

The background is a complex collage. At the top, there's a map of a coastal region. Below the map, on the left, is a photograph of a discarded aluminum can. In the center, there's a newspaper clipping with some text visible, including "PAPER ON THE" and "The". The overall color palette is muted, with shades of brown, tan, and grey.

An Ontology *of* Trash

*The Disposable and its
Problematic Nature*

Greg Kennedy

AN ONTOLOGY OF TRASH

SUNY series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics
J. Baird Callicott and John van Buren, editors

AN ONTOLOGY OF TRASH

*The Disposable and
Its Problematic Nature*

Greg Kennedy

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2007 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written permission.
No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system
or transmitted in any form or by any means including
electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior
permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Kelli Williams
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

An ontology of trash : the disposable and its problematic nature / Greg Kennedy
p. cm. — (SUNY series in environmental philosophy and ethics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6993-4 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Refuse and refuse
disposal—Moral and ethical aspects. 2. Refuse and refuse disposal—Philosophy.
3. Ontology. 4. Environmental responsibility. 5. Refuse and refuse disposal—
Psychological aspects. 6. Waste minimization. I. Kennedy, Greg, 1975– .
II. Series.

TD93.9.O56 2007
363.72'801—dc22

2006013724

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents, for their careful understanding

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	xi
Chapter One: Waste	1
Chapter Two: The Body	23
Chapter Three: Food	55
Chapter Four: The City	89
Chapter Five: Trash	121
Chapter Six: Human Extinction	157
Before the End	183
Notes	189
Bibliography	207
Index	213

This page intentionally left blank.

Preface

This book is something of an odd fish. Its title signals its oddity. “Ontology” literally means the study of being; it is a technical term designating a specific branch of philosophy that investigates why things simply are. “Trash” has no technical but many popular meanings. Contrary to “ontology” and the esoteric inquiry this word denominates, “trash” has at most a street-level significance, which rarely rises above the curb or, in worse cases, the gutter. By what right, then, do I couple the two here? Does their juxtaposition amount to little more than an author’s wile to draw in the roving eye of the curious or blasé?

I can only hope that readers, whether slightly warmed by common curiosity or all aflame with academic zeal, will discover for themselves my innocence of guile. In neither title nor text have I undertaken to be clever. In fact, the entire present work evolved quite spontaneously out of an unconscious and even visceral discomfort I experienced in myself when dealing with the material culture of our society according to the norms of consumerism. To a great extent, the work simply embodies my need to scratch and thereby lessen this irritation. How did things become disposable? Why do we so readily and easily throw our goods away? What has happened, either in ourselves or in our material culture, that permits the former to trash such a huge quantity of the latter?

These questions immediately expose a problem behind our behavior as consumers. Despite its proximity and familiarity, we have no clear understanding of what trash truly is. In the face of landfill shortages and escalating disposal rates, some of us might ponder the best manner to handle the junk, but we neglect to meditate on the wider relation at work between our treatment of things and the status of their existence in the world we inhabit. Before we can throw an object out, we must conceive of it as disposable. Before we can arrive at this conception, we must first

perceive the object in such a way that allows our minds to apply the definitive concept. It follows that something operating at the level of perception precedes all our habits of trashing. What is it about an object that makes us see it as disposable?

Perception so thoroughly informs our experience that we have great difficulty observing its operation. Fortunately, every perception has its content, which, if studied with an eye toward the very act of perceiving, will reveal patterns usually hidden within our perceptions. If we look at trash from the right angle, we start to see something more than a dirty collection of processed fibers, minerals, petroleum, and food scraps. Images of ourselves begin to emerge, uncanny images we could not otherwise behold except through this outside medium. By virtue of its sheer volume, trash now offers us the single greatest means for observing ourselves. An ontology of trash is ultimately self-exploration.

But even if this justifies a serious philosophical look at trash, why ontology? A study of trash cannot be anything but ontological because, with trash, *being* is most at issue. Trash is supposed to be nothing, a non-existent; it is supposed to lack whatever legitimates the presence of an object in our world. In short, the disposable should not be. Yet obviously, and worrisomely, it is, and so remains, usually for a great many years. Ontologically, no other subject is quite so tantalizing as this very odd being that simultaneously resists and includes its nonbeing. Thus, the oddity of this work derives directly from 'the things themselves'. Its otherwise unhappy mixture of the academic and the pedestrian is prescribed by the subject matter itself. Hence, my honest desire to take trash up squarely has inevitably resulted in the queer incongruities of this book.

My thanks go to Ingrid Stefanovic and Claudio Cucciotti for encouraging me to release this odd fish into a larger pool, and to the State University of New York Press for supplying, as it were, the water. If the work has reached any level of maturity, this is due to the gentle guidance of Sonia Sikka, who led my often inchoate thoughts into a place of shelter, where they could grow and strengthen. My deepest thanks.

Introduction

Plastic bags, newspapers, pizza boxes, razors, coffee-filters, napkins, quartz watches, elastic bands, diapers, toothbrushes, j-cloths, mail-order catalogues, aluminum cans, ball-point pens, sticky-notes, hospital gowns, cosmetic compacts, cameras, holiday decorations, ink cartridges, running shoes, juice-boxes, boil-in-the-bag rice, lighters, rubber gloves, bottled water, missiles, glue-sticks, cutlery; two-year-old computers, cat litter, surgical instruments, drinking straws, plastic children's toys, cell phones, batteries, hairspray dispensers, Kleenex, lightbulbs . . .

So many objects of our daily lives know but a fleeting presence. What does it mean that much, if not most, of our ordinary commerce with the world involves destruction? Does consuming disposable goods radically differ from using and maintaining durables? If so, then where does the difference lie—or is it buried irretrievably beneath the discards of a “throwaway society”? Does the evanescence of consumer commodities, from the paper plate to the fashions featured in last year's *Vogue*, reiterate the ceaseless flux of nature, or does it defy the ordered equilibrium to which nature, in the full revolution of its rhythmic cycle, intrinsically tends?

This study inquires into the meaning of disposable objects. It is an ontology because it seeks this meaning in the specific being of such objects. Beginning with the historical fact that things were not always as they are in the age of high technology, that “most Americans produced little trash before the twentieth century,”¹ the study asks how and why beings have become disposable.

Something far more urgent than mere historical curiosity motivates the inquiry. The historian has answers of her own to such questions as those posed earlier. “New materials,” she explains, “especially plastics of all kinds, became the basis for a relationship to the material world that

required consumers to buy things rather than make them and to throw things out rather than fix them.”² Most of us now recognize that such a relationship, responsible for untold environmental degradation, threatens our existence. But how could our technological means to live endanger our existence? Ontology takes up the question of the meaning of trash because it perceives the dangerous paradox involved in the being of trash. It asks whether a discrepancy might divide our modern mode of being, the consumer lifestyle, from our true existence.

To bring up “true existence” is to invite further and thornier questions concerning human nature. Presumably, existing in a truly human manner would mean living in harmony with our nature or essence. But just what constitutes our essence? Indeed, do we not already begin to falsify our existence by searching for some immutable essence underlying it? If it is of the essence of a knife to cut, what analogous statement can be made of us? Is it essential to our being that we love, make mistakes, think, laugh, sicken, and die? A mere list of ordinary activities and attributes leaves our essence untouched. Empirical knowledge necessarily falls short here, owing to an intuition we all have felt that something of us remains outside any catalogue of what we do and how we appear. Sensory observation will never get at the object of this intuition. By their very nature, questions concerning human essence, even those that challenge the validity of all such questions, have a metaphysical direction.

To that extent, this study is also metaphysical. It attempts, through rational argument and evidence, to discover the unapparent truth of disposable items, human nature, and the relation between them. While, due to its material, the study cannot avoid metaphysics, it handles metaphysical speculation like a prudent apprentice would handle a potentially dangerous implement. “Metaphysics,” according to Kant’s classic definition, “is a completely isolated speculative science of reason, which soars far above the teachings of experience, and in which reason is indeed meant to be its own pupil.”³ It seeks answers beyond the immediate world of sense perception. A certain will belongs to such an endeavor, a will to ascertain, explain, and assert. These lofty goals at the same time render metaphysics incapable of practicing the humility of acceptance. The tendency of metaphysics to ascend to higher and higher altitudes of explanation betrays its intrinsic deficiency: it can neither accept nor fully appreciate the ground-level given as simply given. Metaphysics literally overlooks the sheer wonder of Being and consequently loses sight of it. If Socrates spoke truly, that philosophy begins with wonderment, then by questioning that experience, by striving to explain it and thereby in a way to possess it, metaphysics already initiates the end of philosophy.

Just as metaphysics responds at first to wonder and then subsequently loses it, so this study also sets off in response to metaphysics with hopes eventually to see beyond it. This is not to say that the study will gradually abandon argument and reason to end up mute and transfixed in the presence of the ineffable. Rather, remaining cognizant of the inherent tendencies and biases of explicative speculation, it will employ metaphysics with an eye to how the latter inevitably shapes the object of its inquiry.

For the study to make any sense at all of the historical phenomenon of disposable commodities, it must approach metaphysics not as a canon of concepts or a tradition of ideas, but much more a manner of being of those entities capable of ideation and thought. As reason's attempt to comprehend the cosmos, metaphysics is a certain human way of encountering the world. In seeking to grasp the world, metaphysics inevitably engages with and manipulates it. Peculiar to metaphysics, however, is the method of engagement, which disengages all human faculties and features except the rational intellect. This method is, in certain spheres, highly effective, and, if efficacy were the only outcome, our caution with respect to metaphysics would be unfounded. The problem, though, is that, when isolated, reason tends to become domineering and cruel. The innocuous will to explain can degenerate into a hostile will to dominate. Distinction and intellectual autonomy from the physical do not satisfy the metaphysical will, which, in Plato's words, "must escape the contamination of the body's folly." For, "as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be truth."⁴ From the moment when metaphysics supposes the physical as inimical to its projects, it starts to avenge itself on the physical. A paradox ensues. Shorn and scornful of body, emotion and whatever else ties a human being to its physicality, metaphysical reason attains unprecedented power over the material world. It gives birth, as will be seen, to science and technology, and thereby manages to subordinate the physical to its transcendent purposes. This study will get beyond the objectionable in metaphysics—its hostility—if it succeeds in reconciling thought to the humble physicality that our humanness, no matter how elevated its rational flights, cannot cast off.

"Physicality" is itself, of course, a philosophically burdened term originating from the metaphysical dualism established between reason and the body. To answer the tradition simply by valorizing a metaphysically conceived body over reason would remain squarely within that tradition. We know that facile reversals of metaphysical claims only reinforce rather than challenge their legitimacy. I hope that this study avoids recourse to such futile tactics. Nevertheless, the constraints of language,

as well as the strategies of metaphysics throughout its history, urge me to cling to the term “physical” and its cognates. By approaching from a different angle its traditional connotations—such as limitation, finitude, imperfection, vulnerability, and so on—I will attempt to write about physicality in such a way that avoids the dogmatic dualism of mind and body and questions the metaphysical tendency to denigrate the latter pole.

Accordingly, I take pains throughout the study to maintain a conceptual difference between the metaphysical construal of the physical and a more holistic, less prejudicial interpretation. When speaking of matter as conceived within the tradition, I employ the term “substance,” relying on the Cartesian echoes that this word creates. Descartes believed that the substance, and therefore the true essence of an object, consists of mathematical properties inaccessible to sensual perception and open to reason alone. Consequently, substance is matter completely divorced from our sensuality. In opposition to this, I wish to implant matter into our somatic sensitivity. For the purpose of this study, “physicality” implies the entire mystery of human embodiment, including the mysteries of death, finitude, sociability, the desire for transcendence, and so on. The physical always relates essentially to our embodied being-in-the-world. This by no means amounts to a repudiation of reason; rather it reflects, at least to my mind, the most honest and accurate appraisal of the homogenous complexity of reality. Everything we experience, know, or will we do so as embodied “worldlings.” Thus “physicality” and the “human body” are here to be read as existential terms that encompass also mental phenomena. They are not to be confused with the reductive, segregating interpretations of metaphysics and empirical science. Again, I retain the otherwise problematic word “physical” in this manner in order to reveal the ultimate absurdity and impossibility of the metaphysical tradition’s drive to exceed, if not exit it altogether.

Obviously, science and technology make disposables possible. The combined forces of mass production, cheap mechanized labor, globally interconnected transportation and communication systems, and intricate, nearly absolute mastery over raw resources give disposable commodities an economic advantage over and above sheer physical feasibility. Prior to the industrial revolution, labor was simply too dear, and materials too scarce; few people could afford to throw things away. Yet even among the well-heeled a different attitude toward things than ours held sway. Things were, as the cliché goes, built to last. Patina covered objects with special value. Ownership prized the historical continuity of use and possession that would mark, with increasing distinction, the aging of a good. Did this former reverence and attachment to things subside, thus clearing shelf

space for science to market its innovations? Or did technology turn our collective head around, changing our gaze from past to future, amazing us with what we might buy and soon discard?

Most likely, attitude and invention changed together, dialectically. Today the dialectic has advanced to the point that disposable objects so predominate our daily lives that the distinction between disposable and durable has grown untenable. When, in 1923, General Motors introduced yearly model changes to its automobiles it, in effect, filed the phenomenon of durability and continuity in the archive of history. "For manufacturers of all kinds of products, the automobile was the ultimate test case for the principles of consumer marketing: if people could learn to discard cars that still worked, for reasons of style or new technologies, they could certainly come to think of anything else as disposable."⁵ Some of us may continue to polish the patina of antiques and heirlooms, but even here the meaning of their longevity has changed. Now their meaning is determined by what market value they acquire in relation to the revolving door of constantly new and improved commodities.

Humanity has always had its garbage. Yet, in earlier times, things were usually worn out before they were thrown out. Most of the contents of modern garbage-cans, however, underwent little qualitative alteration prior to disposal. Apart, perhaps, from an imprint of lipstick on its rim, the polystyrene cup looks no different after the consumption of its coffee than before. Both its substance and its form are exactly the same, yet its being has fundamentally altered. Before consumption, the cup was a marketable and desirable commodity; after, it is only trash. What does the brief act of consumption involve that could cause such powerful ontological effects?

Recourse here to philosophy, let alone to ontology, might well seem superfluous, if not contrived. True, perhaps the cup has not changed substantially, nonetheless, quantifiable alterations have occurred. For example, the hygiene of the cup is nothing what it was prior to consumption. After use, the cup is no longer sterilized, its germ-count having increased, which means it has become a possible hazard. The consumer does not buy the cup for itself, but rather for the value it has as a commodity. Part of this value is safety. When consumption removes this value, the commodity as such no longer remains intact, and its object changes. Simple economics speaks succinctly where philosophy would seem fated to wander in circumlocution.

That we value objects for their function is nothing new. Novel, however, is the tendency of the value of modern commodities to depart from their function. Jean Baudrillard has argued this extensively:

outside the field of its denotation, the object becomes substitutable in a more or less unlimited way within the field of connotations where it assumes sign-value. Thus the washing machine *serves* as an appliance and *acts* as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. It is strictly this latter field which is the field of consumption. All kinds of other objects may be substituted here for the washing machine as “signifying” element. In the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a *definite* function or need.⁶

In themselves, signs have no meaning. They rely on whatever signification their users bestow on them. Thus, a kind of emptiness or void conditions their being. The extraction of function and especially of need, we shall see, also evacuates the being of things that previously had a certain independent meaning. As mere signs, objects become disposable, with no greater claim on durability than an uttered syllable.

The question still outstanding asks how historically physical, worldly things became mere signs—that is, how beings became insignificant in themselves and prey to substitution and finally to disposal. Without an ontology of disposables, their universal mutation from valued commodity to trash must come across as a kind of witchcraft or reverse alchemy. In itself there is no good reason why the perfectly functional cup must be thrown out upon its being emptied. Nor can we attribute the mystery to mere convention, to the irrational mores of consumer society. Something extraordinary, despite its everydayness, is at work that demands interpretation and elucidation. We must ask what is it about the being of commodities as such that they so readily turn to trash. At the same time, we must also ask what it is about ourselves that we so easily trash the increasing majority of beings that we encounter in the world.

Ontology has several millennia of philosophical legitimacy behind it, but not so trash. In fact, the very word is philosophically objectionable, academically indecent. But precisely its distasteful connotations make trash the mandatory subject of modern ontology. For “trash” connotes violence. We sometimes apply the word to people as a particularly venomous pejorative. As a verb it can be used synonymously with “to destroy,” as in “the thugs trashed the place.” In this sense, “trash” means a manner of physically relating to other beings. It is a mode of comportment, treating things without care, negatively, and destructively. By calling disposables trash, I wish to draw attention to the way in which we exist as consumers in the throwaway society. We exist, for the most part, in a way that violently negates beings rather than takes care of them. The question as to our role in the phenomenon of disposable commodities is

answered succinctly in the single word: "trash." The ontology of trash, therefore, is the study of our modern technological mode of being—a kind of philosophical biography of our life as consumers.

Despite appearances, trash is not a phenomenon consequent to consumption. That once heard adage: "it's not waste until you waste it," no longer applies. The ontology will show that the being of technological commodities includes, *a priori*, their disposal. This means that the being of commodities is always already trashed. The only possible way to make sense of this is in the recollection that trash, first and foremost, is our active mode of existing with and among entities. Because, in other words, we comport ourselves negatively and destructively toward things, we necessarily disclose them as deficient in being, as disposable. Trash is, at one and the same time, the being of disposables as well as the being of "pre-disposed" commodities because at bottom it is also our disclosive mode of being as consumers of technology.

The attuned reader will have already detected familiar strains of Heidegger's thought. This study relies heavily on the great body of ontological insight that he formed throughout his life. It does not, however, seek to be carried along by this body, but rather to quicken and strengthen it. For one of the weaknesses of Heidegger's ontology and his analyses of human being is the absence of a thorough and explicit interpretation of embodiment. This absence is all the more conspicuous and problematic given the pragmatic and worldly nature of Heidegger's investigations. For example, Heidegger makes much of the disclosive power of specific moods or attunements. Particular things, he demonstrates, and the world in general reveal themselves through different ontological modes of being according to the various attunements in which we humans find ourselves. Among others, boredom, fear, angst, and concentrated involvement in a manual task are treated by Heidegger as ontologically significant aspects of our existence. Yet Heidegger remains strangely silent on the bodily basis of all attunements. He neglects to mention that boredom is not simply some kind of mental indolence, but equally a feeling of lassitude and inertia in our bones, a sense of heaviness and fatigue that burdens our bodies. Likewise, the tightened muscles in the neck, the clenched jaw, the scowl and balled fists cannot be separated from anger, as if these were merely accidental physical symptoms of an essentially mental occurrence. Hunger, sickness, sexual desire, and countless other "physiological" conditions all have as broad and profound an ontological import as those seemingly disembodied attunements which Heidegger treats.

The upshot of Heidegger's reticence concerning our essentially embodied being-in-the-world is that his critical interpretation of metaphysics retains a slightly metaphysical hue. It approaches at times the

fantastical because it fails to articulate explicitly the history of metaphysics as it is written in the flesh of physicality. By not including the evidence of concrete changes in our embodied being-in-the-world, his grand history of metaphysics tends to appear as at best a probable fiction. I believe that trash becomes the natural subject for an ontology that examines metaphysics in relation to the human body because it is the metaphysical, scientific disinterest in things that allows us to disclose them negatively. The old metaphysical quest for transcendence, when technologically pursued, descends into trash.

The ontology of trash thus works out to be the history of human embodied being-in-the-world that takes seriously the physiological changes wrought by technology on our embodiment. In this respect, the present study departs quite markedly from Heidegger, even while helping itself to several of the categories, some of the terminology, and many of the insights found in his ontological project. Such a departure, although radical enough, remains true to Heidegger because it carries closer to the point of resolution certain problems and tensions implicit in his physiologically decontextualized construal of the history of metaphysics. It offers an often critical and, I would like to think, corrective supplement to this yet ongoing history.

Since change permits us to perceive the passage of time, the history must first clearly distinguish what was from what is. Consequently, the first chapter examines the phenomenon of waste, something not at all new, in order to contrast more sharply the uniqueness of the modern phenomenon of trash. Waste, we learn, stinks of the body, making it metaphysically aversive. To transcend physicality, metaphysics must rid itself of not only the body, but also of its souvenir: waste. Chapter two deals with the effacement of the lived human body effected by metaphysics by means of technology. The third chapter handles food and begins to show how technological devices, by disengaging the body from the physical world that sustains it, transforms waste into trash.

In chapter four the denaturalization of food is set into the wider context of the often physically inhospitable environment of modern urbanity. In the city, human dependence on commodities is nearly total. Out of reach of its natural needs and the ability to satisfy them, the urbanized body consumes what it neither produces nor comprehends. Its commodities appear opaque to it due, in large part, to the emasculation of its sensitive capacities. While not discounting its success in overcoming much of the isolation and parochialism that can plague rural regions, we also know that modern city-life, in another sense, is a way of being in the world quite removed from other beings. Most city-dwellers, for example, have not even a passing acquaintance with the miraculous diversity of nature.

This disconnection based on separation and insensitivity promotes a destructive manner of taking care of things. It makes trash ontologically possible. Chapter five systematically delineates the ontology of trash. It shows how the technological manner of taking care of things, as our modern mode of being, signifies our failure to be truly human. The delineation, in other words, concludes with the exposure of this dilemma: the phenomenon of trash exists as long as we fail to exist as humans.

Such an understanding of trash leads incontrovertibly to its counterpart, the phenomenon of human extinction. We know that the accumulating trash of our abandonment to consumption puts our continued survival at risk. We might also reflect that the possibility of the imminent termination of humanity would predispose us to a reckless production and consumption of disposables. Why would we bother to produce products likely to outlive all of us? The circular causal relation between disposables that expedite our potential doom and between the fear of our global demise that accelerates the expansion of disposables directs us to a deeper intimacy between trash and human extinction. The same behavior that engenders trash also endangers humanity. Trash represents a desecration of beings that contradicts our role as stewards and preservers of Being. Human extinction, our own annihilation, thus already takes place to the extent that we trash what has been entrusted to our essence. Essentially depriving us, trash threatens our existence.

For all that, however, the real significance of trash is affirmative, not negative. A proper understanding of the phenomenon encourages hope rather than despair. Therefore, this study emerges finally on the far side of extinction's shadow, cleansed of trash through the worldly practice of careful thinking.

The ultimate optimism of this work, I hope, will ameliorate any perceived excess in its critical approach. It is neither my business nor my desire to write a condemnation of the modern world. We all well know its benefits, but our gratitude for these must not leave us permissive of its remediable ills. Any age so satisfied with its situation that it succumbs to philosophical indolence and moral indifference has thus announced its decline. Moreover, any comparison between ages that does not contribute to greater understanding and concern for our own is odious. A philosophical treatment of trash in no manner insults our modern way of being, but rather enlightens it to the real dangers it faces. Wisdom, thankfulness, and change follow upon understanding.

This page intentionally left blank.

CHAPTER ONE

Waste

Throughout their long cohabitation, waste has dogged humanity with a pack of woes ranging from embarrassment to pestilence. Yet the real problem behind these varying troubles is the ambiguity of waste. Anything and everything can become waste. We waste time, hot water, opportunity, money, potential, food, life, love, electricity, kindness and so on. None of these cases would be ambiguous were it not for the trite fact that what one person discards, some other person likely covets. Is watching television game-shows wasteful sloth or recreation? Like beauty, it appears that the phenomenon of waste belongs to the eye of the beholder. Radical subjectivism of this sort raises an inevitable question: if one and the same thing can simultaneously be both waste and not waste, does waste, per se, exist at all?

The ontology of trash commences here because it hypothesizes that trash is a uniquely modern species of waste. If the existence of waste cannot be firmly established, or its essence at least provisionally outlined, the study of trash stalls before it starts. Fortunately, by probing its layers of ambiguity, we can reach a functional, albeit incomplete, understanding of waste. We shall see that the uniqueness of trash lies in its repudiation of the subjective nature of waste. Trash takes on the aspect of a monstrosity, a species whose defining features contradict its genus. Trash signifies an attempt to render absolute the essential relativity of waste and thereby answer its central problem of intrinsic ambiguity.

This ambiguity revolves around the multiple revaluations of the distinction between natural and unnatural. This chapter will proceed by breaking down the complex judgments concerning the nature of waste into their constitutive parts. Waste is often bemoaned, but also sometimes celebrated according to respective evaluations of nature. When we encounter nature as the fecund source of prosperity, we want to emulate

its unstinting liberality. We blithely become prodigals. When, on the other hand, we feel dwarfed or bound by nature's constraints, we tend to regard our unfulfilled ideals as wasted on account of our biological inadequacies. So alternating between shame, censure, and celebration, we attribute waste to nature or to ourselves, depending on our current understanding of our relation to nature. Amid this conceptual confusion a single, solid fact stands out: that waste does in truth exist. So long as we continue to distinguish between positive and negative, we will always face waste. For all wastes result from the inveterate human habit of evaluation.

The Value of Waste

Our responsibility for the phenomenal existence of waste must be stressed because it sometimes vanishes in the surrounding fog of ambiguity. If we take nature as a domain indifferent to value, one on which values can only supervene, waste will appear utterly foreign to it. Ecology teaches that on the macro level nature wastes nothing. There death gets absorbed into life through an incessant, all-encompassing cycle impenetrable to the micro level judgments of positive and negative. Now, when we deign to situate ourselves within this cycle, we would seem to lose the distinguishing marks of judgment in the vastness of cosmic indiscrimination.

Certainly humans, and other intelligent forms of life, are natural products, owing their existence to natural processes which determine their capacities and structures. On this, the broadest, view of the natural, everything that goes on in the universe is natural. When a tree grows and flourishes nothing non-natural is occurring; when a species becomes extinct, even as a result of degradation of wild areas by humans, nothing non-natural is occurring; when humans clear wilderness and build cities nothing non-natural is occurring. All of these processes occur because the laws of nature are as they are. Nothing that happens can, in this sense, be non-natural. Nothing that anyone ever does can be, in this sense, non-natural.¹

Nature's universality, being absolute, without value and judgment, leaves no room for the distinctions that generate waste. In the cosmic scheme of things, the concept of waste falls from sight.

At this cosmological level it costs but little effort to brush aside the otherwise disturbing problem of waste. From nature's perspective, the phenomenon of waste appears a conceptual fabrication born of ignorance.

Something like this God's-eye view inspires former Executive Vice President of the American Can Company, Alexander Judd, in his *In Defense of Garbage*. Judd is convinced that "the garbage problem is not a physical crisis, a resource crisis, or a financial crisis. It is a political and informational problem which needs to be addressed as such."² By this Judd means that the problem boils down to the overactive imaginations and narrow understanding of pessimists and environmentalists. The reason why the problem is not physical, and, by implication, not real, could not be more elementary. As long as we have ground in which to dig holes, we need never worry about our refuse:

The public perceives that the garbage crisis is caused by the runaway growth of disposables, packaging, and discards in general. The real problem, of course, is not the growth of garbage or the quantity of garbage; it is the closing of landfills and the failure to provide replacement sites or alternate ways to handle the discards of towns and cities.

The production of garbage responds to growth in population, household formations, affluence, and commercial activity, but the capacity for the disposal of waste depends more on the availability of land—space—than any other factor. Table 2-1 compares MSW [municipal solid waste] discards, population, and area in the forty-eight contiguous states to similar figures for three other industrialized nations. Those countries discard an average of 22 percent less garbage per person, but we discard 85 percent less garbage per acre than they.³

The garbage-per-acre index takes full advantage of the astronomical blessings of an ever-expanding universe. Garbage will become a problem only on the day space begins to contract. Meanwhile, for Judd, the production of garbage could not be more natural. He proves this by demonstrating the neat cyclical nature of industrial production. The great pits in the earth, created by such production during the extraction of raw resources, are perfectly suited to be filled with the effluent of consumption.

Although breathtaking in its scope and ingenuity, Judd's argument lacks phenomenological subtlety. While waste may not pose problems to humans in a cosmic state of nature, it undeniably disturbs our little, everyday life as lived in a world permeated with value. We might temporarily refrain from assigning values to what we come across, but we cannot so easily will away our evaluative character. Perhaps nothing humans do, not even their judging, is non-natural; yet our very nature makes us feel a kind of separation from the valueless order of the cosmos.