

## Using the Body to Make Sense of the Physiological and Social Implications of Pollution

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Certain aspects of our everyday bodily existence - like excreting waste and sex - are deemed best to conceal from the public view. These functions are relegated to the margins and recesses of household architecture, the relevant body parts are covered and their linguistic signifiers protected by euphemisms (going to the *bathroom*; sleeping together). The biblical rules of pollution seem to revel in the details of these kinds of experiences, casting a spotlight on these domains where silence seems more appropriate.

Scholarly discourse on pollution often serves (probably unknowingly) to cover up this exposed body, thereby restoring our comfort zone. “Purity” – the more congenial and marketable counterpart of “pollution” – becomes a discourse on abstract category oppositions such as order and disorder or life and death, allowing one to forget that the relevant textual materials prefer to get down and dirty with the details of dead rodents, sexual discharges and the symptomology of skin disease. One may get the impression that this branch of scholarship is written for and by androids, oblivious to the messiness of lived experience, and exceptionally capable of manipulating categories of purity in the form of abstract, disembodied symbols.

Should an account of pollution be based on an abstract explanation which sees *beyond* the textual details dealing with bodily experience? Or should the explanation emerge from an engagement with the grisly details of bodily experience? More fundamentally, what does it mean to "make sense" out of a phenomenon such as pollution?

Usually, we are accustomed to thinking in strictly intellectual terms. However, enactivist philosophers have warned us against drawing a sharp distinction between emotions and judgment.

Giovanni Colombetti writes:

What is distinctive about enactivism is that it provides a theory of biological organization and of its relation to the mind that entails that not just emotions, moods, motivational states, etc., are affective, but that *cognition* is too... enactivism claims that the hallmark of cognition is “sense-making,” and a close look at this notion reveals that sense-making is simultaneously a cognitive and an affective phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Along these lines, I will sketch out an outline how the body can serve as a lens for a more coherent account of the logic of pollution than intellectualist accounts, showing how embodied experience supplies the raw materials for social discourse.

This perspective can go a long way towards explaining the important role of pollution in shaping human well-being – both physiological and social. Contrary to the wide-spread tendency to view impurity as a religious idea that needs to be interpreted 'symbolically,' I will suggest that concerns pertaining to pollution were quite real. Let us take, for example, the biblical disease called *sara'at* (often translated "leprosy") in Leviticus 13. Despite the explicit emphasis on the holiness of the camp in the biblical text, it remains clear – based on other biblical (e.g., 2 Kgs 7:3) and extra-biblical sources – that this banishment served public health function: “As for the person with a leprous affliction, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his

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<sup>1</sup> Enacting Affectivity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, (eds. A. Newen, L. de Bruin, and S. Gallagher; (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 571–572., 574.

upper lip; and he shall call out, “Unclean! Unclean!” He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev 13:45–6). The detailed rules of quarantine and readmission to the community can only be understood as primitive means to control the spread of disease, which from our current experience, turn out to be not so primitive after all.

Incidentally, the use of the term *nega'* ("affliction") from the root נג"ע meaning "to touch" to describe this disease connects us with related evidence from ancient Mesopotamia. Consider the following letter describing the steps to contain an epidemic in the city of Mari in ancient Syria from the 18<sup>th</sup> BCE:

The god is striking in the upper district, so I without delay took a bypass. Furthermore, my lord should give orders that the residents of the cities that have been touched [*laptūtu*] not enter cities that are not touched, lest they touch [*ulappatū*] the whole land.<sup>2</sup>

While the idiom of "touched" (Akkadian *lapātu*) cities may appear strange to us, it not only parallels the biblical terminology but also the English term "contagion" from Latin *com-tangere* ("touched with"). As can be seen, we can better understand the ancients' fear of impurity if we understand that it corresponds, in part, to today's fear of disease.

Indeed, contagion provides not only a model for understanding pollution but even a definition: **the perceived transfer of a negative essence from a source to a target.** As several mundane examples can show, there is nothing particularly mystical about the spread of an invisible essence. We experience *actual* contagion in numerous domains: the handling of a smelly object transfers its odor, interaction with a sick individual leads to infection and so on. In fact, these two

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<sup>2</sup> ARM 26/1 17 (my translation).

experiences – filth and infection – suggest a gradated model of pollution, enabling us to distinguish two degrees of pollution in terms of their severity, emotional substrates and consequences:

Degree of pollution	Emotional substrate	Implications
1. Uncleaness	Disgust	Separation from sites of divine presence
2. Danger	Fear	Separation of impurity from individuals and community

The highest standards of purity are required for approaching sites of the divine presence. For this reason, even relatively benign sources of impurity, such as sexual relations, are viewed as antithetical to cultic service. In the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, such encounters were conceptualized in terms of physical space, with the divine presence residing in temples. In mystical traditions, such as in Buddhism and the Kabbala, divine encounters take place within the self, such that impurity prevents mystical experiences.

These two degrees of pollution, associated with disgust and fear, can go a long way towards explaining the various types of avoidance behaviors. They provide a schematic ontology of pollution, suggesting why different sources of impurity were a concern. Yet, this framework in itself does not adequately address the multifarious social implications of impurity.

In particular, I want to focus on the role of pollution terminology in moral discourse, showing how an emphasis on embodied cognition can elucidate the ways this discourse develops. Jonathan Klawans, in his book *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*, succeeded at calling attention to the important distinction between "ritual" and "moral" impurity which is implicit in Leviticus. For example, he pointed out that ritual impurity is not regarded as sinful, unlike moral impurity. On the other hand, whereas ritual impurity often results in a contagious defilement, there is no

contact-contagion associated with moral impurity. However, the reference to "moral" impurity is misleading, since a careful perusal of the examples (incest, adultery, bestiality) reveals that they were almost exclusively sexual in nature.

Considering the wide assortment of transgressions in the Hebrew Bible (theft, dishonesty, Sabbath violation, etc.), one may ask: why was the use of pollution terminology confined to the sexual domain? Biblical commentators who attempt to intellectualize impurity often appeal to abstract symbolic schemes whereby impurity symbolizes death and purity is equated with life. These commentators must labor to explain why sexual intercourse, which serves to propagate life, is polluting. More straightforward explanations emerge if we use the body to make sense of sexual pollution. Frankly, being ourselves of flesh and blood, it should hardly surprise us that such an emotionally charged event involving commerce in bodily fluids and involving potentially momentous consequences, namely conception, would become a central focus of purity discourse.

Indeed, it is striking that the terminology of pollution has often penetrated even modern, secular even scientific, discourse. For example, the term "pollution" can be found in medical literature up to the early twentieth century to describe the perceived danger of male masturbation. Even more significantly, modern clinical evidence pertaining to sexual assault confirms what might have otherwise been expected, that women who have fallen victim to sexual assault suffer from "mental pollution," namely a sense of being defiled.<sup>3</sup> This feeling of defilement is easily understood as a consequence of the violent intrusion into the victim's bodily space, which could

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Nicole Fairbrother and Stanley Rachman, "Feelings of Mental Pollution Subsequent to Sexual Assault," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 42 (2004): 173–189; Christal L. Badour et al., "Disgust, Mental Contamination, and Posttraumatic Stress: Unique Relations following Sexual versus Non-Sexual Assault," *Journal of Anxiety Disorder* 27 (2013): 155–62; Ryotara Ishikawa, Eiji Shimizu and Osamu Kobori, "Unwanted Sexual Experiences and Cognitive Appraisals That Evoke Mental Contamination," *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy* 7 (2013): 1–15.

entailed a violation of the victim's moral code and carry the threat of unwanted pregnancy and sexual transmitted diseases.

These physiological and psychological aspects of pollution tend to be overlooked by modern discussions of impurity, hedged by terms such as "ritual," "religious" or "symbolic" to describe purity behaviors. My point has been to show that, on the contrary, impurity was quite real and served as a potent basis for metaphorical extensions in moral discourse. Indeed, the manner by which physiological pollution provides the vehicle for conceptualizing moral impurity provides a salient illustration of the embodiment of cognition in general: the dynamic in which body becomes the medium for mind and the flesh has become word.