be aimed at providing *the* solution for *the* problem. Given the

fundamentally complex and contradictory nature of our contemporary waste problem, there is never such a thing as "the problem" nor can there ever be a closed answer or an absolute solution in the form of a simple technical fix. We are instead faced with a multitude of different situated, local and often conflicting problems that must be handled accordingly in an ongoing process of "tinkering"[5], of experimenting with a multitude of different partial, open-ended solutions – solutions which are often in tension with one another, and also subsequently generate new problems.

To stick to the story of my iPod, we can take e-waste "dumping sites" and their recent transformation under NGO pressure as an example of how things go wrong when practical interventions *don't* account for the fundamental multiplicity of contemporary waste. As we see in the two most notorious e-waste dumping sites – see Little (2022) for Agbogbloshie and Wang et al. (2021) for Guiyu – most environmental NGO's only stress the "dirty" part of the reality of the dumping site; it is a dangerous threat and thus the dumping site and all illegal burning practices must simply be eliminated. This seems to adequately handle part of the reality of the dumping site and its heterogeneous waste, *but only part*. It obscures the fact that a lot of people in extremely precarious situations are in fact making a living from the dumping site. It is not simply a question of changing the dangerous threat of the dumping site into a possible resource, because while being a dangerous threat, it is *already* also a possible resource: both dirt *and* compost. By ignoring this multiplicity the only source of income of precarious people is taken away. It is thus never a question of simply changing one thing into another – of changing a dangerous threat or valueless stuff into a possible resource – because the reality of our contemporary waste problem is too contradictory and complex to allow for such a simplistic operation; the heterogenous materiality of contemporary waste is never simply just *one thing.* As we saw in the case of my iPod, waste can instead be different things at the same time. And this multiplicity must be accounted for both in our theoretical renderings and in our practical interventions.

5 The term is from Mol (2010). My argument also owes a lot to her account of the multiplicity of reality, which she mostly developed in Mol (2002), but which is a central sensitivity in all her work.

Bio

Joren Peeters is PhD researcher at the KU Leuven Institute of Philosophy and member of the Centre for Metaphysics, Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Culture and of the Working Group on Philosophy of Technology. He does research in philosophy of technoscience and social philosophy and has a general interest in methodological questions about the connection between theory and practice. His current project is on the relation between different partial understandings of waste and on practical and material implications of this relation. He receives funding from the FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, project reference: 1114925N).

Orchid:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5589-7981

Bibliography

Alexander C. and O'Hare P. (2020), 'Waste and Its Disguises: Technologies of (Un)Knowing', *Ethnos*: DOI:10.1080/00141844.2020.1796734

Barad, K. (2007), *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press.

Campkin B. and Cox R., eds. (2007), *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*, London: I. B. Tauris.

Culler J. (1985). 'Junk and Rubbish: A Semiotic Approach', in *Diacritics*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 2-12.

Cohen, W. A. and Johnson, R., eds. (2005). *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Douglas M. (1966), *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge.

Franklin-Wallis, O. (2023), *Wasteland: The Dirty Truth About What We Throw Away, Where It Goes, and Why It Matters*, London: Simon & Schuster.

Furniss, J. (2017), "What Type of Problem Is Waste in Egypt?" *Social Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (August): 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12421

Gille, Z. and Lepawsky, J. eds. (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Waste Studies* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Gilmore, N. (2019), "The Imprudent Promise of Plastics", *The Saturday Evening Post*, June 12.

Haraway, D. J. (2016), *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press.

-----. (1988), "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3).

Hawkins, G. and Muecke, S. eds. (2003), *Culture and waste: The creation and destruction of value*, Lanham, Md., U.S.A.: Rowman & Littlefield.

Heidegger, M. (1962), *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie, J. & Robinson E. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Kristeva, J. (1980), *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*. Paris: Seuil.

Kuhn, S. T. (2012), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press (fourth edition).

Laporte D. (2000), *History of Shit*, trans. Benabid N. and el-Khoury R. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Latour, B. (1984), *Les microbes, guerre et paix, suivi de irréductions*, Métailié.

-----. (2004). "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern". *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), 225–248. https://doi.org/10.1086/421123

-----. (2013), *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Antropology if the Moderns*. trans. By Porter, C. Harvard University Press.

Law, J. (1994), *Organizing Modernity*, Blackwell.

-----. (2019), *Material Semiotics*, The Open University, http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2019MaterialSemiotics.pdf

Lepawsky, J. (2019), *Europe Has E-waste Problems: Exporting to Africa Isn't One of Them*. EuropeNow.

Liboiron, M. (2013), "Modern Waste as Strategy," *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society*. Special edition on Garbage & Wastes. no 29. (open access)

Liboiron, M. and Lepawsky, J. (2022), *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Little, P. C. (2022), *Burning Matters: Life, Labor, and E-Waste Pyropolitics in Ghana*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McDonagh, P., Patterson, M. and O'Malley, L. (2008), "Hidden Mountain: The Social Avoidance of Waste", *Journal of Macromarketing*. DOI: 10.1177/0276146708320442

Mol, A. (2002), *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Duke University Press.

-----. (2010), "Care and Its Values: Good Food in the Nursing Home," in *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*, ed. Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

-----. (2020), "Not quite clean: Trailing *schoon* and its resonances" in *The Sociological Review Monographs*, 68(2) 385 – 400.

-----. (2021), *Eating in Theory*. Duke University Press.

O'Brien, M. (2008), *A Crisis of Waste?: Understanding the Rubbish Society*, New York and London: Routledge.

O'Hare, P. (2019) 2023, "Waste". In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: http://doi.org/10.29164/19waste

Packard, V. (1960), *The Waste Makers*, New York: David McKay Company.

Shaikh, S., Thomas, K., Zuhair, S. (2020), "An exploratory study of e-waste creation and disposal: Upstream considerations". *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 155.

Santos da Costa, P., & Dalsgaard, S. (2024). "Salvage technoscience: Conserving and extracting the value of the Amazon Rainforest". *Environment and Planning F*, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/26349825241248845

Song, Q. Li, J. (2014). *A systematic review of the human body burden of e-waste exposure in China*. Environ Int. Jul;68:82-93. doi: 10.1016/j.envint.2014.03.018

Strasser, S. (1999), *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Thompson, M. (1979), *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, London: Pluto Press

Viney, W. (2014), *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, London: A&C Black.

Wang, K; Qian J. & Shenjing H. (2021), 'Contested Worldings of E-Waste Environmental Justice: Nonhuman Agency and E-Waste Scalvaging in Guiyu, China', in *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111:7, 2165-2184, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2021.1889353

Whitehead, A. N. (1920), *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge University Press.

World Health Organization: WHO. (2023). *Electronic waste (e-waste)*. https://www.who.int/newsroom/fact-sheets/detail/electronic-waste-(e-waste)

World Bank Group. (2023). Solid Waste Management. In *World Bank*.

https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/brief/solid-waste-management.