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Pooping together

Ordinary practices, philosophical interferences

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SUMMARY

What can philosophy tell one about a very mundane and (ostensibly) natural process like pooping? Is pooping even worth studying, since it is something that *everyone does* and *knows* – even if not everyone wants to talk about it? Is pooping something that ‘just happens’, or can more be learned from paying attention to its practices? This dissertation is the culmination of my efforts to take ordinary practices of pooping seriously and to think about them in conversation with philosophical and anthropological literature to see what one discovers.

Focusing on the everyday practices of young children and their caregivers in the Netherlands – from diaper changing, to potty training, and the general cleaning surrounding kids’ bodies – pushed me to challenge two common approaches to pooping: as something natural that just happens, internal to individual bodies, and therefore the domain of natural sciences only; and as something marginal and disgusting, which is only interesting because of its out-of-place character, which makes it the object of moralisation. In contrast with these two common assumptions, the ordinary pooping I attended to brought to the fore just how much *work* goes into something as mundane as living with a body that poops. Making the work involved in ordinary pooping visible also makes apparent the daily work that ‘all’ bodies need to maintain themselves. In this sense it is not only those of us who have conditions, illnesses, disabilities, or whose bodies are somehow ‘not normal’ who partake in this ordinary work of the body. Even ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ bodies do not ‘just happen’. All bodies take work, learning, and effort, no matter how ordinary, naturalised, normalised, or hidden this work might be. In illuminating this work, I align myself with critical disability studies in foregrounding these ordinary practices; turning them into empirical materials that challenge and transform our conceptual tools in order to craft more expansive and inclusive understandings of *how to live with a body*.

The development of these understandings becomes clear in **Chapter 1**, where I begin by paying closer attention to how natural scientists *know* poo, by following a medical scale used to qualify stools according to their form. But, while the scale allows for all sorts of (more or less) objective qualifications and quantifications, its scientific and clinical uses rely on training a different, more ordinary form of knowing poo, which cannot be easily separated from pooping itself. This ordinary knowing, far from being at odds with biomedical understandings of

pooping, forms the basis of these scientific abstractions. Building on science studies' insights on how knowing is *done*, the chapter highlights the importance of this ordinary, embodied knowing, as it illustrates how bringing attention to pooping is key to developing a better sensitivity and language for talking about these practices. Rather than looking for how we know poo in scientific practices only, in this first chapter I suggest that we would do better to also attend to ordinary pooping and its own (less evident, but no less important) forms of knowing.

This fundamental lesson then frames the rest of the dissertation, as I look for ordinary pooping in everyday practices: turning away from medical settings, I focus instead on the mundane practices of people who are *learning to poo*: children and their adults. In particular, in **Chapter 2** I follow my informants as they go through potty training. This process makes clear how pooping is not (only) an internal and natural matter, but something that is learned and practiced, importantly, *together*. While potty training is usually understood as culminating in toilet *independence*, paying closer attention to pooping practices I challenge this notion. None of the bodies I encountered in my fieldwork turned out not to be individual and independent; these ideals always involved negotiating and coordinating different bodies, people, and objects together, in *relational* practices of pooping. As I highlight the shifting and situated *interdependencies* tied into pooping, once again inspired by critical disabilities studies, I appropriate and adjust the classical sociological notion of 'body techniques' to approach the work of learning to poo as an ongoing negotiation between different ways of being together, with others and in shifting environments.

In **Chapter 3**, I turn my attention to diapers – crucial tools in handling poo for all of my informants – and the ethical and normative questions they help raise. Diapers are tools that are generally considered as bad, because of their wastefulness and environmental impacts and in the chapter, I look at an advertisement campaign that purports to fix this problem by recycling them – turning a bad into a universal good. In the practices of my informants though, things were not so clear-cut. Highlighting different *goods* and *bads* of diapers, I show how pooping does not fit and scale up easily amid a universalising version of ethics. Rather than just being waste that can be turned into a good through recycling, in ordinary pooping the *goods* and *bads* of diapers are constantly renegotiated, as different concerns take over in different moments. To make space for this incommensurability of diapers (and of daily life and ethics), then, I offer the notion of

disposable goods: values that are not fixed once and for all, but that are open to changes. Rather than aiming at an idealised happiness, in which all problems can be solved once and for all, this way of looking at values interferes with universal visions of deliberative ethics, as these ethics always require attuning and involve discomfort. In this way, diapers help me articulate a more ordinary approach to ethics, which helps shift the discussion away from moralising and universalising ideals and scales, to ‘stay with the trouble’ of everyday practices.

Finally, in **Chapter 4** I continue the denaturalisation of pooping by engaging with classical anthropological analyses of *dirt*, to complicate the role of disgust in my informants’ everyday handling of poop. Disgust is often considered a natural response to poo, often ending up being used as the main analytic when researching poo. Yet, despite its overwhelming presence in analyses of poo, disgust faded into the background of the ordinary encounters with pooping that I studied. In its place, I traced a different approach in how my informants handled poo which involved cultivating *familiarity* and *informality*, along with an openness to and an active engagement with poo. Rather than centring disgust, then, I propose we cultivate an informal familiarity similar to that of my informants, as it can help with coming to terms and engaging with the crucial ordinary work involved in living with a body that poops.

Taking the lessons of each chapter to heart, then, this dissertation is also an example of the shift I am proposing. Throughout my work, applying what I learned from my informants, I cultivated a different sensibility to poo and to ordinary practices, and I have trained a more informal, familiar, and playful attitude towards my empirical materials, as well as my theoretical concepts. Far from being exceptional and requiring some heroic sacrifice, this attitude can be nurtured by paying attention to the ordinary, everyday work of living with a (pooping) body. After all, we all keep learning and navigating pooping in our own everyday life, thanks to the help of many others. Being open, curious, and careful about these interdependencies, as I show, can lead us to craft more inclusive approaches to bodies – approaches which witness and celebrate the messy yet ordinary realities that emerge from *every* kind of body.

SAMENVATTING

Wat kan filosofie ons vertellen over een heel alledaags en ogenschijnlijk natuurlijk proces als poepen? Is poepen eigenlijk wel de moeite van het bestuderen waard, aangezien het iets is *wat iedereen doet en weet* - ook al wil niet iedereen erover praten? Is poepen iets dat 'gewoon gebeurt' of valt er meer te leren door aandacht te besteden aan de praktijken rondom dit proces? Dit proefschrift is het resultaat van mijn pogingen om alledaagse poeppraktijken serieus te nemen en te onderzoeken, in dialoog met filosofische en antropologische literatuur, en om te ontdekken wat dit ons kan leren.

Door te focussen op de alledaagse praktijken van jonge kinderen en hun verzorgers in Nederland – van het verschonen van luiers tot zindelijkheidstraining en de algemene hygiëne rondom de lichamen van kinderen – werd ik uitgedaagd om twee gangbare benaderingen van ontlasting te herzien. Enerzijds wordt ontlasting vaak gezien als iets natuurlijks dat eenvoudigweg gebeurt, binnenin het lichaam, en dus het domein van de natuurwetenschappen. Anderzijds wordt het gezien als iets marginaals en walgelijks, alleen maar interessant vanwege zijn 'ongepaste' karakter en daardoor onderhevig aan morele oordelen. In tegenstelling tot deze aannames laat de gewone ontlasting die ik bestudeerde zien hoeveel werk er eigenlijk schuilgaat achter iets schijnbaar eenvoudig als het leven met een lichaam dat ontlast.

Door dit werk zichtbaar te maken, wordt ook het dagelijkse onderhoud van *alle* lichamen duidelijk. Het is niet alleen voorbehouden aan mensen met ziektes, aandoeningen of handicaps om dit werk te verrichten; zelfs 'normale' en 'gezonde' lichamen vereisen inspanning, leerprocessen en zorg. Alle lichamen, hoe gewoon, genaturaliseerd of genormaliseerd ook, vragen om werk. Door dit werk te belichten, sluit ik aan bij kritische disability studies en breng ik alledaagse praktijken naar voren als empirisch materiaal om onze conceptuele kaders uit te dagen en te verruimen, zodat we *inclusievere manieren kunnen ontwikkelen om te leven met een lichaam*.

Dit inzicht vormt het uitgangspunt van **Hoofdstuk 1**. Ik begin dit hoofdstuk met het werpen van een nadere blik op hoe natuurwetenschappers ontlasting kennen, door een medische schaal te volgen die ontlasting classificeert op basis van vorm. Hoewel deze schaal objectieve kwalificaties en kwantificaties mogelijk maakt, is de klinische en wetenschappelijke toepassing ervan gebaseerd op een

ander, meer alledaags kennen van ontlasting, dat onlosmakelijk verbonden is met de handelingen van ontlasting zelf. Dit alledaagse weten vormt juist de basis voor wetenschappelijke abstracties. Door voort te bouwen op inzichten uit de wetenschapsstudies ('science studies') over hoe kennis wordt gevormd, laat het hoofdstuk zien hoe belangrijk dit belichaamde, alledaagse weten is. Het illustreert dat aandacht besteden aan ontlastingspraktijken essentieel is voor het ontwikkelen van een betere gevoeligheid en een taal om over deze praktijken te spreken. In plaats van alleen te kijken naar hoe we poep kennen in wetenschappelijke praktijken, stel ik in dit eerste hoofdstuk voor om aandacht te besteden aan het alledaagse poepen en de minder voor de hand liggende, maar niet minder belangrijke vormen van weten die daarmee gepaard gaan.

Deze fundamentele les vormt het kader voor de rest van het proefschrift, waarin ik de alledaagse praktijk van poepen verken, weg van medische omgevingen en gericht op het alledaagse leven van kinderen en hun verzorgers. **Hoofdstuk 2** volgt mijn informanten tijdens de zindelijkheidstraining, een proces dat duidelijk maakt dat poepen niet slechts een interne, natuurlijke aangelegenheid is, maar iets dat samen wordt geleerd en geoefend. Terwijl zindelijkheidstraining vaak wordt gezien als eindigend in toiletzelfstandigheid, stel ik dit idee ter discussie door nauwkeuriger te kijken naar de poeppraktijken. Geen van de lichamen die ik tegenkwam tijdens mijn veldwerk bleek volledig individueel en onafhankelijk te zijn; deze idealen vereisten altijd het onderhandelen en coördineren van verschillende lichamen, mensen en objecten samen, in relationele praktijken van poepen. Deze interdependenties tussen lichamen en objecten onderstrepen dat geen enkel lichaam werkelijk onafhankelijk functioneert. Terwijl ik de veranderende en gesitueerde onderlinge afhankelijkheden benadruk die verbonden zijn met poepen, geïnspireerd door kritische handicapstudies, pas ik de klassieke sociologische notie van 'lichaamstechnieken' aan. Ik gebruik deze notie om het werk van het leren poepen te benaderen als een voortdurende onderhandeling tussen verschillende manieren van samenleven, met anderen en in veranderende omgevingen.

In **Hoofdstuk 3** richt ik mijn aandacht op luiers – essentiële hulpmiddelen in de omgang met ontlasting voor al mijn informanten – en de ethische en normatieve vragen die zij oproepen. Luiers worden vaak als slecht beschouwd vanwege hun verspilling en negatieve milieu-impact. In dit hoofdstuk bespreek ik een reclamecampagne die pretendeert dit probleem op te lossen door luiers te

recyclen en op die manier iets slechts om te vormen tot een universeel goed. In de praktijk van mijn informanten bleek het echter niet zo simpel. Door de verschillende goede en slechte kanten van luiers te belichten, laat ik zien dat poepen zich niet gemakkelijk laat inpassen in een universeel ethisch kader. In plaats van simpelweg te worden gezien als afval dat door recycling in iets goeds kan worden omgezet, worden de waarden rondom luiers in de dagelijkse praktijk voortdurend heronderhandeld, omdat verschillende zorgen op verschillende momenten de overhand nemen. Om ruimte te maken voor deze onverenigbaarheid van luiers (en van het dagelijkse leven en de ethiek), introduceer ik het idee van ‘*disposable goods*’: waarden die niet vaststaan, maar openstaan voor verandering. In plaats van te streven naar een geïdealiseerd geluk waarin alle problemen voor eens en voor altijd kunnen worden opgelost, bevraagt deze manier van naar waarden kijken de universele visies van deliberatieve ethiek, die altijd een afstemming vereisen en gepaard gaan met ongemak. Op deze manier helpen luiers mij om een meer alledaagse benadering van ethiek te formuleren, die de discussie verschuift van moraliseren en universele idealen en schalen naar het ‘bij het ongemak blijven’ (“staying with the trouble”) van de dagelijkse praktijken.

In **Hoofdstuk 4** zet ik deze denaturalisatie van ontlasting voort door de klassieke antropologische analyses van vuil te heroverwegen en de rol van walging in de dagelijkse omgang met ontlasting bij mijn informanten te compliceren. Walging wordt vaak gezien als een natuurlijke reactie op ontlasting, en het wordt vaak als het belangrijkste analytische middel gebruikt bij onderzoek naar ontlasting. Ondanks de overweldigende aanwezigheid van walging in veel analyses van ontlasting, werd het in de alledaagse ontmoetingen met ontlasting die ik bestudeerde naar de achtergrond verplaatst. In plaats daarvan ontdekte ik bij mijn informanten een andere benadering van ontlasting, waarin zij een vertrouwdheid en informaliteit ontwikkelden, samen met een openheid en actieve betrokkenheid bij ontlasting. In plaats van walging centraal te stellen, stel ik voor dat we een informele vertrouwdheid met ontlasting cultiveren, vergelijkbaar met die van mijn informanten, omdat dit kan helpen om vertrouwd te raken met en betrokken te raken bij het cruciale alledaagse werk van leven met een lichaam dat ontlasting produceert.

Deze lessen samen maken dit proefschrift tot een voorbeeld van de verschuiving die ik voorstel: een meer informele, speelse en vertrouwde houding ten opzichte van alledaagse ontlastingspraktijken en onze theoretische concepten. We

blijven allemaal leren hoe we met ons poepende lichaam moeten omgaan, dankzij de hulp van vele anderen. Openheid, nieuwsgierigheid en zorg voor deze onderlinge afhankelijkheden kunnen ons helpen om meer inclusieve benaderingen van lichamen te ontwikkelen en de rommelige alledaagse realiteiten van *elk* lichaam te vieren.

RÉSUMÉ

Que peut nous apprendre la philosophie sur un processus aussi banal et (apparemment) naturel que la défécation ? La défécation mérite-t-elle d'être étudiée, puisque tout le monde la pratique et la connaît – même si tout le monde ne veut pas en parler ? Est-ce un acte qui survient tout simplement ou peut-on en apprendre davantage en prêtant attention aux pratiques qui l'accompagnent ? Cette thèse est le fruit de mes efforts pour prendre les pratiques ordinaires de la défécation au sérieux, en les abordant à travers la littérature philosophique et anthropologique pour découvrir ce qu'elles révèlent.

En me concentrant sur les pratiques quotidiennes des jeunes enfants et des adultes qui s'occupent d'eux aux Pays-Bas – du changement de couches à l'apprentissage de la propreté, en passant par le nettoyage quotidien des corps des enfants – j'ai été amenée à remettre en question deux approches courantes de la défécation. D'une part, la défécation est souvent perçue comme un phénomène naturel, interne au corps, et donc relevant uniquement des sciences naturelles. D'autre part, elle est considérée comme marginale et répugnante, intéressante uniquement en raison de son caractère déplacé, ce qui en fait un objet de moralisation. Contrairement à ces hypothèses, l'étude des pratiques de défécation ordinaire montre à quel point le travail impliqué dans un acte aussi banal que vivre avec un corps qui fait caca est en réalité considérable.

Rendre ce travail visible permet également de révéler l'effort quotidien que demandent tous les corps pour se maintenir. Ce travail ne concerne pas seulement les personnes souffrant de maladies, de handicaps ou dont les corps sont considérés comme "anormaux". Même les corps dits "normaux" et "sains" ne se contentent pas d'advenir par eux-mêmes sans aucun effort. Tous les corps nécessitent du travail, de l'apprentissage et des efforts, peu importe à quel point ce travail peut sembler banal, naturel ou normalisé. Je mets en avant ces pratiques ordinaires dans mon analyse, comme des matériaux empiriques, afin d'élaborer des compréhensions plus inclusives de la vie avec un corps. En faisant cela, je m'inspire des études critiques du handicap, qui depuis longtemps déjà remettent en question les outils conceptuels utilisés pour parler des corps.

Ce raisonnement devient évident dans le **premier chapitre**, où je commence par examiner comment les sciences naturelles comprennent les excréments, en suivant une échelle médicale utilisée pour qualifier les selles selon leur

forme. Bien que cette échelle permette des qualifications et quantifications (plus ou moins) objectives, ses usages scientifiques et cliniques reposent sur une forme de connaissance plus ordinaire, qui ne peut être séparée du processus de défécation lui-même. Ce savoir ordinaire, loin de s'opposer aux compréhensions biomédicales de la défécation, en constitue le fondement. En m'appuyant sur les apports des *sciences studies* concernant la production des connaissances, ce chapitre souligne l'importance de ce savoir incarné et ordinaire, en montrant que prêter attention à la défécation est essentiel pour développer une meilleure sensibilité et un langage plus approprié pour en parler. Plutôt que de se concentrer uniquement sur les pratiques scientifiques, je suggère dans ce premier chapitre de prêter également attention à la défécation ordinaire et à ses formes de savoir moins évidentes mais tout aussi importantes.

Cette leçon fondamentale oriente le reste de la thèse, où je me tourne vers les pratiques quotidiennes de la défécation. En m'éloignant des milieux médicaux, je me concentre sur les pratiques quotidiennes des personnes qui apprennent à faire caca : les enfants et leurs adultes. Plus particulièrement, dans le **chapitre 2**, je suis mes enquêtés au cours de leur apprentissage de la propreté. Ce processus montre que la défécation n'est pas (seulement) une affaire interne et naturelle, mais quelque chose qui est appris et pratiqué ensemble. Alors que l'apprentissage de la propreté est souvent compris comme aboutissant à une indépendance vis-à-vis des toilettes, une observation plus attentive de ces pratiques me pousse à remettre en cause cette notion ou à la compliquer. Aucun des corps que j'ai observés lors de mon terrain ne s'est révélé entièrement autonome ou indépendant ; ces idéaux impliquent toujours des négociations et des coordinations entre différents corps, personnes et objets, dans des pratiques relationnelles de défécation. En soulignant ces interdépendances mouvantes, je m'inspire à nouveau des études critiques du handicap et j'adapte la notion sociologique classique de "techniques du corps" pour aborder l'apprentissage de la défécation comme une négociation continue entre différentes manières d'être ensemble, avec autrui et dans des environnements changeants.

Dans le **chapitre 3**, je porte mon attention sur les couches – des outils cruciaux pour la gestion des excréments de tous mes enquêtés – et sur les questions éthiques et normatives qu'elles soulèvent. Les couches sont généralement perçues comme mauvaises en raison de leur impact environnemental, et dans ce chapitre, j'examine une campagne publicitaire prétendant résoudre ce problème en les

recyclant, transformant ainsi un mal en un bien universel. Cependant, dans les pratiques des familles que j'ai suivies, les choses étaient plus nuancées. En mettant en lumière les différents avantages et inconvénients des couches, je montre que la défécation ne s'inscrit pas facilement dans une éthique universalisante. Plutôt que de considérer les couches uniquement comme des déchets, les "biens" et "maux" liés à leur usage sont constamment renégo-ciés au fil des moments et des situations. Pour rendre compte de cette incommensurabilité, je propose la notion de "biens jetables" : des valeurs non figées, ouvertes au changement. Plutôt que de viser un idéal où tous les problèmes seraient résolus une fois pour toutes, cette manière de considérer les valeurs interfère avec les éthiques universalisantes ; en effet la notion de bien jetable propose de prendre au sérieux les inconforts, tensions et les ajustements impliqués dans l'éthique de la vie de tous les jours. Les couches me permettent ainsi de développer une approche plus ordinaire de l'éthique, qui déplace le débat des idéaux moralisateurs vers les "troubles" et ambivalences des pratiques quotidiennes.

Enfin, dans le **chapitre 4**, je continue la dénaturalisation de la défécation en dialoguant avec les analyses anthropologiques classiques sur la saleté, pour complexifier le rôle du dégoût dans la gestion quotidienne des excréments par mes enquêtés. Le dégoût est souvent considéré comme une réaction naturelle à la défécation et est fréquemment utilisé comme prisme analytique. Pourtant, malgré sa présence écrasante dans les analyses sur les excréments, le dégoût a souvent été relégué à l'arrière-plan des rencontres ordinaires avec la défécation que j'ai étudiées sur le terrain. À sa place, j'ai retracé une approche différente, impliquant une familiarité et une ouverture active à la gestion des excréments. Plutôt que d'accorder au dégoût une place centrale, je propose de cultiver une informalité similaire à celle de mes enquêtés, car elle peut nous aider à appréhender et à accepter le travail ordinaire mais crucial qu'implique la vie avec un corps qui fait caca.

En prenant à cœur les leçons de chaque chapitre, cette thèse est également un exemple du décalage que je propose. Tout au long de mon travail, j'ai cultivé une sensibilité différente à la défécation et aux pratiques ordinaires, en adoptant une attitude plus informelle, familière et ludique envers mes matériaux empiriques et mes concepts théoriques. Loin d'exiger des sacrifices héroïques, cette attitude peut être nourrie en prêtant attention au travail quotidien et ordinaire du corps (qui fait caca). Après tout, nous continuons tous à apprendre et à gérer la défécation dans notre vie quotidienne, grâce à l'aide de nombreuses autres

personnes. Être ouverte, curieuse et attentive à ces interdépendances, comme je le montre, peut nous amener à élaborer des approches plus inclusives des corps – des approches qui témoignent et célèbrent les réalités désordonnées mais ordinaires qui émergent de chaque type de corps.

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