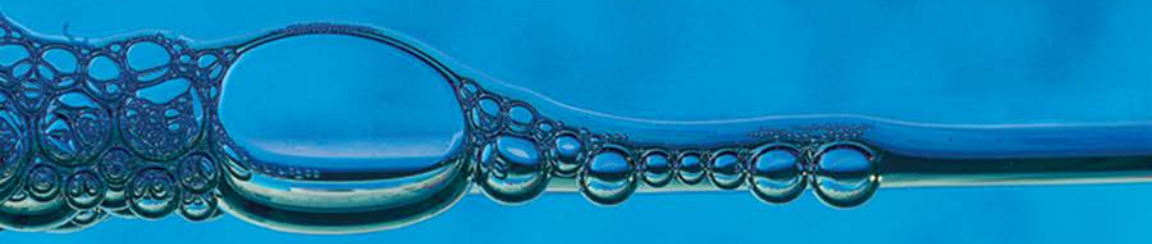
PURITY AND DANGER NOW

NEW PERSPECTIVES



EDITED BY ROBBIE DUSCHINSKY,
SIMONE SCHNALL AND DANIEL H. WEISS

Marking the 50th anniversary of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*

ROUTLEDGE

Purity and Danger Now

Mary Douglas's seminal work *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, 1966) continues to be indispensable reading for both students and scholars today. Marking the 50th anniversary of Douglas's classic, the present volume sheds fresh light upon themes raised by Douglas by drawing on recent developments in the social sciences and humanities, as well as current empirical research. In presenting new perspectives on the topic of purity and impurity, the volume integrates work in anthropology and sociology with contemporary ideas from religious studies, cognitive science and the arts.

Containing contributions from both established and emerging scholars, including protégées of Douglas herself, *Purity and Danger Now* is an essential volume for those working on purity and impurity across the full spectrum of the social sciences and humanities.

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Introduction

Robbie Duschinsky

When the *Times Literary Supplement* printed a list of the 'hundred books which have most influenced Western public discourse since the Second World War' in 1995, side by side with texts by Freud, Wittgenstein, Orwell and Churchill stood Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*. Similarly, within the domain of academic scholarship, O'Brien (2008: 125, 143) observed that 'for forty years' Purity and Danger has held 'formidable sway . . . over the sociological imagination of unclean things', and this has continued to be true. Douglas contested the common presumption that purity and impurity discourses are confined merely to 'primitive' or 'superstitious' cultures and societies, instead arguing that such themes play an important boundary-drawing role in all human societies. The text was a founding work of cultural sociology and symbolic anthropology, and has had an important influence in research across the many areas of human life in which themes of purity and impurity feature.

These are, after all, widely prevalent themes. In their most well-recognised forms, they have varied roles in religious practices and beliefs, ranging from practices of ritual impurity to concerns about the purity of faith. Yet purity and impurity are by no means themes limited to the past, eliminated from our lives by secular modernity. They also inflect secular moral concerns and reasoning, for instance regarding complicity, transgression or restitution. In politics as well, judgments regarding purity and impurity appear in conceptualisations of corruption and scandal. Intriguingly, sensitivity to impurity has been found by researchers to be associated with a marked tendency for conservative attitudes and voting patterns (Inbar et al., 2012).

Other powerful modern institutions depend upon appeals to purity and impurity. For instance, discussions of scientific practice and experimentation can be observed mobilising these themes to address disinterestedness, clarity and the nature of truth itself. Woven together with these scientific frames of reference, material substances, including those we eat or drink like sugar or milk, or consume in the form of drugs, are evaluated and perhaps advertised for their purity. These material images can shape the direction of public health policy, and can be influenced by state-sponsored representations and discourses (Clifford & Wendell, 2016). Our geographical environments,

similarly, often receive such framing – whether in terms of the purity of wilderness, or the polluted environment. In many instances, conflict between different orders of purity classification can occur, as for instance when a river sacred to Hindus for its purifying properties becomes treated by the state as polluted to the point of being harmful to human health (Alley, 2002; Chakrabarti, 2015).

Images of the purity of science have also sat in conflict, but also in profound collusion, with racist discourses. Highly charged discourses of racial purity have shaped the way in which social, ethnic and territorial boundaries are shaped and understood. These discourses bind with the politics and aesthetics of skin colour. And, with sexuality lying at the base of the reproduction of the nation, images of purity and impurity also distinguish between forms of sexual identity, separating between what is perceived as normal and as abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable within a particular context. For instance, virginity may be situated as a measure of the purity of young women, whereas homophobic discourses often deploy themes of impurity and disgust. Across various dimensions of human lives, despite all their differences, Douglas offers the general proposal that 'impurity implies some harmful interference with natural processes' and 'an abnormal intrusion of foreign elements, mixing or destruction' (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982: 36).

Distinctive about *Purity and Danger* was its integration of anthropology and sociology with perspectives from religious studies, cognitive science and the arts. In the past two decades, calls by scholars including Douglas and other scholars for renewed attention to purity and pollution across familiar disciplinary boundaries (e.g., Lugones, 1994; Douglas, 1997; Birnbaum, 2003; Kristeva, 2004; O'Brien, 2008; Berthold, 2010) have begun to be answered by attempts to sustain new conversations and syntheses (e.g., Cohen & Johnson, 2005; Campkin & Cox, 2007; Simon, 2012; Dürr & Jaffe, 2014; Latz & Ermakov, 2014). Work to integrate these advances has been scaffolded by recent international conferences and symposia and by their published proceedings (e.g., Rösch & Simon, 2012), as well as public exhibitions and engagement activities (e.g., Wellcome Trust, 2011). Marking the 50th anniversary of Douglas's pioneering book, *Purity and Danger Now* brings together former protégées of Douglas, leading psychological researchers on disgust and impurity, and a younger generation of scholars, creating a conversation between anthropology, psychology, religious studies and the arts.

The chapters in Part I, in dialogue with Douglas's account of purity and pollution, draw on work in sociology and anthropology to present new analyses, and draw out the interdisciplinary implications for wider discussions of the topic. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas drew on the cognitive science of her day to theorise how the human mind responds to categorical anomalies. The chapters in Part II update this perspective, drawing on cutting-edge work in cognitive science to reassess purity and impurity in psychological perspective. Yet alongside anthropology and psychology, part of

Purity and Danger's distinctiveness was its dialogue with religious studies and the arts. Part III begins with chapters that develop Douglas's legacy as a theorist of religious practice, drawing on developments in the field of religious studies to consider the significance of boundaries organised by appeals to purity and pollution in religious practice – as well as in contemporary secular society. The final two chapters of the book reassess purity and danger in as significant themes for theatre and for painting. A conclusion by one of the editors draws these threads together, and elaborates upon their implications.

Impurity and anomaly

Douglas's biographer Richard Fardon (1999: 84) finds that '*Purity and Danger* contains a potentially bewildering richness of both constructive and critical arguments.' It may be helpful, nonetheless, in setting the scene to present a brief description of the main arguments of *Purity and Danger*.

Douglas begins *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002: viii–ix) by justifying the need for a new social theory. Themes of purity and impurity have 'hitherto suffered from being handled too narrowly' by specialists, who address the topic only with reference to their 'single discipline'. In contrast, Douglas ([1966] 2002: viii) attempts to 'treat people's ideas of purity as part of [the] larger whole' of their social system, accounting for their emergence in any society with reference to universal cognitive faculties of the human mind, which attempt to make a meaningful and coherent moral and symbolic world. On this basis, she describes her central point in the opening chapter of the book as being that 'dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt . . . eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment' through the 'mutual exhortation' by the community of its members ([1966] 2002: 2–3). This exhortation operates on the cognitive perception of individuals, making these mental categories conform to the social consensus on how to understand social, physical and moral reality: 'their main function is to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' ([1966] 2002: 5).

Douglas proposes that classifications of purity and impurity achieve this ordering of experience by associating contingent social divisions with classifications of the natural world. For example, when the external boundaries of society are under pressure they will be symbolised and affirmed through inscription on the skin, or through control of bodily orifices ([1966] 2002: 153–57). Thus 'the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code' and the 'relation between parts of society' ([1966] 2002: 4–5). This naturalising mechanism is identified by Douglas as the major effect of classifications of purity and impurity ([1966] 2002: 43). Thus structural-functionalist and cognitive modes of explanation are brought together to explain the role of purity classifications in symbolising and affirming the overall cognitive or social order.

Douglas proposed that phenomena that contravened the perceived social order classifications would be designated by society as impure:

> Is this really the difference between ritual pollution and our ideas of dirt: are our ideas hygienic and theirs are symbolic? Not a bit of it: I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail . . . the old definition of dirt as matter out of place [is] a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements . . . It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table . . . In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.
>
> (Douglas, [1966] 2002: 43–45)

Douglas states that, though she knows that there are limitations to this account, the value of the 'matter out of place' paradigm is that it represents a step beyond prior theory, which had excluded purity and impurity from profane and secular discourses: 'to recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves us in no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular. The same principle applies throughout' ([1966] 2002: 50).

In putting forward such a general argument, applicable to all types of societies, Douglas places her account directly at odds with the existing theoretical orthodoxy of her day, which separated modern from premodern forms of religious practice and belief. She notes that it has generally been assumed by modern Western scholars that 'holiness and impurity are at opposite poles' in religious systems, since the sacred is identified with the pure ([1966] 2002: 9). As a result, when societies are observed that treat the impure as sacred, Douglas ([1966] 2002: 9, 21) describes how anthropologists and philosophers have tended to explain this with 'cryptic' reference to 'the ambivalence of the sacred', or by classifying such practices as not true religion but rather as taboo and 'magical superstition'. Douglas ([1966] 2002: 26–27) specifically diagnoses both of these devices in operation in Durkheim's work, situating her theory as an attempt to circumvent this account.

Though Douglas believes that the practical conflation between purity and the sacred in academic discourses has left a sizeable analytical blind spot in subsequent research, she argues that it has also had a moral consequence, in causing the pathologisation of forms of sacredness that do not possess the quality of purity. It is only 'for us' that 'holiness and impurity are at opposite poles' – this is not a cultural universal, she argues, or an acceptable scholarly

lens ([1966] 2002: 9; see also Douglas, [1968] 1975). Douglas proposes that the specificity of different ways in which purity and impurity can relate to sacredness has been neglected. As a result, anthropologists, and the public more generally, have come to tacitly align the sacred with the pure. The very 'mark' of a 'primitive' is someone who 'makes no distinction between sacredness and uncleanness' ([1966] 2002: 9).

For instance, Robertson Smith ([1894] 2002: 154), writing on the distinction between holiness and taboo, asserts that to 'distinguish between the holy and the unclean, marks a real advance above savagery. All taboos are inspired by awe of the supernatural, but there is a great moral difference' since 'superstition', 'being founded on fear, acts merely as a bar to progress'. Douglas suggests that such an evolutionist analysis results in a circular logic. Primitives become defined as those who think that the sacred can be impure. The fact that it is only primitives who contradict Christian dogma by believing that the sacred is not always pure is used to dismiss further investigation of the specificity of purity and impurity. In making this argument Douglas follows the work of her colleague from Oxford, Franz Steiner (1956: 50), who asserted that with 'justice we can regard the *problem* of taboo', its treatment as a deviant and primitive form of the sacred, as a 'Protestant' and 'Victorian invention'. Though she finds value in the notion of the sacred for certain purposes, Douglas states that classifications of purity and impurity are irreducible to the influential 'distinction between sacred and secular' and demand theoretical attention in their specificity ([1966] 2002: 50; see Douglas, 1999).

Having thus criticised the problems that have attended prior consideration of purity and impurity or foreclosed such a consideration, Douglas then offers her own general model as an attempt to supplant prior accounts of purity/impurity, which focus too exclusively on 'the sacred'. She contends that if things or people stand perfectly within classificatory boundaries, then they may be designated as pure: 'To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and the kind' and thus in the food laws of Leviticus 'the underlying principle of cleanness in animals is that they shall conform fully to their class' ([1966] 2002: 67–69). However, where anomalies or contradictions appear they must be dealt with so that order can be maintained. She criticises both psychoanalytical and psychobiological perspectives for missing the role of purity/impurity classifications as a 'symbolic system . . . whose primary concern is the ordering of a social hierarchy' ([1966] 2002: 154).

Categories and societies

Douglas's engagement of anthropological theory with other disciplines in theorising purity and impurity has contributed to a generative dialogue around this topic within and beyond the human sciences. However, three lines of criticism of some significance have arisen for the legacy of the text: (1) it jumps too readily from how society is structured to explaining how

purity and impurity classifications operate; (2) it dismisses too quickly the contribution of sociobiological accounts of the origin of disgust for understanding social and cultural processes; (3) the universal theory of purity and impurity presented does not always readily work for all cultures, which make greater or lesser appeal to these. These three criticisms of *Purity and Danger* are briefly discussed later as they form the backdrop, respectively, to the sections of the book engaging with Douglas's legacy from anthropology, psychology, religious studies and the arts.

Since the publication of *Purity and Danger*, scholars across the social sciences and humanities have criticised the anomaly theory for making unmediated explanatory links between categorical systems and the social structure of society as a whole (see, e.g., Bulmer, 1967; Galaty, 1979; Jorgensen, 1991; Navaro-Yashin, 2009). As Valeri (1999: 71) posited, bypassing the realm of social practice leads *Purity and Danger* 'to speak of "the system", of "form", or of "order" as if they were one monolithic thing'. This leads to a number of problems, most notably relating to the multiplicity of relations of power and forms of categorisation in society: 'there are many coexisting orders of classification; what is residual to one may be central to another.' Hetherington (2004) has offered criticisms of the anomaly theory that agree with Valeri's. He argues that the anomaly theory offers an insufficient account of the relationship between processes of categorisation and the way in which phenomena or subjects are positioned with reference to 'presence'. This is in large part because Douglas takes the classificatory system 'as a stable and representable thing' and as prior to the anomalies that its designates. As a result 'she misses the ongoing way in which order is made as uncertain process' (2004: 163; see also Hetherington & Lee, 2000).

In her later work, Douglas herself acknowledged that the anomaly theory is not an adequate account of the relationship between purity/impurity, classificatory processes and social conflict (1980, 1997, 2004: 160). Attempting to explain this inadequacy, Douglas (2005: 95; [1966] 2002: xvii) proposes that her conservative social commitments and her 'kindly feeling for hierarchy' led her work towards 'praising structure and control' in the operation of purity/impurity as classifying and ordering mechanisms. Douglas ([1990] 1996) suggested that the flaws in the anomaly theory are caused by the assumption that society is unitary whole and that there exists a unitary ordering mechanism within the human mind. In a seminar in 1997, Douglas stated that she had come to recognise that there is in fact no universal desire for either cognitive or social order at the base of purity/impurity designations. Against a core assumption of the anomaly theory, Douglas further admitted that there is no 'intrinsic value to purity' for the individual or for society. It is striking that Douglas herself proposed that there is a need for further social theoretical reflections on the topic, which address the specificity of purity/impurity outside of accounts of 'intrinsic value' such as sacredness: 'the only thing universalistic about purity is the tendency to use it as a weapon or tool' (Douglas, 1997).

In framing her culturalist account of purity and impurity, Douglas dismisses 'medical materialism' ([1966] 2002: 36), her label for a view that holds that these classifications are primitive forms of a concern for hygiene. Ritual washing, for instance, in such a perspective would be a cultural vestige of a basic human intuition that links washing to reduced likelihood of disease. Douglas decidedly rejects this perspective, arguing that it neglects the social and communal functions of themes of purity and impurity in the context of a group or society: 'Even if some of Moses's dietary rules were hygienically beneficial it is a pity to treat him as an enlightened public health administrator, rather than as a spiritual leader' ([1966] 2002: 37). A second concern raised regarding the account of *Purity and Danger* has emerged particularly from psychologists, and relates to her criticisms of medical materialism. Psychological researchers such as Rozin et al. (2000) have insisted that there is no incompatibility between recognising that the human disgust response evolved as a disease avoidance mechanism, and attention to its elaboration and redeployment in organising cultural and moral life. Douglas 'relates dirt and pollution to a sense of violation of accepted categories', which no doubt is a significant part of the meaning of perceptions of pollution. However, Rozin and colleagues argue, Douglas did not adequately address how culturally specific perceptions of pollution relate to the universal human affect of disgust (2000: 638).

Considering the evolutionary origins of the disgust response, Rozin and colleagues argue, helps make sense of some of Douglas's observations. Whereas Douglas argued that its products are a focus of impurity because they are ready symbols for the whole or parts of society, Rozin and colleagues suggest that the universality of Douglas's observation can additionally be accounted for by considering the significance of bodies and their products as a source of disease. A biological groundplan offers predispositions regarding the kind of object that are more readily regarded as disgusting – faeces and pus – being classic examples, though there is no iron necessity. The groundplan is sufficiently powerful that Curtis and Biran (2001; Curtis et al., 2004) have been able to plausibly argue that, though exceptions exist, there are quite universal disgust elicitors across human societies. At the same time, however, human children do not generally show a contamination response before the age of three, suggesting that many aspects of our sensitivity to contamination may be a learned behaviour. Rozin and colleagues suggest that the groundplan of predispositions is elaborated within culture, so that disgust becomes integrated as part of how humans engage with the world.

Developing this perspective, psychological researchers have produced a comprehensive body of research documenting the ways in which perceptions of physical impurities shape perceptions of moral purity or impurity, and vice versa. For instance Sherman et al. (2012) reported studies showing that heightened sensitivity to disgusting stimuli was associated with greater ability to detect a faint Gray stimulus against a white background, as if

perceiving a 'speck of dirt'. In contrast, no such effect was observed for white stimuli presented against a dark background. For this psychological tradition, the body is not solely a screen onto which purity and impurity classifications can be projected, but it is the material basis for our cognition (see also Lee & Schwarz, 2012).

A third concern about *Purity and Danger*, raised particularly from the humanities, as well as by some anthropologists, has been that the varying constructions across different cultures mean that, while purity/impurity discourses may appear, they may not align 'the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure' in the same manner as Christianity and modern Western societies have done (Agamben, [1992] 1999: 163–65; [2000] 2005: 45). Rather, there is a cultural contingency to the discourses of purity/impurity that exist within Western discourses today. This has, in fact, been conceded by Douglas. In a late interview with Macfarlane (2006), Douglas admitted that her anomaly theory presumes upon a peculiarly Western notion of purity, inherited from Christian thought, which can be a useful lens for the study of other societies, but which must also be registered as in need of further consideration.

The rolling together of biblical, non-Western and Western purity/impurity discourses can be situated as the cause of the fluctuating account of the relationship between purity and sacredness that may be observed in *Purity and Danger*. When addressing the scriptural prescriptions for forming the Hebrew nation (e.g., Douglas, [1966] 2002: 68–69), the anomaly theory predicts that pure phenomena are 'holy' when they remain within categorical boundaries; when drawing on ethnographic findings from Africa (e.g., [1966] 2002: 209), it predicts that 'sacredness' is the property of anomalous phenomena used to affirm society as a whole. Moreover, as Douglas later admitted, the anomaly theory is not applicable to numerous other areas of purity/impurity discourses within the Hebrew Bible, such as those relating to sacrifices (Douglas, 1998: vii–viii, 2004: 111, 160; Klawans, 2000, 2005). Despite such limitations, however, *Purity and Danger* still stands as an important provocation to research today, and specifically for a conversation that contaminates conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Purity and danger now

In the 1960s, Douglas used the psychological science of her day, in particular cognitive dissonance theory, to explain cultural phenomena; the chapters in this volume reassess this mode of explanation, presenting arguments grounded in subsequent developments in social theory, cognitive science and empirical research. In particular, there are three themes that cross-cut the different chapters of *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives*. These were themes previously raised by Douglas, but regarding which there have been subsequent developments in the social sciences and humanities. A first theme is the relationship between the individual and the community. Chapters

address how appeals to purity and impurity shape the role of the subject within their culture, in critical dialogue with Douglas's claims about the role of purity and pollution symbols as the mirror of social structures. The chapters in *Purity and Danger Now* also develop new approaches to conceptualising the mesh between psychological and cultural processes that lead to symbols of purity and pollution.

The second cross-cutting theme is the relationship between theoretical generalisation and the rich complexity of empirical findings, and how this plays out within different methodological approaches. In dialogue with both Douglas's provocatively universalising discussion of purity and impurity in her early work and her later qualifications of this position, chapters discuss what is stable and what is contingent in appeals to purity and impurity. In particular, they address the specific role of embodied cognition, social interpretation, and relations of power within an organisation or culture in shaping particular discourses. The third cross-cutting theme in the volume is the role of images of purity and pollution in naturalising or denaturalising particular accounts of politics, morality and inequality. Douglas's work focused in particular, and sometimes with a fair bit of approval, on the role of such images in naturalising politically conservative cultures and modes of social division in society. The chapters in *Purity and Danger Now* reassess this account, and develop new perspectives on the role of perceptions of purity and pollution in organising or disorganising forms of social and political domination.

The first four chapters of the book begin from a concern with anthropological theory, grounding the volume in Douglas's home discipline. Chapter 1, by Richard Fardon, sets the scene for the conversation with Mary Douglas's work *Purity and Danger* (1966) sustained in the rest of the volume. It begins by critically considering the legacy of the book for sociology, anthropology and for wider scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. The chapter documents that most often *Purity and Danger* has been remembered as a book on classification that put the nineteenth-century phrase 'matter out of place' back into wider circulation in order to draw attention, by analogy with dirt, to classificatory anomalies. Hence, it was assumed, dirt and anomalies both required tidying. The chapter contests this legacy, suggesting that a rereading of the book suggests a more complex argument against purity and in support of anomaly: purity, or aspiration to that state, is the danger; breaking categories is creative. The chapter closes by looking at the late work of Douglas, which highlighted the importance of themes of purity and impurity. Returning to the study of the Hebrew Bible at the end of her career, Mary Douglas claimed to have found an exception to her own analysis: an example of the creativity of purity. The implications of this exception for sociological and anthropological theory, and for wider debates about the meanings of themes of purity and impurity, are drawn out. The chapter closes by analysing recent empirical and theoretical work in sociology and

anthropology that has addressed themes of purity and pollution, and relate this research to the legacy and limits of the approach presented in *Purity and Danger.*

Chapter 2, by Michael Herzfeld, brings Douglas's ideas to bear upon changes in political ideology since the period in which her ideas about purity and pollution emerged. Douglas once remarked that in England only aristocrats and working-class people enjoyed puns; everyone else thought they were a debased form of humour. That perspective was entirely consistent with her theories of purity and danger, inasmuch as it suggested the risks attendant, for a bourgeois sensibility, of anything that would destabilise semantic certainty. This chapter expands the reach of this insight to consider the ways in which positivism has gained the upper hand in academic and administrative discourse, in the media, and, above all, in public attitudes to the academic world. The chapter also argues that the embourgeoisement of working-class culture has prepared Western societies all too well for the twin assaults, by audit culture and by neoliberal economics, on the status of academic work. It is argued that, herself a convinced conservative, Douglas's most powerful insights came from capitalising upon tensions within and between social science and conservative ideology, particularly as they related to interpretations of the meaning of the human body. The chapter draws out how Douglas's ideas and career raise useful questions about how conservatism itself has changed in the past fifty years. In this way, the chapter sets up discussions of the political valence of purity and pollution discourses, a key concern in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3, by Eveline Dürr and Gordon Winder, uses attention to themes of purity and pollution in order to understand social hierarchies and inequalities in urban space. While taking Mary Douglas's insights as point of departure, the chapter disagrees with and develops Douglas in proposing that both physical and symbolic dimensions of dirt need to be considered in order to understand how they come together to form socio-material assemblages, shaped by power imbalances and genres of embodied movement. Drawing on a case study from Mexico City, this chapter examines how perceptions of urban pollution play out at the local level to demonstrate this argument. 'Slums' have always been inextricably linked to perceptions of pollution and danger, for example in conservative political discourse, in medical discourses of contagious diseases, and recently discourses on poverty as an 'ecological problem'. Nevertheless, slums stir ambivalent connotations and responses. While they are framed as spaces that disgust and should be avoided, they also trigger curiosity and can stimulate social creativity. The chapter documents that residents shape the social discourses and practices at work in the slums, contesting dominant values and aesthetics. The peculiar capacity of purity and pollution classifications to frame the boundaries of acceptability is considered, bringing the ethnographic material together with a critical conversation with Mary Douglas's theory. The chapter closes by developing the wider theoretical position that situates attention to the physical and

symbolic dimensions of pollution as a lens through which to examine the politics and spatial construction of inequalities.

Chapter 4, by Rhys Williams, theorises the relationship between dissent and impurity. From crusty hippies to dirty commies, protesters and political dissenters have historically suffered from association with discourses of impurity in the public consciousness. On the other hand, groups and individuals involved in dissent have just as often embraced conceptual, material and aesthetic impurity for their own ends. The chapter begins with the question: why are social and political protest movements so often understood as both dangerous and dirty – not only in the way that they are figured in the mainstream media, but also as an identity consciously adopted by the protesters themselves? This chapter considers this tendency as a particular manifestation of purity/impurity discourses and their complex connection to the processes of creating, transforming and destroying social structures. Through a synthesis of work by David Graeber, Terence Turner and Michael Taussig, this chapter elucidates the links between purity/impurity discourses and their manifestation on an aesthetic and formal level, as well as their relationship to the logic of hierarchy and power. The chapter also engages a critical dialogue with Durkheimian accounts of social structure as sustained and expressed in its cohesion by images of the 'pure sacred', and disturbed and its chaos expressed by symbols of the 'impure sacred'. In social and anthropological theory, including in the work of Douglas, rituals have long been thought of as social mechanisms precisely for the creation and transformation of mundane social categories, and equally importantly for this argument, they provide a means of projecting their efficacy beyond themselves and into the wider society. This chapter looks at how social movements strive to do the same, through a two-pronged approach of altering the subjectivities of those who participate, and through the use of what Turner calls 'pivots' – symbolic constructs that can transmit the internal force of the ritual to the external society. Whereas rituals, as Douglas observed, typically act to reinforce and prolong the status quo, protest movements can be understood themselves as antagonistic rituals. As such, they can most effectively be grasped through attention to the ritual deployment of purity and idealism by such movements, and public discourses regarding the impurity of their disturbance of space and accepted values.

Following four chapters with a primary engagement with anthropology, the next five chapters of the volume address developments in psychological research. They build from research on the psychology of disgust and embodied cognition. The connection between physical and spiritual purity has been a prominent topic in sociology and anthropology, religious studies and related disciplines for many years. However, only recently has empirical research in psychology and cognitive science started to explore the consequences of purification behaviours and rituals, and many of these chapters are authored by psychological scientists in the vanguard of this research agenda.

Chapter 5, by Giner-Sorolla and Sabo, brings social and anthropological theory of purity and pollution into dialogue with recent developments in cognitive science around the issue of the recruitment of the emotion of disgust to organise social and moral boundaries. This draws attention to the questions of filth as materiality and as political and social symbol that were significant in earlier chapters of the volume. Chapter 5 begins with the observation that if disgust is studied as a construct separate from anger and other high-arousal emotions, the research literature remains unclear regarding what specifically triggers it. Current theories and empirical findings support various ideas: that moral disgust might be an extension of group hygienic concerns; that it might regulate conformity to the group; that it might respond specifically to violations of moral norms about the use of the body in such realms as sex and eating; that it more generally regulates concerns about the purity of the body and soul; or most generally, that it responds to a variety of moral transgressions including purity and fairness. The chapter proposes an original solution to the question of what triggers disgust, based on two observations. First, the chapter draws on studies which suggest that disgust must be conceptualised as both the feeling and metaphor of impurity, a physiological response organised by and within cultural 'software' regarding perceptions of purity and pollution. As a feeling and a metaphor that links the visceral to the social, it can function as a way to track and communicate the moral character of individuals in a group. Second, in dialogue with Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, which alludes to a similar claim, the chapter interprets the available psychological research to argue that disgust may show itself most distinctly from anger when the reasons for judgments of bad moral character cannot be articulated. The chapter closes by deploying this account to consider why moral disgust accompanies a variety of moral transgressions, including imaginary ones, bodily violations and rejections of axiomatic rules.

Chapter 6, by Knowles, Borg and Olatunji, emphasises the contribution made by Mary Douglas in identifying the importance of cultural context for concepts of contagion, and highlight how this context shapes the expression of disgust as a basic universal emotion. Douglas emphasised particularly the homeostatic function of impurity classifications, in keeping society ordered. By contrast, Knowles, Borg and Olatunji combine social and evolutionary thinking, and group and individual-level analysis, and this leads them to consider how classifications of impurity can be functional but also non-functional. In particular, they bring their perspective to address situations in which vigilance about impurity may be profoundly maladaptive for an individual. One case is contamination-based obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), in which patients often report that they avoid some places because of mere incidental association with something considered impure. Furthermore, the contaminant is often perceived as spreading, accompanied by a sense of threat. Rituals may be elaborated to prevent such contamination, and these may fuel or complicate the individual's engagement with organised

religion. The chapter shows that while the symptoms occur in an individual, they have a profound social dimension. For instance, contamination fears and washing rituals were exacerbated in OCD patients during the recent H1N1 swine flu pandemic. The authors also follow Douglas's emphasis on the important link between sexuality and impurity themes, since sexuality unsettles the familiar lines of the body and of social interaction. They examine sexual dysfunction as another set of individual symptoms embedded within social processes, where a disgust response in relation to one's own body or a partner's may inhibit the potential for sexual excitement. Eating disorders, too, may implicate similar processes. In closing, the chapter offers the concept of 'disorders of disgust' as a new research agenda within psychology, indebted to clinical knowledge and psychological research, therefore engaging an interdisciplinary conversation.

Chapter 7, by Gilchrist and Ditto, takes up Douglas's point that breaches of boundaries, particularly body boundaries, are associated with aversion. They agree with Douglas that this aversion is a response shaped by culture and context. However, they argue that the concept of aversion can be regarded as melding two mechanisms which are, biologically, distinguishable. One aspect is disgust, and the other is fear. Drawing on a detailed analysis of the theme of blood as a symbol of danger, and thinking about the adaptive function of behaviour for survival, the chapter observes that this substance can, depending on context, be a trigger for dramatically different types of physiological responses. One such response is fainting, which can be provoked by real or perceived blood loss. Another response is disgust and associated nausea and vomiting, especially in the context of potential contamination or injury. Gilchrist and Ditto offer a complex model. They concur with Douglas that disgust is a consequence and not a cause of anxiety about breaches in the body's envelope, though they qualify this in two ways. First, a qualification of Douglas's generalisation about 'matter out of place', they argue that particular forms of stimuli, and certain interpretations of those stimuli, are particularly disposed to elicit disgust as a result of human evolutionary history. Second, they argue that such anxiety-induced disgust may in turn trigger stress-related nausea and vomiting, attending to the psychophysiological materiality of impure substances more than Douglas's focus on symbolic meanings.

Chapter 8, by Lee and Schwarz, begins by documenting experiments that show that, under certain conditions, people are motivated to engage in bodily cleansing and purging. But cleansing the body, for example, by washing one's hands, removes more than physical contaminants; it also removes diverse residues of the past. Early research focused on the psychological consequences of cleansing in order to attain a more pure moral standing, for example, after having been reminded of one's past unethical deeds. This literature was not much in dialogue with Douglas's ideas. More recently, however, research by Lee and Schwarz has re-engaged Douglas's hypotheses in *Purity and Danger*, and explored the extent to which cleansing behaviours

remove negative states more generally, such as the doubts following difficult decisions involving cognitive dissonance. The chapter develops this discussion of the literature in cognitive science, including work by the authors, and synthesises an account of the conceptual implications of this body of knowledge, with particular emphasis on judgment and decision making. In particular, the chapter outlines how thinking about embodied cognition can help understand the role of purity and impurity in shaping inequality, exclusion and stigma as both universal and culturally situated phenomena.

Chapter 9, by Speltini and Passini, draws links between psychological and cultural processes in examining the antinomies cleanliness/dirtiness and purity/impurity. First, the notion of the body as an object of representation and collective imagination are examined. In particular, a series of bodily practices (such as hygiene practices, habits and traditions of cleanliness) are considered in their historical and cultural variability. Starting from these premises, the link between cleanliness and purity – as it is, for instance, ritualised and conceived in religious practices – is analysed. The chapter brings together insights from research on purity and impurity in religious contexts with an analysis of the significance of feelings of impurity within obsessive-compulsive disorder. Put together, these two domains suggest a psychosocial perspective on the antinomies of clean/dirty and pure/impure. The chapter explores how these antinomies develop embodied metaphors in regulating social encounters. This approach is then deployed in addressing the formation of collective visions of identity and embodiment, and the role within these visions of disgust and anger. Integrating contemporary psychological, sociological and anthropological research, the chapter closes by developing a model of when and why images of dirt and impurity are recruited to legitimate social exclusion and the stigmatisation of out-groups as contaminating.

Having presented five chapters that engage with themes of purity and impurity on the basis of developments in psychological research, the final five chapters of the book look to the humanities for new perspectives on the themes of *Purity and Danger*. One of the most important and influential aspects of the book was the use of the anomaly theory to interpret the laws of clean and unclean animals in the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible. It was remarkable, and contrary to anthropological orthodoxy at the time, for Douglas to interpret modern practices like housework within the same paradigm as ancient religious practices.

Extending this legacy of seeing continuity between religious and ostensibly secular practices, Chapter 10, by Weiss and Zellentin, sets out to disturb supersessionist discourses about ritual purity – which situate it as something 'our' society has 'got beyond', no longer relevant to the kind of world we live in except insofar as it relates to the practices of backwards Others. The chapter begins by acknowledging that history of the West is to a large degree the history of Christianity. It was Christianity itself, which from its beginnings has claimed to have superseded the arbitrary, uncouth and at the very best temporary notion that God required the people to follow the

particularistic, tribal and unreasonable provisions of the Mosaic law, especially in its provisions for ritual purity. Starting with a detailed analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the chapter traces the history of this claim within key Christian and Enlightenment texts, arguing that this ancient discursive manoeuvre has now itself become part of the subtext in which we view the past two millennia: in today's world, maintaining religion, and a quest for ritual purity, has become the concern of Others, whose backwardness many seek to purge from our bright and forward-facing society. The chapter argues that this forms a piece of the backdrop of Islamophobia, where 'Islam' represents a group strongly associated with unenlightened observance of religious authority, and especially of ritual purity. Yet the supersessionist story crumbles when considered closely. The chapter traces the integral role of appeals to purity and impurity within both early Christian supersessionist discourse, wherein concern for ritual purity is itself treated as dangerous carrier of impurity, and in contemporary social and political discourses that repeatedly use metaphors of purity and impurity precisely in the characterisation of others as less enlightened. By bringing historical research on the history of ritual purity in conversation with contemporary political and cultural dynamics – including the secular revolution and Islamophobia – the sharp rhetorical binary between 'enlightened us' and 'backwards them' is examined and criticised.

Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* widely is treated by biblical scholars as a foundational text for the study of purity and impurity in biblical law and ritual. At the same time, Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Douglas's work, which has been enormously popular and influential in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, has been widely ignored by biblical scholars. Chapter 11, by Weiss, brings Kristeva's theories of impurity and abjection into dialogue with scholarship on purity and impurity in the Hebrew Bible. While Kristeva assumes that all biblical ascriptions of impurity to a person or object are ipso facto ascriptions of disgust and hierarchical deprecation – particularly in the form of misogyny – the chapter argues that recent scholarship on biblical impurity shows this assumption to be incorrect. Rather, in many cases, biblical ascriptions of impurity are not associated with denigrating abjection, but instead represent affectively and valuationally neutral elements of everyday human life. The particular ways in which Kristeva appears to misconstrue the biblical conceptual framework are shown to have implications both for her broader theory of impurity as well as for that of Mary Douglas. By contrast, as manifested in the Hebrew Bible as well as in classical rabbinic literature's reception of the latter, the theoretical possibility of a cultural framework of impurity that is not inherently socially repressive may serve as a signpost for further reflection on different possibilities for constructions of 'non-eliminatist' social structures in the present.

Chapter 12, by Klawans, adds to the analysis presented by Weiss by comparing the implications of Kristeva's account and that of Douglas for post-biblical Judaism. A striking correspondence exists between Kristeva's

approach to defilement and the approach in evidence among the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls discovered near Qumran in the 1940s and 1950s. The chapter then probes the methodological ramifications arising from this coincidence, as a lens on wider questions related to the study of purity and impurity. First, the chapter considers the purpose of theorising about purity and impurity: whom it helps, and when. Second, the chapter addresses the 'emic and etic' problem that has long faced theories of the topic, considering the possibilities and problems of cultural translation between different cultural forms within which appeals to purity or pollution may occur. The chapter illustrates and further explores these two considerations by raising the issue of Kristeva's characterisation of pollution classifications across cultures as both inherently misogynistic and exclusionary. The chapter juxtaposes the common theoretical infrastructure shared by Douglas and Kristeva with the rather different moral claims, in particular about the meaning and value of ritual practices.

The final two chapters of the book move to address the arts, which also feature in the interdisciplinary synthesis presented in *Purity and Danger*. Both draw on the tradition of research in embodied cognition that has developed in psychology in the decades since Douglas's work. In Chapter 13, Firestone and Lyne bring *Purity and Danger* with them to thinking about Shakespeare. It is noted that in what are traditionally thought of as Shakespeare's 'problem plays' (specifically, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Hamlet*), there is a distinctive concentration of disgust-inducing language, especially in the form of metaphor. In addition, however, tendencies towards anxiety, pessimism, dissatisfaction and/or revulsion with these plays have been observed in audiences and critics. Tackling a parallel question to the previous chapter, though on a very different terrain, this chapter focuses on Hamlet in exploring how and when the disgust induced in one context influences, or indeed overrides, judgment in another. The chapter draws upon the research findings considered in Chapters 5–9 to consider the link between moral transgressions and physical disgust reactions. This body of research may offer some insight into how literature, specifically poetic language and effects, shapes judgment. The chapter argues that patterns of language have effects on the nature of an audience's (or reader's) moral assessments, not just of the immediate fictional situations but also across the rest of the play.

Finally, Chapter 14, by Ward, critically engages with the concern of some critics who have sometimes dismissed the study of purity and impurity by claiming that these themes are simply a matter of interpretation, solely 'in the eye of the beholder'. The chapter tackles this criticism on its chosen terrain, in considering how the processes of the human eye and brain shape our perception of purity and impurity. The chapter presents new research in the history of art that overturns common understandings of statements about pure painting among the Parisian avant-garde before the First World War. Such statements are generally understood through the lens of later discourses,

in which 'pure painting' is painting unconcerned with other concerns, such as representation. However, close attention to the writings and works of artists in the period, such as the Delaunay-Terks, shows the influence of the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, and his discovery of 'simultaneous contrast': that when two objects are placed next to each other and are of contrasting colours, each then looks brighter, easier to see, and less tainted by other hues. Artists applied Chevreul's finding that perceptions of purity are shaped by the way that the human eye works, and intensified in the context of the production of contrasts in the environment. Working with the example of the Parisian avant-garde before the First World War and its notion of pure painting, the chapter then addresses the Douglas-inspired question: what were the particular dangers inherent in the aesthetic risks they took and how was their purity 'expressive' of social structures? While some of the answers intersect with Douglas's categories, like formlessness and ambiguity, dirt, and identity, the chapter also argues that, before its canonisation, 'pure' painting was multivalent and critical. Faced with the alienation of the modern city, economic competition, and the disintegration of traditional artistic values, these artists used 'purity' pleadingly, ironically, and even in ways that redefined the term. These avant-garde answers to Douglas's question about the relationship between symbols and social structure open up possibilities for thinking differently about both modernism as a movement and purity as a perceptual phenomenon, as a form of individual symbolic agency, and as a cultural discourse.[1]

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Note

1 All page number references in the present volume are to the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger*, apart from Chapter 1, which focuses specifically on the chronology of Douglas's thought and refers to the original 1966 page numbering.

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Introduction

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6 Disgust, disease and disorder: impurity as a mechanism for psychopathology

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7 Distinguishing disgust from fear: the vomit and faint defenses

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