
Artifact

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In the book of Leviticus we find a lengthy description of the procedure for inspecting an afflicted house—that is, a house in which mildew was seen in one of the walls. Once a house has been rendered impure on account of such affliction, the Pentateuch stresses, everything that is in it is immediately rendered impure as well. Thus, in order to protect one's property from impurity, prior to official inspection by a priest the house should be cleared of all its contents—namely, furniture and utensils, clothes and bedding, cushions and boxes, and everything else a person may own.¹ The creators of the Mishnah, a formative Jewish rabbinic codex that was compiled around the turn of the third century C.E., took note of the biblical text's attention to what may seem like an entirely trivial matter: everyday household objects. A mishnaic tradition attributed to Rabbi Meir (a mid-second-century sage) presents the care for such articles as a heartening indication of the Torah's compassion for human beings:²

Said Rabbi Meir: What is it that might be rendered impure for him?
 If you will say his wooden articles and his clothes and his metal articles—he
 immerses them, and they are then rendered pure!
 Rather, what is it that the Torah spares?
 His clay articles, his pitcher and his ewer.
 If this is how the Torah spares his negligible property, all the more so his precious
 property;
 If so for his property, all the more so for the lives of his sons and daughters;
 If so for that of the wicked,³ all the more so for that of the righteous.

According to Rabbi Meir, in regard to most articles there is no real reason to be concerned that they may contract impurity, since they can be purified by a simple

act of ritual immersion. The only articles that will actually become unusable if they contract impurity are clay articles, which cannot be immersed and must be broken down if they have become impure. However, since clay was a cheap and ubiquitous material in the rabbinic period, clay objects (such as pitchers and ewers used for oil) were of relatively little importance and were easily replaceable. If God spares even such lowly and disposable articles, says Rabbi Meir, then all the more so he spares the lives of human beings.

This passage powerfully makes the point that household objects, even of the most mundane kind, are an inseparable part of human life. Clearly, utensils and furniture are not as important to persons as the lives of their children; but nonetheless persons have some sort of personal investment in them—which, according to Rabbi Meir, scripture remarkably acknowledges and respects. To understand the human habitat, to be attentive to human needs and concerns, is also to be conscious of the array of things that inhabit the world in which human beings work, sleep, cook, eat, sew, plow, dress, paint, write, and perform various other activities—which all involve, at least in most cases, some artifact. This applies to the affluent modern world as much as it applies to the world of second-century Palestine: although we rarely take heed of the fact that there is hardly any facet of our daily life in which we do not make use of various artifacts, the most banal and mundane objects are what allow us to perform the most basic tasks as well as the most elevated and highly esteemed activities. As the French sociologist Bruno Latour put it, if you are convinced that inanimate objects make no difference in human lives, try “hitting a nail with and without a hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket, walking in the street with or without clothes, zapping a TV with or without a remote,” and so forth.⁴ The realm of everyday life, then, is laden with and defined by artifacts.

The Mishnah, from which the passage I quoted above is taken, is perhaps best described as a treatise on the everyday—an everyday that is designed, shaped, lived, and reflected upon in accordance with Jewish law as the rabbis who created the Mishnah understood it. It is a lengthy and systematic attempt to encompass every single aspect of the human world—from the manufacture of wine and oil to the upkeep of one’s henhouse, from building a staircase to hiring workers—insofar as all these aspects are in some way mandated by *halakhah*. With this tremendous attention to the details of which daily life consists, it is not surprising that we find in the Mishnah recurring references to artifacts—both to specific items and to artifacts as a general category. I am using the word “artifacts” as a less-than-perfect translation for the Hebrew term *kēlim* (sg. *kēli*), which serves in rabbinic literature to denote usable objects of all kinds—furniture, clothes, utensils, and so on. I choose the word “artifacts” (rather than “articles” or “vessels,” sometimes proposed as translations for *kēlim*) to emphasize both the inclusive nature of this category and the most critical quality of a *kēli* as the rabbis understood it—namely that it is

an object made by and for human beings. Objects that have not been in any way given form or processed by human beings, such as rocks or logs of wood, do not fall under the category of *kēlim*, and the rabbinic science of artifacts, which will stand at the center of this chapter, does not apply to them.

It is easily understood why the Mishnah, as a text that applies norms to every aspect of daily life, closely engages with various artifacts and their functions: the attempt to legislate what people should or should not do in specific circumstances closely involves the question what they should or should not do with specific artifacts. When discussing the Sabbath, for instance, as a day on which no labor may be performed, the question which artifacts may or may not be used is crucial; likewise, when setting down detailed rules regarding the retrieval of lost objects, this entails a consideration of different kinds of artifacts that people may lose; and other similar examples are abundant. In this respect, artifacts are of concern to the rabbis of the Mishnah insofar as they play a part in the various actions and behaviors that the Mishnah is trying to regulate. However, the rabbis did more than occasionally refer to artifacts in the course of developing other halakhic topics; they also dedicated an entire tractate in the Mishnah, and a very sizable one, solely to the topic of artifacts.

Tractate *Kēlim*,⁵ which is the second largest in the entire Mishnah, introduces a remarkably meticulous, systematic, and extensive categorization and classification of hundreds of artifacts that are commonly and uncommonly found in the human lived world—from pots and pans to needles and pipes, from weaving looms and shovels to toilet seats and shoe racks, from baskets and mantles to flutes and helmets, and many, many more. For each and every one of these artifacts, the tractate's purpose is to determine its susceptibility to impurity—namely to decide whether a particular artifact may contract impurity or not, in case it had contact with a source of impurity (such a leprous person, a menstruating woman, a dead body, an afflicted house as we have seen above, and several other sources).⁶ The normative function of this tractate, then, is to give the readers or listeners guidelines as to how they should manage their belongings in case these belongings have had contact with a source of impurity (that is, what they should take the trouble to purify and what does not require purification); but in order to do so, the rabbis develop an extremely elaborate body of knowledge, which I will refer to here as a “science of artifacts.” This knowledge entails not only inventorylike information about all the artifacts that conceivably inhabit the human world, but also—much more important—fundamental principles for inquiring what an artifact is and how it functions. In other words, the halakhic system of purity and impurity serves for the rabbis as a template through which they map the material world as they know it—to the extent that the material world is processed by human beings.

The questions of what motivated the rabbis of the Mishnah to take on such a taxing enterprise, and why they considered such exhaustive knowledge of artifacts

an important part of the education of their real or imagined audience, drive one to the much broader and complicated questions of the rabbis' intentions in creating the Mishnah as a whole and of the nature of this compilation as such, with which I cannot engage here.⁷ My purpose in this chapter is not to determine why this knowledge was created and developed but rather to explore what this knowledge consists of and how it is structured. Taking as a given the fact that the rabbis thought that a comprehensive knowledge of the world of artifacts is necessary for the halakhically erudite Jew, I examine first what the rabbis considered worth knowing about artifacts and second what the rabbis conceived to be the ways of knowing artifacts. What were the conceptual tools with which the rabbis categorized and classified what seems like an endless assortment of objects; more important, what does this system of knowledge tell us about how the rabbis made sense of the world that surrounded them—and of the human beings that inhabited it?

As I will show in the following pages, an examination of the rabbinic science of artifacts reveals a distinct way of knowing—of mentally approaching the material world, reflecting on it, and classifying it. This way of knowing, I suggest, is guided by the underlying view that humans are not wholly separate and detachable from the material objects that surround them, but rather that they experience and perceive their material belongings as extensions of their own bodies. Correspondingly, one knows artifacts not only by taking inventory of their objective qualities (size, shape, matter, etc.) but also by knowing their subjective qualities—that is, what they mean to the individual who owns them or uses them. In other words, for the rabbis knowing artifacts is inextricable from knowing oneself.

CLASSIFYING ARTIFACTS: BIBLICAL ORIGINS AND RABBINIC DEVELOPMENTS

As is the case with almost every area of rabbinic expertise, the mishnaic science of artifacts rests on biblical foundations. Several verses in the book of Leviticus provide some basic rules and distinctions regarding the impurity of artifacts, rules and distinctions that the rabbis develop and expand according to their own interpretation of the text and, as I shall argue later on, according to their fundamental perceptions regarding the relation between human beings and the material world. At the core of the knowledge of artifacts, then, seems to stand a hermeneutical enterprise—that is, an attempt to apply the edicts of the Pentateuch in a consistent and methodical manner to the rabbis' own lived world.⁸ However, the mishnaic knowledge of artifacts is informed by certain ideas and principles that far exceed the biblical text, and it is these principles that will stand at the center of my inquiry here.

The key text for the classification of artifacts appears in Leviticus 11:31–33, in a passage that discusses the impurity conveyed by creeping and crawling creatures:⁹

Those are for you the impure among all swarming things; whoever touches them when they are dead shall be impure until evening. And anything on which one of them falls when dead shall be impure: be it *any article of wood, or a cloth, or a skin, or a sack—any such article that is put to use* shall be dipped in water, and it shall remain impure until evening; then it shall be pure. And if any of those falls into a clay vessel, everything inside it shall be impure, and it itself you shall break.

Whereas several biblical texts make the point that various artifacts are susceptible to impurity if they have contact with one of the sources of impurity,¹⁰ the verses above are of particular importance in that they (presumably) make the points that not all artifacts contract impurity and that not all artifacts contract impurity in the same way. In other words, these verses open up a space for the construction of knowledge, insofar as knowledge is based on a set of distinctions and categorizations. I shall begin, then, with an exposition of the rabbinic knowledge of artifacts as based on the categories laid out in the biblical text and then continue on to explore the unique rabbinic take on knowing artifacts: namely on the subjective processes of conceptualization and reflection applied to them.

The first distinction, obviously, is a distinction of material. The passage above mentions only five kinds of material that may contract impurity: wood, cloth, skin (i.e., leather), sackcloth, and clay. This presumably indicates that all other materials are not susceptible to impurity at all. However, another biblical text, which discusses the need to purify all the loot from the Israelites' war with Midyan, mentions other kinds of materials as well, thus indicating that those are also susceptible to impurity: "You shall also cleanse every cloth, every article of skin, and all the work of goats, and every object of wood. . . . Gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead—any article that can withstand fire—these you shall pass through fire, and they shall be pure" (Numbers 31:20–23). Taking these verses into consideration, the rabbis also included metal articles ("gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead") among the artifacts that are susceptible to impurity. Finally, the rabbis added two more kinds of material to the list: bone, which they derived from the mention of "the work of goats" in Numbers 31:20, taking it to refer to anything that comes from goats (including the horns), and glass, for which they admitted not having any biblical proof text.¹¹ What is excluded from the rabbinic list, then, are articles made of stone, earth, and dung, which the rabbis considered insusceptible to impurity—not only because they were not mentioned in the Bible but also, as I will argue later on, because they were seen as too close to nature, as not sufficiently man-made.

Leviticus 11:33 also puts forth an important distinction concerning how different articles contract impurity: it maintains that whereas most articles contract impurity from the outside (when a source of impurity has contact with their external surface), clay articles contract impurity from the inside (when a source of impurity falls into them). This curious ruling generated a whole array of rabbinic

discussions regarding how impurity is contracted by different artifacts, which we will not get into here; but it also brought forth another criterion that was central to the rabbis' classification of artifacts, which pertains to the ability of the artifact to serve as a receptacle. Since the verse seems to assume that clay artifacts need to have an inside to become susceptible to impurity, the rabbis concluded that at least clay articles must be able to function as receptacles in order to contract impurity. They also attempted to apply this requirement to articles made of other materials (except for metal), for which it is often much more difficult to determine what constitutes a receptacle and what does not. (For example, is a cushion stuffed with feathers, or a hollow pipe, to be seen as a receptacle?) Accordingly the rabbis often stretch and tweak the definition of "receptacle" in different directions. Thus, immediately following the determination of material—which is the organizing principle of the tractate as a whole—the determination whether a particular object is a receptacle or not is the first step that the rabbis take in its classification.

The most important criterion that guides the mishnaic science of artifacts, to which essentially almost all the rabbinic discussions in the tractate are dedicated, and on which I will focus hereafter, lies in one biblical clause that easily goes unnoticed: *any . . . article that is put to use*. In its context in the Leviticus passage, this clause seems to offer merely an explanatory definition to the general term "article" (*kēli*), namely: What is a *kēli*? It is something that is put to use. The rabbis, however, interpreted this clause as restrictive: only those articles that can be put to use are susceptible to impurity. Thus, the most critical thing one ought to know about an artifact (besides the material of which it is made and its shape) is whether it is usable or not; and it is through the definition of usability that the rabbis develop a new conceptual framework and a new way of knowing that leave the biblical texts far behind.

When classifying and categorizing objects according to their usability, the rabbis exclude not only objects that are man-made but nothing conceivable can be done with them (for example, a piece of woven fabric of a size of less than three fingers on three fingers)¹² but also artifacts that are not yet usable and objects that are no longer usable. For example, a pot that is still on the potter's wheel or a sandal whose straps are torn are both unsusceptible to impurity, even though pots and sandals as such are by all means usable objects. Accordingly, in order to determine the susceptibility of different artifacts to impurity one must know exactly, first, if and how they are used; second, at which point during their manufacture they become usable; and finally, what defects terminate their usability and thereby their susceptibility to impurity. The determination of susceptibility to impurity thus requires an extremely detailed knowledge of the exact form and function of every artifact under the sun, and it is mainly this knowledge that the Mishnah attempts to construct and lay out. To illustrate briefly the form in which this excruciatingly detailed knowledge is presented, I will quote here a sample of two randomly cho-

sen mishnaic passages. The first attempts to determine at which point various wooden artifacts can be considered usable:¹³

Beds and cots [become usable—i.e., susceptible to impurity] after they are rubbed over with fish skin. . . . Wooden baskets—after their rims are bound round and the rough end is smoothed off. . . . A wicker case for flagons or for cups, even if the rough ends are not smoothed off inside.

And the list goes on and on. (There are similar lists for artifacts made of other materials.)

The second passage discusses the point at which different metal artifacts can no longer be considered usable and thus become insusceptible to impurity:¹⁴

If a shovel has lost its blade, it still remains susceptible to impurity, because it is like a hammer. . . . If a saw has lost one tooth in every two, it becomes insusceptible; but if there is a length of one *sit* of teeth left at any place,¹⁵ it remains susceptible. If an adze, scalpel, chisel, or drill has been damaged, it remains susceptible to impurity; but if it has lost its sharp edge it becomes insusceptible.

In addition to their concern with determining the beginning and end of usability for each object, the rabbis were conscious of the fact that many artifacts can be used for more than one purpose: for instance, a chest is primarily used for storage, but one can also sit on it; a bedsheet is primarily used as bedding, but one can also use it as a curtain; and so forth. The elaborate mishnaic science of artifacts thus assesses the usability of specific artifacts not only vis-à-vis their original or more common functions but also vis-à-vis possible secondary functions.

In its extremely elaborate lists of artifacts, which encompass a dizzying array of household, agricultural, military, artistic, and even musical objects, tractate *Kēlim* serves as a particularly extended example of one of the most prominent genres in the Mishnah—namely the genre of inventorylike lists. Lists appear in the Mishnah as part of the exposition of almost every halakhic topic and provide detailed answers to questions such as what plants can be sown together, what jewelry one can or cannot wear on the Sabbath, what writs can and cannot be written during festival times, and so on, and so forth. The prominence of such lists is curious, since the overarching principles that govern the classification of objects into those lists are usually fleshed out explicitly in the Mishnah itself, in a way that seems to make the lists somewhat redundant. It is plausible that the primary purpose of these lists is didactic, as in the case of other practices of list making in late antiquity, most notably Polemius Silvius's *Laterculus*.¹⁶ Whether these lists reflect the effort of rabbinic disciples to apply the principles that they have learned to real-life examples or the lists were provided by the masters in order to allow the disciples to deduce the principles on their own, they seem to attest a certain pedagogical setting.¹⁷ Nevertheless, I believe that these lists serve not only a didactic but also a

rhetorical purpose, which is especially pronounced in the case of tractate *Kēlim*: by classifying every conceivable object under a halakhic rubric, the rabbis make the point that their greater normative enterprise in fact encompasses everything there is in the world. There is no zone, not even the most negligible, that is beyond the scope of *halakhah* or is insignificant for the rabbis' legislative endeavor: every minute aspect of the individual's life is underwritten by rabbinic law in such a way that in order to decipher the halakhic script of the everyday, one must approach the rabbis. These lists thus construct the rabbinic system of knowledge as utterly comprehensive and as tantamount to the knowledge of the world as such, thereby establishing the authority of the rabbis themselves as the only competent bearers of this knowledge.

THE FORCE OF LABOR AND THE FORCE OF THOUGHT

So far I have shown that the question of usability stands at the center of the mishnaic endeavor of classifying artifacts and that the primary purpose of the elaborate lists provided in tractate *Kēlim* is essentially to determine how and at what point different artifacts go into and out of usability. However, the rabbis go beyond the question whether a particular artifact can be put to a particular use or not in a given condition; they also suggest a unique perspective on what usability means. First, they make the point that only what is designated for human beings may become susceptible to impurity:¹⁸ for example, only rings meant to be used by human beings are susceptible to impurity, whereas rings made for animals and inanimate objects are not.¹⁹ Second, and more important, the rabbis maintain that some forms of use are actually not use at all, and thus artifacts made for certain purposes are not susceptible to impurity. A prominent example for this principle is the ruling that items made only for decorative purposes are not susceptible to impurity.²⁰ How are we to understand these additional requirements, which exceed the basic notion of usability and integrate the question of what one uses the artifact for into the science of artifacts?

A helpful direction for answering this question can be found in one of Karl Marx's most fundamental observations, according to which artifacts are in essence extensions of the human body. Human beings, Marx noted, make artifacts as ways of prolonging their bodies and allowing themselves to act in ways desirable to them: they thus put labor into natural resources and process them in such a way that nature becomes "man's inorganic body."²¹ When we fill a cup with water from a fountain, the cup functions as an extension of our mouth; the clothes we wear are an extension of our skin; the plow we use is an extension of our hands and feet; and so on. We thus see whatever we do with artifacts as if it were done by us, and we say not "my gun shot him" or "my pencil drew the picture" but rather "I shot him" or "I drew the picture." A similar understanding of artifacts, I suggest, stands at the

basis of the rabbinic science of artifacts. The susceptibility of an artifact to impurity is determined not merely by its usability but also by the question whether this artifact plays an active part in the lives of human beings, in such a way that it can be considered an important and consequential part of the human habitat, part of one's "inorganic body." The fact that something is produced by human beings is not enough; it also has to function as a supplement to the human body—something that defective and incomplete artifacts, artifacts not made for immediate human use,²² and even decorative artifacts, cannot be said to do.

I propose, then, that the main criterion that the rabbis set for assessing the impurity of artifacts is not quite usability but rather a sense of continuity between the owner or user of the artifact and the artifact itself. This continuity, as we shall immediately see, is determined not only by what people do with an object but also—and perhaps especially—by what they think about an object. Continuity between person and artifact, which is the prerequisite for the susceptibility of the artifact to impurity, is seen by the rabbis as attained through a twofold process: first by investment of labor in the artifact and second, and more critical, by the investment of thought and deliberation in it. Thus, in the Mishnah susceptibility to impurity is ultimately determined by the questions whether an artifact matters to people or not and whether they conceive of it as part of themselves or not.²³ In other words, a highly significant part of the rabbinic knowledge of artifacts is the knowledge of how people relate to particular artifacts—which is, in essence, a knowledge of human subjectivity.

Artifacts are essentially products of human manipulation of natural elements. Human beings invest labor in wood, metal, sand, vegetation, or any other naturally found material, and through their labor they transform this element into part of the human arena, or—to use a somewhat dated expression—transform it from nature to culture.²⁴ In the rabbinic view, it is this transformation that inscribes the material element into the world of impurity. For as long as a material entity is in its unprocessed state, it is beyond the reach of impurity and is not affected by it in any way: for instance, natural water reservoirs, trees, and animals are not susceptible to impurity, and even if a corpse (the ultimate source of impurity) falls directly on or into them, they do not become impure.²⁵ However, once the water has been drawn, the tree has been made into a chair, and the animal has been slaughtered, it becomes susceptible to impurity. It is of interest here that artifacts made of stone, earth, and dung—materials that are closely associated with the natural environment and that go through very minimal processing in order to be adapted for human use—are considered by the rabbis to be part of nature and can never be susceptible to impurity.²⁶

The manipulation of natural elements is, in a sense, a process of humanizing the material world. Impurity, I contend, is perceived by the rabbis as a phenomenon that primarily affects people, and it can affect nonhuman entities only insofar as

they are seen as part of people's the "inorganic body." The ability to become impure is thus constructed in the rabbinic discourse as a manifestation of the "human-ness" of the artifact, which is tantamount to continuity between person and object, as I argued above.

As in the Marxist paradigm, in the Mishnah the transition of a material object from the natural to the human realm and from inconsequentiality to consequentiality takes effect through labor. The decisive moment in which an object is transformed into an artifact is known as "completion of labor," *gemar melakhah*, a phrase referring to the very last action required in order to consider an artifact fully manufactured and ready for use—for instance, hitting a metal object with a hammer one last time in order to give it its final shape or baking newly made clay objects in a kiln. Part of the rabbinic science of artifacts is determining what constitutes this final action in the process of manufacture for different artifacts. However, for the rabbis the completion of labor in and of itself is a necessary but insufficient condition for the "humanization" of material elements such that they become exposed to impurity in the same way that human beings are. The critical process that allows for the transformation from nature to artifact, and from insusceptibility to impurity to susceptibility, is thought. Put differently: in order for an artifact to become susceptible to impurity, the conclusive physical action applied to it, which signals the artifact's readiness to be used, must be followed by a mental action.

"Thought" (*mahshavah*) is a term used in the Mishnah to denote a person's intention to make use of a particular artifact. The moment at which an object is rendered consequential enough to be impure—that is, inscribed into the human realm—is the moment in which someone deliberates using this article and begins to see it as her own. To be sure, thought alone is entirely ineffective unless the artifact's manufacturing process is complete (or at least unless it has reached a stage at which the artifact can be used as is); but once it is complete, the artifact does not become susceptible to impurity until one in fact plans to make use of it.²⁷ Furthermore, artifacts made by an artisan for sale and not for personal use are not susceptible to impurity prior to their selling, since no thought can subject an artifact to impurity except the thought of the one who owns it.²⁸ Thought is thus tantamount to the consideration of something as one's own, or in Marxist terms, to the consideration of something as part of one's extended body. There is indeed a close correspondence between the decisive role of thought in the determination of susceptibility to impurity and its decisive role in the determination of ownership: a central principle in the rabbinic laws of ownership is that if an article is lost or stolen, the finder or thief legally becomes the new owner of the artifact once the original owner has "despaired" of getting the article back—that is, has severed her previous mental ties to the article in question.²⁹ A critical component of ownership is actively thinking of an article as one's own, and it is only when an article is actively considered to be one's own that it is susceptible to impurity.

The process that inscribes artifacts into the human realm, then, is ultimately a mental process: it is the investment of an artifact with the subjectivity of its owner through the act of deliberation and the establishment of a personal relation between the one who uses something and the thing used. Furthermore, the rabbis point out that susceptibility to impurity is contingent upon thought not only when first establishing relations with an artifact but also when reestablishing such relations after the artifact has become unusable. For instance, we find a ruling that “a [three-legged] table one of the legs of which has been removed is not susceptible to impurity. If a second one is removed, it is not susceptible to impurity. If a third is removed, it becomes susceptible to impurity once he thinks about it.”³⁰ Whereas a two-legged or a one-legged table is considered an inconsequential artifact, since it cannot be used for any purpose (unless it is repaired), the tabletop itself can potentially be put to various uses. However, in order for the tabletop to be transformed into an object that matters—in this case, not from nature to artifact but from junk back to artifact—one has to want to make use of it.

This unique aspect of the rabbinic understanding of the workings of impurity allows us to gain a new perspective on the rabbinic knowledge of artifacts that we have examined thus far and to see it as geared, at least in part, toward the mapping and systematizing of human subjectivity. If artifacts are classified according to their ability to become impure, and this ability is closely dependent upon the extent to which humans invest thought and deliberation in those artifacts, then the knowledge of artifacts is ultimately the knowledge of how people relate to artifacts. The human habitat is constructed not only through labor but also, and perhaps especially, through mental processes of appropriation and attachment, and thus those processes themselves are an underlying object of knowledge. In order to know artifacts, the Mishnah suggests, one is required to know oneself: to decipher the susceptibility of artifacts to impurity is to reflect actively on one’s own mental and physical connections to the material world that surrounds her.

Tractate *Kēlim*, then, is an attempt to set basic observations regarding how human beings relate to artifacts and to determine at what point each artifact is likely to be seen as consequential or inconsequential to human beings and what kinds of thought processes can be seen as transforming what kinds of artifacts. The rabbis do leave some room in this system for the personal relation of the individual to his or her possessions (that is, sometimes the only way to determine whether an artifact has become susceptible to impurity is to ask the owner whether she has made a conscious decision to use it), but for the most part they are attempting to construct a standardized subjectivity—a set of general assumptions on how human beings operate vis-à-vis artifacts that is independent of the peculiarities of each individual.³¹

A powerful illustration of this attempt to standardize subjectivity can be found in the rabbinic ruling that the process of making an artifact matter (and thus of

rendering it susceptible to impurity) through thought works only in one direction. Whereas artifacts can be thought into impurity, they cannot be thought out of it: that is, they can stop being part of one's extended body not through mere thought but rather only through actual, physical change. In the words of the Mishnah: "All artifacts descend into their impurity by thought and do not ascend from their impurity except by a change of deed."³² For example, when one makes a pair of shoes, she has to take a conscious decision to use these shoes in order for them to become susceptible to impurity; but the shoes do not simply cease to be susceptible to impurity once the owner makes a new pair and decides to stop using the old ones: rather, the first pair of shoes remains susceptible to impurity until the shoes are physically harmed in a way that makes them unusable. This ruling can be understood in strictly pragmatic terms, as stemming from the fact that from a legislator's point of view it is impossible to keep track of the fluctuating relations of individuals with their possessions in order to determine those possessions' susceptibility to impurity. Whereas it is quite easy to pinpoint the initial decision of a person to use an artifact, the moment in which one decides to stop using something is much harder to locate. Thus, choosing the point at which the artifact is physically unusable as the marker of loss of susceptibility to impurity is the most feasible solution. However, I propose that behind this pragmatic solution lies a particular view of how subjective attachment to artifacts actually works, a view guided by the premise that the average person does not break her mental attachment to her possessions so long as they are still usable. This assumption may seem strange to those living in the affluent world of the twenty-first century, who daily throw away perfectly usable artifacts, but it was taken for granted in the world of antiquity, in which most people owned very few things, on which they were highly dependent.³³ In this setting, even if a particular individual does happen to make a decision to stop using an artifact, this choice does not influence the status of this artifact, since the rabbis apply to this case the general rule that they have devised for a standard consciousness.

These assumptions about how people think of and treat artifacts, which guided the rabbis in creating the mishnaic tractate, bring us to the question of the relation between this body of knowledge and the lived reality of the rabbis and their contemporaries. Unfortunately, here we are essentially in the dark. It is safe to say that the Mishnah faithfully reflects the material culture of its time, not only in that it provides an elaborate inventory of the artifacts that were in use in the first centuries C.E. and describes their various functions, and modes of production, but also in that it gives its reader a genuine sense of how greatly people were invested in their personal possessions and the significance that they attributed to them. It is very difficult to know, however, whether the rabbinic mapping of artifacts and the guidelines for the determination of susceptibility to impurity had any impact beyond the realm of the rabbinic study house. First, we do not know how familiar

the teachings of the rabbis were among the wider public;³⁴ and second, we do not know to what extent, if at all, teachings related to purity and impurity were of any practical applicability at the time when the Mishnah was compiled. The impurity of household objects is a matter of concern only for those who are careful to maintain a bodily state of purity (and thus refrain from touching artifacts that have become impure or eating food that has been handled with or kept in impure artifacts), and the question how many people in Palestine of the first few centuries C.E. were in fact concerned with ritual purity was and still is a topic of ongoing debate.³⁵ Even scholars who hold that purity in everyday life was a matter of concern for a substantial number of people during the Second Temple period often assume that after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. the practices of purity became more and more marginal, in such a way that by the time of the compilation of the Mishnah this topic had become mainly theoretical.³⁶ The question remains, however, whether to see the mishnaic descriptions and prescriptions of purity practices as evidence for the lived reality of previous generations (or of small pious groups that still attempted to maintain those waning practices at the end of the second century) or as scholastic edifices that did not have any real impact on the lived reality of Jews in Palestine of that period.

Although this question cannot be answered with certainty in an almost complete absence of extrarabbinic sources from this period, in a recent article Joshua Schwartz argued that tractate *Kēlim* reflects a prevalent practice of intentionally sabotaging household furniture in a way that makes it officially unusable (and thus unsusceptible to impurity) but still allows it to be somehow used in its compromised state.³⁷ In this way people were able to prevent their essential household objects (of which furniture is but one example) from being rendered impure, by utilizing to their benefit the rabbinic principle that defective artifacts are unsusceptible to impurity. As Schwartz writes, the utilization of this principle is an indication of extensive acquaintance not necessarily with the rabbinic science of artifacts but only with its basic guidelines:³⁸

It is hard to imagine that the average householder (or probably even rabbi for that matter) could keep track or follow the minutiae of the decisions pertaining to the numerous utensils mentioned in *Kelim*. . . . The average householder probably related to the general principle that a “broken” implement was not susceptible to ritual uncleanness.

Although Schwartz cannot show conclusively that this intentional damaging of artifacts to which the Mishnah alludes was indeed practiced in Palestine of the first centuries, I find persuasive his argument that the mishnaic knowledge of artifacts is a combination of scholastic study-house discussions and basic, widely familiar principles. It is quite possible, then, that the general ideas that the rabbis devised on the impurity of artifacts were applied, in a technical and simplified

manner, in the everyday lives of owners of artifacts and shaped how artifacts were thought of and handled. It is regrettable that the paucity of evidence does not allow us to go beyond the realm of conjecture here.

RETHINKING THE HUMAN

Although the practical implications of the mishnaic science of artifacts may have been limited or even nonexistent, the very enterprise of creating and developing this incredibly elaborate body of knowledge and the principles by which this knowledge is guided speak to fundamental aspects of the rabbinic understanding of the human as such. We have seen that for the rabbis artifacts were classified according to their owners' relations to them: that is, according to how mentally and physically invested in them their owners could be seen to be. This investment of human subjectivity in an inanimate material object, I proposed, was seen as transforming the nature of the object in such a way that it acquired a quality that the rabbis identified as quintessential to human bodies: the ability to contract impurity.

Here it is important to add one further dimension to the mishnaic picture, which will allow us to see its notion of the relations between human beings and their material environment in a fuller light. The same essential principle for the determination of susceptibility to impurity in artifacts—namely the question of continuity with the owner—also applies to human bodies. In various passages in the mishnaic discussions of purity and impurity we find the notion that body parts and areas that one does not strongly identify with oneself, or bodily components about which one does not care, cannot contract impurity.³⁹ Thus, for instance, any source of impurity that resides inside the body (like impure digested food or a dead fetus)⁴⁰ does not render one impure, since it is not accessible to and controllable by the person; invisible parts of the skin cannot be rendered impure by skin afflictions;⁴¹ and invisible bodily areas need not have contact with the purifying water during purification.⁴² In addition, whatever dirt or obstruction that one has on one's skin does not constitute a barrier between this person and the purifying water during ritual immersion so long as the person is not bothered by its presence.⁴³ Although I cannot discuss these fascinating aspects of the mishnaic purity laws here, it is important to note that the rabbis ultimately viewed the impurity of the human body as governed by the same principle as that by which the impurity of artifacts is governed: its various components have to matter to the individual and to be identified with the self in order to be susceptible to impurity.

This conceptual framework, in which artifacts and human bodies are both assessed vis-à-vis their subjective relations to their owners, provokes us to rethink the basic distinction between "person" and "world." Ingrained in modern consciousness is the view of the human body as a sealed envelope in which the self is contained, and which is wholly distinct from the material world—organic and

nonorganic alike—that surrounds it. The Mishnah, in contrast, presents a view according to which the human body, which is in essence a material entity, is part of the greater material environment that surrounds the person, and both the body and the artifacts that were made or purchased by the person as extensions of the body must be invested with human subjectivity in order to be seen as part of the self. In other words, the Mishnah suggests that the human being should be seen through a broader lens, one that includes not only the individual bodily monad but also the material elements that the person has made part of himself or herself.⁴⁴

The call to integrate the material environment and the world of inanimate objects into studies of society and culture has become increasingly prevalent in the past decade, especially owing to the work of scholars active in the field of ANT (actor-network theory). Thus one of the most influential shapers of this field, Bruno Latour, writes: “No science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even if it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of better term, we could call *non-humans*.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the political theorist Jane Bennett writes: “Humans are never *outside* of a set of relations with other modes [of existence]. . . . A material body always resides within some assemblage or other.”⁴⁶ However, whereas Latour, Bennett, and other scholars of similar persuasion (who are often referred to as “post-humanists”) are trying to introduce a perspective that is not unequivocally centered on human beings but sees them as but one component in a larger system, I am suggesting that the Mishnah (which is without question a text whose only point of concern is human beings) presents a picture in which a consideration of the nonhuman is a vital part of understanding the human. The Mishnah’s science of artifacts reminds us that the ancient world was a world in which “things” mattered; it was a world in which most people owned few articles and in which what they owned was tremendously important to them—as the passage with which I began, regarding the Torah’s sparing of household objects, poignantly illustrates. One’s garments, utensils, furniture, working implements, and so forth, were one’s dignity, one’s livelihood, one’s comfort, and one’s well-being. As such, they constituted not only part of one’s habitat but also part of one’s self-perception and part of one’s making as a person. This realization, I believe, urges us to think the concepts of selfhood and personhood in antiquity, which have been a topic of much recent interest, through the perspective of subjective relations with the material world.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the mishnaic science of artifacts, like the decisive roles of subjectivity and consciousness in the mapping of the material world, also challenges some of the ways in which we tend to think of knowing. For the rabbis, as we have seen, artifacts do constitute objects of knowledge; but this knowledge is primarily attained not through cerebral contemplation of artifacts from an external point of view but rather through the physical and mental connectedness of human bodies with the artifacts that surround them, and through

reflection on this connectedness. In the Mishnah, artifacts are knowable and decipherable in terms of impurity only insofar as they are seen as extensions of the human body and as entities in which one has invested one's own subjectivity; in other words, knowing in the Mishnah is seen as contingent upon appropriation. The material world is accessible for conceptualization and for the application of human categories because it is itself humanized, and it is humanized because it is seen as fundamentally part of the one who perceives it. This brings to mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's powerful words on the dual nature of the body as both subject and object:⁴⁷

My body is a thing among things; it is caught in a fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception, and thereby knowledge, is possible not simply because we are part of the world as objects but also because we turn the world into a part of us as subjects. To be in the world, to relate to the world, is to turn the world into me, in such a way that the body and what is external to the body are seen as "made of the same stuff."

The Mishnah, I propose, structures and develops in a unique and incisive way the mode of knowing through appropriation to which Merleau-Ponty points. The rabbinic science of artifacts is not a body of knowledge constructed by going beyond the self but a body of knowledge of the world through the self—and ultimately about the self. As such, the Mishnah's treatise on artifacts invites further explorations not only on what is worth knowing but also on what it means to know.

NOTES

1. Leviticus 14:24–36.
2. Mishnah *Nega'im* 12:5; see also Sifra *Metzora* 5:10 (ed. Isaac Weiss, *Sifra de-bei rav* [New York: Om Publishing, 1946], 73a).
3. Although neither the Bible nor the Mishnah says this explicitly, there is a tradition according to which afflictions come about as punishments for sin. Therefore the one whose house is afflicted is identified here and in several other places as "wicked."
4. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.
5. The title *Kēlim* was apparently given to the tractate rather early in the course of its textual development, since at its very end we find a statement attributed to Rabbi Yose that refers to the fact that the tractate begins with rulings regarding impure objects and ends with a ruling regarding pure objects: "Happy are you, *Kēlim*, that you have entered in impurity and departed in purity." This statement suggests that the tractate was already known by this title before the final redaction of the Mishnah.

6. The sources of impurity are listed in Leviticus 11–15 and in Numbers 19. They include primarily persons with genital discharges, persons with skin afflictions, and dead creatures.

7. For a helpful survey of the problematics of defining the Mishnah's genre and purposes, see Yaakov Elman, "Order, Sequence, and Selection: The Mishnah's Anthological Choices," in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, ed. David Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53–80.

8. This is to say not that the rabbis actually derived all their teachings and rulings strictly through a process of biblical interpretation and extrapolation but simply that the Pentateuch functions as the framework of law that they attempt to develop and apply, whatever their exact method of doing so may be.

9. Jewish Publication Society translation (emphasis added), with slight modifications.

10. In Leviticus 15 we find recurring statements according to which every article on which a person with impure genital discharge sits, lies, or rides becomes impure, and in Numbers 19:15 it is mentioned that every open vessel that resides in the same tent as the dead is made impure.

11. As mentioned explicitly in Tosefta *Kēlim Bava Batra* 7:7.

12. Mishnah *Kēlim* 27:8.

13. *Ibid.* 16:1–2.

14. *Ibid.* 13:4.

15. According to the commentators, *sit* is the distance between the tips of the outstretched thumb and forefinger.

16. On the didactic setting and principles of Polemius Silvius's *Laterculus*, see Elizabeth Dulabahn, "The *Laterculus* of Polemius Silvius," PhD dissertation; Bryn Mawr College, 1986.

17. On the pedagogical dimension of the Mishnah and its use for the training of rabbinic disciples, see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Transmitting Mishnah: The Shaping Influence of Oral Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

18. This principle, it should be noted, applies also to food: only food that human beings regularly consume or that is designated for consumption by human beings is susceptible to impurity, as the Mishnah makes clear in *Tohorot* 8:6 and *Uqtsin* 3:1–3. For an elaborate discussion of the impurity of foodstuffs in the Mishnah in comparison with the impurity of artifacts, see Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 74–95.

19. Mishnah *Kēlim* 12:1.

20. *Ibid.* 24:13.

21. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 329.

22. One of the Mishnah's principles is that artifacts made as supplements for other artifacts that are not directly used by human beings (e.g., covers for utensils or instruments) are not susceptible to impurity. Similarly, several articles that are designated for sacred use only are not susceptible to impurity, since they are not meant for human beings.

23. In this view I differ somewhat from Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, who dealt extensively with the topic of the subjective component in susceptibility to impurity; see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Human Will in Judaism: The Mishnah's Philosophy of Intention*

(Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 95–130. Eilberg-Schwartz centered his discussion on naming and argued that the susceptibility of an object to impurity depends on whether or not human beings title it as artifact (and likewise with food, which human beings do or do not title as such). Naming is an important component in the Mishnah but hardly accounts for its conceptual system in its entirety. See my discussion in Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self* (above, n. 18), 88–90.

24. The view that susceptibility to impurity is a manifestation of pertinence to the realm of culture as opposed to that of nature was presented by Vered Noam, *From Qumran to the Rabbinic Revolution: Conceptions of Impurity* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Press, 2010), 288 (in Hebrew).

25. The biblical origin of the notion that natural elements are not susceptible to impurity is Leviticus 11:36–37, according to which natural reservoirs of water and plants that are still connected to the ground cannot become impure even if a dead creeping creature falls directly on them.

26. The large number of stone vessels from the Second Temple and mishnaic periods that were found in various areas in Palestine suggests that, since stone vessels were considered impurity-proof, this was a material of choice for communities and individuals concerned with the observance of purity. See Roland Deines, *Jüdische Steingefäße und pharisäische Frömmigkeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 228–33; see also Eyal Regev, “Pure Individualism: The Idea of Non-Priestly Purity in Ancient Judaism,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 31 (2000): 176–200.

27. Mishnah *Kēlim* 26:7.

28. *Ibid.* 26:8.

29. See Mishnah *Bava Qamma* 10:2, *Bava Mezi’a* 2:1–2, *Kēlim* 26:8.

30. *Ibid.* 22:2.

31. See also Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Human Will* (above, n. 23), 123–29.

32. Mishnah *Kēlim* 25:9.

33. On the reluctance to throw away potentially usable articles in antiquity, see Kathryn Kamp, “From Village to Tell: Household Ethnoarcheology in Syria,” *Near Eastern Archeology* 63 (2000): 84–93.

34. The traditional view, according to which the rabbis were the uncontested leaders of the Jewish society in Palestine after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., was significantly undermined by the influential work of Seth Schwartz, who argued that the rabbis’ impact was extremely limited and that most of the Jewish population in Palestine at the said period was detached from halakhic Judaism. See Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 101–76.

35. See E. P. Sanders, “Did the Pharisees Eat Ordinary Food in Purity?” in *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 131–254; Roland Deines and Martin Hengel, “E. P. Sanders’ ‘Common Judaism,’ Jesus, and the Pharisees,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995): 1–70; Hannah Harrington, “Did the Pharisees Eat Ordinary Food in a State of Ritual Purity?” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995): 42–54; John Poirier, “Purity beyond the Temple in the Second Temple Era,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 247–65; Hanan Birenboim, “Observance of the Laws of Bodily Purity in Jewish

Society in the Land of Israel during the Second Temple Period,” PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006 (in Hebrew).

36. This view was first presented by Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 72–107; for a more refined view, which sees the diminishing ubiquity of purity observance throughout the tannaitic period as a gradual process, see Yair Furstenberg, “Eating in a State of Purity during the Tannaitic Period: Tractate *Teharot* and Its Historical and Cultural Contexts,” PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010 (in Hebrew), especially 254–62.

37. Joshua Schwartz, “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle: Prolegomena on Breakage and Repair in Ancient Jewish Society,” *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 5 (2006): 147–80.

38. Schwartz, “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” (above, n. 37), 179.

39. For a detailed discussion of the rabbinic mapping of the human body, see Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self* (above, n. 18), 48–73.

40. Mishnah *Miqva'ot* 10:8 and Mishnah *Hullin* 4:3. See also Noam, *From Qumran to the Rabbinic Revolution* (above, n. 24), 296–300.

41. Mishnah *Nega'im* 6:8.

42. Mishnah *Miqva'ot* 8:5.

43. *Ibid.* 9:2–3.

44. The view that in certain social contexts personal possessions are actually viewed as part of their owner’s body was influentially suggested by the anthropologist McKim Marriott in his studies of Indian society; see McKim Marriott, “Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism,” in *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, ed. Bruce Kapferer (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976), 109–37. Several anthropologists have continued to develop this theme in their studies: see Cecilia Busby, “Permeable and Partible Persons: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and Body in South India and Melanesia,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3 (1997): 261–78; Edward LiPuma, “Modernity and Forms of Personhood in Melanesia,” in *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Views from Africa to Melanesia*, ed. Michael Lambeck and Andrew Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53–79; Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance, and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: Athlone, 1999). For a useful survey of this topic, see Chris Fowler, *The Archeology of Personhood: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 53–78.

45. Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (above, n. 4), 72 (emphasis original).

46. Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32 (2004): 347–72 (quotation from pp. 353–54; emphasis original).

47. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–91, quotation from p. 163.