

THE IMPURE OBJECT OF THE LEFT SACRED

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The levels of impurities in a material are generally defined in relative terms. Standards have been established by various organizations that attempt to define the permitted levels of various impurities in a manufactured product. Strictly speaking, then a material's level of purity can only be stated as being more or less pure than some other material.

No matter what method is used, it is usually impossible to separate an impurity completely from a material. The reason that it is impossible to remove impurities completely is of thermodynamic nature and is predicted by the second law of thermodynamics. Removing impurities completely means reducing the entropy of the system to zero. This would require an infinite amount of work and energy as predicted by the second law of thermodynamics. What technicians can do is to increase the purity of a material to as near 100% as possible or economically feasible.

–Wikipedia

Purity is searched for in the laboratory, in sober separations of matter from matter; in the demarcations of laws; in certain religious practices. The removal of impurities is an elaborate quest of separations, a ceaseless maintenance of identity, a structuring of language and matter. Yet the transgression of limits of the pure is one of the great powers of the sacred, the impure left sacred which is full of potential for liberatory force. The left hand sacred, dangerous and impure, was integral to past Pagan/polytheist practices, and needs to be again.

The western imagination is much influenced in its thoughts on purity and impurity by the Book of Leviticus. Mary Douglas, an American anthropologist, analyzed purity and defilement through an analysis of that Biblical work in her 1966 book, *Purity and Danger*. She wrote, “Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas.” At the beginning of her investigation, she asked why would the hyrax, the hare, and the camel be impure, but the frog and gazelle clean and the hippopotamus not, and some locusts but not all?

While the abominations of Leviticus have attracted critical analysis for over 2,000 years, from the Hellenistic era when Greek thought based on the idea of natural reason was brought to bear upon them and theorized that the most delicious animals were the ones permitted, there were also the ethical theories, and the medical theories which remain popular to this day, with the anachronism of knowledge of trichinosis being projected back onto the undercooked pork of long ago. However, Douglas’ analysis found an obsessive interest in classification, of ordering, and an especial orientation to excluding hybridity, animals that in some way challenged the culture’s ordering principles. These principles came from the Biblical God’s creation; therefore, hybridity would be a violation of that. Cud-chewing, cloven-hooved animals were part of the Israelite God’s covenant with his chosen people, and their nature and habits reflected that original ordering and covenant. The pig,

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cloven-hooved, yet non cud-chewing, violated this along with the camel; so did the hare which, with its constant chewing, appeared to have cud but was not cloven-hooved. The impure also incorporated creatures that violated their assigned category, such as sea creatures like eels that didn't apparently have the required fins, or any creature that swarmed or teemed, like most insects, and worms which were associated with death, corpses, the epitome of the defiled.

Julia Kristeva took this analysis further in theorizing the Biblical focus on defilement as evidence of a “tremendous forcing” of maternal power into the symbolic order in Lacanian terms in her *Powers of Horror*.²⁴ She notes that, while Isaiah had already stressed purity and impurity, it was with the Second Temple, the returning of the Israelites from the Babylonian Captivity, that these oppositions became fundamental to Jewish religious life. In a way that would have seismic reverberations for future historical development, the Babylonian Captivity shaped the development of monotheism, as the religious life was molded by a great sense of the people having transgressed and so deserving such punishment.²⁵ She argues that material abomination and the topological (here the religious life of the Temple)²⁶ are two sides of a coin: “The one and the other are two aspects, semantic and logical, of the imposition of a strategy of identity, which is in all strictness, that of monotheism.” The human is completely set off from the Deity, with the first dietary prescription being laid down in the expulsion from Eden.

Kristeva sees these all as essentially about separation, the separations established by the symbolic Law of the Father, and she goes further to link these to the development/establishment of subjectivity.²⁷ Death is viewed as especially defiling. “A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable and lining of a human nature whose life is indistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution.”²⁸ The corpse is waste, it is the mixing of categories and the challenging of the symbolic and God's law.

If the root of systems of the pure/impure lie in the horror of death, especially the immediately present corpse, rotting, perhaps teeming with maggots, and stinking, not the clean bones of the ancestors, but the disturbing confrontation of our mortality, in this sense death is disruptive. It's important to not project back into earlier times our modern knowledge of viruses, bacteria, and other microbiological agents of disease. In death's appearance our identity can be shaken, even if momentarily, and this involves the shuddering of our symbolic cultural-linguistic codes of meaning. I see a black plume of smoke rising from the crematorium on a warm fall day as I stand in the sun of the parking lot, and there is a momentary breakage—that is the smoke of my friend's burnt remains. However, it passes quickly as the smoke dissipates, a clean dealing with corpse. An ashy, purified residue left behind. Perhaps the widespread repugnance with death and the hemming of it with taboos of purity are rooted in the intense reminder it gives of the materiality of the body with its mortality, and the linked view of both birth and death being so twined. The dead must be turned to Ancestor, and the cast off decaying corpse hid with its unpleasant reminders of animality, of that which is solid liquefying in fecund rot,

24 Kristeva theorized a semiotic that is something like the pre-mirror state of the child, and associated with the mother, as opposed to the symbolic order of history, sociology, and assigned meanings, the Law of the Father. Yet unlike in Lacan's thought, it continues to break forth in poetry, in prosody and rhythm of language and music.

25 (Kristeva 93)

26 Kristeva maintains that with the Second Temple came the emphasis on abomination, the ferocity of symbolic order, and the abjection of the remainders, all that must be excluded; it passed from a sacrificial religion to a moral one. The sacred was delimited to the One, strictly the right-hand sacred: “at the limit, everything that remains, all remainders, are abominable.” It was a radical shift.

27 (Kristeva 94)

28 (Kristeva, 109)

of the dissolution of the basic dichotomy humans have made between them and the other myriad of life. "We have no greater aversion than the aversion we feel toward those unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly. Those substances where the eggs, germs and maggots swarm not only make our hearts sink, but also turn our stomachs."²⁹ Life and Death terribly mixed, all mixed up. The most basic categories rupturing, confused, fermenting.

If the corpse is the ground of impurity, it may seem surprising that Birth is also the subject of such ideas of pollution, of the impure, of what the Greeks call miasma. But again, basic ordering principles are cast aside, undermined, ruptured in the event of birth, the mother's body violated by the emergence of an other, paralleling the violence of the worms and grubs who transmute the corpse flesh. "Like excrement, the mother poses a threat to the identity of the body, to its autonomous corporal limits..."³⁰ All associated with the violence of Death, the disruptor of the cultural world of work, of making tools. Since in archaic times, and in many present or near-present tribal cultures, all deaths were perpetrated:

Death was a sign of violence brought into a world which it could destroy. Although motionless, the dead man had a part in the violence which had struck him down; anything which came too near him was threatened by the destruction which had brought him low. Death presented such a contrast between an unfamiliar region and the everyday world that the only mode of thought in tune with it was bound to conflict with the mode of thought

governed by work.³¹

The supernatural force that has seized the dead person and has disordered the "course of things does not cease to be dangerous once the victim is dead." It lingers and can assault those living; in other words, it is *contagious*.

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Since Durkheim,³² there's been a recognition that not only do religions separate sacred and profane, but that the sacred itself is dualistic: there is a beneficial, positive, right-hand sacred, and a dangerous, chthonic, left-hand sacred, a pure and an impure sacred. Durkheim forged an understanding of the sacred as dual (though first posited by Robertson Smith): the pure right-hand sacred of

heaven-oriented religions, of the institutions of the type familiar through Christianity; and the left-hand or impure sacred, characterized by the destructive, and the tabooed, perhaps most familiar through Tantrika practices. The term sacred originates in Latin sacer, which had both meanings, the "set aside" could be the conventionally holy or it could be the accursed (in languages derived from Latin, sacred still contains both meanings, the accursed being a form of the sacred). Students of Durkheim such as Marcel Mauss, most known for his work on gift economies, didn't necessarily see this duality as of separate realms, but could be two aspects of the sacred, the left sacred seen most clearly, perhaps, in sacrifice. The tremendous force of breaking tabooed behavior showed in such times as festival and the death of a king. According to the *College de Sociologie*, a 1930s group established in Paris to study the sacred founded by Georges Ba-

29 (Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 81)

30 (Direk 196)

31 (Bataille, *Erotism* 46)

32 Emile Durkheim elaborated on the left and right sacred in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)

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taille, Michel Leiris, and Roger Caillois, the sacred was seen “as radically opposed to the profane or everyday as well as acutely ambivalent, internally divided between pure and impure, beneficent and dangerous, right and left aspects.”³³ It is dangerous to the normally stultifying orders we live within.

Someone has been seized by death: to stop its spread, Death must be propitiated—and that means dealing with infernal, impure powers, and those others that may require transgression of purity in the dark sacred, and thereby paradoxically a part of death. In Greece, the chthonic powers were approached by the defiled with mussed hair, with lamentation and blood poured into a pit, pretty much the opposite of the Olympians. Instead of white animals, black ones were sacrificed.³⁴ Release from normal rules of order and purity were found in Dionysian rites, of maenads slipping out of women’s usual confined state into forest and mountain raving, and omophagia, eating the raw meat of sacrifice.³⁵ In the Celtic world of Gaul, shadowy deities are called to covens of sorceresses in the Larzac Tablet,³⁶ revealing left sacred practices. Irish lore is replete with dealings with the dwellers of the sidhe mounds, the dead, and visionary poetry is found on grave mounds, in darkness, and young poets arise out of fugue states like Amergen in the story “Does Greth Eat Curds.”³⁷ The poet in the making is filthy, defiled and in communion with chthonic and marine powers. Around the world practices for breaking ordinary order abound, with the practitioner conscious of the social nature of an order that must seem

33 (Biles 4)

34 (Burkert 200)

35 (292)

36 (Koch 3-4)

37 (Thompson 138-9)

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simply reality to the ordinary person." So we can see that the left and right sacred are sides of the same coin, or on a spectrum. In Sumer, in the story of the descent of the goddess Inanna into the Underworld ruled by her dark sister Ereshkigal, who has her hung up like a carcass on a butcher's meat hook, she receives the aid of the non-binary beings called variously *kurgarra*, *galatur*, and *assinnu* who were said to have been created by the god Enki from dirt under his fingernails. They were lived in human roles by gender-variant male-bodied priest/esses.³⁸

Besides Dionysos, perhaps in western tradition there's no more exemplary deity of the left-hand sacred than the late classical Hekate. While in earlier days the chthonic (and once celestial) goddess received household and shrine leavings and sweepings put out on the nearest crossroad, by the early centuries of the Common Era she specifically took those substances considered defiled in systems of dirt and cleanliness, for example being offered cow dung incense³⁹ and even a "perfume" made of goat fat, baboon shit, and garlic.⁴⁰ She is even seen as a devourer of corpses, that most polluted of objects; as Hekate Borborophobia, the Eater of Filth, she was addressed.⁴¹

The understanding of the left-hand impure transgressive sacred has largely been left out of the understanding of contemporary Paganism/polytheism to our detriment, and leads to the appearance in recent

38 (Conner 70-2)

39 (PGM: 4 1438-40)

40 (PGM 4: 2455-66) (qtd in Rabinowitz 62)

41 (Rabinowitz 62)

times of panics about miasmatic contagion. The forms of the heterogeneous sacred are limitless but often are of bodily fluids, of rot, of excrement, of flows and eruptions of the body. They violently transgress the rational, the utilitarian, and puncture the flat world with which modernism/capitalism has pervaded the planet. The idol sedimented with blood and ghee is a traditional image; the headless Acéphale⁴² of the Batailleian secret society is a modern one.

It is interesting to consider how rules of tabooed and impure behavior were suspended at certain times, such as after the death of a king. For example, reports from Hawaiian kingdoms show the whole system of

order, of pure and impure, crashing after the death of the one who personified it.⁴³ The headless sacred emerges in the loss of the leader. It's worth considering that "capital" etymologically is derived from head (the Latin *caput*); the sacrifice of the headless sacred can lead us elsewhere. Contemplating such applications to our own world

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and developing praxis is timely; a confrontation with impure heterogeneous sacred matter can help take us somewhere better, bursting into alternate worlds.⁴⁴ The disordering, the rupture of firmly held identities,

42 Acéphale is both the headless mythic person and the name of the secret ritual group founded by Bataille, which could be thought of as the inner mystery of the outward political College de Sociologie. One aspect of the headless is that of a non-authoritarian reclamation of myth, as opposed to the headcenteredness of fascism. See Allan Stoekl's "Introduction" to Bataille's *Visions of Excess*.

43 *The Accursed Share* (89)

44 I think the outer model of the College de Sociologie and the secret society of Acéphale offer models very relevant for our time.

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the shuddering of the impure sacred, are the shifts we need in a world awash in industrial pollution, racist oppression, misogyny, compulsory heterosexuality, extinction, and hyper-capitalist exploitation. And it's more than time we shape our paganisms/polytheisms with the awareness of the power of the left-hand sacred.

I will end with a short tale.

The sirens were on, security had been breached, an automated voice demanded clearance of the structure. But one scientist didn't evacuate, ignored his colleagues' stern gestures as they departed; perhaps he'd been infected by the virus that was rumored to be sequestered in the institute's basement. A violation of protocols, but he stayed on seeing a beast manifest, a hippopotamus it seemed, no, it was shifting into a pangolin, or was it a sow giving birth? He reeled, glasses falling off, staggered. Now a woman turning into an eel, then a slime mold, kaleidoscopic and iridescent and it was Abraxas and then a dancing decapitated man and...you get the picture. The scientist had dropped his lab coat, in fact he stripped naked and was ruptured in a mystic experience, his self lacerated in an ecstasy. Afterward, they said he was filthy but his smile blissful. That world was never the same.

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