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Ethics of waste: Disposability, self-cultivation and the art of transience

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Abstract
In today's world, waste is perhaps the most significant yet complicated category deprived of a proper definition. For environmentalists, waste as a practice of excess stands for death, whereas for commodity cultures, it represents economic freedom and personal choice. Amid the appeals to save the planet and the tendency to possess and accumulate, the solid interconnections we once had with our waste, have been long forgotten. What we are left with, is a restricted sort of source as the moral motivation for responsible abandonment, reflecting the core of actual crisis. This reality presents substantial obstacles in finding ways to coexist with the waste we've neglected every day. The article hence intends to collect nearly everything that modern society throws away and never really looks back. In taking up this as a challenge, I aim to explore how waste, often seen as worthless detritus, contributes to shaping the self and ethical sensibilities. When it comes to waste management, the intention is neither to imply the need for changes, based on fear or disgust nor to alter its apparent negative role into a positive one. Instead, what I do desire is to provide, waste material, the attention it deserves, by considering and re-considering various instances of their crucial generative role.

Keywords: Waste materials, commodity cultures, solid interconnections, ethical sensibilities, generative role)

Introduction

"A consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the economy, but it sprinkles sand into the bearings of morality." (Bauman, 2013, 15)

Waste is not a topic to which one easily warms. For instance, in our locality monsoons are quite difficult to handle. One of the major issues during that period is water-logging. Everyone in the neighbourhood talks about it, yet nobody does anything. In many respects, just the opposite holds when it comes to trash: everybody does something about it – make it, maybe take it out, perhaps haul it away – but hardly anyone is ever concerned about it. Similarly, while defining trash, we simply get away with words like discarded, expelled, overflowing, or excess. But just think, does it go anywhere near what 'waste' really is? The conventional definitions or the lazy denotations take no notice of our routine feelings and ethical concerns that waste potentially may invoke. Waste is not something we are separate from. The bond that ethics, disposability, and waste materials share with each other or the moral practices that a garbage bin may arouse can't be just overlooked. We are thoroughly mixed up with trash every moment, literally and metaphorically, we live with it in complex patterns of economic and toxic interdependency; thus, we have a shared future with it. So trash-garbage-waste-rubbish are not only our problems. A far deeper relation, we have, to all the stuff – that we leave behind. They dominate a unique normative sense – a solid category of judgment [1]. Things or people labelled as waste or trash inherently carry a unique scent of rejection due to those labels. Such terms are not used in praise or appreciation; on the contrary, they are ready at hand to register a negative evaluation of an object or a person, or an endeavour. Wasted money makes us repent (*A waste of precious funds!*), wasted efforts make us depressed (*Such a waste of energy*!), wasted time makes our idle lives apparent (*What an enormous waste of time!*), and so on.

As a proverb 'waste' contrasts two words laden with meaning in both their verb and noun forms. As a noun, it is just one of many terms related to the topic of this study: garbage, debris, rubbish, trash, etc. But as a verb, 'waste' not only implies 'pointless consumption' – like squandering, extravagance, and indulgence – but also suggests decay, destruction, and death. At times, "waste" signifies decline, as in the phrase "wasting away". This can describe someone gradually losing health and vitality due to a serious illness, such as cancer, or a prolonged lack of proper nutrition. "Waste" can also imply "death". For instance, during the American war in Vietnam, "to waste" meant "to kill" [2]. Overall, "waste" suggests many links in addition to the one between indulgence and deprivation [3]. Such inclinations are closely related to the Jain concept of "parigrahā "(परिग्रह). Jainism holds that the greater the worldly wealth a person accumulates, the more likely they are to commit sins in order to obtain and sustain it. Thus, the idea of "parigrahā", which refers to the tendency toward material accumulation stands in strong opposition to the principle of "aparigrahā" (commitment to non-attachment, and non-possession). This distinction highlights the importance of "aparigrahā" (अपरिग्रह) as a fundamental virtue (the fifth "vrata" of the "Pancha Mahāvratas") in Jain practice, embraced by both ascetics and householders. It encourages individuals to release material possessions, desires, and attachments as a transformative path toward spiritual liberation and ethical enlightenment (ākiṃcanya) [4]. The entire process reflects a commitment to reducing one's dependence on material things and fostering inner contentment. However, the tendency to waste, at times, is very hard to resist [5]. If we look outside, there are commodity relations, where waste works as a stunning method of such consumption, and as an invitation, that most find difficult to refuse [6]. As a result,

our wasteful selves get the proper nourishment, and encouragement from modern capitalist culture. This degeneration highlights a distinct difference between the perceived value of novelty and utility where the consumer evaluates these kinds of various aspects relating to his or her own self-actualization. Thus, in the act of consumption, we buy the self rather than simply buying a product. For Scanlan,"*…this act of purchase - the desire of consummation in such a world becomes the mark of a strangely schizophrenic subjectivity, always at the mercy of a future seduction that comes to form in a modification of the Cartesian cogito: now we exist as we consume*". Fashion is then rooted in this schizophrenic impulse, which demonstrates an inability to concentrate on any one object for long, while also generating a challenge in addressing the tension that drives future desire. This is especially relevant because such desire needs to be perpetually renewed. Within such uncertain conditions, consumer products can be like magical charms that offer the possibility of self-renewal. 'Who you are' becomes thoroughly caught up with 'what you own'. That sort of 'The more the merrier habit' is deeply engraved in the structures of our social values, cultures, and in the cultivation of the self. As a trendy fashion system, constant serial replacement here plays a significant role too. Take an example. After one year when my over-ear headphones broke down, the repairer said that it would cost around five thousand (rupees) to replace some of its damaged parts (if he found them anyhow). Along with it, the great advice comes, that it would take much less if I buy another one. What will be more feasible for me then? Surely to buy a new one. Also, I remember once my sister refused to wear my outgrown pretty good jeans because they were not up to the latest fashion trends. She must get cropped flair ones, her each mate already possesses. And trust me, time after time, in my family this wasteful drama just got bigger and better.

What we want to let go of, builds who we are. Garbage that typically succumbs to human intervention—becoming a tool of desire and manipulation—can occasionally rebel against that control. It reveals social texts that ultimately can disclose the logic or illogic of an entire culture. Though I agree, it seems really difficult to see the actual movement of sociality, still, none can deny, that in terms of each new meaning and waste practice, dynamic human-waste relations become more and more immanent and open-ended. From religious taboos to cultural practices and consumer culture, human beings also, like waste materials are created alike. The more a person tries to escape their feelings of emptiness, the more it reinforces our living subjectivity—our sense of identity.

A Reflection of Societal Ignorance

When we view progress as the historical result of ever-evolving technology that elevates our expectations, it shifts from merely fulfilling our appetites to igniting a relentless quest for new experiences and material possessions. This expansion of desire leads to a void that can only be filled with one layer of waste after another, symbolizing a deep emptiness at the center of our modern existence. Such a Contemporary mode of living is reflected in our habitual, thoughtless consumption, which is the flip side of wastefulness, realized through the constant creation and accumulation of new products. This cycle of desire fuels an ongoing interplay between individuals and society, perpetuating a state of ignorance. When people designate something as waste, they are making a conscious decision to disconnect from it. At some point, such ignorance becomes vital to one's identity – it transforms into a primitive element from which knowledge separates itself.

In his reflections on loss, Max Sebald reminds us of the value of the long-forgotten debris of our lives. He draws attention to the tangible nature of such forsaken objects - to their ontological stability-their lasting presence- repeatedly reminding us of how little we acknowledge them. For Sebald, abandoned places and things have the potential to unveil the hidden truths of lives that have slipped into obscurity. He shows what can happen when you notice waste- when you pay close attention to its presence. Suddenly, discarded objects appear animate and able to make claims on us. Could the recognition of waste as things, change our relations with it? While their motivation is often scarcity and need, the material practices they invent involve an openness to the thingness of waste. It is the possibility of transformation and misuse that makes waste available to other systems of objectification. But one has to be willing to see and feel this. Inventing a new materialism involves a responsiveness to objects that is mutually transformative for both people and things. Waste captures the attention not simply of those in desperate need but also of those able to imagine different uses, able to reanimate it. By refusing to other waste, to reduce it to structure or a mere metaphor, Sebald implicates the materiality of waste in questions of attachments, compassion, and moral considerations. This is where necessity ultimately meets creativity and where ethics meets imagination.

Like Sebald, pragmatists such as James, Rorty, and Deleuze all, in different ways, put questions of action, function, practice, and experience at the center of ontology. According to them, 'thing' has a life of its own that we must accommodate in our activities. What, then, of "waste"? If we begin to recognize waste as "things," what new material relationships and practices could emerge? When waste is treated merely as lifeless objects, confined to the dump or garbage truck, it rarely challenges us. It does not provoke questions because it has been controlled, made passive, and pushed out of sight. Viewing waste as dead objects limits our possibilities, but considering waste as "things" opens up a world of potential. This perspective highlights the blurred line between what is useful and what is useless, as well as the distinction between objects and things. Waste, seen as things, is rich with possibilities for becoming a source of meaning and existence.

Within a fluid economy of values, people generate waste at highly individualized moments and for deeply personal reasons. While you may forget what you eat, drink, or consume in other ways, the waste you produce tells a different story. It exposes the fragile illusion of self-actualization created through consumption. Just as we selectively gather the elements of the world that resonate with us, integrating them into our identities, we must also let go of other aspects of ourselves that become scattered around us. These discarded remnants may be challenging to

identify—perhaps a stray comment, an ill-considered opinion, or a minor misstep. The increasing volume of personal waste drives the need for more advanced technologies to "de-materialize" these leftovers, which could be uncovered by anyone curious enough to explore the garbage or, more alarmingly, to steal your identity. As our life details are continually replicated, this risk only grows. As Bauman noted: "*Most people don't give much thought to what they are discarding at home: phone bills, credit card statements, work-related materials, ... the amount of information you can learn about a target is astounding*." Wastebaskets and trash bins are easy to search and crumpled papers are easy to read. During the 1960s, both official and renegade garbologists were concerned with obtaining the 'dirt' on particular individuals, incriminating stuff that would be found in the trashcan leftovers that were later used to reveal the private details of someone's life.

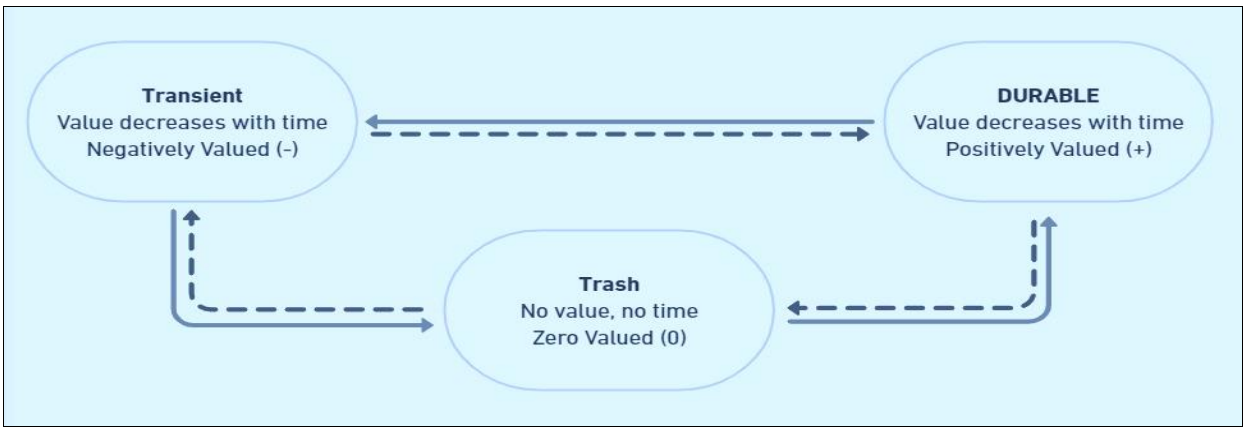
This brings us to the work of "The Tucson Garbage Project" [7], initiated in 1973 by archaeologist Dr. William Rathje (also known as "Captain Planet") and his students in the city of Tucson in the Southwestern American state of Arizona. "The Garbage Project" laid the foundation for the emerging field of "garbology," which continues to influence research on waste patterns, recycling initiatives, and the socio-cultural dimensions of modern consumption. This groundbreaking approach involved excavating and analyzing thousands of tons of garbage from landfills, providing a wealth of data on contemporary consumption patterns and waste management practices. It came together as an innovative study that applied archaeological and sociological techniques to contemporary garbage in order to understand modern consumer behaviour. They believed that within our discarded wastes lay the truth about consumer society. The researchers therefore built a map of the special distribution of garbage in public places, which allowed them to predict the probable location of various kinds of garbage ranging from broken glass to clothes to sexual objects. By analyzing the contents of landfills and household wastes, the initiative provided valuable insights into what people actually consumed versus what they claimed to consume. It showed that people frequently underreported their consumption of alcohol, junk food, and other socially stigmatized items. In contrast, individuals often exaggerate their healthier habits. Interestingly, the researchers discovered that discarded sexual objects and related magazines were rarely found in household trash but were frequently located in public garbage cans or near public waste areas. Such findings reveal a common understanding that nothing truly disappears once thrown away. It appears that pornography is the only type of discarded item that receives such particular attention during disposal—highlighting how garbage can undermine one's carefully crafted identity. The garbage symbolizes the deeper psychological elements that, even if left unburied or unorganized, bring us back to a past we thought we had left behind.

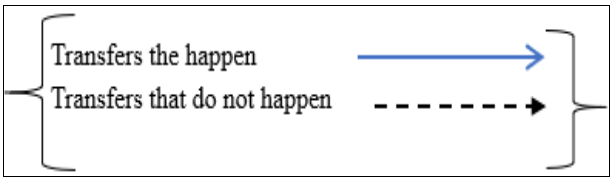
Waste as End-point of Value

As modern civilization has almost perfected the means to forget, we largely remain ignorant, often wilfully so, of the reality of waste – of the inevitable end that our once-cherished shiny new objects of consumer culture will find. Drains and ducts facilitate swift disappearance. It's easy to forget things when elimination is so streamlined and when there is no possibility of careful deliberation. However, the conversion of objects into waste - of valued into valueless is complex and multifaceted. There is a multiplicity of pathways to the limit point at which all functions and values get completely depleted. The question is: What is the role of rubbish in this radical process of shifting value? Michael Thompson says value transformations rely upon the possibility of things with zero value, that is, rubbish. Even the basic ritual of putting out the garbage is one of the key ways in which we acknowledge this absolute insignificance every day. Just because things decay over time doesn't necessarily strip them of their worth. When an object is no longer used and is forgotten, still later it can be revalued as a classic, retro, kitsch, archaeological artifact, or a rare exceptional piece. As cultural narratives evolve, these objects are reinterpreted, allowing them to transcend their status as rubbish and reenter the sphere of value, often with newfound reverence or aesthetic appreciation. No object is fated to remain relegated to a particular category forever. Along with cultural shifts, economic factors, and market trends also highlight the contingent and transformative nature of value itself, revealing how the past is continually reassessed and revalued in light of the present. However such radical transformation would not be feasible without first removing the object from traditional value considerations. Thus, rubbish becomes essential, bridging the apparent gulf between extreme categories. As an area outside conventional value judgments, trash hence serves as a creative reservoir of material and social potential, which can be tapped to bring about significant change or preserve relative stability.

Thomson argues, without a category of rubbish, it is quite impossible to generate new and unexpected structures of value. Interestingly, the value he's here referring to is shaped by social dynamics, not by the inherent qualities of objects themselves. Most value forms are, in Thomson's words, transient and temporary; easier to dispose of and detach ourselves from. Then there are things, that appear relatively inalienable. They are durable and permanent. The distinction between transient and durable forms is what makes it absurd to compare the value of a trending social media post with a classic novel, a fast-fashion outfit with a handcrafted suit, or a disposable smartphone with an antique rotary phone. When one value decreases to zero, the other expands infinitely. Social economists have traditionally acknowledged two distinct categories of possessions. However, Michael Thompson introduces a third, hidden category: Rubbish. Unlike other categories, Rubbish holds no value and is therefore overlooked in socio-economic theories. Yet, this oversight is misleading. Rubbish serves as the bridge between Transient and Durable objects. Without the existence of Rubbish—if everything retained some value—transfers wouldn't occur. Moving from negative to positive (or vice versa) requires passing through zero. Even when present, there's only one continuous transition. Waste occupies this overlooked category between transient and durable, acting as a valueless limbo where, at some point, an item might be revalued and move into the realm of durability.

Fig 1: The Dynamic Systems of Cognitive Categories





A key implication of Thompson's perspective is that rubbish isn't simply what remains after value has been exhausted. He argues that the contents of a bin or dumpster aren't actually rubbish—at least, not yet. These items are merely transient, holding little value that decreases over time. Discards only become 'rubbish' once social processes and practices effectively remove them from circulation and consideration. For Thompson, rubbish isn't exactly worthless; rather, it's something not even deemed worthy of assessment. It's not actively labeled as having a negative value, but rather passively ignored as having no value at all. This places rubbish in a 'valueless limbo' (Hawkins 78), existing somewhere between the recognized categories of transient and durable. Value transformations from rubbish can never be entirely prevented. The potential for radical shifts in value—and, by extension, social revolutions—remains ever-present within any societal system. This is precisely because materials and representations are in a state of constant flux, making such transformations an intrinsic possibility.

The hidden category of rubbish isn't controlled by the mechanisms that govern the overt parts of the system, which focus on valuable and socially significant objects. This lack of control allows rubbish to serve as the pathway for the seemingly impossible transition of an object from transience to durability. As a transient object loses value and its expected lifespan shortens, it might slip into the rubbish category. Ideally, in a perfect world free from nature's destructive forces, an object would reach zero value and zero lifespans simultaneously, disappearing much like the 'one hoss shay' in Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem, which collapses into dust in a single moment. However, in reality, this rarely happens; instead, the object often lingers in timeless, valueless oblivion, where, if it hasn't yet turned to dust, it might eventually be rediscovered. This rediscovery could come from someone with a fresh new perspective, who sees potential in what was once discarded, thus reintroducing the object into the realm of durability and value.

How Self Relates to Waste

"…diving into rubbish is essential if we are to understand who we are, how we relate to one another, and what we are really capable of." (Thomson, 2017, xi)

As Thomson has shown it means a lot in terms of economies of value because of waste's crucial role in generating change. But what does it mean for person–thing relations? What triggers a reframing of rubbish, and inhibits this? Regardless of how much we deny it, our trash speaks volumes about us – or at least significant paragraphs. Every day we spend lots and lots of time washing, going to the toilet, taking out the garbage, deleting nonessential photos-files-documents, making more room for the system software, etc. After all, disposal is a kind of purification ritual that restores us to an ordered state; that is its function and its pleasure. There are these ways through which waste is implicated in the making of our particular ethical sensibilities. But where there is a wide range of variety in waste materials (like biological, informational, gaseous, and so on) on earth, a whole sack of thoughts and feelings are also attached to those waste practices and their after effects. As a result, in today's world, nobody can conceal the vital role of trash in the care of self anymore. When we get rid of the clutter, we tend to feel clean & purified (it definitely makes us feel good about ourselves). It makes us feel, that this sense of goodness of doing the right thing for our environment is firmly linked to the practice of virtue or a sense of obligation toward profound moral codes. Before my study time, I am more likely to clean my room and spray a bit of room freshener. Every damn time, when I asked myself why I had done this, the answer was simple – because it makes me feel pure and peaceful within.

Still how much we clean – on how many levels we want to put our trash out of sight - out of mind - out of smell, there is considerable evidence that we take them to be revelatory of all manner of not insignificant facts about the common human condition. Let's demonstrate that a little bit. In 1988, arose the US Supreme Court case California v. Greenwood [8]. The Laguna Beach resident, William Greenwood came under suspicion from a local police investigator for drug trafficking. Having no hard evidence against Greenwood, police officer Jenny Stracner decided, that in order to gather enough evidence to obtain a search warrant for Greenwood's house, she had to look at his garbage. Stracner, after several searches, had enough dirt on Greenwood to get him arrested but after experiencing multiple arrests, Greenwood ultimately sued the state. The

lower court dismissed the charges against Greenwood because a warrantless trash search violates state law and the officer would not have had probable cause to search Greenwood's home without the illegally obtained evidence. An appeals court affirmed this decision. The case was then taken to the Supreme Court where the decision from the state court was overturned and Greenwood was found guilty. The aim here is not to provide a summary of jurisprudence nor to assess the arguments put forth by prosecutors, defendants, juries, judges, or legal scholars. What I am trying to establish through, all of this, is that trash is a very strange thing. We have deliberately distanced ourselves from it, cast it out of the orbit of our care, and implicitly declared that we are done with it. Yet it testifies eloquently to the personal habits of those who generate it – to their political preferences, romantic inclinations, and all manners of thoughts and attitudes not necessarily meant for public consumption. Although trash is after all, by definition what we have thrown out, it still has the power to reveal. When we place our trash carefully in a sealed opaque container, we want the content of our trash to remain private. Despite that, the waste that we no longer care for boasts how tenuous that separation is. This tension – this uncertainty- 'Is it me? Is it not me?', is reflected in countless other contemplations on garbage.

Waste, thus, isn't just a fixed category of things - it is an effect of classifications and relations – a trademark of our civilized modernity that undergoes constant changes (where dual-flushing toilets, garbage contractors, and in-sink erators protect us daily from the valueless filth with streamlined efficiency). Government programs for waste management, sustainable development goals, public policies, and mass education campaigns alter our personal & domestic conduct extensively. From rubbish, waste becomes recyclables – from the dustbin, it moves to the compost heaps & out of these utterly brand-new formations, unique combinations of guilt, conscience, and self-regulation blossom.

The styles of waste disposal decode styles of self and it's fundamental to the practice of subjectivity. Don't underestimate it. We can almost analyze an entire culture by going through that garbage (Douglas 35). If we find greasy food boxes in a garbage bin outside of a residence, we infer perhaps, the residents are not into home-cooked meals these days; piles of syringes, cotton balls, or disposed roller bandages make us think of a medical care facility nearby. Therefore. waste is a social text that we can't ignore and it discloses the logic & illogic of culture. Hence, the connection between the styles of waste disposal and the styles of self can be quite intriguing at times. These methods differ widely based on the preferences of individuals, the practices adopted by communities, and the regulations set by society at large, such as:

Table 1: Exploring the Link between Waste Habits and Self-Identity

Styles of Waste Disposal	Styles of Self
Efficiency and Expression	Some individuals or societies may prioritize efficient waste disposal methods, aiming for cleanliness and orderliness without much emphasis on personal expression. This can reflect a style of self that values practicality, and functionality over individuality.
Sustainability and Identity	On the other hand, those who adopt eco-friendly waste disposal practices often see it as an extension of their identity. Their style of self might be characterized by a strong environmental consciousness and a desire to minimize their impact on the planet.
Innovation and Creativity	Certain waste disposal styles, such as upcycling or repurposing materials, can reflect a creative and innovative style of self. People who engage in these practices may see waste not just as a problem to be eliminated but as a resource for artistic expression or problem-solving.
Community and Collaboration	Collaborative waste disposal efforts, like community recycling programs or shared composting initiatives, can highlight a communal style of self. These individuals may place value on working together for a common cause and building connections within their community.
Minimalism and Simplicity	Embracing minimalistic waste disposal practices, such as reducing consumption or opting for zero-waste lifestyles, can reflect a style of self that values simplicity, mindfulness, and conscious consumption.

Therefore, regardless of the numerous ways garbage is reduced to a product of culturally & historically variable human practices, in the end, what we want to get rid of ultimately tells us who we are. Interestingly, renowned Italian author Italo Calvino approached the same thing, yet with a unique perspective. When we unburden (pile up waste and throw it out) ourselves, he says, what do we really do then? - we differentiate who I am and what is unalterably alien. He says, "*My trash is revelatory of who I am not…because the real I is what remains of me in the wake of my rubbishing. I am to be distinguished from my trash, not through it*" (Calvino 104).

"Only by throwing something away can I be sure that something of myself has not yet been thrown away and perhaps need not be thrown away now or in the future." (Bauman, 2004, 28) No matter how trivial taking out the garbage may seem, the way we do it reflects an ethos—a way of being. As Foucault explains, ethos is closely tied to ethics, as it shapes how our behavior affects our bodies. Of course, shifting focus from the big psychological dramas to everyday relations, habits, and ethics could risk becoming another form of subjectivism that overlooks waste. We recognize this risk. Yet, we believe that changing waste practices requires a process of self-reflection, encouraging people to think about how they live. If we begin with our immediate environment and make small changes to help the planet—like choosing a paper bag over a plastic one—these actions can lead to important shifts in our relationship with waste, influencing how we manage it and how we feel about our responsibility and moral standing. Thus, the "Reduce, Reuse, Re-cycle" hoarding boards catch our attention. They don't just indicate our minimal household routines, rather they implicate our bodies. Such campaigns spread their paws not only to subject who we are – not only to confine our bodies and bodily movements but also, to scrutinize our entire self & how we should act in this world.

Ethics of Dispose-ability

Along with waste, comes disposability. There are moments when I try to think about this issue and I suddenly find my mind flooded with (images of) heaps of plastic bottles. Conceptually that is quite compelling and thought-provoking to imagine how mundane objects like ordinary plastic bottles or polymer pouches can become capable enough to question the relationship between economic processes, resources, and environmental degradation, all at once. Unfortunately, these essential elements of take-away markets do not surprisingly pop up in a series of movements and shifting valuations. The future of a typical plastic lid on a coffee cup is also anticipated. You are utterly wrong if you think this fate of disposability appears after we finish our coffee. In fact, the journey has rather started long before. The chances of its being disposed of, are already inscribed in the form and functions of the cup, on its smooth surface, and in its very plastic materiality. It is quite remarkable, how we dismiss the plastic lid as rubbish prior to actually getting the chance to use it.

Anticipating and accepting waste is not something that occurs after an object's use-value has been depleted, but rather is embedded in the material object and our interactions with it from the outset. Disposability becomes a fundamental condition shaping these objects. They are designed for disposal, and the act of discarding them quickly is driven by the user's own expectations. This emergent space-time is not merely a fast-tracked product life cycle—moving from production to consumption to disposal. In fact, if the object's future as waste is anticipated even before its use, what we are really observing is a horizontal network of connections, a topology that extends in multiple directions rather than following a simple linear path. A crucial aspect of this topology is the awareness of the object's eventual fate as waste, even before accessing it in the present. Most importantly, there is an acceptance that it is already destined to become waste. All this comes as a part of learning to embrace the conventionalities of disposability that depend on acquiring a form of ethical blindness – the blindness to waste without care [9].

Take a look at the situation of where I am currently staying. Kolkata, one of India's four metropolitan cities and the capital of West Bengal, is facing a growing environmental challenge due to the large amounts of municipal solid waste it generates. The local authorities, while dedicated to their duties, are struggling to handle this increasing problem. The key challenges arise from inadequate waste segregation, limited door-to-door collection, numerous open dumping sites, an outdated waste transportation fleet, and an inefficient recycling network. It is estimated that only 10% of Kolkata's waste is recycled, leaving a significant portion unaccounted for. Yet, where could the rest (of the trash) have disappeared to? Close by, on the edge of this city, in the rural district of Dhapa, lies a small hill (At least at first glance, it appears to be a hill!). It is the infamous Dhapa landfill, the destination for much of the city's solid waste over the past 30 years. Since 1981, the disposal site has served the city of joy, as an uncontrolled dumping ground. As a result, Dhapa sees fire all day. The fires come on their own, from the garbage itself (due to the emission of excessive methane and diverse fermentation of various organic wastes). They burn all day and all night, every day of the year. Since there is no waste segregation at the source, harmful metals like zinc, nickel, lead, and arsenic are dumped, contaminating the soil. The nearby canal contains alarming levels of dissolved solids, high biological oxygen demand, and heavy metals like zinc and carbon. The people living near the landfill are left with no choice but to breathe in the toxic fumes. Many have built homes from the waste, and their lives revolve around it. With no alternative landfill available, stopping waste disposal here is not an option for the city's authorities [10].

Interestingly, the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, undertook a World Bank-supported project titled "Capacity Building for Industrial Pollution Management," which aimed to develop a "National Programme for the Rehabilitation of Polluted Sites." This initiative focused on remediating various polluted sites across the country, including the closed dumpsite spanning 12.14 hectares in the Dhapa Dumping Area of Kolkata. The West Bengal Pollution Control Board served as the state-level implementation agency for this project, responsible for overseeing the remediation efforts and ensuring adherence to environmental standards throughout the rehabilitation process. Based on the detailed Environmental Baseline Monitoring conducted around the closed dumpsite, a conceptual site model was developed to assess the associated environmental impacts. The evaluation (published in Feb 2014 as The "Dhapa Dumpsite Environmental And Social Assessment Report") revealed significant environmental risks linked to the closed dumpsite, which necessitate urgent attention. As outlined in Fig 1, the summary highlights various environmental impacts, emphasizing the potential for pollutant migration into the surrounding areas.

Table 2: Environmental Impacts due to Closed Dump Site [11]

Environmental Indices	Impacts
Air Quality	The methane and carbon dioxide concentrations in landfill gas are high, approximately 55% and 40% v/v, respectively. However, landfill gas generation is low due to the low content of organic matter in the waste body.
Groundwater Quality	Upper groundwater below waste has moderate contamination due to leachate percolation. Deep aquifers are not contaminated and the water is acceptable for drinking purposes.
Surface Water Quality	Surface waters (lined dry weather untreated sewage canal/drainage channel) around the dump site are found to be contaminated with organics and heavy metals due to migration of run-off and leachate from dumpsite but the major cause of pollution is the untreated city sewage.
Soil Quality	Topsoil is found to be contaminated with heavy metals and organics due to surface run-off and leachate and also due to windblown dust/ litter
Sediment Quality	Sediments from the drainage channels around the dumpsite are found to be contaminated with heavy metals like chromium, lead, cadmium, copper, and zinc.
Ecology and Biodiversity	Surface run-off and leachate entering the wetland and agricultural fields

The baseline environmental status here indicates that leaving the closed dumpsite in its current state poses substantial risks to the local ecosystem and public health. Therefore, it is crucial to explore and implement options for the environmentally sound closure of the dumpsite, ensuring effective containment of pollutants and safeguarding the neighboring environment from further degradation.

This issue is not confined to developing countries alone. Even in well-developed nations, poor industrial practices and inadequate waste management can result in significant environmental hazards and public health issues. Take the Love Canal Incident as a reference. Love Canal is a neighbourhood in Niagara Falls named after a large ditch (about 15 meters wide, 3–12 meters deep, and 1600 meters long) dug in the 1890s for a hydroelectric power project. For years, the ditch sat mostly unused, except as a swimming spot for locals. In the 1920s, Niagara Falls began using it as a dumping site for city waste, and during the 1940s, the U.S. Army added waste from World War II, including materials from efforts to develop a nuclear bomb. In 1942, Hooker Chemical purchased the land, lined the canal with clay, and buried an estimated 21,000 tons of hazardous chemical waste, such as carcinogens like benzene, dioxin, and PCBs, in large metal barrels, covering them with more clay. By 1953, Hooker sold the land to the Niagara Falls School Board, including a contract clause revealing the chemical waste and absolving Hooker from future liability. Despite this warning, the school board built a public school on the site and developed the area into a housing project, with around 200 homes along the canal and another 1,000 in the surrounding neighborhood. The canal's clay cap and walls were damaged during construction, causing some barrels to leak. Over time, chemical waste seeped into residents' basements, and barrels began surfacing. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, local residents reportedly suffered significant health issues such as high rates of miscarriages, birth defects, and chromosome damage, but studies by the New York State Health Department disputed all of that. Finally, in 1978 President Carter declared a state of emergency at Love Canal, making it the first human-caused environmental problem to be designated that way [12].

How Change Occurs: Rethink, Renew & Reuse

Let's look at a different picture now. Roughly 7450 miles away from where I live, lies Pennsylvania. In 2004, the US Sewer and Water Department decided to solve a serious bio-waste issue by signing a contract for a full-scale vermicomposting system there. The previous sewer system was used to transfer dewatered bio-solid wastes into a landfill that was rapidly losing its capacity. As an alternative, extensive use of vermiculture worm beds emerged as a promising solution at that time. They were there not to change the routine or habits of the township – not to assert authority nor to have any stern impacts on the householders. By employing vermicomposting, which utilizes worms to break down bio-waste, the project generates high-quality nutrient-rich compost while minimizing environmental impact. However, from a macro-political level, the implementation did show us a thing or two. The project demonstrated the crucial role of active governmental intervention. It also proved that the people are quite welcoming toward accepting sustainable technology and highlighted the continued relevance of environmental concerns. This project, thus has been recognized for its pioneering methods in bio-waste management and environmental benefits. It sees waste not as a mere phobic object, rather it can be perceived as part of a relationship in which we can sense our interdependence with what we discard and feel the force of time & transience instead.

There are other ways in which the ethos of disposability, distance & denial can be challenged - various paths through which waste micro-practices can be whole-heartedly transformed. Therefore it is always possible to experiment and go beyond the limits that are imposed on us. In doing this, we are not claiming essential freedom but taking up the possibility of new modes of self-direction and cultivation that express a "reflective heteronomy". Several examples illustrate this active experimentation with waste. For instance, the toilet festivals in Mumbai are community-driven events where slum dwellers take matters of sanitation into their own hands. These festivals often involve the construction, maintenance, and use of public toilets in densely populated urban areas where access to proper sanitation is limited. By organizing and participating in these festivals, residents not only address a critical public health issue but also redefine their relationship with waste. It shifts the perception of waste management from a distant, often neglected task to a collective, empowering experience. This transformation in their approach to waste also reflects a deeper transformation in how they see themselves and their capabilities within their living environment. Now let's think about a compost pile. The care and attention involved in managing a compost pile turn disgust at decay into pleasure in renewal. Then there are minor practices such as gleaning and 'making do' that show fundamentally different relationships between people and objects. Gleaning, traditionally understood as the act of collecting leftover crops from fields after the harvest, and 'making do', which involves creatively reusing and repurposing available resources, represent practices that challenge conventional person-thing relationships. These practices highlight a resourceful engagement with waste, where discarded or overlooked materials are given new value and purpose. Gleaning and 'making do' not just involve survival strategies; they reflect a broader philosophy of sustainability and adaptability. By engaging in these minor practices, individuals learn to see potential in what others might consider worthless, thus fostering a mindset that values innovation and creativity over wastefulness.

However, the use of modern waste management systems protects us from encountering change. Think about how residential waste is collected in sealed bins by automated trucks. These trucks take the waste to faraway landfills or incineration facilities. Thus, the whole process keeps the waste and its decay hidden from view, making it easier for us to avoid dealing with the messy and often unpleasant aspects of waste breakdown. The comfort and predictability we experience are often based on technologies designed to efficiently remove waste, helping us bypass the inevitable transformations that discarded items undergo. Most disposal practices involve interactions with technologies or containers rather than directly engaging with the waste itself. We witness the act of elimination and removal but seldom the processes of decay and disruption. This raises the question: How can we cultivate a self-aware micropolitics that recognizes our intrinsic ties to waste and focuses on managing these relationships in thoughtful,

sustainable ways? What tactics and active experimentation would be necessary to open ourselves to waste, challenging the egoism, exploitation, and destruction that it fosters? As we've suggested, the first step is to become aware of waste, to allow it to capture our attention. In that brief moment, a new relationship with waste begins to form. When waste draws our attention or stirs us at a deep, visceral level, we are reminded of the body's intensities and diverse experiences. These emotional responses can feel like an overflow, a surplus beyond the control of the rational, manageable self. Recognizing waste's emotional impact disrupts those epistemologies that focus on a subject already equipped to act on the world and "do the right thing." The body, in this sense, isn't merely a subject responding to the objective world—it is an "articulated body in transition." In this context, affect can dismantle binary oppositions by connecting us to the dynamic rhythms of existence. It can help us recognize our place within and as part of the world. Children's play with waste materials provides an example of such active experimentation, as it involves creating new meanings and relationships. This parallels practices like gleaning and improvising that we have previously explored. By exploring these practices, we see how waste can become a catalyst for creativity and resourcefulness, challenging conventional notions of what is useful or valuable.

Conclusion

In summary, we may conclude that waste is not merely a negative byproduct of consumption, instead it holds a potential source of meaning, self-identity, cultural expressions, and societal narratives. In a consumer-driven society, the act of disposing of waste materials often reveals a broader sense of societal ignorance symbolizing detachment from repercussions of our collective acts. Gradually, when we begin to recognize waste as a crucial component of self-cultivation and ethical responsibility, we initiate a transformative dialogue. This dialogue challenges the prevailing consumerist mindset, pushing us to confront our insatiable desire to accumulate more and more, often without reflecting on the impact of our actions. Waste, in this context, becomes a mirror that reflects our values, priorities, and ethical standards, forcing us to acknowledge its role in shaping not only our material world but also our moral outlook.

A shift in perspective is therefore necessary—moving from viewing waste as merely disposable to understanding it as an opportunity for transformation. This transformation is grounded in sustainable practices such as reducing consumption, reusing resources, recycling waste materials, and embracing decomposition processes that allow for natural reintegration. By adopting these waste habits, we are not simply managing trash; we are also redefining our relationship with the world around us and embracing a more holistic approach to consumption.

Still, a sustainable future requires more than just practical solutions; it demands a fundamental rethinking of how we engage with our trash. This shift allows us to cultivate deeper connections with both our environment and ourselves, fostering a sense of accountability and ethical obligations. By recognizing the value in what we discard, we challenge the cycle of mindless consumption and move toward a world where our actions are aligned with the principles of sustainability, equanimity, and respect. This approach calls for collective awareness, where each action taken in managing waste contributes to the greater goal of building a more conscious and interconnected society.

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We have not received support from any organization for the particular submitted work. As the authors, we also have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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