

## CHAPTER ONE

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# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

Willy-nilly we confront waste as a phenomenon of our world, and the fact that from some transcendental vantage point it appears an illusion does not help us in the least as we grope forward through imminence. Living in the world, we cannot look down on it disillusioned. Even while dismissing the problem of garbage, Judd clings to a certain notion of waste. Any large stretch of empty space vacant of our junk seems to strike him as reprehensibly wasteful.

What, then, characterizes the phenomenon of waste, whether illusion or not? Kevin Lynch provides a good, phenomenological description:

Waste is what is worthless or unused for human purpose. It is a lessening of something without any apparently useful result; it is loss and abandonment, decline, separation, and death. . . . The dictionary definitions are centred on man. . . . The term is applied to a resource not in use, but potentially useful, wasted time, a wasted life, an empty building or machine. . . . Resources in use that are losing their usefulness unnecessarily are also thought to be wasted. The loss may be unnecessary, brought about by too rapid or inefficient an expenditure, or by lack of normal maintenance. . . . But if the loss is due to normal wear, then it is not waste but expected cost. . . . Moreover, if the loss is due to some uncontrollable event such as a tidal wave or a hurricane, the event is not a waste, since it could not have been prevented. *Thus we multiply our opportunities for waste as we improve our control and prediction of events. Waste implies negligence or human failure.*<sup>4</sup>

Waste embarrasses and shames us because it confronts us with a reflection of our own shortcomings.

On the strength of this, we could make two plausible hypotheses. First, any society, such as our own, that generates gross amounts of waste must have correspondingly gross inadequacies. Where the average person creates nearly five pounds of garbage per day, the human failure must also be proportionately massive. Second, a society preoccupied with concealing its wastes must have, so to speak, something important to hide from itself. Rather than countenance its own negligence, a wastrel society might take Herculean pains to sweep its waste under the carpet. Beneath the strain of this impossible task a society can grow inured to its increasing absurdity. Our exports in garbage destined for an exotic Third-World disposal increase yearly.

Waste offends us to the extent that it reflects back our own shortcomings, our failure to preserve the value that we originally invested in an

object. While evaluating is an active rational process, waste-making involves a certain passivity. It follows on a withdrawal of our direct participation with things. When things degrade beyond our control, we think it unfortunate, but do not feel responsible. Our conscience is pricked when we neglect to intervene, when we fail to give of ourselves to the maintenance of our own projected values. Waste occurs only with a subtraction of worth; an already worthless object cannot be wasted. Since values are our investment into things, their subtraction marks our divestment from or indifference to things.

What this points to is the importance of care regarding the phenomenon of waste. When, despite, or even due to our earnest effort to the contrary, we end up destroying a valuable object, we feel more inclined to treat it as an accident than a waste. If, on the other hand, indolence, absentmindedness, or plain indifference were the cause, the ensuing destruction strikes us as an offensive waste. Even when in both cases the loss could have been avoided, the latter counts more as waste. It seems, then, that waste results from carelessness—that is, from a neglect or failure to care for the things we have valued.

Given that values are human projections, the process of devaluation in fact turns out to be more basically one of dehumanization. “Waste comes from the Latin *vastus*, meaning unoccupied or desolate, akin to the Latin *vanus* (empty or vain), and to the Sanskrit word for wanting or deficient.”<sup>5</sup> The prime deficiency is our own insofar as waste implies our failure and shortcomings. Thus, the privation that characterizes waste results from our own inadequate response to the obligations intrinsic to the worth we attribute to the valued thing. Wasting unsettles us because it involves a contradiction between our judgment and our conduct. When our actions confirm the value we project, we do not waste. When, on the contrary, we refuse to comport ourselves in accordance with our projections, we contradict them and in the clash of contradiction the thing has its value knocked out of it. We retract our values, leaving an emptiness in the thing. This, however, is preceded by a more basic and pragmatic retraction of our care and practical concern with the thing.

The dehumanization of wasted things occurs at a deeper level than the mere aesthetic faculty that subjectively regards one thing as trash and another treasure. True, the determination of wastes does involve a certain subjective imposition on the being of the entity in question. To this extent, waste-making resembles all other types of projection, and, moreover, a loose and arbitrary one at that. Anything valued can look like junk from some vantage point. Despite this subjective relativity, it is still most instructive to understand this supervening projection as more profoundly privative. Rather than seeing waste as an expression of an essential human

activity—projecting negative values—we might better regard it first as a matter of human withdrawal and deprivation.

A case can be made for this on epistemological grounds. In her classic study on the sociological meaning of rites surrounding pollution and impurity, Mary Douglas writes:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. . . . Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. . . . In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.<sup>6</sup>

A sufficient kinship exists between the notions of dirt and waste to justify thinking about the latter in a similar fashion. Dirt is what settles outside the ruled lines of our conceptual schema. In other words, it eludes or resists our everyday conceptualizations. The use of concepts, of course, is the privileged province of reason, which is presumed, at least in the metaphysical tradition, to be the endowment unique to, and definitive of, human beings. What reason cannot conceptually work with, it relegates to the negative classification of dirt or pollution. But the unworkable elusiveness and incomprehensibility of its contents make this classification a kind of anticlassification that repulses reason. Reason cannot help categorizing things, and so it employs 'dirt' as the default category that appears in the absence of rational comprehension. Thus, the concept of dirt and waste is where, so to speak, reason loses its grip and where this definitively human faculty malfunctions.

Douglas begins to explain how this operates by arguing that the dichotomy between the pure and the impure serves traditional societies as the foundation for their cultural superstructure. Although this dichotomy matches more or less that between the sacred and the profane, it remains distinct and primary, for it results directly from the invariable epistemological makeup of human consciousness. As beings who function mentally by means of definite concepts, we inevitably encounter objects and circumstances within our wide range of experience that transgress our clean conceptual boundaries. These transgressional experiences threaten the order that consciousness constructs out of its concepts and are thus perceived as dangerous. Whatever conforms to our concepts and helps entrench them is experienced as safe, unambiguous—in a word, pure.

On this account, pollution originates with ambiguity. Dependent on a peculiarity of the human mind, it is more an epistemological entity than a material one. Wherever consciousness uncovers something unclassifiable, something against the weave of its conceptual patterns, there it finds a source of danger, able to contaminate its requisite order with chaos. That which consciousness cannot precisely situate repels it. So it happens that taboos develop around such things as feces and menstrual fluids. These are matter out of place; they are both of the body, but no longer contained within it. So with waste in general; it always dwells at the margins of our concepts. Wasteland is the scrub between city and country. Garbage is all that anonymous stuff falling between valued objects and simple dust.

Owing to the malleability of conceptual structures, their patterns can assume any number of variations. Cultural relativity arises partly from the fact that different patterns expose different sources of purity and pollution. This implies that no object in itself is immune to becoming waste, while, on the other hand, no object is in essence waste, given a more accommodating pattern. The conceptual constitution of reason conditions the existence of values. Concepts are, by definition, finite, otherwise they could not have any meaningful application. The finitude of conceptual consciousness, generating its particular pattern of finite concepts, renders this consciousness essentially perspectival. What secures and strengthens its sense of order and control attracts it. What disrupts this sense repels reason and is evaluated accordingly. Values serve to reinforce the concepts from which they derive. Although the projection of values is a conceptual activity, the platform from which all values are launched remains ultimately physical. We value those things that we perceive to bring us pleasure, health, and happiness, for these promote the physical security on which reason builds its conceptual order.

Since waste is, most simply put, our failure to preserve our values concretely, it, too, has a practical fundament. Waste, like dirt, is what our reason can no longer usefully comprehend and categorize in terms of our pragmatic encounter with the world. Yet reason arrives at this loss only after, so to speak, our hands no longer work to maintain the thing's former value. So here reason follows the physical withdrawal of our active concern with our projections. Our initial rational values formed "a set of ordered relations," while our physical behavior enacts "a contravention of that order." Only following this practical contravention does the object become devalued. It no longer accords with the ordered relations of reason because it has ceased to fit into the primordial world of our practical concern. Waste, then, is not just matter out of place; it is matter without place.

### Natural Wastes?

If what has been said about waste has any bearing, it would seem to apply only to artifacts, that is, to objects invested not only with human value but also with some degree of human ingenuity and industry. But there exists an entirely different and prototypical variety of waste that never began as valued. Excrement provides our first experience of waste, on which all related experiences are ordered. I have suggested that wastage through devaluation results from a failure somehow to live up to our uniquely human capacities. Excrement, on the other hand, seems like a waste that directly expresses our humanity. Man, as Ernest Becker has colorfully put it, is the god who shits—a bizarre and fabulous combination of spiritual and rational aspirations and physical, corruptible matter. Becker writes: “Excreting is the curse that threatens madness because it shows man his abject finitude, his physicalness, the likely unreality of his hopes and dreams. But even more immediately, it represents man’s utter bafflement at the sheer *non-sense* of creation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus our fecal wastes instantiate our essential nature. They are redolent of our mortality. Ambiguity asserts itself here, because now waste seems like a wholly natural occurrence in opposition to the transcendental status of reason. It is easy to see why this type of waste would be inherently problematic, for it is emblematic of the crucial problems of our radically absurd human condition—that we are half divine (reason) and half bestial (nature). Bodily waste repulses us for the same reason that death does. They signify our finiteness, that which makes us human, all too human, and not gods.

How does this fit consistently with the claim that devalued wasting of objects represents an absence of our humanness, when our most basic wastes partially embody our peculiar nature? What does devaluation have to do with finitude? From the metaphysical point of view, finitude has always implied negativity or lack. When, for example, Descartes inquires into the cause of his errors, he notices

that passing before me is not only a real and positive idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) but also, as it were, a certain negative idea of nothingness (that is, what is the greatest possible distance from any perfection), and that I have been so constituted as a kind of middle ground between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being. Thus insofar as I have been created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me by means of which I might be deceived or led into error: but insofar as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is,



insofar as I am not the supreme being and lack a great many things, it is not surprising that I make mistakes.<sup>8</sup>

I have said that wasting valuable objects involves privation, but this must not be restricted to the kind of metaphysical privation mentioned here. The more primary privation is an existential one. The failure implied in this kind of wasting stems from a rejection of the truth of our insufficiencies. To be finite means, in addition to erring, not to be self-sufficient, to be reliant on other beings to preserve our being. Neglecting to care for the things that help sustain our fragile existence amounts to a denial of our finite nature. It is a mendacious assertion of our supernatural divinity and a wishful disavowal of our animality.

Waste, then, can imply failure at two very different levels: the metaphysical and the existential. With respect to metaphysics, bodily wastes symbolize the obstinacy of our “lower” animal nature and the latter’s pitiable inability to live up to the directives and imperatives of pure reason. Yet, on the existential level, this rational flagellation of the body, which refuses to acknowledge and accept our physical dependencies, lapses readily into the negligence concerning things that leads to their wasteful devaluation. In other words, metaphysical denial of the flesh often leads to a dismissal of the world. So while metaphysics defines waste as privative when measured against an absolute transcendental order of being, an existential phenomenology of waste understands this metaphysical definition itself as the original withdrawal of our own active embeddedness the world.

Keeping these two opposing perspectives distinct is crucial for any degree of clarity on the issue of waste. Metaphysics, with its supernatural ambitions and affinities, treats nature as wasteful of the rational elements putatively imprisoned within it. The opposite perspective, what I have called, for lack of better terms, existential and phenomenological, regards the neglect of our worldly needy nature brought about by our carelessness toward things as ultimately the waste of our own complex human being. The present study adopts this latter perspective. For only in the view of this perspective does the overwhelming phenomenon of technological disposables—trash—appear in a meaningful and edifying way. Otherwise the sight of it must continue to dumbfound and dehumanize us.

Waste, however, is not yet trash. What this study must recount is the history of how the metaphysical perspective on waste has become technologically instituted as trash. Such a recounting will explicate the absurd position of certain technophiles, like Judd, who find no reasonable cause for concern in the mounting debris of the consumer culture. On the

contrary, the magnitude of modern trash seems to convince such enthusiasts of modernity's unrivaled economic success and technological prowess. This can only make sense given a view that finds nature wasteful and the technological transformation of the natural as productive. Technology, we shall see, dissolves the problem of waste by fixating and absolutizing its inherent ambiguity. Technology replaces waste, a creature of value, with trash. Whereas waste results from a relative, subjective devaluation, technological objectification, that is, unconditional, absolute devaluation, engenders trash.

### **“Positive Waste”**

Before moving out onto the concrete absoluteness of trash, we must traverse a final ambiguous slough of waste. For there remains a kind of waste that, having none of the negative implications previously dealt with, might well pass with the title of “positive waste.” Guilt and shame do not burden all instances of wasting. Often relief and even festive celebration accompany certain acts of discarding. The ritual of potlatch, for example, not infrequently included the intentional destruction of highly valuable objects, even homes. Rituals (perhaps more than scientific modernity wishes to acknowledge) serve profoundly personal needs. To the extent that rituals humanize us, ritualistic wasting could not, as my argument would seem compelled to say, dehumanize us. In that case, waste would not imply human failure. It would bring about human fulfillment.

How does waste, the essence of which contains loss and negation, take on positive value? Baudrillard begins to puzzle out this paradox with his observation that “all societies have always wasted, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, a superfluity that the individual—and society—feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive.”<sup>9</sup> Far from posing a problem and implying failure, waste in this case seems to offer a solution, or a salve, as it were, for the abrasions of physical finitude. Waste, Baudrillard implies, need not suggest death and privation. It can equally symbolize the life process, the abundance and exuberance of nature. By emulating this abundance, humans have submerged, to use Nietzsche's distinction, their discriminative Apollinian elements in a Dionysian participation in the valueless holism of nature. This “primitive” solution to waste is the antithesis of the metaphysical solution. Whereas metaphysics finds nature prodigiously wasteful and attempts to overcome the problem of waste by becoming supernatural, the “primitive” experiences freedom from the conceptual constraints of reason by joining in the

undifferentiated flow of natural growth and decay. Both responses attain at best only partial success, for both leave one of the dual aspects of our physical-rational nature dissatisfied. Yet the primitive solution does have at least one advantage over metaphysics, in that, though it fails to satisfy reason, neither does it frustrate or deny it. Metaphysics, however, generally intends to break asunder the bands of human bondage, conceived as our specifically physical fallibility. Its tenor is more aggressive. Furthermore, in its disposal of nature, it refuses the core truth of nature as well as our own mortality. This truth is finitude.

Rough empirical evidence for this claim can be found by comparing the respective success met with by these two responses. If positive wasting is indeed unproblematic, this means its success can be measured according to how clean it is of human failure and neglect. As it turns out, authentic ritualistic wasting does not, strictly speaking, create waste at all, due to the care and attention it involves. Rituals cultivate mental concentration and heighten an awareness for details. They lose their point and power when performed distractedly, carelessly, hurriedly; thus, they are incommensurate with negligence and indifference. It is important to distinguish waste from ritualized attempts at surpassing necessity.

### **The Feast**

The ritual of feasting provides the most obvious and basic example of the phenomenon of “positive wastage” ascribed by Baudrillard to all societies. An objective definition of feasting might run: consuming more than basic physical requirements of the body demand. However, as a ritualistic celebration of abundance, the traditional feast carves out a piece of nature’s plenitude and offers the celebrant direct participation in the vitality and bounty of life. The feast inundates mere survival with abundance, thereby sublimating it. Survival ceases to be a concern within the special boundaries marked off by the feast because these boundaries concentrate the universal copiousness of nature, making it amenable to direct human participation and some measure of human control. The feast clears a space for humans to play at immortality by offering not mere excessive consumption, but rather the physical incorporation of abundance itself. When feasting, the celebrant consciously reenacts the unconscious law of nature. Or, more precisely, the celebrant personifies, both literally and symbolically, the essence of life.

As with all types of ritual, the feast accomplishes this nearly magical transcendence by setting limits. In this case, the most basic boundaries are temporal. Feasts occur at special times and have definite durations. A

temporally undefined feast loses all of its symbolic force and efficacy. Without the concentration of abundance created by the delimitation of time, the feast distends, becoming undifferentiated from normal consumption. For its part, normal consumption always has more or less to do with mere survival, with satisfying the mortal needs of the body. So long as man remains in essence a mortal, ineluctably finite being, normal needy consumption cannot be done away with. This hangs as the backdrop on which the ritual of feast is meaningfully projected. In other words, the feast derives its power and meaning only in contrast to ordinary consumption characterized by leaner necessity.

With the erasure of the feast's temporal borders, the ritualized concentration of abundance dissipates into mere excess. Since excess is defined relative to a given purpose, it must be called unnatural insofar as nature lacks any sort of express *telos*. The meaning of the feast depends on its symbolic power to rarefy base survival through a special concentration of the natural life force. This meaning disappears to the same extent as do the ritualized limits on which it depends. The absence of the feast's transcendent meaning consequently gets filled by the purpose of normal consumption, that is, the maintenance of the physical body. Since the human body consists of nothing but limits all the way down to its very spatial extension, its maintenance has very definite requirements. Whatever exceeds these said requirements is excessive. So, while the symbolic significance of the feast preserves it in the abundance of nature, the loss of this significance leaves room for the deluges of excess. Indefinitely prolonged feasting must end in mere gluttony—the excessive consumption that defies the body's limited needs as well as the brief taste of immortality offered to the spirit enthralled within the limits of the feast.

Being finite, humans can cope with abundance only under special conditions instituted by ritual. We cope by making sense of James's "blooming, buzzing confusion." Excessive consumption, however, because unconditioned, reopens bounded meaning to the kind of chaos that the institutions of ritual were built to contain. The consumer society, with its bottomless cornucopia of commodities, lays out a perpetual feast lacking beginning and end. It obliterates all meaningful temporal differentiations. As its advertisements vaunt, the consumer society permanently strives to replace the normal consumption associated with the needy body, with the extraordinary, transcendent consumption accomplished by reason, that faculty of ours nearest to the infinite. Even so basic a good as food is never advertised as a necessity. Rather it is sold—and bought—as simply another component among others that constitute a certain lifestyle inhabited by a specific persona of consumer. Semantic and symbolic significance—properties of our linguistic reason—take precedence over the

pragmatic significance of the objects we desire and seek. Consumption becomes a kind of interminable chatter, a speaking in tongues that can no longer meaningfully address the real limits of the body. Excess thus enters the new discourse of consumption when the delimiting body is forced from its role as interlocutor.

Anyone who has ever overeaten knows the dull, heavy, and deathlike feelings that follow excessive consumption. Gluttony blunts the keenness of the senses; the experience of excess brings about sensations closer to the inertness of death than to the vibrant animation of life. Similarly, the technological supply for the unbounded celebration of lifestyle ends up destroying the meaningful vitality of the traditionally circumscribed feast of the life force.

It remains to be seen whether the difference between the traditional and the modern forms of feasting entails a real ontological distinction between natural and technological abundance. While it does hint at such a distinction, mere insinuation does not permit decisive conclusions. The feast exists as a cultural response to a brute, inexplicable fact confronting man—the overabundance of nature—and any natural phenomena of this kind can elicit a wide variety of responses. It will prove helpful to point out some other essential features of the traditional feast in contrast to modern rituals of consumption. If sharpened sufficiently, the contrast may show an underlying difference between sources of these incommensurable forms of ritual.

Baudrillard draws attention to the first feature when he admonishes that:

we have to distinguish individual or collective waste as a symbolic act of expenditure, as a festive ritual and an exalted form of socialization, from its gloomy, bureaucratic caricature in our societies, where wasteful consumption has become a daily obligation, a forced and often unconscious institution like indirect taxation, a cool participation in the constraints of the economic order.<sup>10</sup>

As a meaningful ritual, the traditional feast must also be culturally instituted, but, as an institution, it cannot obligate. As soon as one is compelled to feast, the possibility of genuine feasting vanishes. For a feast to function truly its participants must enter into it voluntarily, otherwise it amounts to a kind of forced-feeding—the very antithesis of the celebratory incorporation of abundance. The ritual of the feast serves temporarily to transcend the exigencies of the needy body. Any obligation with respect to feasting simply substitutes one set of necessities for another.

Obligation subordinates the feast to the very thing it was designed to overcome.

Tightly bound to its voluntary nature is the celebratory essence of the feast. A ritualized affirmation of abundance, the feast allows its celebrants to appropriate the overwhelming fullness of nature, mitigating its awesome grandeur for a set period of time. Through this appropriation, the celebrant directly participates in the inexhaustible life force. A kind of spontaneous merger thus ensues between the person and her celebrated source of abundance, which traditionally has been nature. There results from this a feeling of limitless expansion, although conditioned, of course, by the all-important limits of ritual. Elative joy attends every authentic feast. Without this distinguished guest, the feast quickly deflates into a lifeless masquerade of mundane consumption.

The celebratory aspect of the feast reflects not only its content, but equally its form. Because a cultural response, the feast is also a collective one: it has to be shared to attain meaning. The feast involves other celebrants no less than it does abundance. It taxes the imagination to picture a solitary feast, which can be nothing more than a sumptuous feed. In short, the phenomenon of the feast is crowded with people, laughter, and edible plenty. It has a voluntary, celebratory, and communal structure.

A final essential feature of the feast remains. Although not to be attempted here, it could be plausibly argued that the ritual of the feast developed out of the ritual of sacrifice. In any case, the feast retains a sacrificial element in its receptive and grateful acknowledgment and celebration of abundance. For its part, the ritual of sacrifice performs a kind of dialectic exchange by offering back what has been received. Strictly speaking, the sacrifice is not a giving, but a returning. Moreover, it involves what looks like another example of positive wastage. In sacrificing, a person places something of utility outside the sphere of possible human use. Thus, the sacrificed object gains value to the extent that it escapes its use-function. With respect to utility, its value corresponds inversely to its being consumed. Like the feast, sacrifice transcends, by this means, the exigencies of survival. Feast and sacrifice seem to overlap, for there can be little joy without gratitude; and gratitude without joy is a grudging contradiction.

If we care to listen to Baudrillard, as well as to our own experience of disappointment and dissatisfaction, the modern consumerist feast lacks the primary qualities of its traditional antecedents. A gloomy obligation to excessively consume hardly qualifies as feasting. Add to this the typical attitude of the participant—characterized by an insistence on the inviolable right of the consumer rather than by receptive gratitude—and the notion of feast mutates beyond recognition. The dissolution of the

necessary temporal limits has left modernity with an exceeding capacity to consume. The result is that the ritual of the feast, once the primary vehicle for making sense of and bringing order to the brute fact of nature, has grown almost irreparably ineffectual. It has lost its font of meaning. The extinguishment of the feast, however, does not mean the disappearance of the problem to which it originally responded. Douglas observes: "As a social animal, man is a ritual animal. If ritual is suppressed in one form, it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction. . . . It is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts."<sup>11</sup> A culture left with a mere husk of ritual must develop a substitute to handle the experiences no longer controlled by the moribund cultural institution.

### Conspicuous Consumption

In lieu of the feast, technological society has developed its own codified behavior that mimics positive wastage in order to superimpose its own metaphysical excesses onto natural abundance. Metaphysics deals in excess because its very essence drives toward surpassing limits. This excess gets ordered, or, more accurately, gets ranked in what Thorstein Veblen called emulative wastage. In a manner reminiscent of the feast, emulative wasting attempts to impose order on the chaos of superabundance by introducing into it limits and distinctions. However, the attempt fails and falls short of meaningful ritual because these limits are manufactured by reason alone. Extrinsic to the phenomenon, they have an arbitrary and physically groundless character.

Written at the turn of the twentieth century, Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* predates the completed construction of the modern monoliths of advertising and mass media. Nonetheless, the industrial revolution by that point had matured sufficiently to show all the most prominent features of its older age. Veblen's famous theory demonstrates how the nature of abundance is inoculated with cultural meaning through the needle of social status.

The theory claims that human community transformed from a primeval state of peaceable and egalitarian coexistence into a "consistently warlike habit of life."<sup>12</sup> Under belligerent conditions that threaten the security and survival of a person or a people, physical prowess assumes supreme value, thanks to its unrivaled utility. In war, as on the hunt, strength and power secure both the physical—for example, food—and the social—for example, stability—goods of life. In other words, power brings home the spoils and the kill. Through characteristic confusion, people

began to equate material wealth—the product of power—with power itself. So it happened that the “possession of wealth, which was at the outset valued simply as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act.”<sup>13</sup> More than merely reflecting power, wealth comes to materialize it, physically manifesting the possessor’s importance to the community. Standing as indubitable proof of social worth, wealth thus becomes the surest determinant of social status.

The wealth produced through power and predation has an almost magical quality. What otherwise would require long periods of labor to procure is taken possession of with sudden celerity. A concentrated burst of energy fells the prey, bringing immediate material plenty, while prolonged hours of manual toil, or industry as Veblen calls it, fail to produce equivalent quantity. The conflation of power and wealth severs any connection that may have bound prosperity to work. Work thereby suffers a double debasement: because it falls short of wealth, it has always to labor on necessity, and because work does not require physical prowess, only the weak find it necessary. The occupation of the inferior, productive work comes to occupy a position of inferiority below power.

It follows from this that to work means to reveal one’s low status. Conversely, to display through idleness the absence of the need to work means to enjoy the appropriated fruits of power. Ostensible uselessness on the productive level translates into great utility by the measure of prosperity. The activity of leisure thus manifests the possession of wealth and power. The more conspicuously one practices this activity in the sight of the community, the more stable one’s elevated position of rank.

Conspicuous leisure functions well to establish order in communities small enough that most members may witness and understand the claims to status asserted by it. In the anonymity of larger groups, however, the efficacy of leisure as evidence of power decreases. To properly convey meaning, leisure requires a certain degree of familiarity among neighbors as to how they spend their time. Conspicuous consumption, on the other hand, can immediately convince even a complete stranger of the consumer’s social rank. Fashion, for instance, enables the consumer of luxuries quite literally to wear his worth. Expensive, coveted garments and jewelry proclaim at once, through a kind of *lingua franca*, the disposable wealth possessed by the wearer.

“From the foregoing survey of the growth of conspicuous leisure and consumption,” to quote Veblen, “it appears that the utility of both alike for the purposes of reputability lies in their element of waste that is common to both. In the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods.”<sup>14</sup> For either leisure or consumption to persuasively demonstrate wealth, they must involve excess. With this, Veblen



discovers meaning within the meaningless excesses of industrial society. Waste is ascribed a purpose: to make patent the wealth and power of the wastrel in question. What is naturally meaningless consequently becomes the very determinant and defender of social order. As in the case of feasting and sacrifice, waste sheds its repellent nature when it is purposively placed within the human project of meaning.

Veblen further bends the nature of abundance to the incipient consumer culture's requirement for meaning in the absence of traditional ritual when he writes:

With the exception of the instinct of self-preservation, the propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper. In an industrial community this propensity for emulation expresses itself in pecuniary emulation; and this, so far as regards the Western civilized communities of the present, is virtually equivalent to saying that it expresses itself in some form of conspicuous *waste*. The need of conspicuous waste, therefore, stands ready to absorb any increase in the community's industrial efficiency or output of goods, after the most elementary physical wants have been provided for.<sup>15</sup>

The ritual of conspicuous consumption gives some sense, albeit absurd, to the seeming pointlessness of industrialization's overproductivity, whose overwhelming aspect relents somewhat, just as the awesomeness of natural abundance relents through the feast within the signifying confines of ritual.

Veblen's prose, as the previous quotation witnesses, echoes with catches of a sophisticated social Darwinism, which is itself a cultural by-product of an industrialization that postdates the decline of ritual feasting. Emulative wastage opposes festive wastage in its most basic features. Conspicuous consumption is, by definition, competitive rather than communal; its very function is to stratify individuals into antagonistic classes. This competitive essence imbues the ritual with a feeling of compulsion, which can appropriate even a refusal to participate. Because the entire society operates on the principle of emulative wasting, every member of this society necessarily performs in its codified consumption. An individual can, of course, assume a greater or lesser role in the performance, but cannot completely exit the stage while remaining a part of the cultural play. In this way the "ritual" is personally manipulative.

The manipulation, furthermore, does not stop at the participants; it penetrates with even greater force into the objects of consumption. A tendency toward violence marks conspicuous consumption. Whereas the

traditional feast sets up consumption as the grateful reception of natural power, emulative wastage seizes objects as a willful assertion of human power. The possibility of sacrifice in this latter “ritual” is completely foreclosed. Its mandatory consumption has no need for the integrity of its objects; it consumes them as mere empty symbols of its power. The feast, contrariwise, relies on the integrity of its objects, for they have not only to symbolize abundance, but also must instantiate it. Feasting evokes gratitude because it functions only insofar as its objects are received in the spirit in which they were given. The gift of natural abundance is not an interchangeable, metaphorical prop for the human subject’s self-aggrandizement.

### Scarcity and Abundance

These fundamental differences rest on a still deeper difference. Uncovering this difference means breaking ontological ground. It became clear earlier that the feast primarily enacts an affirmation of natural abundance. It expresses a human acceptance of the amazing fullness of nature that helps finite man find his bearings, howsoever briefly, amid the plenitude. Strictly speaking, feasting cannot waste. For just as the life force of nature, having neither purpose nor the values that purposes impose, cannot exceed itself, so its symbolic consumption cannot become excessive or wasteful. The feast recreates the immense fecundity of nature on a human scale, transferring the wastelessness of the original to the recreation. A feast cannot have too much. What the human celebrants do not consume, of this the presiding, though unseen, gods will partake.

The modern form of ‘positive wastage’ could not contradict this more starkly. Emulative wasting is predicated not at all on abundance; its real source is scarcity. From this source flow its competitive, compelling, violent, and ungrateful qualities. Because the codified consumption seeks to order experience and secure cultural meaning through the hierarchical establishment of rank or status, it necessarily trades in a scarce commodity. By definition, status cannot be abundant. It presupposes a hierarchy, the top of which remains forever exclusive. Should every member of a group possess like status, then the very notion of it would dissolve into vacuity. Emulative wastage thus flies in the face of what Baudrillard attributed to all human societies, namely, the festive rituals that celebrate the exuberance of life.

Marshall Sahlins’s provocative essay, “The Original Affluent Society,” exposes the economic mechanisms driving the consumer society. There he writes:

The market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely unparalleled and to a degree nowhere else approximated. Where production and distribution are arranged through the behaviour of prices, and all livelihoods depend on getting and spending, insufficiency of material means becomes the explicitly, calculable starting point of all economic activity.<sup>16</sup>

Sahlin argues that true affluence belongs to unsophisticated hunter-gatherer societies, rather than to the materially excessive, though structurally impoverishing affluence of industrial systems. This does not mean that we must immediately start fashioning spearheads out of our credit cards. But it does mean countenancing the serious faults of a culture that presumes to have overtopped all limitation. The culture fails to see that its lofty achievements sit on a mountain of suffering and denial: "This is the era of hunger unprecedented. Now in the time of the greatest technical power, is starvation an institution. Reverse another venerable formula: the amount of hunger increases relatively and absolutely with the evolution of culture."<sup>17</sup>

A most fascinating conclusion issues from this. Technological excess, presumably the sublimated analogue to nature's abundance, grounds itself on scarcity. A significant difference between natural abundance and technological excess has come to light. The first stems out of a natural fullness, the second from scarcity, that is, from a lack, a nullity. This means that only the latter truly involves waste. Only the latter takes place within the desolate emptiness of failure and neglect that waste implies.

For all its excesses, then, consumer culture remains rooted in finitude. This accounts for its unlimited trash; for wastes in general implicate human finitude. Despite its abundance, the essence of nature is finite. The finiteness of matter, embodied in our physicality, is what the metaphysical perspective sees as wasteful in nature. Rationality is deemed wasted on the bodily animal. The technological quest to escape the waste of nature aims at dominating nature and breaking its essential limits on matter. The limitless material of this destructive initiative is trash.

This explains the unproblematic nature of trash from the phenomenological point of view. The phenomenon of trash appears within the metaphysical denial of finitude. The fact that such copious material cannot cut its roots to finitude, no matter what level of technology is employed, points to a fundamental truth of nature and of being. It indicates that the finitude of human being—its physical mortality—not only conditions phenomena, but relates eradically to Being. Whereas waste implies human neglect and failure, trash forcefully declares the marriage between Being and finitude. It does this by showing that the metaphysical neglect for the

needs of our finite nature results in a flood of material failure. Reportedly only two manmade structures are visible to the naked eye from outer space. The first is the Great Wall of China; the second, New York City's Fresh Kills landfill site. When properly perceived, trash signals the waste of our true being. There hides in all of modernity's *rejeta* unrecognized potential for edification.

Ontology is the study of being. An ontology of trash will focus on the mode of being unique to the technological era: disposability. Yet if the perception is to be edifying, as opposed to simply dismal and despairing, the insight must look through the being of trash to how it relates to our own current mode of human being. Trash can act as a lens that brings to clear sight the matrimonial bond between human being and what Martin Heidegger calls Being as such. Heidegger himself questioned Being with such unflagging devotion that no ontological pursuit coming after him can overlook his contribution. This study will lean greatly on the strength of Heidegger's thought. If it uses trash a lens to investigate human existence, then Heidegger's thinking of Being provides the frame that keeps the lens in place.

By no means does Heidegger have a monopoly on ontology. In fact, he even repudiated the term as his thinking matured. And other philosophers too have had just as much and more to say about technological modernity as he. This study's reliance on Heidegger is not for, as the saying goes, lack of options. On the contrary, I appeal to Heidegger's thought for what it shares with the wisdom of great spiritual traditions. For example, many commentators have noted the affinities between Buddhist and Heideggerian ontologies.

Both Heidegger and the Zen master would say that Western humanity's technological will to power over nature arises from an inadequate understanding of what it means to be human. So long as we regard ourselves as ego-subjects who are the measure of all things, we will plunder the planet in an endless quest for security and control. Needed is a shift from our present understanding of all things as objects whose value lies solely in what they can contribute to some human purpose. Such a shift, which would be an epochal historical event, would reveal to us that our true aim in life is not to exploit things, but instead to let them manifest themselves as they are. The highest possibility of human existence, then, is to love and to serve: we become ourselves when we let beings be. Heidegger's notion of releasement seems very close to the Buddhist doctrine of compassion for all beings.<sup>18</sup>

To love and to serve is also the core teaching of Christianity and Hinduism. For me the spiritual sympathies shared among Heidegger's philosophy and venerable religious traditions lend credibility to the former.

This study, however, is not a theological work, but an ontological one. My concern is to demonstrate that indeed the "highest possibility of human existence" is the ontological service of "letting beings be." The prime reason I must turn to Heidegger and thus engage in philosophy rather than religion is for his historical insight. If acknowledged at all, history typically receives something of a crude interpretation from most religious traditions. Heidegger's thought is, on the other hand, explicitly and essentially historical.<sup>19</sup> If trash is to be properly understood and responded to, it must be approached in its peculiarity, which means in the context of its historical development. It does not help much to say our ancestors neither enjoyed nor suffered today's mass-produced disposables simply because they lacked the requisite technology. One could still intelligently ask why they lacked the technology. What made their world and their way of being so different that they likely could not have conceived what we now find commonplace? Heidegger's ontology marks a path that wends through such questions toward meaning.

Yet at spots the path grows quite obscure. Both his students and his critics have pointed to areas of trouble and grave concern in Heidegger's thought. His notorious silence on ethical, moral, and political issues does present a sizable, though not insurmountable, stumbling block to all who would follow him. So, too, the alleged traces of metaphysics that some believe to have turned up in his "history of Being."<sup>20</sup> His grand historical narrative itself might appear to some as a egregious example of metaphysical speculation gone awry. And, although masterfully adept at analyzing certain aspects of everyday existence, Heidegger at the same time refuses so much as to mention other equally, if not more important aspects such as our sexuality, our relationship to illness and aging, our quest for pleasure, and hope for corporeal immortality. He thus seems to dutifully follow the metaphysical tradition in its characteristic neglect of the lived human body. "Unfortunately," remarks Zimmerman, Heidegger's "discussions of embodiment are limited, perhaps because of his uncertainty about how to define the body without lapsing into naturalistic categories."<sup>21</sup> While caution here is indeed philosophically prudent, the omission is unfortunate because Heidegger's thought sympathizes with our inherited wisdom thanks to, and I know no better word for it, the spirit of humility running through it. In an age bent on surpassing all limits, Heidegger stresses the essential limitations of being, especially human being. From *Being and Time* on, human mortality plays a pivotal role in his philosophy. Our

finitude defines our worldly being. But there is much more to it than just that. The mystery of our mortality is at once the bestowal and perfection of Being as such. For “man necessarily belongs and has his place in the openness (and at present in the forgottenness) of Being. But Being needs man as the there of its openness in order to open itself. . . . If Being needs man in this way in order to be, a *finitude of Being* must be assumed accordingly.”<sup>22</sup> In this sense we are entrusted with mortality in our service to Being. The notion is not altogether foreign to Christianity. Eckhart says that “God needs me as much as I need him” and, more generally, Christian doctrine holds that our fallen existence is the means by which God’s mercy, forgiveness, and love can be realized. The Buddhists have a similar idea that the dark realm of suffering and illusion (*samsara*) is the gift we receive that invites us to enlightenment. Whatever the details, these various ways of thinking accord in that we must find our salvation in the face of our limitation.

The heart of human mortality and finitude is our corporeality. For this reason, Catholics anticipate not just resurrection but specifically resurrection of the body. Similarly, the awakened one (the *Buddha*) exists incarnate in order to ease the sufferings of all beings and help them to enlightenment. Because of its inextricable tie to salvation, “the body phenomenon is the most difficult problem.”<sup>23</sup> These words are Heidegger’s, but the practical work of solving this problem he for the most part forgoes. Also, the lack of a solid physical basis to his philosophy of finitude makes Heidegger’s thought susceptible to unwanted, perhaps unnoticed, metaphysical incursions.

Since Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger’s phenomenology has received numerous “substantial” amendments that seek to flesh out a philosophy of embodiment missing in his thought. The ontology of trash hopes to make further amends by demonstrating how the junked material of our technological mode of being ultimately belies our metaphysical quest for the infinite and proves it to be irremediably flawed. It will do so by interpreting the bodily situation of modern humanity with a view to its ontological significance. Upon situating the modern body in a technological conurbation devoid of the nourishment of nature, this study will have arrived at a position at which it can show how trash wastes our mortal being through the looming phenomenon of human extinction.