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Excerpt

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Introduction

ad divos adeunto caste, pietatem adhibento, opes amovento. qui secus faxit, deus ipse vindex erit.

They shall approach the gods with purity, they must bring piety, they must leave offerings. Whoever acts contrary to this, the god himself will take vengeance on him.¹

(Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.19)

These commands are the first in a long list of religious laws set down by Cicero, as part of a legislative programme which he suggests would form a stable, regulated society. Before defining which gods should be worshipped and in what manner, before setting out which days must be sacred and the offerings that must be made, his stipulation is clear – purity must be assured. In the field of religion it walked hand-in-hand with piety as a demonstration of the respect due to the gods. It was also the first condition that must be met before any situation where humans and gods meet.

The *De Legibus* attempted to define a society held together by structure and order, and in formulating the laws regarding religion Cicero appears to have been influenced by the laws and customs of his own society.² Bodily purity represented the first crucial step within the religious framework he sets out, but Cicero was anxious to stress that ‘purity’ should refer to more than mere bodily cleanliness or sexual abstinence, and should also include the purity of the soul. Bodily impurity, he argued, could be easily rectified through the sprinkling of water, or by the passage of a predetermined number of days. A stain upon the spirit, however, could be cleansed by neither of these actions, and, since Cicero believed that this was of greater importance, he argued that greater care must be taken of its condition.³ He went even further in his work *De Natura Deorum* in drawing a link

¹ Unless stated otherwise, translations provided throughout are mine. All abbreviations follow those listed in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edn, revised).

² Cic. *Leg.* 2.23; Rawson (1973: 334–56); Powell (2001a: 17–39). ³ Cic. *Leg.* 2.24.

between purity and piety, stating that ‘our worship of the gods is the greatest and purest (*castissimus*), the most venerable and full of piety, as we always venerate them with a pure (*pura*), complete and uncorrupted mind and voice’.⁴

Two points are immediately apparent from these statements. First, they demonstrate that purity mattered in Cicero’s view in order to assure a successful relationship with the gods, an issue that lay at the heart of Roman religion. Second, ideas of purity could be expressed in more than one way and could be applied to a variety of different things. Since purity appears to have been such an important factor within Roman religion, the issue of religious pollution deserves some consideration. Was pollution a definable entity? How serious an issue was it? If asked, could a Roman citizen of the Republic or early Principate describe it in any clear way? In everyday Roman life one could be marked with dirt, mud, blood or any number of other substances without being ‘polluted’, just as one could be free from such things without being ‘pure’. Purity and pollution were not direct opposites of one another, but rather were two states considered ‘different’ from normality.⁵ So why was purity stressed so vigorously in religion? What did participants in rites hope to accomplish through achieving a state of purity beforehand? For the purposes of the *De Legibus*, Cicero suggested that the threat of divine retribution would help to ensure conformity within his ordered society by the strengthening of religious authority.⁶ Many ideas about what is dirty or contagious are cultural constructs and all are amplified within the sphere of religious ritual. As a result the idea of purity works well with that of conformity. Order is imposed upon the people by pressuring them into conforming to shared ideas of purity.

Cicero’s ideas on the good life suggest that the struggle to maintain this purity required constant vigilance. He implies that pollution could be incurred by any number of means, and that it might not be easily removed. This depended on the nature of the pollution, as well as the religious context in which it occurred. Cicero was writing a philosophical work encouraging the cultivation of the soul (hence his stress upon spiritual purity), as well

⁴ Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.71 (*cultus autem deorum est optimus idemque castissimus atque sanctissimus plenissimusque pietatis, ut eos semper pura integra incorrupta et mente et voce veneremur*); Dyck (2004: 290–2).

⁵ Bendlin (2007: 178–9). Susan Cole has also stressed that ‘the vocabulary of purity overlapped the vocabulary of cleanliness, but the two states . . . were not the same’; Cole (2004: 36). Cf. Neumann (1992: 71–5).

⁶ Cic. *Leg.* 2.25.

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as demonstrating the virtues of a society dominated by law.⁷ The idea was repeated in the *De Divinatione*, where he suggested that a man whose spirit was ‘pure and clean’ (*castus . . . purusque*) was better placed to receive and interpret the messages of the gods.⁸

In practice, however, it was bodily purity that mattered most.⁹ The customs of *pietas* dictated that Aeneas could carry his father out of Troy while stained with the blood of recent battle, but he refused to touch the images of his household gods until he had cleansed himself in a stream.¹⁰ Similarly, before the sacrifice of an animal, a religious official in Livy urged the dedicator to wash in running water (*vivum flumen*) in order to ensure the successful completion of the offering.¹¹ For Cicero, Virgil and Livy the result of impurity, whether physical or spiritual, remained the same; the person became unfit to approach the gods or to offer sacrifice. Cicero’s ideal world is one of order, where citizens maintained bodily purity, but devoted the majority of their time to spiritual purity. In practice, however, a show of physical cleansing might be all that was required to meet the immediate demands of ritual purity.

This is an opportune time for a study of pollution in ancient Rome, because the subject has shown various forms of resurgence in recent years. Valerio Valeri’s *The Forest of Taboos* (2000) re-evaluated much of the existing scholarship on impurity from the world of anthropology, discussing a huge volume of material on pollution concepts across human culture. Even more recently, Ron Barrett has applied established theories of pollution to various Hindu sects and the purifying roles of the Ganges, demonstrating the social complexities that must be understood in any study of the dangers associated with dirt. This has been accompanied by a number of scholarly and popular works from the fields of sociology and biological/hygiene studies, such as Virginia Smith’s *Clean: a History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (2007).¹² The death of Mary Douglas, the subject’s leading figure, in 2007 just weeks before she was due to give a keynote address at the British School at Rome on pollution in the ancient city also led to widespread discussion of her work. Her career spanned over fifty years in which she made

⁷ North (2000: 25) stresses that the *De Legibus* presents us with Cicero’s philosophical society, not necessarily with the Rome of the late Republic. Indeed, much of Cicero’s theory came from pre-existing Greek philosophical ideas of ‘spiritual purity’, although Powell (2001a: 26) also notes a number of innovative ideas within the text. Moulinier (1952: 168–71) examines the use of purity within Greek philosophy, and the clear distinctions between ideas of clear/unmingled when referring to physical substances on the one hand, and philosophical truth on the other.

⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.121. ⁹ Scheid (2003: 26–7).

¹⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.717–20. The scene mirrors Hector’s refusal to offer libations at Hom. *Il.* 6.263–9.

¹¹ Liv. 1.45.

¹² See also Curtis (2001: 17–31; 2007: 660–4); Ashenburg (2008: especially 15–47).

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numerous contributions to the study of impurity in human society. The proceedings of the conference, *Rome, Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity* (2012), cover over two millennia of the city's history, and demonstrate how Douglas' ideas on the classification of pollution remain potent decades after their initial conception.

Aside from this most recent development, the issue of purity in Roman society has received surprisingly little attention to date, even in the heavily debated field of religion. Although the publication of Robert Parker's ground-breaking *Miasma* (1983), on pollution in archaic Greek religion, should have inspired study and discussion across classical scholarship, the subject has remained surprisingly stagnant. The central aim of this study, therefore, was to provide a comprehensive examination of the key forms of impurity that existed in ancient Rome. Although pollution within Roman society as a whole requires greater attention, this investigation will centre primarily on those areas of purity/pollution that concern religious ritual. Due to the nature of this subject and the limitations of evidence, the focus will be predominantly literary and concerned with the periods of the late Republic and early Principate. While sources from the Christian era are discussed where relevant, it has been necessary to omit detailed analysis of Christian perceptions of pollution, which would itself require a lengthy and detailed examination. In particular this study aims to integrate theories derived from anthropological research, where the subject has received more widespread consideration, with the traditions and approaches of classical scholarship. It aims to demonstrate that the language employed across ancient literature is an essential tool in interpreting a society's own understanding of its values. Such a study must begin, however, with a more general evaluation of scholarship regarding issues of purity and pollution in human societies.

Modern approaches

Anthropology

Since its publication in 1966, Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* has remained the single most important work in the study of impurity across human culture. Using fieldwork gathered among the African Lele, combined with an in-depth study of the Hebrew text *Leviticus*, Douglas set out a template for the evaluation of dirt and pollution which she continued to refine throughout her extensive

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career.¹³ Her most fundamental theories were based around the classification of dirt as ‘matter out of place’, which suggested both ‘a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order’.¹⁴ This rejected the existing, outdated interpretation of the time, that dirt was the result of internalised shame/guilt within the ‘savage’ individual, and which was treated (in Douglas’ summarisation) as ‘irrational and beyond analysis’.¹⁵ Douglas’ own structuralist ideas stemmed from the theories of Émile Durkheim, which argued that religion demonstrated and reaffirmed the values of a society, rather than the fears and taboos of the individual.¹⁶ This led her to seek an explanation for why a specific society classified a particular being or substance as impure. If impurity was disorder, these cases gave crucial information concerning what society prized as order.¹⁷ Douglas also argued that public demonstrations recognising and dealing with a perceived danger helped to ‘enforce conformity’ amongst members of the same group.¹⁸ As a result, when we see public demonstrations connected with purity in ancient Rome we should not view them as isolated events, but rather as part of a continuing discourse in which Roman society constantly re-evaluated and readjusted its cultural principles. Religious rituals, or rather the literary and historical reports that described them, are therefore an ideal medium through which to interpret notions of purity and impurity, and so of order and disorder.

Central to Douglas’ theory was the role of boundaries in the creation and maintenance of order. The symbolism of the human body was critical to understanding these boundaries:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.¹⁹

¹³ See also Douglas (1975: 106–15; 1996: especially 72–91; 1998: 5–12; 1999: 33–45); Neusner (1973: 119–130); Harrington (2004: 71–127); Moore (2009: 270–84).

¹⁴ Douglas (1966: 8–50 at 44).

¹⁵ Douglas (1975: 108); Webster (1942: 14). This view was influential in the study of ancient Greek pollution in the early to mid-twentieth century; cf. Dodds (1951: 28–63).

¹⁶ Douglas (1966: 24–9); Metcalf and Huntington (1991: 28–9).

¹⁷ Douglas (1966: 24–7, 80–2); Fardon (1987: 4–6). ¹⁸ Douglas (1966: 45, 49).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 142. For anthropological works employing theories of bodily symbolism, see also Zuesse (1974: 482–504); Meigs (1984: 125–36); Mullin (1996: 509–24); Valeri (2000: 70–83); Bowie (2006: 40–5);

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The body's emissions transgress its orifices, which are therefore perceived as vulnerable, and imbued with both a sense of power and/or danger.²⁰ *Leviticus* lists any form of bodily discharge as ritually unclean, and requiring various acts of purification to protect the community from accidental defilement of sacred places, which would result in divine retribution.²¹ Natural human processes such as birth and death involved members of the community losing control over the flow of emissions, or marked a breach in the order of the body, the danger of which was expressed in terms of pollution and disorder.²²

Some have accused Douglas of oversimplification in trying to define a universal pattern of behaviour regarding dirt, and she later revised many of her theories concerning the interpretations of *Leviticus*.²³ Valeri, in particular, stressed the danger of referring to a single system of order, when in fact it is more accurate to view ideas about dirt as operating within 'many coexisting orders of classification; what is residual to one may be central to another'.²⁴ However, Douglas' ideas have remained a key starting point for subsequent studies, and have also been refined over the years, usually as a result of anthropologists reacting to phenomena within their chosen society of study.²⁵ One prominent example of this appears in the work of Anna Meigs, on the Hua of New Guinea and modern North American culture.²⁶ Meigs places greatest emphasis on the body as the source of pollution, focusing on fluids (sweat, blood, saliva, etc.) as well as hair and fingernails. Each of these substances, according to the Hua, carry the *nu* (life essence) of the person they stem from, and this power may be considered dangerous to others. Meigs sums this relationship up as 'anything which is *nu* or a form of it can be polluting – anything that is polluting is a source of *nu*'.²⁷ Since each of these substances derives from the body, Meigs takes this idea further by arguing that behind every pollution taboo lies the fear of death.²⁸ Blood,

Shilling (2003: 64–6); Cole (2004: 30–65); Gregory (2007: especially 23–6); Barrett (2008: 25–6, 164–6).

²⁰ For example, Miner (1956: 503–7). ²¹ *Leviticus* 15.1–32.

²² Parker (1983: 61); Mullin (1996: 514); Schott (1988: 37).

²³ Douglas (2001), with critical analysis by Klawans (2003: 89–96; 2006: 45–6). Cf. Kirk (1981: especially 43–7); Wright (1987: 5–9); Fuller (1996: 1–31). On the problems and limitations of comparative theory in anthropology, see Eggan (1954: 743–63), who stresses the need for comparisons to be made with awareness of their specific cultural framework, under which criteria the rituals and anecdotes regarding purity across the ancient world become most relevant to Rome as part of the wider tradition of purity in the Mediterranean.

²⁴ Valeri (2000: 71). ²⁵ Fardon (1987: 6); Kirk (1981: 47). ²⁶ Meigs (1978: 304–18; 1984).

²⁷ Meigs (1978: 307). On pollution from bodily emissions, see Stevenson (1954: 45–65 at 63); Harper (1964: 169); Cole (2004: especially 34–7); Attridge (2004: 72–3).

²⁸ Cf. Parry (1982: 74–110; 1994: especially 151–90); Hallam, Hockey and Howarth (1999: 26–7); Barrett (2008: 164–5).

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saliva and all other bodily fluids function correctly within the body, and while still attached, hair and fingernails continue to grow as normal. Upon disconnection with the body the link with the body's vitality is severed, and so the substances begin to decay, sometimes visibly; in effect, they die. The greatest threat posed by these substances is through their potential to gain unwanted access to another's body. In illustrating this, Meigs uses Douglas' own examples of muddy shoes on a dining table or hair in a bowl of soup, contrasting them with toys, paper towels and clothing, all of which are 'out of place' on a dining table, but do not arouse the same feeling of revulsion as the shoes or hair. These non-threatening forms of disorder are reclassified as 'mess' by Meigs, while the shoes, which may introduce faeces, saliva or rubbish from the streets into the food we eat, naturally give greater cause for alarm.²⁹ In the words of C. S. Lewis, 'Minerals are clean dirt. But the real filth is what comes from organisms – sweat, spittles, excretions . . . The impure and the organic are interchangeable conceptions.'³⁰

The pivotal role of classification in Douglas' theory complemented the earlier anthropological work of Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (trans. 1960). Van Gennep saw human relationships as occurring within a clearly defined set of boundaries. Important social actions and events involved transference across one boundary to another. This began with a stage of separation, followed by a period of transition, during which phase the subject was said to be in a 'liminal' state, and culminated in successful reintegration of the person, or persons, back into everyday society. Typically such liminal periods between separation and reintegration coincided with periods of danger or susceptibility for the subject and those around them, and so rituals were put in place to protect them during their rites of transition and subsequent reintegration. For example, the period in which a bride was transferred from her father's household to her new husband's was considered a liminal period. The crossing of boundaries, in this case typically the threshold of the new home, was accompanied by prophylactic signs and actions to protect the bride, maintain her fertility and prevent danger accompanying her over the threshold.³¹ More crucially, in the removal of the corpse, a period of time passed in which the deceased was between two vital stages of being, no longer one of the living, yet not fully one of the ancestral dead.³²

²⁹ Meigs (1984: 99–113). Cf. Bloch (1982: 219); Strathern (1982: 126); Parry (1985: 212–30); Valeri (2000: 100–5).

³⁰ Lewis (1945: 232). ³¹ Van Gennep (1960: 1–14, 116–45).

³² Hertz (1960: 46); Metcalf and Huntington (1991: 81–2).

This stress on the perceived danger resulting from liminality brings us to the second major source of pollution identified by Douglas. This concerns substances and, in particular, beings, which are viewed by wider society as liminal in and of themselves, those things that Victor Turner classified as ‘betwixt and between’.³³ In *Purity and Danger* this theory was tested on the various taboos and impurities attributed to animals in *Leviticus*. In her original thesis Douglas supposed these to be the result of the animals’ anomalous physical form (i.e. those animals which are cloven-hoofed, but do not chew the cud). She withdrew this theory later, however, stressing instead the nature of animals accepted for eating as those that were acceptable for sacrifice on the altar. ‘Non-ruminants going on four legs are unclean in a strictly technical sense, meaning that they can neither be sacrificed or eaten.’ They are not unclean, merely abominable, which she takes simply to be an instruction to avoid.³⁴ This did not alter the main principles of ‘the anomalous’ espoused in *Purity and Danger*, however. The interpretation of dirt as ‘matter out of place’, and of an increased danger resulting from boundary transgression still stands. A clearer example, and one with particular significance in Roman religion, is that of ‘monstrous births’ (i.e. those born sexually androgynous or with extraneous limbs). Such beings crossed natural boundaries (particularly those of gender) irrevocably, and were considered deeply alarming omens. Under the Republic their discovery was considered a matter for religious specialists, and their removal was executed in a way that coincided with an expression of purification – usually by their being thrown into the sea or burned to death.³⁵ As neither clearly male nor female, the hermaphrodite was permanently between classifications, and so subject to Victor Turner’s ‘negative characteristics’ for liminal beings: ‘They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows.’³⁶ Society, and especially the immediate family, was unable to readjust to allow for their total integration, and so they threatened social structure as a whole.

In recent years the socio-centric theories of Douglas have also come under scrutiny (and criticism) from specialists in the fields of biology and

³³ Turner (1979: 236); Parker (1983: 62–4); Roscoe (1996: 204).

³⁴ Douglas (1966: 68), revised in the Routledge Classics edition of *Purity and Danger* (2002: xiv–xvi).

³⁵ Cic. *Div.* 98; *Obsequens*, 3, 12, 22, 25, 27a, 34; Macbain (1982: 127–35); Allély (2003: 127–56); Engels (2007). The religious fear attached to such omens appears to have faded over time, and by the first century AD Pliny noted that although they were once feared, hermaphrodites were now used for entertainment; Plin. *HN* 9.4, 11.261–2.

³⁶ Turner (1979: 237) stresses the importance of sexual distinctions in societies dominated primarily by ‘kinship institutions’. The patterns of behaviour expected of a particular sex cannot be employed with full confidence, nor can the child’s role within the family unit be assured.

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psychology, notably Kevin Reinhart and Val Curtis. Rejecting Douglas' scepticism regarding what she termed 'medical materialism', Curtis argues that disgust stems not from a desire for social order, but from deeply embedded genetic and evolutionary imperatives.³⁷ In particular, uniformity in human expressions of disgust, combined with patterns amongst those substances which are considered unclean, suggests a biological motivation aiming to protect the human body from harmful substances, especially those which result in sickness and disease.³⁸ For Rozin and Fallon, this danger revolves primarily around the mouth and the fear of 'oral incorporation of an offensive object'.³⁹ The offensive objects typically have their origin within the human body, but their findings clash somewhat with the theories of Curtis, in that they suggest an 'absence of disgust' during the first formative years of a child's development, with disgust towards various objects and substances increasing over time.⁴⁰ While biologists and psychologists at times distance themselves from Douglas' theories (which have obvious problems when applied universally), the argument has, perhaps, been taken too far. It is impossible to deny the obvious biological causes behind physical demonstrations of aversion, or fail to note the frequency with which bodily functions and excretions are received with disgust. Following much of Douglas' theory, similar conclusions were reached by Meigs regarding the ingestion of 'powerful' substances from the body amongst the Hua. Yet to suggest the biological reaction is universal is equally problematic. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure the extent to which our reactions are learned from those around us. Young children can be seemingly oblivious to much of the 'dirt' with which they come into contact. In matters of religious pollution and prohibition, these issues present a less significant obstacle. Indeed, many of the causes or sources of religious pollution are not tied to the category of 'disgust' on which biologists tend to concentrate. The symbolism attached to prohibitions or requirements remains a significant approach for interpreting social values or beliefs. As more evidence regarding Roman attitudes is evaluated, it may be that application of Douglas' theories is indeed viable.

³⁷ Curtis (2001: 17–31; 2007: 660–4). Reinhart (1990: 1–24) examines Islamic religious laws regarding purification and notes the potential limitations of Douglas' theories being applied across all cultures.

³⁸ Rozin and Fallon (1987: 23–41); Phillips *et al.* (1997: 495–8; 1998: 373–5); Curtis (2001: 21–6); Smith (2007: 8–44 especially 11–17). For biological and social reactions to smells, and the links to hygiene, cf. Poirret (1998: 89–102).

³⁹ Rozin and Fallon (1987: 23–5). Cf. D'Arms (1984: 328); Izard (1991: Chapter 12).

⁴⁰ Rozin and Fallon (1987: 33–5).

Ancient pollution

In 1983, using the recent theories offered by Douglas, as well as those of Durkheim and Van Gennep, Robert Parker set about creating a systematic and comprehensive model of pollution within ancient Greek society. His work aimed to advance the study of Greek pollution beyond the vague notions of shame and guilt culture, developed most notably in the 1950s by Eric Dodds.⁴¹ Using this structuralist template, Parker asked a number of questions which have to be addressed in any assessment of pollution in a given society. Most crucially, the issue of what constitutes 'pollution' must be defined in order to establish the scope of the investigation. The function of pollution within a society is also significant, and may vary depending on context. Frequently referring to examples from Greek tragedy and philosophy, Parker considered whether pollution represented 'a literary mechanism or a living preoccupation'. Similarly, was it a pretext or might it be a genuine cause for war? In all such cases he noted the need to recognise what he termed the 'unchallengeable validity' wielded by pollution in such situations.⁴²

He focused initially on Greek language, combining anthropological theory with philology. At the centre of his investigation were the Greek terms *miasma* and *agos*. While observing that the verb *miainō* might refer to corruption in a wide variety of forms (e.g. damage to personal reputation or social justice), he noted that the noun *miasma* (and its adjective, *miaros*) most frequently carried three related consequences: 'it makes the person affected ritually impure, and thus unfit to enter a temple: it is contagious: it is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin'.⁴³ However, Parker was careful to follow Douglas in rejecting as a universal concept the idea that the sacred and the unclean were interchangeable in so called 'primitive' society. Such ideas had been put forward before, in studies of Polynesian taboo, by leading religious scholars of the early twentieth century such as Mircea Eliade, and appear to be unsupported in the wider debate on social pollution.⁴⁴ This is not to say that things deemed to be sacred are not subject to rules and regulations. Eliade, Douglas and Parker all note the ambivalence inherent to the Latin term *sacer*, which even Roman sources understood could signify either sacred or accursed.⁴⁵ The noun *agos* (cursed) is frequently grouped together with *miasma*, and although

⁴¹ Dodds (1951: 35–48); Parker (1983: 1–3). ⁴² Ibid. ⁴³ Ibid. 3–17.

⁴⁴ Douglas (1966: 11); Eliade (1958: 14–15; 1959: 20–4).

⁴⁵ Eliade (1958: 15–19); Douglas (1966: 10); Parker (1983: 12). For *sacer*, see Macrob. *Sat.* 3.7.5; Serv. *Aen.* 3.75; Warde-Fowler (1911a: 57–63); Bennett (1930: 5–18).