

Five Counterexamples To A Definition Of Dirt

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Abstract.

This paper considers five counterexamples to Mary Douglas's definition of dirt, or attempted counterexamples, one of which is extracted from a scene from George Eliot's novel Middlemarch and another from Marilyn Strathern's essay on anthropology at home.

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Introduction. A well-known definition of dirt is that it is matter out of place. This definition dates back to the nineteenth century at least, when a British prime minister reported hearing it (Fardon 2013: 25). However, it is often associated with the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Though she did not devise it, she does extract from it a thesis which may well not have occurred to the person who came up with the definition. According to Douglas, what people regard as dirt depends on their system of ordering. Here is a preliminary attempt to clarify Douglas's thesis.

It is composed of these three commitments:

1. Each individual has a system of ordering.
2. A system of ordering is a system composed of norms of the form "Things of type T should be in location L," for example shoes should be on the floor.
3. An individual judges that something is dirt if and only if they observe that it is not in its proper location, given their system of ordering.

Note that commitment (i) does not say that each individual has a unique system of ordering. Two individuals may share the same system.

Commitment (i) raises the question of does this apply to babies? If not, one might qualify the commitment. And commitment (ii) raises the question whether the filling in of L allows for more complex location specifications, such as "on the floor or on the ground or on the shoe rack." Also the question arises of whether it covers non-spatial locations. Someone might judge that nightgowns worn at noon are somehow dirty – that is not the appropriate temporal location for them. Let us say, "Yes" to both. And commitment (iii) raises the question of how one clarifies judgment. Does one have to say, "That is dirt," or be disposed to say so? I suspect that the thesis is actually about experience: some things are experienced as repulsive by an individual when they are located out of their proper place, given the individual's system of ordering. If so, (iii) can be replaced with (iii*): an individual experiences something as repulsive if and only if they perceive that it is not in its proper location, given their system of ordering.

One kind of counterexample to the thesis we have formulated involves something which is not in its proper place, given the individual's system of ordering, but they do not experience it as repulsive. For example, a £50 note on the road. In the face of such an example, I suspect Douglas would retreat to the claim that being out of place is a necessary condition for this experience. Douglas can still say, "Where there is dirt there is system," (1966: 36) and, with a bit of interpretive work, "Dirt exists in the eye of the beholder." (1966: 2) But what about things which an individual regards as in place and yet they give the individual an experience of repulsion? Below are some counterexamples in line with the question.

Counterexample 1. When a certain person in an apartment block dumps rubbish in a communal bin, they have an experience of repulsion when opening the bin; but that is the designated place for rubbish within their system of ordering.

Counterexample 2. The second example I shall consider comes from the esteemed novel *Middlemarch*. A character called Mr. Brooke is speaking to the rector's wife, Mrs. Cadwallader. He is thinking to run for political office but not as a Tory or a Whig, rather as an independent. He tells her, "You ladies are always against an independent attitude – a man's caring for nothing but truth, and that sort of thing. And there is no part of the country where opinion is narrower than it is here – I don't mean to throw stones, you know, but somebody is wanted to take the independent line; and if I don't take it, who will?" She replies, "Who? Why, any

upstart who has got neither blood nor position. People of standing should consume their independent nonsense at home, not hawk it about.” (Eliot 1871-2: chapter 6)

Here is an interpretation of this scene. The characters accept the following three propositions. (a) The ladies of Middlemarch have a repulsion reaction to an independent approach in politics, which attempts to say what is true, rather than simply choosing one of the traditional parties and supporting the orthodoxy of that party. (b) Someone should pursue the independent approach. (c) An upstart without blood or position should, i.e. someone not from a prestigious family and without a high status job. These propositions are consistent. Even though the upstart who pursues an independent approach is taking on a role which is appropriate given their rank, the ladies of Middlemarch would still have a repulsion reaction. Such an upstart is a kind of political dirt, yet at the same time not out of place.

Many pages later, Mrs. Cadwallader warns some others, “talk of an independent politician and he will appear.” (1871-2: chapter 38) I do not see how one can salvage Douglas’s definition of dirt if the situation, as I have interpreted it, corresponds to something real. Of course, one might object that the novel is a fiction. Its subtitle is “A study of provincial life” and it is meant to be realistic. Nevertheless, any novel with scientific pretensions, which aims to realistically convey what life was like in a given period, is likely to never, by itself, completely overcome this objection.

Counterexample 3. The third example I shall consider comes from the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, or more precisely an interpretation of her claims about anthropology at home in an influential essay. She does not say that she is objecting to Douglas, but the interpretation is quite close to what she does say. According to a definition proposed by Strathern, anthropology at home is anthropology done in the context that produced it (1987: 17). But at the time when she was writing, this kind of anthropology was the object of disgust. The anthropologist should not be doing research into customs within a university in England, say, which is somewhere Strathern would wish to count as at home by her definition. They would just end up stating the obvious (1987: 17), such as that there is a graduation ceremony and students who have just finished their degrees wear special robes during it. They should be going to an exotic tribe and then telling us about its worldview and customs. So anthropology at home is anthropology in its place – in the culture that produced this discipline – and yet it is, or at least was, regarded with disgust.

There is a way of countering this counterexample. This is to say that the counterexample appeals to the concept of the place of anthropology, but from the point of view of those who were disgusted by anthropology at home there is no such thing as simply “the place of anthropology.” Rather one must distinguish between the place of fieldwork and the place of certain anthropological institutions, such as departments, libraries, and the like. Anthropology at home was, and perhaps is, the object of disgust because it was perceived to be anthropology which involves fieldwork which is out of place: fieldwork which is not done in a suitable place for doing anthropological fieldwork.

Counterexample 4. All the books by Margaret Atwood are in a poetry section of a large university library. That produces an unhappy reaction in a certain observer – what is that doing there? – but she does write poetry and the observer likes some of her poetry. Furthermore, he is not of the opinion that her novels are better, and it is often convenient to keep all the books by a literary author together, which the observer accepts. Perhaps this observer wants Atwood located according to her public image – she is most famous as a novelist. It is tempting to say that he does not understand his own system for ordering until he views Atwood in the poetry section.

Counterexample 5? There is a puzzle that occurred to me in relation to the definition of dirt, though it may not itself qualify as a counterexample. If dirt is just matter out of place, but everything is now in its place, then it is as if ideals are out of place and rather than in our minds, now they are in reality.¹ Is not reality supposed to resist this imposition, leading to a compromise? This may account for the experience of eeriness one sometimes has upon encountering especially neat and well-ordered phenomena. The observation that there is this eeriness is an old one.² If I can claim any novel contribution it is in relating it to Douglas’s framework for making sense of dirt and disgust. Faced with everything in its place, it is as if the whole scene has somehow been polluted, without the pollution’s being locatable to any specific part.

References

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¹ This line of thought suggests there is something paradoxical about everything in its place.

² But is it limited to visual and auditory and “intellectual” experiences of order? I cannot speak for others, but I personally am not inclined to think “This tastes exactly like what I had in mind” and feel in any way troubled.