

Making the City “Second Nature”: Freegan “Dumpster Divers” and the Materiality of Morality¹

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How do people maintain deeply held moral identities in a seemingly immoral social environment? Cultural sociologists and social psychologists have focused on how individuals cope with contexts that make acting on moral motivations difficult by building supportive networks and embedding themselves in communities of like-minded people. In this article, however, the author argues that actors can achieve a moral “sense of one’s place” through a habitus that leverages the material dimensions of place itself. In particular, he shows how one community of radical environmental activists make affirming moral identities centered on living “naturally” seem like “second nature,” even in a seemingly unnatural and immoral urban environment, by reconfiguring their physical world. The author shows how nonhuman objects serve as proofs of moral labor, markers of moral boundaries, and reminders of moral values, playing both a facilitating and constraining role in moral life.

INTRODUCTION

How do people for whom living “morally” is a key part of their identity leverage the apparent moral challenges posed by their environment to sustain a sense of moral selfhood? The relationship between moral values, action,

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and social context is a long-standing area of inquiry for social psychologists (see Blasi 1980; Hardy and Carlo 2005; Lizardo and Strand 2010), but it also bears heavily on a range of sociological analyses. Members of impoverished inner-city minorities (Duneier 1999; Anderson 2003; Liebow 2003) or the working class (Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005) frequently confront the low status afforded to them by society by asserting their moral worth. Employees in non-profit hospitals or hospices must balance a commitment to health care as a social right with pressure to economize on or limit treatment (Livne 2014; Reich 2014). Political activists, too, must weigh wanting to change the world with living in a social milieu where most do not share their worldviews. This article shows how such actors may make living morally seem like “second nature” by drawing on the material world.²

I approach morality as a set of individual or collective beliefs that specify the kinds of persons or actions that are “good” or “right” (Sayer 2005, p. 8; Winchester 2008, pp. 1753–54; Stets and Carter 2012, p. 122),³ evaluations that apply to actors across different situations and over time (Tavory 2011, p. 273). This definition sets up the central problematic of this article: how actors, in the face of situations that appear to make living up to the range of their motivations to act morally difficult, nonetheless achieve a sense that maintaining a moral identity is a habitual, relatively unproblematic, and sustainable second nature.

A long line of thinking within cultural sociology, frequently drawing on Durkheim ([1897] 1997, [1915] 1965, [1924] 1953), has focused on how an *individual* sense of living morally is facilitated by *group* life.⁴ This article argues, however, that the material characteristics of place can provide resources for sustaining a sense of moral selfhood. In particular, I show how nonhuman objects can serve as proofs of the substance and significance of moral labor, markers of boundaries that distinguish moral actors from those they perceive as less moral, and totemic reminders of moral commitments. At the same time, these material proofs, reminders, and markers add a dimension of unpredictability to moral life that actors must manage (see Latour 2005). In short, I argue that one way individuals can achieve what Bourdieu (1990, p. 295) might call a moral “sense of one’s place”—a degree of comfort with

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² The development of this particular framing was aided by an anonymous reviewer.

³ This definition is open to multiple metaphilosophical positions on morality, e.g., whether one should be a consequentialist or follower of Kantian categorical imperatives (see Abend [2014] on this “moral background”).

⁴ Although this group-level focus is often characterized as a “Weberian” approach to morality (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013, p. 53), I show below how Durkheim’s analysis of morality in society as a whole can be fruitfully applied to smaller groups.

the possibilities and limits of living up to a moral identity but that nonetheless allows for the ongoing development of a moral identity through the creation of new moral practices—is through a *habitus* that constructs and is constructed in dialogue with material objects.

I develop this argument through an ethnographic study of the moral lives of “freegans” in New York City. Freeganism is a small emerging movement within radical environmentalism in the United States and Western Europe whose participants attempt to dramatize the unsustainability and excesses of mass consumerism by claiming to minimize their participation in the capitalist economy and living off its waste (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Gross 2009). Freegans are best known for publicly “dumpster diving” and redistributing discarded but edible food from supermarkets, but freegan practices also include gardening in abandoned lots; creating and repairing bicycles, clothing, or furniture from discarded materials; foraging for wild food in urban parks; and limiting paid employment in favor of full-time activism.

Freegans are ideologically heterogeneous: some describe themselves as anarchists while others evince a more reformist critique of capitalism’s excesses. Nonetheless, nearly all frame their activism as centered on a deep, moral motivation to live more “naturally.” Jeff, a tall, muscular white freegan in his mid-20s with a degree in filmmaking, explained: “My vision is that eventually we live in a world where we don’t have any of this modern technology. Live with the land, on the land, and everything we get comes from nature. Civilization is fundamentally, inherently crazy and unsustainable, and eventually it exhausts itself. I think we can be mature, responsible beings, but still be wild animals. That’s what other animals on the planet do, why should we be any different?” Jeff’s description of freeganism harkened to the “back-to-the-land” communalism that flourished in the 1960s, except in one obvious respect: Jeff, and the other freegans studied in this article, all live in New York City. In fact, Jeff continued to work at a job he said he loathed in order to make monthly rent payments to a landlord he claimed was exploitative, so he could live in a city he characterized as a “black hole sucking up the resources of the planet.”

Yet the apparently problematic human environment of the city was nonetheless necessary for freegans’ practices, such as publicly displaying and politicizing wasted food. What is more, I argue that the very adversity of the city, when combined with the physical resources the freegans made out of their environment, allowed freegans to carve out a sense of moral place in the city. For all his rhetoric, there was an evident comfort and familiarity in the way Jeff navigated the streets of Brooklyn on the bike he built from abandoned parts, combed the curb looking for useful waste, and cultivated a garden amid slabs of broken concrete behind a local community center. Jeff’s everyday *habitus* belied this discursive clash between the ideals of living “naturally”

and the reality of life in a city. In fact, living naturally in the city seemed like second nature thanks to one of the city's apparently most problematic features: waste.

I begin this article with a review of recent literature on morality, which has emphasized interaction and group life as sustaining moral identities and motivating moral action. I then reconsider Durkheim's later work on totemism and Bourdieu's work on practical action, supported by more recent work in cultural sociology, to reemphasize the role of the material world in moral life. I theorize how nonhumans can serve as proofs of moral labor, markers of moral boundaries, and reminders of moral values. I then explore freegans' contradictory relationship to urban life, showing how freegans make living naturally central to their identities yet live in a city that appears to make doing so difficult. I then demonstrate how freegans invert the seeming "problems" posed by the city, turning it into a place in which morality can seem second nature, through engagement with the physical world. Nonhuman proofs, markers, and reminders are not just props or conduits for the construction of moral selves, but active players that both enable and constrain moral action, findings I reflect on in the conclusion.

THE MATERIALITY OF MORALITY

Moral Identities, Motivations, and the Habitus

Theories of the relationship between moral values, moral action, and social context have undergone several paradigm shifts within post-Parsonian sociology (see Lizardo and Strand 2010). "Tool kit theorists" recognize the frequent divergence between what people say and do and thus reject the notion that a coherent moral worldview shapes action (Swidler 1986, 2001; DiMaggio 1997). Instead, individual action is patterned by an external scaffolding of cultural codes, roles, and institutions from which individuals draw in a situational, ad hoc fashion. This approach to the relationship between values and actions presents "morality" as, foremost, justifications for actions undertaken for potentially nonmoral reasons (Lamont 1992, 2000; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

From the perspective of tool kit theory, asking how individuals act in ways they see as "moral" in social contexts that make doing so difficult does not really make sense. If "moral responsibilities are not fixed, but are improvised" (Sanghera, Ablezova, and Botoeva 2011, p. 169; see also Brown 2009; Turowetz and Maynard 2010), the problem becomes one of situational impression management rather than bringing action into accordance with some inner moral "core" (see Goffman 1959). Actors might need to explicate gaps between beliefs and actions but feel little need to close those gaps themselves in the name of some stable moral sense of self.

More recent work within social psychology and sociology, however, has asserted a more systematic relationship between moral beliefs and actions. As Vaisey (2009) argues, deeply internalized, but not necessarily verbalized, moral worldviews may “motivate” action across time and across social contexts. From this perspective, the “problem” of maintaining a moral sense of self becomes more comprehensible: actors carry relatively constant moral motivations but confront environments that vary in the degree to which they facilitate acting on them. Even if individuals can live with contradictory moral commitments, struggle to articulate what those commitments are, and hold them alongside nonmoral desires, the ability to act on moral beliefs can nonetheless be an important source of personal “ontological security” (Giddens 2009, p. 50).

While these two visions of moral action appear incompatible, social psychologists have partly bridged them by suggesting that the relationship between moral norms and action may depend on “moral identities” (Blasi 1980; Monroe 2001; Hardy and Carlo 2005; Reynolds and Ceranic 2007). Nearly everyone sees himself or herself as a “moral” person and thus feels some need to account for his or her actions in terms of shared moral codes. At the same time, the degree to which acting morally is central to the conception of the self—and, as such, plays a motivating role—is variable (Monroe 2001; Aquino et al. 2009; Stets and Carter 2012). Disparities between motivations and actions might be primarily a concern for individuals with a high degree of moral identity—such as, I will show, the freegans—for whom not being able to act morally is injurious to the sense of self (Burke and Stets 2009, pp. 69, 80).

How do individuals with a high level of moral identity interact with the world around them in practice? Vaisey (2009) observes that to constantly reevaluate one’s lifestyle vis-à-vis moral values would be “cognitively overwhelming.” Instead, as ethnographers in the Bourdieusian tradition have argued, becoming a “moral” actor with a “moral” identity entails the development of a “moral habitus,” a “thoroughly embodied and practical form of moral subjectivity” (Winchester 2008, p. 1755; see also Ignatow 2009; Abramson and Modzelewski 2011). This moral habitus is more deliberately cultivated and less deeply ingrained than the primary habitus but nonetheless serves as a powerful subjective and behavioral force (Wacquant 2014, p. 6).

Although Bourdieu himself was skeptical that moral norms were the basis for action (for a critique, see Sayer [2005]), this extension of habitus captures important points that have appeared elsewhere in the sociological literature on morality. Moral beliefs and identities are not just prior to moral action but are constructed in a dialectical fashion through action, creating a sense of one’s moral place relative to the surrounding social structure (Winchester 2008, p. 1755). Moral assumptions and beliefs are often intuitive and embod-

ied rather than discursively articulated (Sayer 2005, pp. 42–43; Abend 2014, pp. 30, 55). And even as morality can constrain individual action, it can be generative of new practices (Joas 2000, pp. 14, 66).

When the everyday moral habitus and the actor's position in social space are aligned, actors are like a "fish in water" that "does not feel the weight of the water, and takes the world about itself for granted" (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992, p. 127). In such situations, following the motivating impulses of one's moral identity becomes "second nature," something "experienced as non-problematic—expected, understood, [and] navigable" (Martin 2000, p. 197). This happens not just through occasional situations when actors can make themselves feel they are "moral enough" but through the ongoing dialectic of everyday habitus and social environment.

Group Life and a Moral Sense of Place

Bourdieu's (1984, 1990; Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992) work usually emphasized the homology between the mental structures of the habitus and the "rules of the game" in the surrounding field. Nonetheless, it is clear that the specific moral habitus and the avenues of action open to it are not always congruent (Sayer 2005, pp. 26, 44). To be a committed Muslim in a Christian country or an animal rights activist at an event catered for meat eaters entails adjustments to a pure enactment of moral motivations. What is the consequence of these situations? Bourdieu suggested that one result could be "hysteresis"—a habitus ill adapted to action in a particular social environment (Bourdieu 1990, p. 62; Lizardo and Strand 2010, p. 221).⁵

But while Bourdieu is often read as describing a habitus that stems from and thus reproduces the outside world (see Sallaz and Zavisca 2007, p. 25; Wacquant 2014, p. 5), Bourdieu (1990, p. 61) himself points out that the social world and the habitus are constructed together. Agents can generate contexts in which, even as a fish out of water in the wider society, their moral habitus can align with its social milieu. For example, Vaisey and Lizardo (2010) show how actors "prune" their social networks to increase interactions with others who share their moral worldviews.⁶ Participants in deviant communities, for example, often differentiate themselves on the basis of moral criteria of personal or collective worth, which almost by definition put them "out of place" in society (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Moon 2012). Subcultural participants can sustain their opposition to conventional norms partly through group life, which provides "free spaces" and rituals that reinforce identities and motivations and create contexts for acting on them

⁵ This is similar to "identity theorists'" suggestion that an "unverifiable" identity is liable to be replaced (Burke and Stets 2009, p. 80): frustrated freegans, e.g., reverting to their identity as middle-class urban denizens or more moderate political agents.

⁶ Identity theory, as cited above, makes a similar point about how actors search out situations in which salient identities are likely to be confirmed (Burke and Stets 2009, p. 73).

(Fischer 1975; Fine and Kleinman 1979).⁷ Recent work has more explicitly argued that the appeal of subcultures stems from simultaneous development of an individual moral habitus and the structures, rules, and rituals of deviant group life (Wacquant 2004; Abramson and Modzelewski 2011).

These conclusions are consistent with a long line of sociological thinking on morality. Drawing on Durkheim's (1997) analysis of suicide, for example, sociologists of religion and health have focused on how the presence of social ties facilitates individual moral worth, meaning, and self-preservation (Idler and Kasl 1992; Maimon and Kuhl 2008; Wray, Colen, and Pescosolido 2011). Offering one canonical reading of Durkheim's analysis, Bellah (1973, p. xliii) concludes that "it is the very intensity of group interaction itself that produces social ideas and ideals and . . . it is from the warmth of group life that they become compelling and attractive to individuals." In addition to providing "warmth" through social integration, groups also exert regulation, shaping and constraining the ability of actors to diverge from their moral motivations or abandon their moral identities (Durkheim 1997).

This literature thus offers a clear prediction that can be brought to bear on empirical material. If freegans have achieved any sense of living morally as second nature, it likely stems from having created groups or interactional spaces within their moral habitus in line with the social environment. This is not the same as saying that group life is purely harmonious, only that it affords individuals the opportunity to act out moral motivations in ways that affirm moral identities. As noted in the introduction, however, I posit another, material route to finding a moral sense of place.

Materiality and Moral Second Nature

Durkheim's thinking about morality evolved over the course of his life (see Abend 2008). Although he maintained that "society . . . is the source and the end of morality" (Durkheim 1953, p. 59), in *Elementary Forms* he explored more circuitous connections between individual and group moral life. In fact, although morality is derived from society, its power stems from the fact that it is perceived as extrasocial, coming from "something greater than us" (1965, p. 257). Along the same lines, in *Suicide*, he insisted that "man cannot live without attachment to some object which transcends and survives him" (1997, p. 210). Hence, we invariably see morality as originating not in society but in external entities, such as gods, or abstract concepts, like "nature" (Durkheim 1953, p. 79).⁸

⁷ The same point has been made for social movements (Hirsch 1990; Polletta 1999; O'Hearn 2009).

⁸ Durkheim's argument in *Elementary Forms* for "primitive" societies is analogous to his argument about "advanced" ones, in which the moral regulation of society must come from an entity outside of it: the state (see also Durkheim 1957).

It is from this interplay of the social and nonsocial in moral life that Durkheim's conception of totems originates. Actors make totems out of the desire to represent the impersonal social forces that they see as acting on them. Thus, although totems are "the source of the moral life of the clan" (1965, p. 219), they are nonetheless always, in part, tied to something outside the clan, such as wild animals (p. 87). Far from being simple outgrowths of moral life, totems exert moral influence over individuals, as evidenced by prohibitions on eating animals of the totemic species. Consequently, the religious forces Durkheim describes are "physical as well as human, moral as well as material" (p. 254).

Subsequent work provides a further basis for considering the material world in moral life. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's (1962) critique of Durkheim, Jerolmack (2013, p. 14) shows that the animals and plants drawn on in totemic religion are not just "good to think with" but enable qualitatively different ways of thinking, perceiving, and classifying the social world. The implication is that the objects coded as "moral" are not just arbitrarily pulled from the environment but instead are selected on the basis of moral beliefs and reworked through moral practices. In fact, groups in a "moral minority," like the freegans, may indeed be pushed to draw on items that are not coded as moral by the dominant group—such as, I show later, waste.

A central contribution of this article is that relationships between humans and the material world may not just enhance or contribute to the confirmation of moral identities in group life but may actually themselves become the basis of an individual's moral sense of place. The notion of a practical reworking of the material environment is an important element of habitus (Lizardo and Strand 2010, p. 211), but I break from Bourdieu's (1990, pp. 71, 76, 273) assumption of a three-way homology between the subjective habitus and the objective social and material world. Instead, an actor whose moral habitus is out of sync with the behavioral expectations and patterns of the social environment may nonetheless be like a "fish in water" with respect to his or her ongoing reordering of physical space or material milieu. At the same time, linking the dialogical relationship between habitus and environment to developments elsewhere in sociology, I insist that objects are not just passive props in a social morality play. Instead, as Latour (2005, pp. 10, 74) argues, objects may actually do things that social actors cannot and can transform rather than simply transmit the meanings that humans attribute to them.⁹

I focus on three distinctive roles that objects can—and, as hinted at by the existing literature, do—play in moral life: (1) proofs of moral labor, (2) markers of moral boundaries, and (3) reminders of moral commitments.

⁹Although I agree with Latour that objects "make a difference," I make no claims to the existence of a "flat" world in which objects live moral lives or are intentional or reflexive in the same way as humans (see Jerolmack and Tavory 2014).

Moral proofs.—Recent work in the symbolic interactionist tradition has shown how behaviors toward nonhumans can reflect, anticipate, and even prompt human action (Tavory 2010). Jerolmack (2013, chap. 5; Jerolmack and Tavory 2014), for example, explores how urban pigeon handlers' relationships with birds can serve to foster new human connections. Yet even if we accept the Durkheimian notion that the roots of moral values themselves always reside in social life, this does not mean that all moral action is directed toward or made with reference to other human beings. Pigeon handlers—like an animal shelter employee or art conservator—may very well have moral identities founded on their relationships with the birds themselves.

I draw on the study by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 131), who argue that moral justifications must be buttressed by moral “proofs,” which in turn are “based on objects that are external to persons.”¹⁰ But, once again, morality is not just about proving that we are moral to others. Actors with strong moral identities in social worlds that make acting on moral motivations difficult must also find ways of proving their morality to themselves. In this respect, having tangible, physical evidence of moral action can be a crucial confirmation of the depth of moral commitments, even while other actions or objects can contradict them.

Moral markers.—The drawing of boundaries between groups and individuals graded on a hierarchy of moral worth is a key aspect of moral life (Lamont 1992, 2000; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Sherman 2006; Sanghera et al. 2011). But what makes the “symbolic” boundaries of morality “real”? Cultural sociologists have argued that symbolic meanings are stabilized and transmitted through physical carriers (Mukerji 1994; Molotch 2003; McDonnell 2010). Indeed, a range of research has suggested that physical objects can make boundaries a more consistent presence in social life than discursive expressions.¹¹

I show how freegans distinguish themselves from others, even when placed in social situations (like jobs) when acting on the moral motivation to live “naturally” seems difficult, using material identifiers. Yet precisely because of their material presence, objects can also invoke moral boundaries when human actors do not intend to do so (see Tavory 2010). The “wrong” object—like a Wal-Mart bag carried into a “fair-trade” shop (Brown 2009, p. 872)—can highlight discrepancies between moral values and action to both external audiences and actors themselves.

¹⁰ Identity theory also considers “resources”—physical objects alongside social relationships—as crucial for “identity verification” (Burke and Stets 2009, chap. 5). However, these authors quite explicitly move away from viewing material resources as distinctive from social ones in their functions.

¹¹ The role of physical markers in constructing boundaries has been shown in studies on subcultures (Hebdige 1979, p. 78), class differentiation (Goffman 1959, p. 36; Bourdieu 1984, p. 184), or religion (Winchester 2008, p. 1770; Tavory 2010).

Moral reminders.—As Durkheim (1965, p. 391) noted, society “cannot be assembled all the time.” Totems serve to remind the individual of his or her moral motivations even when that individual is outside of the social context from which those motivations originated. We might predict that, in a modern city, where individuals move rapidly between different groups and locations (see Simmel [1903] 1971), such “totems,” far from being primitive hold-overs, might actually become more important in sustaining moral identities. Indeed, Jerolmack and Tavory (2014, p. 73) argue that “everyday totemism” reaches far beyond religious life. Interactions with even “mundane” non-humans such as pigeons (or more obviously signifying ones, such as flags or clothing) can allow humans to connect with social groups “in absentia.”

Once again, though, we should go beyond simply seeing objects as a proxy for social ties, or what Durkheim (1997) described as “social integration.” Objects can also step into the other role Durkheim envisioned for the group: moral “regulation,” one of “monitoring, oversight, and guidance” (Wray et al. 2011, p. 508). As I show, nonhuman objects can forcefully remind freegans of their moral identities, even when they are outside the freegan group itself, and in contexts in which freegans might prefer to set them aside temporarily.

DIVING IN: METHODOLOGY

I elaborate my theoretical argument about the relationship between moral identities, moral motivations, the habitus, and physical objects with an empirical study of how freegans rework their material environment. This study is based on nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork with the activist organization *freegan.info* in New York City, between 2007 and 2009. Over this time, I attended scores of *freegan.info* events: “trash tours” (publicly announced dumpster dives open to newcomers and media), wild food foraging expeditions in city parks, collaborative sewing “skillshares,” “feasts” held in freegans’ homes, and monthly organizing meetings. As time went on, I began to spend time in the freegan bike workshop and freegan “office”—really, a nook in the cluttered, windowless basement of a converted warehouse in Brooklyn—which led to more interactions outside of formal group events. In spring 2009, I conducted 20 interviews, which constituted nearly a complete census of active members of the *freegan.info* group who self-identified as “freegan.”¹² I also analyzed several thousand e-mails from *freegan.info*’s “freeganworld” listserv (which has over a thousand subscribers), giving me a better sense of freegan ideology and practice across contexts. In 2012, I returned to New York and conducted follow-up interviews and observations.

¹² I defined “active” group members as people who attended freegan events over a period of at least three months. Only two such individuals declined to be interviewed.

Fieldwork initially focused on freegans' public, performative claims-making. The centrality of nature to freegans' moral worldviews, and their discursive critiques of urban life, emerged through the course of observation. These findings led me to ask whether and how freegans carved out a moral place in a city they frequently characterized as immoral. As time went on, I attempted to test emerging hypotheses derived from theory through fieldwork, a process of theoretical reconstruction congruent with the extended case method (Burawoy 1998). As Tavory (2011, p. 289) observes, "the less the environment is built to cater to a specific category of people, the more moral situations would arise in these people's lives." I thus view freegans—with the apparently gaping chasm between their articulated moral identities and the reality of the urban environment—as a strategic research site for examining in accentuated form how living in an adverse context can actually become the basis of a moral sense of place.

A crucial objective of participant observation was getting past the ad hoc reasons freegans offered for their behavior to identify any underlying motivations, which Vaisey (2009) argues are best identified with forced-choice survey questions. But his argument assumes that sociologists must ultimately rely on some kind of verbalized representation to study moral beliefs and behaviors. Using participant observation, however, we can actually see patterns of behavior and identify trends that reveal the underlying motivations behind them by "sampling" across a range of situations and moments in time (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Ethnography thus is a valuable technique for studying morality "in the wild" (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010, p. 11), as actors deal with practical moral conundrums and conflicts.

Nonetheless, the concern with the materiality of morality adopted here poses problems for ethnographic examination. The value of *observing* moral action rather than *asking* about it stems from the notion that meanings are made "between individuals" rather than "by or within individuals" (Jerolmack and Khan 2014, p. 200). However, I assert that moral motivations are also acted out between individuals and nonhuman objects. By definition, though, any situation I could access involved at least two humans: the observer and the observed.

I adopted three strategies to evaluate if, how, and why freegans' actions were directed at objects. First, I looked for the unintended material "traces" (Latour 2005, p. 193) of freegan practices. Second, by quite literally "getting my hands dirty" at freegan events—by, for example, eating discarded food—I gradually gained access to the more unguarded and candid moments of freegans' lives. Finally, I also began to engage in freegan practices on my own, including subsisting almost entirely on discarded food for a six-month period. Through embodying freegan morality myself, I more fully understood how everyday relationships to the physical world could help sustain a sense of moral place in an apparently adverse context.

FREGAN MORAL IDENTITY AND THE CONTRADICTIONS
OF URBAN LIFE

Consistent with the definitions of morality cited above, freegans invoked deeply rooted, cross-situational and cross-temporal identities founded on the “right” or “wrong” way to live to explain their involvement in freeganism. David, a bearded white male in his early 30s, claimed that—despite growing up in a conventional, middle-class home—“[I] always felt like I had to minimize my impact and live as nonviolently as possible. I’ve basically always been an anarchist.” Prior to discovering freeganism, three-quarters of freegan.info participants reported their primary activist involvement as animal rights, a movement whose participants are overwhelmingly motivated by moral beliefs (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). Most moved beyond veganism when they realized the moral limits of a vegan diet: continued support for environmentally destructive agriculture or poor working conditions in the food industry.

While freegans’ worldviews were undoubtedly shaped by their early involvement in other social movements and activist networks, freegans nonetheless experienced their motivations to act morally as a permanent, intrinsic part of their identities. As Jeff articulated, “I was always radical. Sometimes it was latent, sometimes it wasn’t encouraged, sometimes it was covered up by other things. But I was always radical.” My own observations of freegan.info participants during an extended period of time (over five years) suggested that living morally, for them, was not just a temporary project. Instead, as one put it, “Realizing what you believe and trying to live that is very complicated and something that a lot of people—especially myself—are going to spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out.” Whether or not they still identified as freegans, when I returned in 2012, all of the reinterviewed informants offered examples of how trying to live morally continued to structure their lives.

More than just rhetoric, freegans’ moral beliefs were built into their everyday practices, or *habitus*. David began dumpster diving when he realized that even organic farming killed small mammals and insects. Although I could not verify his claim not to have bought food for 13 years, I never saw him acquire food any other way than “dumpstering.” At various times, I also observed him spending hours searching for and dismantling mouse-traps, meticulously picking live flies off of wax paper, and berating other residents of his shared house for poisoning bedbugs. Madison quit a job with a six-figure salary and sold a luxurious Manhattan apartment after having her “mind blown” at a freegan.info event. Perhaps most notably, even though it was, as one freegan put it, “horrifying and disgusting” to others, most freegans regularly recovered and ate wasted food because they perceived purchasing food as morally anathema. Freegans, then, appeared to be indi-

viduals with strong moral identities who made their capacity to act on their moral motivations a core and enduring part of their sense of self.

But what did living morally actually mean? The definition of freeganism on freegan.info's website is a sprawling list of virtues and vices: "Free-gans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed" (<http://freegan.info>) But in interviews as well as in public events that explained freeganism to those unfamiliar with the movement, freegans frequently focused on a moral imperative to live more "naturally." As Benjamin—a freegan activist in his mid-20s who lived in a squatted building in Brooklyn—explained, "We're just so disconnected from it [nature]. One of the goals [of freeganism] is just connecting with each other and connecting with the rest of life on earth, connecting with the earth itself."

Freegans evoked humanity's fall from grace, central to Judeo-Christian moral narratives, and made nature central to the story. As Evie, a speech pathologist in a public hospital and lifetime Palestinian liberation activist, articulated during one meeting, "There was a point where human beings stepped out of nature and decided to control nature," and it was at this point that the seeds for a whole range of social ills—mass consumption, exploitation of animals and humans, and ecological devastation—were planted. Nature provided both a centerpiece of freegan discourse and a guiding principle for new freegan.info projects. Proposing that the group start an urban garden, Guadalupe noted, "My ideal is a little different than just having a mini-farm. I'm very interested in letting the plants that just naturally grow in the area do their thing and even help them grow. This includes 'weeds.' I don't really believe in the concept of an undesirable plant. I believe in biodiversity."

That freegans would evoke nature as central to their moral worldviews was unsurprising. The power of nature as moral principle has a long history in strands of American culture (Nash 1973; Cronon 1996), often in opposition to very different framings of "the good" in terms of consumption, competition, or free-market capitalism. Unsurprisingly, sociologists have shown that beliefs about nature—for example, freegans' claim that living naturally meant not consuming animals—are culturally and temporally variable social constructs (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Freudenburg, Frickel, and Gramling 1995; Fourcade 2011). Yet, paradoxically, research also shows that the appeal of nature as a framework for determining right and wrong stems from the popular belief that nature is free from social influence (Bell 1994, p. 7; Jerolmack 2013, pp. 134–35). This was precisely the sense in which freegans used nature: to refer to something that was immutable, primordial, and uncontestable, a moral concept "outside of us" in the Durkheimian sense.

Freegans' discursive commitment to living naturally and the reality of freegan.info as a group based in a city built by humans would thus seem to be in direct contradiction. Indeed, when I asked freegans in interviews about their views of urban life, they often repeated a familiar American cultural trope that valorizes the natural aspects of rural life and demonizes the city (see Hummon 1990). One freegan characterized the city as an "evil haven of decadence and debauchery"; another described it as "incredibly psychologically destructive" because it separated residents from natural spaces. Ryan speculated that "rates of depression are so high in America because we're in a city, and we aren't in some heavily forested area being spontaneous and finding wild asparagus."

On a more practical level, aspects of the urban environment made conforming to some elements of the officially articulated freegan identity difficult. According to the movement's informal manifesto *Why Freegan?* and the homepage of freegan.info, freegans engaged in a "total boycott" of the capitalist economic system, meeting as many needs as possible outside the market. For example, freegans claimed they could live for "free" by squatting illegally in abandoned (or "wasted") buildings. Yet in New York, property values are high enough that abandoned buildings are rarely left unoccupied for long, and the police actively search for and remove unlawful occupants. As such, even though "true freegans don't pay rent," as one told me, the reality was that nearly all of them did. Some had eliminated rent payments, but only by buying a home outright. The result was an admission that, for all their political and moral commitments, there were many parts of freegans' urban lives that they could not control. As one freegan told me, "there are so many things I see that I can't change. I can't change the way the building I live in operates. I know that if I lived elsewhere, I would do things completely differently."

A similar apparent divergence between articulated values and avenues for moral action could be made for employment. One of the pamphlets that freegan.info passed out during events on public sidewalks averred, "Freegans are able to greatly reduce or altogether eliminate the need to constantly be employed." But nearly all freegans maintained conventional, waged occupations, because needing money was an "unpleasant reality" as long as they lived in a city. While some had found employment in activist organizations or nonprofits, others worked in more clearly problematic fields like product design. As Evie, herself a homeowner, admitted, "I'm freegan in lots of little things in my life. But at the end of the day, I am paying taxes and funding a couple of enormous wars, and sort of everything bad that's going on in the world." Reflecting on the divergence between freegans' moral ideals and the exigencies of urban life, one freegan sighed, "Manhattan is one giant contradiction."

CLAIMING CITY CONTRADICTION, FINDING URBAN NATURE

How did freegans respond to this apparent disparity? When confronted with the gap between the two, most freegans offered to others what might be framed as a moral justification: they stayed in the city because it was an efficacious site for their activism. At one “freeganism 101” event, a newcomer asked Jeff why he hadn’t moved to the countryside. He replied, “Setting up a commune out in the country would be good for me, but I don’t know how that would be for the overall resistance. I definitely want to get out of the city eventually . . . [but] there’s a lot of work that needs to be done in all different places . . . and lots of it needs to happen here, and not in the country.” In truth, it is difficult to imagine freegans’ political tactics outside of an urban context. Cities concentrate retailers in a small geographic area, allowing freegans to organize public, performative dumpster dives for passersby and the media and to recover a wide range of goods relatively easily.¹³ In a sense, what looks like moral contradiction is thus inherent in freeganism: the movement depends on the unnatural urban environment in order to protest the economic and social system that the city symbolizes, all in the name of living more naturally.

If we view “morality” through the lens of tool kit theory, freegans’ explanation for the gap between beliefs and practice, and the various ways they deploy that reasoning in interaction, could be the focal point of analysis. Or we could view freegans as satisfied with reaching a certain, sub-optimal threshold of acting morally (see Gigerenzer 2010). I have argued, however, that the notion of moral habitus implies that action creates a more ongoing sense that living out a moral identity is “second nature.” Did this process of finding a moral place in the city happen through group life—that is, social dynamics within freegan.info? Certainly, as Durkheim would suggest, freegan.info provided a space where freegans could freely discuss, develop, and reinforce moral beliefs that would otherwise struggle to find a hearing. During feasts, for example, freegans held freewheeling debates about elements of their natural ethos, such as whether humans were “primordial vegetarians,” if they should return to agriculture or revert to foraging, or whether human beings should voluntarily go extinct.

Yet, despite the sharing of freegan skills I describe below, freegan.info was less successful in helping freegans act on their moral motivations. Freegan meetings were often filled with announcements that one or another practice or product had turned out to be environmentally destructive or

¹³In five years of monitoring the freegan world e-mail list, I have not encountered a single mention of rural freeganism. The one academic account I can find of rural freegans notes that they frequently go into a nearby city in order to dumpster dive (Gross 2009, p. 61).

exploitative, leading to a new escalation of what moral living entailed with little sense of how to achieve it. In 2008, Rob and Leslie, two core freegan.info activists, attempted to extend freegan principles and address concerns that freegan.info was facilitating an insufficient range of anticapitalist or ecoconscious practices by founding a collective household for anarchists in Brooklyn. The space, “Surrealestate,” hosted a bike workshop, community meals with dumpster-dived food, and activist fund-raisers. Yet even that space charged rent, which led many in the group to reject the very notion that it was “freegan.” Others alleged that the project constituted first-wave gentrification. This acrimony was emblematic of a frequently evoked “basic lack of trust” within freegan.info, which I saw play out in strident arguments during freegan.info meetings. The overall sense, as one person told me, was that “there’s no real freegan community.”

While the presence of conflict certainly does not invalidate the possibility of a social group providing a moral sense of place—Durkheim, after all, never claimed that groups had to be harmonious—other evidence also suggests otherwise. In interviews, many freegans claimed that “true” freegans engaged in practices like dumpster diving “on their own”—not just at freegan.info events. As one explained, “Freegan.info is just a side project to the real thing, which is being freegan itself.” Some freegans even experienced the group as a barrier to living morally: in 2008, Guadalupe, a Latina mother from a low-income background, announced that she would be “stepping back” because she had spent so much time with the group that she had been unable to dumpster dive enough to support her family and thus was buying food—a situation she saw as morally untenable. When I returned in 2012, freegan.info had collapsed under the weight of internal discord, yet most freegans described how they continued to deepen their understanding of what was required to maintain a moral identity and thus faced the same challenges of creating a sense of affirming that identity—albeit without any support from the group itself.

What is more, while at its height freegan.info met only a few times a month, clashes between freegans’ moral habitus and the social environment of the city were frequent. In a society where many social situations involve buying something—from a beer to a movie ticket—being a freegan meant either profound isolation or constant violations of freegan principles. As Barbara told me, “You can sit in a room of five or ten people, and they’re talking about bargains and sales and ‘Where’d you buy that?’ and what the latest technology is, and you can really feel like you don’t want to participate at all, or that you have to guard it [your freeganism].” Benjamin elaborated how the ideology behind his freeganism fed into a feeling of alienation and disaffection: “I always stand around in a room full of people and think, ‘Oh my God, no one is an anticapitalist here.’ I feel so alone, I feel so out of place. . . . It’s so lonely. It’s depressing as hell to live here [in

New York].” Others reported an involuntarily shrinking social network as nonfreegans were pushed away from them and few new freegans appeared to fill the holes.

Despite their deeply rooted moral identities and the barriers that social existence in the city posed to acting on them, though, freegans still insisted they were living morally. Perhaps more importantly, many debates about abstract principles did not translate into anxiety in day-to-day life, suggesting that freegans were not among those actors who “churn through their moral narratives in their internal conversations almost obsessively” (Sayer 2005, p. 29). In their daily lives, both within and outside *freegan.info*, freegans showed few signs of a Bourdieusian “hysteresis,” suggesting that their habitus and environment were, in a sense, aligned. As I show, though, the environment they were aligning with may not have been primarily a social one.

Freegans could rarely articulate how they managed to find a moral sense of place in the city, except that it had something to do with nature and the city itself. As one told me, “Freeganism . . . it’s a way of downscaling the city somehow. It tells me, ‘Okay, I can live small here.’” Rob, a tall freegan with a shock of curly red hair, speculated, “Within the city, nature is a park, a tree, or a bug. Or maybe it’s noises or creepy things or shadows. That’s nature to me. Freeganism is a way of relating to nature in the city. It lets things happen organically. Everyone is part of the equation. It ends up being just, sort of, magic. People are like nature and there are all sorts of varieties and uniquenesses in any situation.” As I argue in the rest of this article, freegans made a city seemingly full of contradictions into a “common-sense world” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 58), within which living naturally was second nature, by practically appropriating and reconfiguring their material world into moral proofs, markers, and reminders.

MAKING THE CITY “SECOND NATURE”

Moral Proofs and Natural Resources

Freegans’ “wild food foraging tours” through city parks were, in large part, neither political nor practical. Foraging events lacked the performative critique of capitalism that made freegan trash tours appealing to the media. They were not particularly helpful in allowing freegans to survive “outside” capitalism either. Ryan, an experienced forager, got only a fraction of his calories from it; Guadalupe remarked that dumpsters have “tastier food.” Yet whenever Ryan announced his willingness to lead a tour, the group was invariably enthusiastic and turnout high. The appeal, I argue, stemmed from the way tours functioned as a kind of “nature work” (Fine 1998, p. 4), a directed process of relating to the physical environment that enabled freegans to see the city as providing natural resources that functioned as tangible proofs of their efforts.

On one tour along the northwest edge of Manhattan, a visiting activist from California commented how, to his surprise, the plants the group was finding were identical to those he found in his home state, despite vast differences in climate. Ryan replied, "There's lots of biodiversity in the rainforest, but there's unique species here [in the city] too." Both presented the city as an ecosystem, replete with its own species, flows of resources, and cycles of food availability. Wild food foraging tours were not just a way of imagining the city as a natural ecosystem, but treating it as such through concrete and material—yet, as the notion of *habitus* suggests, simultaneously also symbolically and morally laden—practices. As Ryan admonished the group, "Here you see a bunch of ostrich ferns growing in a clump together. If you know to only pick half of them, they'll grow back. But pick all of them, and it dies." At another point, Ryan's guidance more directly touched on a key moral motivation for freegans—finding value in waste. Motioning to a downed tree, he observed, "Lots of things that look like waste aren't waste when you look a little closer." He took us to the other side and revealed edible mushrooms growing on it, which freegans then picked—in moderation.

Expeditions to find burdock root and edible flowers were not the only moments in which freegans approached the city as a natural resource base that furnished proofs of their ability to live naturally. They also did so with respect to human-made urban waste. Of course, despite a social scientific trope of waste as "urban metabolism" (Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006), there is nothing superficially natural about New York's vast waste disposal apparatus. Indeed, in their public events, freegans often went to great lengths to emphasize the highly unnatural social processes that created waste. As one freegan explained to a group of 15 newcomers on a trash tour, "It's not individuals, it's the system [that produces waste]. The stores are trying to extract surplus value, to borrow a Marxist term. But our system ends up with a huge amount of waste and unrecognized costs."

While in their deliberate, planned events waste served as a symbol of all that was wrong with the city, in everyday practice waste became a fixed aspect of the physical environment. One weekend, I joined Benjamin and Lucie, two young freegans, for a free art festival on Governor's Island. We had been discussing the recent closure of the Occupy Wall Street encampment, and I commented that the island had large tracts of open space that could be occupied. Benjamin replied, pensively, "Yeah, but what would you eat? You'd have to go into the city to dumpster [dive], and there are only ferries on the weekend." Lucie laughed, "You remember that food comes from places other than dumpsters, right? You *could* farm it." "Oh right," Benjamin replied, "I forgot." In effect, the social origins of food waste had receded to the background in a moral *habitus* that drew its power from treating waste as a natural resource.

The availability of garbage depends on the vicissitudes of store employees and sanitation workers, yet for self-described “urban foragers” like freegans, it was nature that provided the waste. Noted one freegan, “The difference between foraging and agriculture is trying to control nature, versus preparing yourself to respond to whatever nature throws at you.” Although waste in New York is so abundant that freegans could easily eat only prepared food or only organic produce if they wanted, freegans nonetheless often “rescued” unappealing items and turned them into food. One autumn evening, the group uncovered dozens of ears of dried, ornamental corn. When one newcomer moved to put them back in the garbage—assuming they were inedible—Madison snatched them. The next week, she returned having transformed them into hominy: a time-consuming and impractical move, but one that affirmed a moral identity that, as she put it, allowed her to make use of “whatever nature throws at you.” While freegan political activities were a direct challenge to urban social institutions, freegan nature-work transformed the environment in more subtle ways, through developing a habitus that would allow freegans to partly subsist on precisely what their nature-work on the city made available.

While freegans’ self-description as “urban foragers” and their labeling of waste as a “natural” resource might seem strained, these discourses were tied to concrete practices. One freegan observed how the often unreflective, ingrained habits of a dumpster diver paralleled those she envisioned foragers—the reference point for her moral motivations—as having: “When you go dumpster diving . . . you do things in the natural way. It’s like . . . going in the forest to find food. . . . You need to explore, first, to find good spots. Then you need to really work for your food: it’s harder, you need to open bags, to search, to climb into a dumpster. . . . It’s always surprising. You don’t know what you’re going to find. It makes it more natural. It’s like going back to the time when people would go into natural spaces to get food.” For her, dumpster diving was “natural”—and, therefore, also in her eyes, moral—precisely because it required effort. It was precisely the adversity of place that allowed her to have a “sense of her place” that she could envision as analogous to life in a forest.

As the quote suggested, even as freegans imbued the urban waste stream with moral meaning, the physical characteristics of the waste stream itself required ongoing readjustments. This was particularly evident with respect to the way the rhythms of the urban waste disposal system structured freegans’ time. While a grocery store might be open 16 hours a day, the window of time for dumpster diving is just a few hours between when stores close and garbage trucks appear. One night, I was working in the freegan office with David—who did not cook and usually ate directly from dumpsters—when he looked at his computer and declared, “It’s 8:30. We can almost go dumpstering.” Eating like a forager meant gathering food at the

inconvenient times it was available and going without otherwise. Needless to say, frequent changes in stores' disposal practices themselves pushed freegans to reconfigure their routines to shift to new sites or new times.

For freegans working normal jobs, this was not necessarily easy—which was, perhaps, part of what made it meaningful. Marion, a woman who had been “surviving” from waste reclamation for more than five years, despite having a significant income, explained, “I try to project and say ‘This is what I have, I probably won’t go on this day because of the weather.’ But I have to plan in advance to make sure I’m prepared. . . . It gets laborious, to stay on the street, late *late* at night, day after day. So I try to limit it to get what I need, at least. It can so easily turn into still [being] on the street at 1:30 in the morning. It’s exhausting for me.” In order to act on their conceptualization of living naturally, freegans had to conform to the rhythm of waste metabolism on a seasonal as well as daily basis. Back-to-school shopping season, for example, was one of the only times freegans could dumpster dive office supplies. Barbara—a tenured and, by her own admission, well-paid public school teacher—noted that the “only” time she could find instant oatmeal was during move-out days from college dorms. While she could certainly have bought instant oatmeal and no one in the group would know the difference, it appeared that she didn’t. Instead, for two Saturdays in a row, I found her alone in the dumpsters of New York University looking for oatmeal. Her solitary efforts suggested that, insofar as urban waste functioned as a moral “proof,” she herself was the primary audience.

At times, freegans’ public denunciation of waste and their treatment of waste as a finite natural resource base were overtly in tension. In 2009, Ryan lamented, “There has been less waste lately. . . . No more bulk boxes with one bottle broken and the rest intact but slimy.” Some speculated that the decline in waste output was a result of the economic downturn. Others, though, returned to ecological metaphors, noting that a particular “fertile” chain of stores in Murray Hill had been “overharvested” and thus become “exhausted” by the overly frequent “exploitation” of local divers. A lack of care toward the natural resource base that waste represented, then, could serve as a sign of a habitus gone awry. In a context in which physical rather than social relationships were key to affirming moral identities, these circumstances threatened freegans’ “identity kit” (Goffman 1961, pp. 14–21). Some freegans even embarked on a series of collective efforts—including a futile visit to the stores’ managers asking them to “give back the garbage”—to rectify the situation.

Indeed, throughout my time with the group, there was an ongoing conflict between those who wanted to call attention to waste in order to grow the movement and those who wanted to keep it hidden in order to ensure their ability to maintain themselves on the system’s margins. This conflict played out in practice: while some welcomed others to join them on dives

outside those scheduled by *freegan.info*, others would hide evidence of their activities out of fear that nonfreegan divers would discover their favorite spots. Paradoxically, the nature of freegans' resource base—and its dependence on store managers' and employees' fickle actions—meant that freegans' political actions threatened to deprive them of the very objects they used to prove to themselves that they were living naturally. Such tensions are constitutive of moral life, insofar as we recognize that moral identities exist alongside other, nonmoral identities (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 290), and the dispositions of the *habitus* are only partly coherent and integrated, owing to their construction within multiple environments (Wacquant 2014, p. 6).

Moral Markers and Human Nature

Urban waste was not just a proof of freegans' moral identities but also a way of physically differentiating freegans from both the capitalist mainstream and other animal rights or environmental activists, with whom freegans made common political cause but whom they saw as morally wanting. Speaking in front of an otherwise receptive audience—an undergraduate class on food, waste, and sustainability at NYU—David lectured about the uselessness of formal education: “We live in a profoundly deskilled society. We’ve been infantilized, and very few of us know how to do anything outside of our little narrow box of employment.” Real skills, he observed, were those that would allow humans to survive in nature—skills that freegans were already developing. “We have false ideas about what constitutes fresh food,” he noted. “A lot of food tastes better when it looks worse. But those are not the tactile and aesthetic qualities people look for when they purchase produce.”

During the trash tour after the presentation, David pulled me over to a bin filled with discarded tofu, chicken, and cheese from the store's hot food salad bar. He commented, “A lot of vegans would just leave this here, but look.” David plunged into the mixture and pulled out a sauce-covered white chunk and explained how to identify whether it was meat on the basis of the way it broke when crushed between the thumb and forefinger. For him, living naturally off the city's resource base—rather than unnaturally from its supermarkets—required connecting with another version of nature: human nature, embodied in corporal practice (Ignatow 2009, p. 100). Indeed, successful urban foraging required all the senses to be constantly if not always consciously attuned to the physical surroundings in a natural way, because edible items were signaled not by neon signs but by more subtle and difficult to discern hints: lumpy plastic bags or the faint smell of food.

The above example was not the only time that David used physical objects as a marker of moral distinction. At monthly “Really Really Free Mar-

kets,” where freegans would gather with other scavengers and anarchists to swap surplus household items, *freegan.info* would often provide a buffet replete with carefully washed, aesthetically pleasing dumpster-dived food. But when I accompanied David to more mainstream animal rights conferences—where he was a frequent gadfly—he reversed the style of presentation. He would make a show of the fact that freegans’ flyers were printed on the back sides of “rescued” paper—in sharp contrast to the glossy pamphlets of the Humane Society of the United States—and flaunt that the food on offer at the table was past its sell-by date, not free of genetically modified organisms or organic, and obviously from a dumpster.

These objects helped David balance a *political* desire to be present at the conference with a *moral* motivation to distance himself from mainstream veganism, which he saw as a “bourgeois ideology that worships consumption.” Certainly, anyone in attendance who spoke to David would become aware of his views, but, on one level, they didn’t need to because the boundary was materially manifest. A similar duality appeared during regular trash tours, when freegans used expensive and desirable recovered items—like still-bagged organic coffee—as an “interactional hook” (Tavory 2010, p. 57). The lure of free stuff would temporarily drag passersby into freegans’ political project. Yet if when the freegans revealed the foods’ origins the others expressed disgust, these objects instantiated moral boundaries.

Although, in these instances, freegans’ self-differentiation was overt, their moral boundary marking through sensory relationships to food was a more implicit part of their everyday habitus. In response to a query about food safety, Marion quipped, “I never look at the sell-by date, it’s irrelevant to me. It’s about the condition of the food: you smell it, you taste it, and if it’s horrible, don’t [eat it].” Eating safely meant cultivating knowledge of the material properties of food, knowledge that freegans claimed had been lost with urbanization: “Not knowing about food, and thinking about safety standards, that comes from living in the city. . . . If you take a yogurt, and you don’t know what it is and you don’t know how it’s made, and all you know is the expiration date, then after the expiration date you’ll throw it away. If you know how a yogurt works, you know it could be good two months after. You just taste it.” Media and bystanders frequently queried whether dumpster divers ever got sick. Invariably, freegans responded that no one ever ailed from recovered food, asserting first their own knowledge of food—which set them aside from the incompetence of the ordinary consumer—and then a more general claim about the real nature of the human body. As Guadalupe told one reporter, “People in this country are a lot more freaked out about dirt than they need to be. We need a little dirt in our lives for our immune systems to be strong.”

These comments were not just bluster. *Freegan.info* as an organization discouraged participants from eating straight in front of the camera, for fear

of the media's propensity to splice together images to maximize dumpster diving's "ick factor." Outside the public eye, though, freegans would often spend hours debating politics and revolutionary strategy while eating directly from the trash bin. My own meals with freegans in their homes, as well as glances into freegans' refrigerators, suggested a striking willingness to eat over-the-hill and rotten food. In effect, these scavenged items were exemplars of how "the most mundane objects . . . [can] become a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile" (Hebdige 1979, p. 2) from the still essentially middle-class world in which freegans lived and worked. And, in a Latourian sense, these objects occasionally "acted back" in unpredictable ways: although reticent to admit it, some freegans could recount how their embodied confidence that they were conforming to humanity's more resilient internal nature led them to eat food that left them sick for days.

Freegans' moral habitus of relating to physical objects could help maintain boundaries when the more conventional aspects of their lives threatened to erase them. From 2007 to 2009, freegan.info operated a bicycle workshop in the cramped basement space of an anarchist "infoshop" in a low-income neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Leslie, a college-educated "radical social ecologist" in her early 30s who was one of the shop's main volunteers, described how her first visit to the space was "exhilarating" because, for the first time in her life, she realized that she could "build and create things and figure out how to do stuff, solve problems, use tools." Rob, who had a degree in computer science from an elite private university, offered a similar assessment of how the skills he learned in the workshop—skills his classmates lacked—brought him closer to human nature. "Bike repair really got me into working with my hands," he explained, "which is, like, so critical to being a human being—to be able to manipulate your environment and physical things. You don't get that in school." For Rob, the bikes that came out of that space were materializations of freegan values. Through problem solving and careful repair, decaying discarded parts became bikes that could provide sustainable transportation for decades. But the bikes were also markers of difference. In a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood that freegans saw as full of "hipsters" riding "expensive fixed gears," freegan bikes were almost ostentatiously worn looking and ugly.

Some particularly unconventional activities for which freegans themselves had little explanation made sense as projects that developed the habitus and the physical environment in a morally affirming way. After one freegan feast in Jeff's apartment, eight of us stayed around to watch Ryan conduct a "skillshare" for the group. Ryan removed a handful of yucca leaves from his backpack and placed them on the floor. He demonstrated how to scrape the flesh off the leaves, which isolated the internal fibers. These, he explained, could be woven into rope. After half an hour, Ryan had created a drawstring for his hat, while the rest had only a few sloppy, short strands

of fibers to show for their efforts. Nonetheless, the group was so enthralled by the event that, immediately after, they began discussing plans for similar training in canning and preserving fruit, sewing clothes, and making wine. The moment was one of Durkheimian (1965, p. 236) “collective effervescence,” in which the social affirmation of freegans’ distinctive moral identities was amplified with palpable markers.

These same objects could act as markers of moral difference in self-evidently “nonfreegan” situations. Freegans could—and did—ride their salvaged bikes to work or take dumpster-dived food to potlucks with nonfreegan friends, giving a moral tinge to otherwise problematic situations. Barbara described writing her lesson plans on the back sides of paper that she pulled from other teachers’ recycling (or waste) bins, a practice she readily noted set her apart despite their shared participation in paid employment. But Barbara’s “quirks” could have unintended consequences: she recounted that once, after sitting down with her dumpster-dived lunch, a colleague stood up and walked away, announcing, “I will sit here with my clean food.”

Here, the “waste” Barbara at other times used to draw moral boundaries evoked them when she had not intended to, providing an unintended “mold” for interaction (see Jerolmack and Tavory 2014). While for freegans objects recovered from the garbage could set them apart as moral, for nonfreegans they could invoke “pollution rules” that made them “wicked object[s] of moral reprobation” (Douglas 1966, p. 170). Freegans could thus not seamlessly “enlist” the physical world (see Latour 2005). Indeed, the use of these objects as moral markers could give freegans a sense of place in the urban environment even as it deepened their sense of being out of place in their social milieu.

Moral Reminders in the Urban Frontier

Finally, physical objects functioned as “moral reminders” for freegans’ moral motivations, including those developed or shared within the group, outside the group context. Like so many other self-identified freegans, Lola, an itinerant art student who had come to New York in the summer of 2008, claimed to see the city as the antithesis of morality, averring, “I think that the urban culture is what I’m opposed to.” And, like other freegans, she also offered proof that she could turn the harshly unnatural city into a natural urban frontier. Referencing her bike, she told me, “Bicycling is such a freeing feeling. You’re in direct contact with nature. The physical aspect of it is amazing. It feels to me like breaking through some kind of invisible barrier. . . . You can’t fall asleep on a fixed gear [bicycle]. You can’t just ignore things that are going on. You can’t just look up at the stars; it’s actually being in contact and being directly involved with what is happening.”

To Lola, nature was something with which she could be in “direct contact” in the city, found not by “look[ing] up at the stars” but by engaging with her more immediate, built environs.

Lola expressed particular pride at her fixed-gear bike: she built it herself, which to her meant that “I know every part of it and understand why and how everything works.” As with becoming an “expert” on food, understanding the material properties of her bicycle was crucial to Lola’s moral identity as someone living a more natural life than other urban denizens. More than that, though, her bicycle seemed to function as a personal totem, a ward keeping the immoral forces of the city at bay. In the summer of 2008, Lola spent a stint house-sitting a luxurious apartment in the Upper West Side. She invited me over, and I noted that she had crammed her bicycle into a tiny corner of her bedroom rather than leaving it elsewhere in the capacious apartment. She confided, “It felt really weird to stay here, so I brought my bike into my bedroom with me, just as a reminder.” Here was a moment when the clash between values and environment threatened to make her feel quite literally out of place, until Lola reworked that place in a small but tangible way.

All freegans juggled tensions between their political ideals and everyday lives, but these contradictions were particularly acute for Ryan. Despite helping Jeff and David organize an “antitechnology” conference in 2009, Ryan had a degree in computer science and was working 40 hours a week in Connecticut programming touch-screen computers that, in his own words, “made it easier for rich people to watch TV.” That he was not just an ordinary college-educated computer programmer, though, was inscribed on his person. When Ryan showed up at one freegan meeting in midsummer, he was wearing a backpack that he had built out of bicycle tire inner tubes and was clad in sandals he put together from a discarded fire hose. Attached to his backpack was a trowel he told me he used to dig up edible plants he finds in long bicycle trips, one of which brought him to some of the most remote regions of northern Canada. He emphasized the importance of his sensuous relationship to the materials: “When I buy something I really need, I don’t feel like I own it. I’m afraid to sew it, patch it up. This backpack, I can feel it. I know what’s wrong with it; I know what’s right with it. If something’s not working, I can cut it up and make it work for me in a new way. It’s all about ownership. . . . Once you make something, you can control exactly what it’s going to do.” When I pressed Ryan as to why these skills were so important, he demurred: “I don’t know where exactly my learning is going towards.” A comment he made more informally, though, was telling: “I came straight from work,” motioning to his backpack and shoes, suggesting that he had worn them to his rich clients’ houses. While, in such contexts, Ryan probably could not raise his “anti-

civilization” beliefs, his evident skill in dealing with physical objects reminded him that he was, in his own mind, more a rugged frontiersman than an urban professional.

This was not the only time I saw freegans draw on practices toward material objects to remind themselves and others of their moral commitments in moments when these self-conceptions felt threatened. One December evening, I attended a freegan feast in Madison’s Brooklyn flat, which she had purchased after quitting her corporate job. I noted my surprise that Madison’s building had a doorman; she replied, “I know, I didn’t feel great about it either, but look at what I did with it.” She then walked me around the flat showing how nearly every item of furniture had been taken “right off the street.” Analogously, Barbara once confessed to me something she had been hiding from the group: that she had recently taken a flight for a vacation. “Have you ever dumpster dived a plane?” she whispered, before taking from her backpack complementary food, napkins, and utensils she had acquired while walking past the first-class seating area. She did not show the items to others in the group. Instead, as she suggested, she recovered them because the objects themselves reminded her of an opportunity to actualize her moral motivations at an unexpected moment.

Although some uses of physical objects as reminders were deliberate, materials could call on freegans to put their environment back in its moral place when they were not intending to do so. One cold winter night, we approached the back side of a Food Emporium, where, from a distance, it was clear there was a larger than usual amount of food. As we walked up, Barbara exclaimed, “Oh my god, this is going to be outrageous.” It was: the store was evidently destocking, and so large quantities of unexpired, non-perishable goods were on the sidewalk. This night’s event was supposed to be a “trash trailblaze”—where the group would quickly investigate new potential spots and then move on—but the group lingered long after everyone had taken what they could carry. When I asked Madison why we stayed, she opined, “It’s like an elephant graveyard. Right now, we’re just mourning the food.” Although it was ultimately store employees who put the waste on the curb and freegans who decided to imbue the waste with symbolic meaning, it was the wasted objects themselves that redirected freegan behavior.

At other moments, these reminders had a more positive valence. In contrast to a modern industrial food system built on standardization and predictability, freegans embraced the unscripted moments of dumpster diving, averring that “it’s always unpredictable; that’s part of the adventure of it!” Reflecting Fine’s (1998, p. 49) conclusion that “meaningful experiences of nature must include uncertainty,” I witnessed firsthand the excitement that emerged whenever there was a rare find, like a box of tempeh or a pomegranate—their unexpected appearances potent reminders that freegans were

not shopping or even growing food, but doing something they saw as fundamentally more natural.

Waste could capture freegans' energy even when not with *freegan.info*. Although food is wasted at predictable places and times, other items freegans need to find in order to avoid spending money—clothes, toiletries, and appliances, to name a few—appear more stochastically. The “dumpster eye,” as one described it, was at times only at the margins of freegan consciousness (see Tavory 2010, p. 56), but the right garbage could unexpectedly bring it to the forefront, breaking down barriers between when they were or were not acting on their freegan moral motivations. When I began to dumpster dive more myself, I realized that traversing the city on foot—often regardless of my intentions—took much longer than it had previously, as I zigzagged across streets in order to examine any garbage that looked remotely promising.

Some admitted that their practice of freeganism bordered on hoarding, because they felt a strong compulsion to “rescue” only marginally useful items. Observed one freegan, “In my apartment, we have all sorts of things lying around, because you never know when you’re going to need to build this or fix that. You just keep everything.” This ethos of “making do and getting by,” many freegans claimed, harkened not just to prehistoric foragers but, more recently, to homesteaders on the American frontier. But living out these values could be taxing: “I get tired of trying to save the world,” sighed Barbara, after spending an hour trying to find someone to take a shoe rack she had found on the sidewalk.

Objects demanded freegans' time and attention in other ways as well. While in the previous section I noted how building bikes from discarded parts was part of what helped freegans “mark” themselves as living more naturally, they were also a source of constant frustration. Salvaged bikes were constantly breaking down and needing new scavenged parts, which themselves would not last long. Similarly, the implacable materiality of food—namely, the fact that it perishes, and if it has been “rescued” from a dumpster, it perishes quickly—often led freegans to spend significant time paring moldy fruit, recooking and transforming old vegetables, or redistributing excess bread. Although on a purely rational level freegans knew that “rewasting” food had no additional negative environmental impact, they nonetheless exhorted themselves—often in private—to “not waste the waste.” This embodied set of practices reworked freegans' world in a way they sensed as natural yet threatened to remind freegans of the very “unnaturalness” as these objects returned to a wasted state.

CONCLUSION: MATERIALS, NATURE, AND MORALITY

Although freeganism as a political movement is an intrinsically urban phenomenon, the social dimensions of city life—finding a place to live, working,

and interacting with others—posed substantial barriers to individual freegans acting on moral motivations with which their identities were closely bound. Freegan.info as a group provided ongoing reinforcements of freegans' moral motivations—much as the Durkheim-inspired conclusions of literatures on social movement “free spaces” and subcultures would suggest—but it only infrequently provided them with a social environment aligned with them. Nevertheless, freegans were able to achieve a sense of their place in the city, one that made living morally frequently unremarked and second nature. They did so through a habitus that both drew on and reconstructed the physical environment in line with their frequently unarticulated and varied conceptions of “nature.” While freeganism is no doubt an idiosyncratic movement, these findings have implications for studies on materiality, nature, and morality.

Material objects can play a significant, and distinctive, role in social life. As recent work has shown, objects are not mere bearers of cultural meanings but can actively reshape those meanings (Latour 2005; McDonnell 2010; Jerolmack and Tavory 2014). I have added the assertion that material objects—or, more generally, the nonsocial—can be the ends of moral life. In truth, “bringing materiality back in”—to evoke a sociological cliché—is consistent with common sense. Although “waste” is not a common object of moral concern, it is nonetheless arguable that significant moral action is directed toward nonhuman entities, such as “gods” or “nations” (see Cerulo 2009). Physical representations of those entities, such as idols or flags, can call forth powerful moral commitments. Yet the moments when objects proved uncooperative—when bikes broke down, food rotted, or others interpreted waste in a radically different fashion—also speak to the complexities, limits, and risks of the material world in sustaining a moral self. The three roles of objects I have demonstrated here provide a basis for further research into the extent and role of the material world in moral life.

The fact that freegans made living morally seem like second nature through their interactions with waste itself has intriguing implications. On one hand, waste's banality would seem to reaffirm Durkheim's (1965, p. 52) assertion that mundane objects—ranging from “a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, [or] a house”—can be imbued with moral meaning. A crucifix around the neck could be a significant marker of moral boundaries; an old photo a potent reminder of familial commitments; a carefully sorted recycling bin proof of an ecological identity. Yet that freegans chose waste was not random. Waste for freegans was “polyvocal” (McDonnell 2010, p. 1803): at once a symbol of capitalist immorality and privately a resource for moral living. Waste evokes intensely negative emotional and moral meanings in broader Western culture (see Douglas 1966; Abbott 2014). In a group that set itself up in opposition to mainstream (im)morality, using waste provided an effective way to leverage the adversity of the environment. High-end green

consumption may be just a cover for elite distinction (see Johnston 2008; Elliott 2013), but low-end salvaging is a way of abnegating a social status perceived as immoral through contaminating oneself with negatively coded objects.

These findings also bear on literatures examining the social construction of nature. Sociologists have largely moved beyond older nature-city binaries, convincingly showing that urban denizens can have meaningful experiences of nature even in a modern metropolis (Wachsmuth 2012; Jerolmack 2013). Some “radical constructivists” have gone further to claim that “in a fundamental sense, there is nothing *unnatural* about New York City” (Harvey 1996, p. 186; see also Heynen et al. 2006). Yet my findings remind of an important caveat: whether or not nature is “constructed” from a social scientific point of view, freegans would doubtlessly say that nature’s power as a grounding for morality stems from the fact that they perceived it as not constructed and not coming from society. Freegans, like many modern-day environmentalists and ecoconscious citizens, drew on nature as a potent, transcendent ideal, much as others might appeal to Christianity or socialism.

Urban homesteaders, gardeners, or dumpster divers are not simply “thinking” nature into existence, however. Nature is made through practice and interaction (Fine 1998; Jerolmack 2013). While these interactions are invariably shaped by social characteristics (Bell 1994; Jerolmack 2013)—freegans’ visions of nature, for example, reflected a distinctively Western and middle-class worldview—physical objects were also a key and indispensable component of these constructions. Indeed, in the absence of physical referents, freegans’ construction of the city as natural would lack credibility, both to themselves and to others. By focusing on the physical material out of which nature is made, we can understand that, while nature may be socially constructed, it is not done so effortlessly or evenly. Even if freegans’ capacity to imbue the city with natural meaning supports a constructivist viewpoint, freegans implicitly understand that rendering the city natural is more difficult than, say, doing the same to a rural farm. Further research should examine how deploying the notoriously nebulous culture code of nature is facilitated or blocked by different physical environments.

Finally, this article speaks to the resurgent sociological interest in morality. I have offered an intervention into perennial debates about how moral beliefs relate to action by arguing that, although the two are rarely perfectly in sync, a moral habitus can nonetheless draw on the challenging aspects of the environment to create a context for acting on moral motivations. I do not want to imply that achieving an affirming sense of one’s moral place is inevitable or in all cases necessary; actors—including those who, like freegans, appear to have strong moral identities—can and do live with glaring contradictions. I do, however, concur with those recent studies that suggest

that at least some actors do have an internalized moral core and do make serious, if inconsistent, efforts to live up to it. Morality should not just be studied in terms of achieving a particular and often unattainable bar of “right” but also as part of the ongoing striving for the “good” (Joas 2000, p. 168). By thinking in terms of a moral habitus, we can refocus on this striving’s generativity of new practices, the formation of moral beliefs and identities through action, and the notion that living morally can be an almost subconscious second nature. Freegans had a sense they were living naturally but rarely could explicitly explain how.

If freegans did manage to rework their physical environment in a way that gave them a sense of moral place, it came at a price. Living morally was something intrinsically desirable, yet at the same time, they recognized that morality could interfere with other things they desired, ranging from maintaining social relationships to being efficacious activists. They thus remind us that, as Durkheim ([1914] 1973, p. 152) observed, “we cannot pursue moral ends without causing a split within ourselves, without offending the instincts and the penchants that are the most deeply rooted in our bodies.” The material dimensions of morality confirm that, precisely because morality is seen as coming from things outside of ourselves, making morality second nature often comes into conflict with the “first nature” of other identities or motivations. In the end, in motivating action that transforms the world, morality often presents a barrier—perhaps a physical one—to actions that would remake the world for other reasons and to other ends.

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