

Elizabeth Spelman

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*Reviewed by Marion Smiley, 2019*

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This book focuses on something that philosophers are not used to thinking about: trash. Moreover, it does so for the purpose of teaching us something about ourselves. Hence, it is not simply a book about trash; instead, it is a book about trash and us. What, it asks, does trash mean to us? How do we understand it? What place does it have in our lives? What kinds of things do we deem worthy of being thrown out? How do we experience throwing these things out? Who takes our trash away from us and what is our relationship to them? What can we learn about ourselves—both individually and collectively—from studying such matters?

Not surprisingly, we would not be able to learn much of anything about ourselves from studying such matters if we had to take our definition of trash as authoritative. We define trash as something that we throw out on the grounds that we do not want it. (In other words, we define trash as something that from our perspective is not worth keeping.) Hence, trash would not appear to be the kind of thing that we could construe as important in our lives. Instead, it would appear to be something of a sideshow: the stuff of a Seinfeldian stand-up comedy routine.

But “importance” is not built into any subject matter. Hence, we do not have to take our definition of trash as authoritative in this context. (Obviously, we will always have to keep it in mind when exploring what we think we are doing when we throw things out.) Instead, we can stand back from our definition of it and explore how trash functions—both literally and figuratively—in our lives. In other words, we can ask questions like: What does trash do for us materially and spiritually? How does it function in the economy and our personal lives? What kinds of things does it enable us to express? How does it enable us to express these things?

Elizabeth Spelman places these kinds of questions at the center of her extraordinarily thoughtful, far-ranging, and beautifully written study of trash. Moreover, she answers these questions in the way that only a gifted feminist philosopher committed to bringing philosophy to the world of everyday life could. To wit: she takes our everyday experiences of trash, as well as our use of the metaphor of trash, seriously, and then uses her gifts as a philosopher to articulate the working

concepts, as well as the norms, values, and beliefs, that enable us to construct trash as the subject matter that we do.

Spelman assumes—and then demonstrates—that what we throw out, as well as what we choose not to throw out, tells us a great deal about the kinds of things we do and do not consider to be part of ourselves. Likewise, she makes clear that how we throw these things out, along with how much we throw out, who takes these things away, and how we relate to them, registers our economic priorities; how, if at all, we value nature, what kinds of communities we live in, and the place that we give to race, gender, and class in the organization of collective life.

Spelman's primary focus is on material things that we throw out. But she also tracks our use of the term *trash* to talk about things that we consider to be trash-like—bad novels, the tabloid press, morally corrupt politicians, the inhabitants of trailer parks, sexually active women—and, in doing so, shows how the term *trash* can be used metaphorically to signify what is from our perspective the worthlessness, smelliness, and/or generally disgusting nature of particular persons, groups, and institutions. Likewise, she branches out to focus on matters of waste in general and shows how it, too—or at least our understanding and organization of it—registers our sense of responsibility (or lack thereof) for the byproducts of our lives.

I say “we” here reluctantly. “We” do not always interpret trash in the same way, throw out the same kinds of things, throw out as much as others do, or hold the same opinions about those who collect our trash. Indeed, although we may share a lot in common when it comes to these things, we frequently differ among ourselves in ways that are either purely individual or reflective of our place in the community. The same holds true for our use of the term *trash* to describe things that are for us trash-like. Some of us still call sexually active women “trash” and inhabitants of trailer parks “trailer park trash,” but others—hopefully many more—recoil at such imagery and push back when the term *trash* is used to describe any human being.

Not surprisingly, Spelman, who throughout her career has opened our eyes to the importance of taking different perspectives, experiences, and identities seriously in all contexts, recognizes the importance of exploring the variety of ways in which different individuals, groups, and their communities relate to trash. Moreover, in doing so, she makes clear that what we call trash can take on different meanings in accordance with both the particular kinds of questions that we are asking of trash and the particular disciplines within which we are asking these questions. How, she asks, do we construct trash when we talk about it in the context of law, economics, social relations, psychoanalysis, biology, personal exposés, and so on?

In the context of law, we ask whether we own our trash once it is taken out of our home, as well as whether others—nosy neighbors, police detectives, tabloid journalists—have a right to sift through it. Although our concern here is sometimes with property rights *per se*—if, say, we put something of value in the bin by mistake—it is primarily about our ability to keep others out of our private lives. Hence, when we talk about trash in a legal context, we are forced to come to terms with whether what we throw out is or is not still part of us. In this sense, trash speaks to us, not just about itself, but about how far our sense of self extends out into the world.

Trash speaks to us, even as its status as trash signals a significant distance between it and us. We can get rid of our trash, but it doesn't quite get rid of us. . . . In some cases, . . . we may not want others to know what it [trash] still has the power to reveal. (20–21)

Whereas legal squabbles over the ownership of trash tell us about what we do and do not want to include in our senses of self, sociological tracks on the subject matter tell us about how we construct our status categories in the community. Not surprisingly, the ability to throw things out that others would consider to be valuable and/or necessary provides the wealthy with a way of signaling their high status in those capitalist communities that value materialism. But in other kinds of communities—puritanical and environmentalist—the practice of throwing these things out constitutes self-indulgence, insensitivity to the needs of others, and/or disrespect for nature.

What about how we experience trash? Although we do not all talk about our experiences of trash or, for that matter, even have them, we can turn to works of literature to discover what those experiences might be. Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* demonstrates the full range of possible experiences, not only with throwing trash out, but with living with it. Italo Calvino, in his exquisite "La Poubelle," tells us about his own (enjoyable) experience of taking the trash out. According to Calvino, taking the trash out every night enables him to order his life by getting rid of things that he does not want. But, paradoxically, it also helps him create his "real me."

Only by throwing something away can I be sure that something of myself has not been thrown away and perhaps need not be thrown away now or in the future. The "real" me is what remains after I throw my rubbish out. (91)

In all of the above cases, Spelman zeroes in on how we interpret, organize, and relate to trash as a material thing and asks what we can learn about ourselves and our communities from taking the many facets of our relationship to trash seriously. In other cases, she zeroes in on how we use the term *trash* to talk about nonmaterial things and, in doing so, highlights the various ways in which we use the term *trash* metaphorically to denigrate particular groups, individuals, and institutions. In these cases, the metaphor of trash becomes a social and political weapon.

In other cases, it plays a key role in framing various aspects of reality for us. Two of the most original parts of *Trash Talk* are those in which Spelman shows how psychoanalytic theory and theories of evolution employ the metaphor of trash to frame their respective worldviews (worldviews that have subsequently become part of our own ways of appropriating reality). In the case of psychoanalytic theory, the metaphor of trash is used explicitly to convey how patients throw away desires that threaten them. (According to Freud, patients, in the interests of hiding these desires from themselves, repress them by throwing them out of their conscious lives.)

The case of evolutionary theory is more controversial, since it requires us to move from the "waste" associated with genetic mutation to "trash" and since evolutionary theorists differ among themselves about whether we can use the imagery of waste in this context. The case comes down not only to accepting evolutionary theory in general, but to recognizing the importance of junk DNA—90% of the genetic material in humans—as important to the evolutionary process. Interestingly enough, in the case of junk DNA, we are faced with a kind of waste that is also

useful to the process in play. Hence, in Spelman's words, it "may be junk . . . but not trash" (143).

Although Spelman recognizes that we may go too far in using the metaphor of trash to talk about waste that is useful, she feels comfortable using the metaphor of trash to talk about waste in general. I am not sure that she can do so justifiably. Indeed, I suspect that she cannot. Trash requires a level of self-consciousness and valuation on the part of the agent that waste does not—meaning that whereas something can be deemed waste by a disinterested third party, it cannot be deemed trash unless the agent throwing it out thinks of it as trash. Suffice it to say here that when we use trash as a metaphor, we need to take the element of self-consciousness seriously.

Spelman may herself have gone too far in using the metaphor of trash to talk about something that a disinterested third party might call waste. But she has nevertheless provided us with a very fruitful—and fun to read—analysis of what might otherwise be dismissed as a throwaway topic. Indeed, she has single-handedly opened our eyes, not only to the importance of trash in our lives, but to the fact that trash can "talk" to us about a whole host of things: how we construct ourselves, what we value, and how we frame reality in a variety of realms. The book's style may be breezy and self-consciously unpretentious. But its insights are profound.