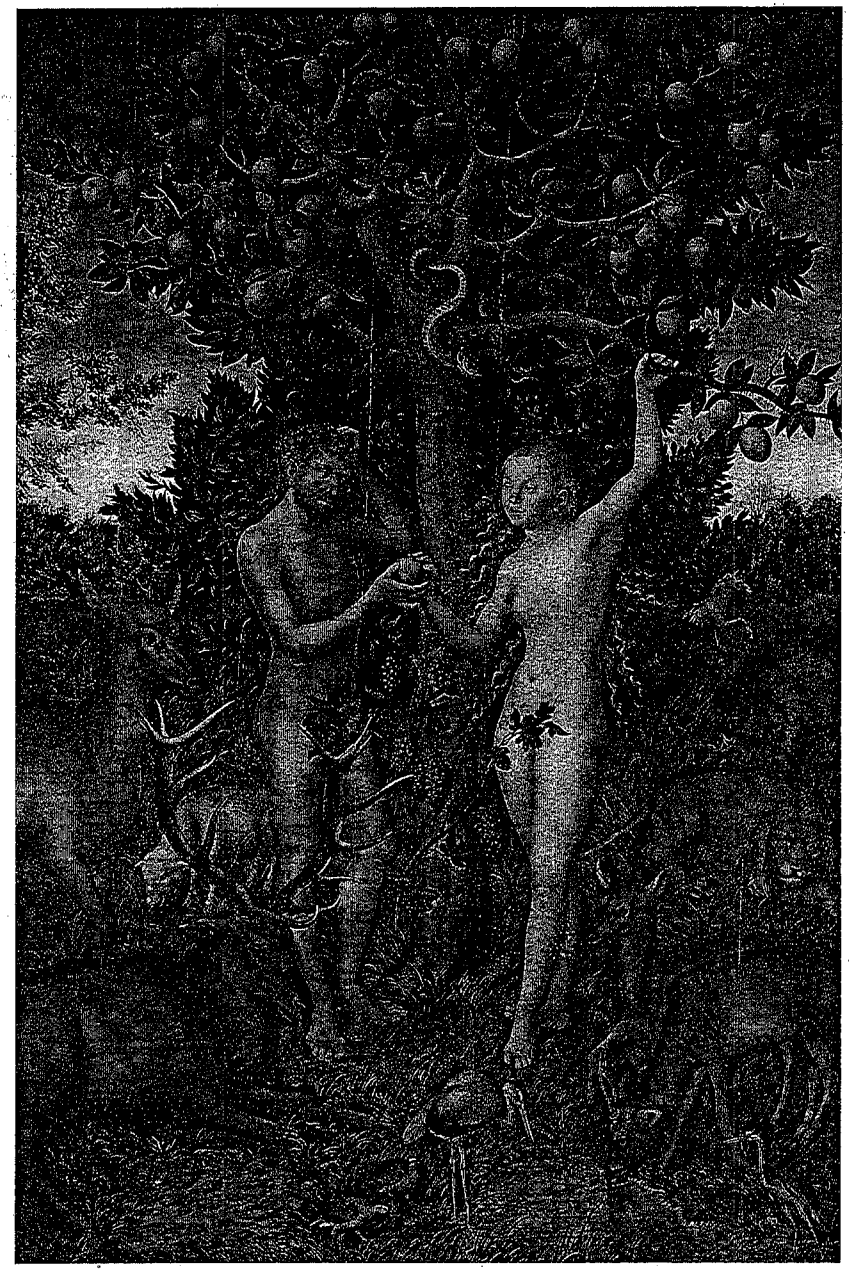

THE HUNGRY SOUL

Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature

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4

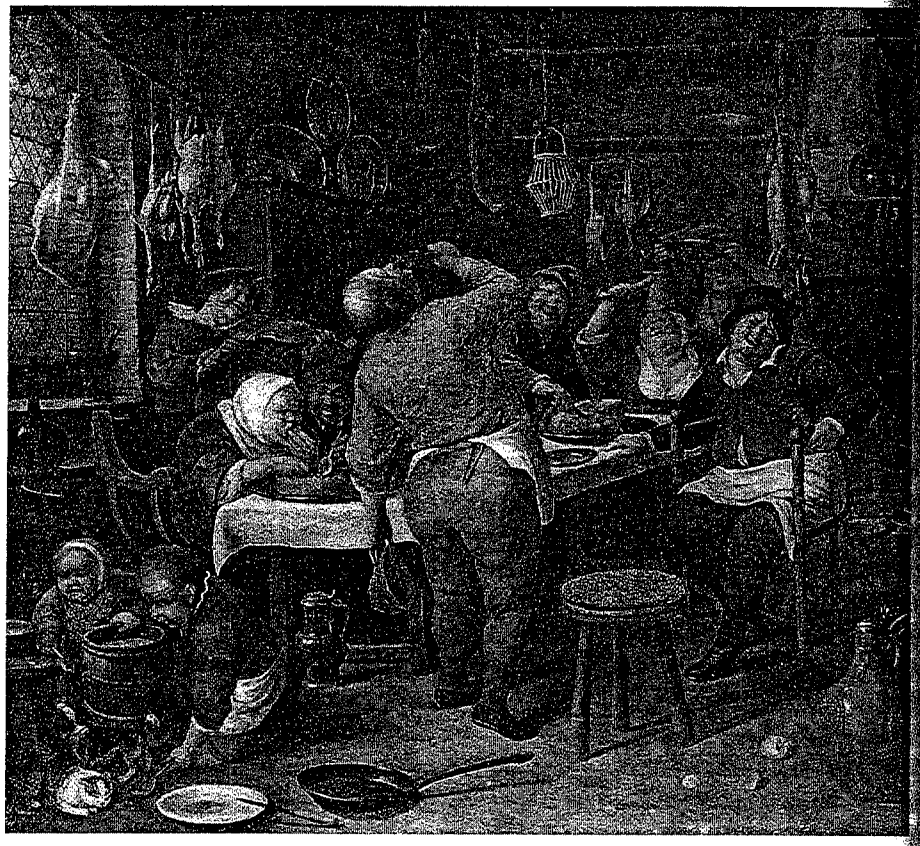
Enhancing Uprightness

Civilized Eating

Whoever eats in the street or at any public place acts like a dog.

—Talmud

(Kiddushin 40b)



The upright animal's first and most universal custom regarding eating is a taboo against eating the upright animal. Recognizing and (at least tacitly) appreciating the human form, we restrain ourselves from reducing other human beings to mere meat. Recognizing also the common neediness of all human beings—the elevated human form persists only because lowly animal necessity is met—we extend ourselves in acts of hospitality, offering food and drink to the stranger. Through these customs, negative and positive, our peculiarly human self-consciousness both restricts omnivorousness and elevates the meeting of bodily necessity in the direction and support of uprightness. Our humanity thus recognized and acknowledged, we sow the seeds of community in breaking bread together. Company (from *com-*, "together," and *panis*, "bread") comes to accompany the bread.

Precisely because human beings usually eat together, the customs of eating govern not only what human beings eat but also where, when, with whom, and especially how. The manner(s) of eating, even more than what gets eaten, expresses the humanity of the eaters, at least as they have come to understand it. Though the specifics differ markedly from one society to the next, all cultures have explicit or tacit norms governing the "how" of eating—norms that serve to define the group, ease interpersonal relations, and help civilize the human animal.

What exactly do we mean by "civilize"? And how do the customs of civility relate to our underlying nature? Though we will always be attending to these large questions as we proceed, it would be desirable, on the threshold of our discussions of civilized eating, to make these matters briefly thematic.

Civility, originally a political notion referring to the things of the citizen (Latin *civis*, "citizen"), has come to mean the social condition of being civilized. Hard to define concretely, it may be understood as the opposite of being barbarous, rustic, rude, crude, coarse, blunt, violent, bestial, disorderly, undignified, primitive, "natural," or wild. Civility comprises behavior thought to be appropriate to the everyday intercourse of civilized people: regulated bodily posture and carriage and controlled functions of eating, drinking, excretion, sleeping, and sex; ordinary courtesy, propriety, and politeness; and decorous and tactful speech and deed in all usual social relations.

Elaborating the elements of basic civility with respect to eating will be the main business of this chapter.*

Civility, though it sounds like something praiseworthy, especially when seen as the opposite of the barbarous and the bestial, is not without its critics. It has been attacked, in the name of "naturalness" and spontaneity, as being insincere, false, and arbitrary. It has been attacked, in the name of *Kultur*, as being superficial, routine, and mindless. It has been attacked, in the name of morality, as being etiquette not ethics, mere outward appearance rather than deep excellence or right. And it has been attacked, in the name of high wit and amusement, as being too concerned with our embodiment, too serious, and too much enslaved by shame. Though these criticisms are not without their force, it is my contention that they are finally wrong. Civility, while different from high culture, is not at odds with it; one can appreciate Beethoven without being a boor. Etiquette and ethics, rightly understood, are in fact continuous, partly because character is often revealed in outward display; moreover, the principles of self-command and consideration for others shown in "small manners" are of a piece with virtue and justice. Indeed civility may very well be the heart of the ethics of everyday life. Also, as we shall see, the finest wit will not be shameless, and the laughter it seeks and gets is itself a product of our cultivated and communicative embodiment; the coarse rustic is a humorless fellow.

The challenge from the side of nature and naturalness is more complicated, inasmuch as it depends on knowing whether the natural is primarily the native and uninstructed or whether it is the mature and cultivated. Here we again come close to the deepest concerns of this inquiry, the relation between custom and mores and our underlying nature. Do customs of civilized eating suppress our nature? Tame it? Deform it? Transform it? Adorn it? Perfect it? Elevate it? Or transcend it? Even if these cultural forms represent an improvement over our nature uninstructed, do they achieve it by rising above it, by realizing its immanent directions, or by lifting it above what it naturally is or suggests? Or does civility improve us by some combination of restraint and encouragement, suppression and elevation, purgation and purification? We approach the table with these questions in mind.

*My treatment of the basic manners of eating will be guided by the overall argument of the book, and I make no pretense of comprehensiveness. Many fine books exist on this subject, ranging from works on etiquette to scholarly treatises. I would like to single out for special attention a superb recent book, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, by Margaret Visser, which appeared as my own essay was nearing completion. Every topic of interest is richly covered, and with cross-cultural detail; one can learn something interesting on every page.[1]

The Table, Place of the Meal

In most parts of the world people who come together for meals take food at a table. Some tables are round or square; others are elongated, either oval or rectangular. Some are tall, others short; some are set on an elevated platform ("high table"), others in a slightly sunken hollow, with seating possible on the surrounding floor. Each of these variations has its own import and consequence for what takes place at the table; but because each is nonetheless a table—that is, each shares in this recognizable form—there is also a common theme, with a universal meaning of its own.

The table means the place of the meal. But the meal is already an advanced kind of eating, as Brillat-Savarin observed in his speculations on the origin of the pleasure of the table:

> Meals, in the sense which we attach to the word, began with the second age of man; that is to say, as soon as he ceased to live wholly on fruits [and nuts]. The dressing and apportioning of meat necessarily brought each family together, when the father distributed the produce of his hunting among his children, and later, the children, growing up, performed the same office for their aged parents.
>
> Those gatherings were at first confined to close relations, but gradually came to include friends and neighbours.
>
> Later, when the race of man was spread over the face of the earth, the weary traveller would find a place at those primitive meals, and tell his news of far-off lands: so hospitality was born, with rites held sacred by every nation; for the most savage tribe strictly bound itself to respect the life of him who had eaten of its own bread and salt.
>
> The meal may also be held responsible for the birth of languages, or at least for their elaboration, not only because it was a continually recurring cause of meetings, but also because the leisure which accompanies and succeeds the meal breeds confidence and loquacity.[2]

Having a meal at table is thus more than eating; it gives rise to "the pleasures of the table, which must be carefully distinguished from their necessary antecedent, the pleasure of eating." As Brillat-Savarin put it:

> The pleasure of eating is the actual and direct sensation of a need that is supplied.
>
> The pleasures of the table are reflex sensations, born of the various circumstances of fact, place, things, and persons attendant upon a meal.
>
> The pleasure of eating is common to ourselves and the lower animals, and depends on nothing but hunger and the means to satisfy it.
>
> The pleasures of the table are peculiar to mankind, and depend upon much antecedent care over the preparation of the meal, the choice of the place, and the selection of the guests.
>
> The pleasure of eating requires, if not hunger, at least appetite; the pleasures of the table, more often than not, are independent of the one and the other.[3]*

The civilization of eating, as we shall see, contributes much to enhancing the peculiarly human activities and pleasures of the table. But we proceed step by step, first by unpacking further the meaning of being at table.

To be at table means that one has removed oneself from business and motion and made a commitment to spend some time over one's meal. One commits oneself not only to time but also to an implicit plan of eating: We sit to eat and not just to feed, and to do so both according to a plan and with others. A decision to have a sit-down meal must precede its preparation, and the preparation is in turn guided by the particular plan that is the menu. Further, to be at table means, whether we know it or not, to make a commitment to form and formality. We agree, tacitly to be sure, to a code of conduct that does not apply when we privately raid the refrigerator or eat on the

*Brillat-Savarin continues: "Both of the two conditions may be observed at any dinner. Throughout the first course, and at the beginning of the session, each guest eats steadily, speaking not a word and deaf to anything which may be said; whatever his position in society, he frankly forgets all else but the performance of the great work. But when actual need begins to be satisfied, then the intellect awakes, talk becomes general, a new order of things is apparent, and he who hitherto was a mere consumer of food becomes a table companion of more or less charm, according to the qualities bestowed on him by the Master of all things." Though meals need not so sharply separate and sequence the two kinds of pleasures, the pleasures themselves are in their essence distinct. The interesting thing to follow is how regulating the first prepares and informs the second.

run or in our cars, or even when we munch sandwiches in front of the television with our buddies who have gathered to watch the Super Bowl. There we eat (or, more accurately, feed) side by side, as at a trough; in contrast, at table we all face not our food but one another. Thus we silently acknowledge our mutual commitment to share not only some food but also commensurate forms of commensal behavior. To be sure, the forms will vary depending on the occasion; the dinner table at home with family, the dinner table at home with guests, a banquet table at a testimonial dinner, and a picnic table in the park have different degrees and (in part) different kinds of formality, as do also the family breakfast and the family dinner. But in all cases there are forms that operate, regulate, and inform our behavior and that signify our peculiarly human way of meeting necessity.

A table, all by itself, silently conveys the beginning of this meaning. Unlike animals, most of whom feed directly off the ground, we take our food higher up. The table everywhere rises above the ground; even in Asia, where people eat lower than we do, the table is still separated from and higher than the floor.* The table's elevation is even the implicit idea in the ancient Greek word for "table," *trapeza*, thought to be derived from *tetra* + *peza*, "four-footed."

But though it is elevated, we who join it are not. We sit down to eat. The table goes with sitting (or kneeling), as opposed to both reclining and standing. In sitting down the upright creature abandons his mobility and his struggles against the larger world; he settles in, at least for awhile, to attend directly to his most basic needs. He adopts an intermediate, semiupright posture, a mean between life and lifelessness, between full wakefulness and sleep, between man and beast. Although submitting to what is necessary, the seated eater does not abandon his human attitude; even while resting himself in part from the effort to stand erect, he persists in the effort to keep his spine straight. Indeed, our aspiration to uprightness is even supported by the relatively uncomfortable character of dining room chairs (compared with "easy" living room chairs). With their help we straighten our backs, holding our upper half erect. Our lower half we both yield to nature and hide beneath the table. Only what is hu-

*Even at a picnic, which is the deliberate return to a more naturalistic, rustic, and informal mode of having a meal, a blanket (or other cloth) is spread on the ground as the symbolic equivalent of the raised table, the food is spread across the blanket, and all sit around its edges.

manly most significant do we keep in view, precisely as we meet the most elementary of animal necessities. The satyr's nether parts are kept out of sight and, we hope, out of mind. The opposite of upright conduct is conducted "under the table," the place where indiscretions tend to occur, the place where the philanderers play footsie or allow their hands to roam, the place where dogs hang out but where even small children are not supposed to go crawling around.

The Latin root of "table," *tabula*, a "board or slate," emphasizes not its legged-elevation but the hard and flat features of its surface. Any large board, horizontally placed, can become a *tabula*. Indeed in earlier times and in closer quarters a removable board (sometimes the same one used for sleeping) was set up and taken down before and after each meal (one board for both bed and board); not only the food but also the table was specially created for each dining occasion. The one large common board around which everybody sits is a symbol of the in-commonness of the activity. In fact, the table itself constitutes the individuals as a commensal (*com-*, together, + *mensa*, table) group, those who eat at table together. Those who take their food sitting or standing apart, even in the same room, are outsiders.

The table as such forms the group, but the shape of the table can both *in*form the group and express its order. Rectangular tables have two heads; fully round tables are headless. In the typical family meal, at a rectangular table, the father and mother occupy the head places; at a dinner party the host and hostess usually do, though occasionally pride of place is given to an honored guest. In both these less and more formal orderings, where one sits reveals one's relation to the order. The round table is more "egalitarian" and communal, and at least in principle more conducive to fostering a single conversation. In China, for these reasons, people formerly ate at circular tables, all sharing food from common dishes placed in the center. But this arrangement may not in fact always be the most commensal; a round table need not be very big before speech across it becomes impossible and each person's company gets reduced to two, one on either side, neither face-to-face. Curiously the more "hierarchical" rectangular table is often more compatible with greater intimacy.

The table is not only an instrument of ease and a cause of community. It is also an embodiment of human rationality, with its remarkable capacity to distinguish, to recognize, and especially to

measure. The Sanskrit root *ma*, meaning "measure," is the likely source of the Latin word *mensa*, "table," as well as of the Greek word *metron*, "measure," which in turn is related also to the Latin verb *metior, metiri, mensus sum*, "to measure" (and with the dative, "to measure out," to distribute). Table is the place where food is apportioned, measured out, and distributed. In principle, it is not only doled out, it is meted out, in a *fitting* manner. Food is not just shared, it is shared justly: As the Homeric formula puts it, "And no man's hunger was denied a fair portion."* Justice in distribution of food, unlike justice in distribution of honors, must pay primary attention to need rather than to rank or merit. And because need need not be equal, neither must the portions: "Suppose that to eat ten mina is much, and two mina is little; it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six mina; for perhaps even this will be large or small to the recipient. For Milo [a famous wrestler] this is little; for a beginner in gymnastic it is much."[4] Measured distribution, commensurate (*com-*, "with" + *mensus*, "measure") especially with need, is implicit in taking food together at table—that is, com-*mensa*-lly.

The table at which we sit is usually set. A single cloth covers the entire surface; individual place settings locate each person as a discrete participant in the shared meal, with each plate a promise of a personal portion to be received. The table itself may have other uses between meals. Its surface may be used for folding laundry, doing homework, paying bills, playing games. As mealtime approaches, however, the table is cleared of all matter unrelated to the ceremony of eating together; mail, newspapers, and scissors are removed, and the table gets set. The cloth separates eating from all other possible uses of the same table. A mark of distinction as well as of refinement, it demarcates and honors the common meal.

The principles of distinction and specialization inform also the settings of place. Multiple utensils—plates, glasses, cutlery—announce, even to the uninitiated, a more-than-one-course meal, and promise a temporal sequence. The use of utensils as such is of course mainly in the service of cleaner, neater, and more aesthetic eating—a matter to which we shall soon return. But the sanitizing

*In Homer the just king is he who knows the proper portion or share that one man gives another, the portion or share which the gods allot. The just king is therefore identical to the excellent host.

actual distance created and bridged by the utensils (the fork between hand and plate, the spoon between mouth and bowl, the knife between teeth and meat) is matched by greater psychic distance, and with it the possibilities for discriminating awareness. Indeed the plurality of tools—even if only a single knife, fork, and spoon—with their plurality of functions directly teaches also the need for attention and discrimination. The use of the various implements, our most visible activity at table, distracts both feeder and viewer from the homogenizing activity of feeding itself. More complicated than biting, chewing, and swallowing, the human and humanizing use of tools partially disguises the underlying animal necessity. For if human eating is more than feeding, and if the ordered meal encourages the discrimination of different tastes and courses, it makes sense to highlight these distinctions through the use of separate and specialized implements. Moreover, the formalized common rules governing their usage—which fork for the salad, which glass for the water—reinforce the sense of community, distinguishing those who are inside from those who are not.

The set table in the home is in fact an embodiment of the community that is the family. On special occasions, when the good china and the embroidered tablecloth are used, the family heirlooms reappear and, with them, memories of generous ancestors responsible for their existence in our midst. Even at the ordinary family dinner, the very existence of the set table, with something to be served on it, reminds everyone—especially the young—of our indebtedness to those who come before, those who are the provisioners. Being together at table thus encapsulates the meaning of being at home, where bonds born of biological necessity are celebrated and elevated by our (albeit tacit) recognition of the meaning of time and kinship and our expression of generous love and sustenance.

Basic Table Manners

Whether at home or away, whether as host or guest, being at table and eating with others obliges proper conduct. Table manners are learned first around the family table, as young children are taught by direct instruction and by example the dos and don'ts of dinner. We who are by now well habituated—and even the less mannerly among us—are almost certainly unaware of the countless rules that we unconsciously practice, each of which had to be learned. We are probably equally unaware of just how long it took the human race to articulate and institute these manners of civility.[5] A quick corrective for our ignorance on these points is available in early books on manners, whose reading show us both how much we have taken instruction and how much we needed it.

Perhaps the most famous and influential of these books was written by the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1530, near the end of his life. Entitled *De civilitate morum puerilium* (*On Good Manners for Boys*), it is a founding text for the very notion of "civility." The book is addressed to the youthful reader,[6] providing him with instruction on a wide range of topics, all of them involving "outward bodily propriety": the care and carriage of his body, dress, behavior in church, manners at table, meeting people, play, and the bedroom.[7] Fully one-third of the text concerns table manners.

To a modern reader some of what Erasmus has to say may seem obvious, in part because the conduct he seeks to restrain is crude beyond our experience. Still it reminds us that such instruction was once not only necessary but also against the then-prevailing habits. And what now seems obvious to us has become so thanks in no small part to Erasmus and his descendants. We shall consider his instructions in some detail.

There are basic rules about our physical appearance at table, first aimed at cleanliness and neatness:

> Sit not down until thou have washed but let thy [finger]nails be pared before, so that no filth stick in them, lest thou be called a sloven and a great niggard [literally "dirty knuckled"]. Remember the common saying, "Before make water," and if need require ease thy belly; and if thou be gird too strait [that is, if your belt is too tight] it is wise to unloose thy girdle [beforehand], which to do at the table is shame[ful]. . . . When thou sittest with greater men, see thy head be kemmed [combed]; lay thy cap aside, except the manner of some devotion cause thee otherwise or else some man of authority command the contrary, whom to disobey is against manners.[8]

Other rules regarding appearance concern our posture and bodily attitude, which are to be kept erect and steady, resisting the temptations to yield altogether to the downward pull of necessity:

> It is permissible for the elderly and convalescent to lean one or both elbows on the table; but this, as practiced by some affected courtiers who consider their every action elegant, is something to be avoided, not imitated. . . . Fidgeting in one's seat, shifting from side to side, gives the appearance of repeatedly breaking wind or of trying to do so. The body should, therefore, be upright and equally balanced [that is, on both buttocks].

The placement of the hands also requires instruction:

> When sitting down have both hands on the table, not clasped together, nor on the plate. It is bad manners to have one or both hands on one's belly as some do.

And again:

> Some people eat and drink without stopping not because they are hungry or thirsty but because they cannot otherwise moderate their gestures, unless they scratch their head, or pick their teeth, or gesticulate with their hands, or play with their dinner knife, or cough, or clear their throat, or spit. Such habits, even if originating in a sort of rustic shyness, have the appearance of insanity about them.

These instructions, governing the body, hardly exhaust the subject. But with even a moment's reflection they remind us of the enormous array of appearances, postures, and other movements and uses of the body that are banished from the table. The multiple possible uses of hands—like those of the body generally—are circumscribed, restricted, and rendered harmonious with the work of eating undertaken in a communal setting.

In addition to controlling our external appearance, manners seek also to control our internal appetites or, at least, their influence on our overt conduct. These customs quite directly address the matter of human voracity, especially by teaching the boy to be the master of his belly.

> Some people have scarcely seated themselves comfortably before they thrust their hands into the dishes. That is the behavior of wolves or of those who, as the proverb puts it, devour meat from the pot before the sacrifices are made. Do not be the first to touch food set on the table, not only because that convicts you of greed, but because it does, on occasion, involve danger, since someone who takes a mouthful of burning hot food without first testing it is forced either to spit it out, or, if he swallows it, to scald his gullet—in either event appearing both foolish and pitiful. Some degree of delay is necessary so that a boy becomes accustomed to controlling his appetite. With such an end in view, Socrates never let himself drink from the first wine bowl of the evening even when he was an old man. If seated with his elders, a boy should be the last to reach for his plate—and only when he has been invited to do so. It is boorish to plunge your hands into sauced dishes.

The boy must learn not only to control the demands of his belly, he must also not be enslaved to the delights of his palate:

> Nor shall you select from the entire dish as epicures do but should take whatever portion is in front of you. . . . Just as it is, therefore, a sign of intemperance to thrust your hand into every part of the dish, so it is equally impolite to turn the dish so that the choicer morsels come to you.

Erasmus also provides, as one might expect, instruction on a variety of other topics, including the proper use of utensils, the correct placement of one's cup and knife, how to receive and refuse various servings, how to carve, and how to execute various other aspects of the process of eating. Understandably much attention is paid to the workings of hands, mouth, and eyes. These customs are of special interest to us because they govern the most important bodily aspects of the upright posture. Here especially we can see how fitting customs can validate and enhance the natural promise of the upright human form.

Regulating Hands, Mouth, and Eyes

Human beings, we remind ourselves, do not bring their mouths down to their food. They lift their food to their mouths, using their hands. In Erasmus's time, well before the fork was in common use, men used their hands quite directly. ("What cannot be taken with the fingers should be taken on your plate." "If seated with his elders, a boy should not put his hands to the dish until he has been invited to do so.") But even so, suggestions were made both to make the

practice less crude ("What is offered should be taken in three fingers" [rather than with the whole hand]; "It is ridiculous to pick an eggshell clean with finger-nails or thumb. . . . the polite way is to use a small knife") and to remove the greasy results in ways unknown to animals ("To lick thy fingers greasy or to dry them upon thy clothes be both unmannerly; that must rather be done upon the board-cloth[!] or thy napkin"[W]). The natural human form, having liberated the human mouth from the need to apprehend and grasp its fodder, is now enhanced by customs that moderate and partly disguise the need even for human hands to dirty themselves with the low business of serving ingestion. Human hands are not just stuffers for the mouth; thus they must themselves not become mixed up with or clothed by the food.

This desideratum is achieved by means of the implements of eating; in the West, mainly knife, fork, and spoon; in the East, often chopsticks. The fascinating history of these utensils encapsulates the gradual progression of the civilizing process, itself tied to changes in what and where people eat and to evolving standards of feeling and disgust.[9] Cultural differences in the nature and use of implements are legion, reflecting and incorporating different sensibilities and judgments. For example, in the English manner, the fork, held in the left hand, enters the mouth with tines down, the food balanced—not impaled or "spooned"—on their rounded backs; this compels the taking of small mouthfuls, for very little can be lifted at one time, and prevents pushing the fork far into the mouth—both points of refinement. The American manner of shifting the fork to the right hand after cutting makes lifting to mouth easier, but being more cumbersome, slows down the process; moreover, it means that only one hand (the right) does any work and that the knife cannot be brandished while food is being put into the mouth—likewise points of refinement. Yet these differences are small variations atop some larger underlying generalities.

Utensils are, in the first place, useful, as the name implies. Solid food needs to be cut, grasped during cutting, and then lifted to the mouth; before personal forks came into common use, lifting was done with the knife (or fingers). Lifting liquids requires a small-cupped container with a handle, the spoon. But the main benefit of the implements is that they get food to mouth neatly and cleanly,

without dirtying or greasing the fingers (and face). The concern here is more aesthetic than hygienic; it was clearly expressed as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before the appearance of the personal fork:

> It is *very impolite* to touch anything greasy, a sauce or syrup, etc., with your fingers, apart from the fact that it obliges you to commit two or three more *improper* acts. One is to wipe your hand frequently on your serviette and to soil it like a kitchen cloth, so that those who see you wipe your mouth with it feel nauseated. Another is to wipe your fingers on your bread, which again is very *improper*. And the third is to lick them, which is the height of *impropriety*.[10]

In the West it was the spread of the personal fork that solved the distasteful problem of dirty fingers. The Italians and Spaniards in the seventeenth century began furnishing each diner with his own small fork; the English ridiculed the practice for years before grudgingly accepting it.

> The fork revolution did not . . . present the world with an utterly strange new instrument; what did constitute an important change in the West was the spread of the use of forks, their eventual adoption by all the diners, and their use not only to hold food still while it was cut, but to carry it into people's mouths.[11]

In the use of the knife, correlative changes over recent centuries have been governed mainly by considerations other than utility, neatness, and a concern to avoid ugly or disgusting appearance. The instrument of violence, used both in killing and severing, it has undergone changes in shape and sharpness that render it less dangerous. First the double-edged knife was reduced to single-edged, the point was rounded off, and finally even the cutting edge of the table knife was deliberately dulled: Margaret Visser reports that "according to Tallement des Réaux, Richelieu was responsible for the rounding-off of the points on table-knife blades in France in 1669, apparently to prevent their use as toothpicks, but probably also to discourage assassinations at meals. It became illegal for cutlers to make pointed dinner knives or for innkeepers to lay them on their tables."[12]

More important, the use of the knife came increasingly under the rule of strong taboos. These taboos further reduce the already small

risk of actual bodily harm, but they function mainly symbolically, to hide altogether the violent possibilities of the knife. Whereas in the Middle Ages the sharp dagger-knife was lifted to mouth, today one must never put even the dull table knife to mouth. Norbert Elias gives a plausible explanation:

> The caution required in using a knife results not only from the rational consideration that one might cut or harm oneself, but above all from the emotion aroused by the sight or the idea of a knife pointed at one's own face. . . . [I]t is the general memory of and association with death and danger, it is the *symbolic* meaning of the instrument that leads, with the advancing internal pacification of society, to the preponderance of feelings of displeasure at the sight of it, and to the limitation and final exclusion of its use in society. The mere sight of a knife pointed at the face arouses fear: "Bear not your knife toward your face, for therein lies much dread." This is the emotional basis of the powerful taboo of a later phase, which forbids the lifting of the knife to the mouth.[13]

Margaret Visser adds that the horror we feel when we see people pointing a knife at themselves is less a fear of actual danger, and more the worry that people will relax the relatively new rule against using knives to deliver food to mouth, the silent fear that knife lifting will make a comeback.[14]

Other taboos reinforce the retreat of the knife: One does not use it on fish; one may not cut a potato, boiled egg, or other round objects; one must not keep it in one's hand when it is not in use; where possible, one should cut with the side of the fork. In none of these is the purpose health, cleanliness, or the reduction of danger. Rather it is to continue to augment, through symbolic deeds, the psychic distance between human eating and the violent destruction that all eating—especially meat eating—necessarily entails.

The retreat of the knife parallels major shifts in the manner in which meat is served at table. Again from Elias:

> In the upper class of medieval society, the dead animal or large parts of it are often brought whole to the table. Not only whole fish and whole birds (sometimes with their feathers) but also whole rabbits, lambs, and quarters of veal appear on the table, not to mention the larger venison or the pigs and oxen roasted on the spit. The animal is carved on the table.[15]

As manners begin to soften during the succeeding centuries, whole animals are no longer brought to or carved at the table (save at rare "olde style" dinners on holidays like Thanksgiving). Carving is done behind the scenes. The animal form is so altered in preparation of the meat dish that one cannot recognize when it is served what its animal origin was—or sometimes even that it *had* an animal origin. Our tastes keep us carnivorous, but our practice shows that we are not proud of the fact. Many cultures have sought, in the civilizing process, "to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be 'animal.' They likewise suppress such characteristics in their food."[16]

The Chinese and Japanese have advanced this process farther than the West. The knife has for centuries been utterly banished from the table. All foods, including meat, are precut into bite-size pieces. Chopsticks make for—and celebrate—small mouthfuls. The distance from the violent knife and the grasping hands couldn't be greater. To many Chinese even refined Western habits appear uncivilized: "Europeans are barbarians: they eat with swords." Yet the principles of distance and delicacy fulfilled by the Chinese and Japanese customs are the same ones that have been slowly at work in the West, at least since the Renaissance.

As might be expected, the regulation of eating itself is carried mainly by rules concerning the mouth. Returning now to Erasmus, we find that graphic unflattering comparisons—with animals or thieves or choking men—bear the rhetorical burden of persuasion. Here are some choice examples (with my italics added):

- To gnaw bones is *for a dog*; good manners require them to be picked with a small knife.
- To lick a plate or dish to which some sugar or sweet substance has adhered *is for cats*, not for people.
- Some devour rather than eat their food, just like those who, as the saying goes, are shortly to be marched off to prison. Such gorging should be left *to brigands*.
- Some stuff so much at one time into their mouth that their cheeks swell like a *pair of bellows*.
- Some in eating slubber up their meat like *swine*. (W)
- Some snuff and snort in the nose for greediness, as though *they were choked*. (W)

These various rules proscribe improper use of the teeth (gnawing), tongue (licking), and cheeks (stuffing), as well as improper modes of swallowing (without chewing), chewing noisily (slubbering), and breathing while eating (snuffing and snorting). Taken together they made a singular teaching: Eat inconspicuously and like a human being. We are urged to eat self-consciously, affirming in our manner of eating that we are—and know that we are—different from animals and different also from those deformed human beings who cannot or will not live in human society.

Even in eating, we remember that the organ of eating has a more peculiarly human function: speaking. An act of speaking should not be "contaminated" with food: "It is neither polite nor safe to drink or speak with one's mouth full." Those to whom we speak should not be showered with particles of food; neither should they be compelled to witness our half-chewed food. Yet, at the same time, because eating itself is private, human eating together requires speech: "Continuous eating should be interrupted now and again with stories." Without conversation the belly rules the mouth, and the table becomes no different from a trough.

It is shared speech, even more than the shared food, that makes a community of diners. Bread can be shared only partially: Each person's share is not shared with others, and any portion eaten by me diminishes what is left for you. True, that each person will get his share creates a shared atmosphere of comfort and ease: Because each one's need can be satisfied without fear of attack, guards are lowered and intimacy becomes more possible. But it is really only speech that can be shared in full. Indeed, each person's portion of the conversation is enriched by others' taking part. In the course of privately restoring the (necessarily private) body with food, the soul keeps its head erect, taking and giving nourishment in conversation. This deep insight into who and what we are informs these elementary rules about eating and speaking. As we shall see in the next chapter, they invite the question of whether the common meal is not finally better understood—to overstate the point—as an "excuse" for conversation.

Yet the rational animal, when at table, does not forget his animality. Though filled with conversation, the meal is not a philosophical seminar or a scientific investigation. Because the participants eat as well as speak, the attitude of the speakers cannot be one of detached beholding, and certainly not toward one another. For these reasons humanized eating means also regulating the use of our eyes. Our eyes, windows through which we can gaze on the world with wonder and curiosity, cannot be indulged at table. Shame dictates the main rule: Do not watch others eat. Again Erasmus:

> It is bad manners to let your eyes roam around observing what each person is eating, and it is impolite to stare intently at one of the guests. It is even worse to look shiftily out of the corner of your eye at those on the same side of the table; and it is the worst possible form to turn your head right around to see what is happening at another table.

Because eating, even when conducted in public, remains in essence a private or intimate matter, it is governed by "protective shame," which enables us to meet our needs and to manifest our incompleteness without corrosive self-consciousness. Paradoxically, eating with others enables us to draw attention away from our neediness and from the power that hunger exercises over us. Having company in meeting necessity permits selective inattention to the brute fact of necessity. But when we see others staring at our food—or at our biting and chewing—we cannot hide from ourselves both that we are feeding ourselves and also what it means—including our enslavement to appetite and our submission to the largely involuntary acts of biting, chewing, and swallowing.

But the rules against staring are meant not only to hide ugly or embarrassing conduct. They are meant to protect the immediacy of our *social* activity against objectification. As Erwin Straus has noted: "All looking and being looked at is a lapse from immediate communication. This is demonstrated in everyday life by our annoyance and irritation at being observed."[17] Here again manners come to the aid of protective shame, that mysterious power of the soul that stands guard over immediate and open participation in life:

> The secret that shame protects is not, however, as prudery makes the mistake of believing, one that is already in existence and only needs to be hidden from outsiders, for those who are in becoming are also hidden from themselves. Their existence is first made explicit in their shared immediate becoming.[18]

Commensal friends, in a way not unlike lovers, seek the half light of mannerly eating and silence about its merely physiological side, in order to be able to commune intimately—immediately, unselfconsciously, directly—over the sharing of food. The curtain of invisibility shame drops between ourselves as detached beholders and ourselves as engaged participants is destroyed when we are stared at. We are then compelled to look at ourselves, and at ourselves *eating*.

What we would not have done to us we ought not do to others. Gazing and staring at other eaters objectifies their conduct. We cease to regard them as fellow companions; we come to see them as isolated *Fresser*. In gazing and staring we remove ourselves psychically from the community of human animals humanly meeting animal necessity and adopt the vantage point of voyeur,* or, at best, of disinterested observer, from which we look down on these lesser creatures caught in the act of stuffing their mouths. To do so furtively, say, while hiding behind one's drinking glass, is one of the worst violations of propriety: "To look aside when thou drinkest is a rude manner and like as storks to wry the neck backward. (W)" The shameless viewing of Olympian detachment, like the shameful *fressen* of subhuman animals, is absolutely out of place at table.

Just as detached looking is out of place at table, so eating is out of place in public, except at those public occasions explicitly convened to include it (like public festivals) or in those public places set aside for eating (like restaurants or picnic areas). A man eating as he walks down the street eats in the face of all passersby, who must then either avert their gaze or observe him objectifiedly in the act. Worst of all from this point of view are those more uncivilized forms of eating, like licking an ice-cream cone—a catlike activity that has been made acceptable in informal America but that still offends those who know why eating in public is offensive.

I fear that I may by this remark lose the sympathy of many readers, people who will condescendingly regard as quaint or even priggish the (not-only-Talmudic) view that eating in the street is for

*"The behavior of the voyeur is not an inherently meaningful surrender to fate, like that of lovers [and, I would add, of eaters]. . . . The voyeur reveals, in his objectifying attitude and in his furtive entry into the Other's most intimate experience, the antithesis of two modes of being—the public mode and that of immediate being."[19]

dogs. Modern America's rising tide of informality has already washed out many long-standing customs—their reasons long before forgotten—that served well to regulate the boundary between public and private; and in many quarters complete shamelessness is treated as proof of genuine liberation from the allegedly arbitrary constraints of manners. To cite one small but telling example: yawning with uncovered mouth. Not just the uneducated rustic but children of the cultural elite are now regularly seen yawning openly in public (not so much brazenly or forgetfully as indifferently and "naturally"), unaware that it is an embarrassment to human self-command to be caught in the grip of involuntary bodily movements (like sneezing, belching, and hiccuping and even the involuntary bodily display of embarrassment itself, blushing). But eating on the street—even when undertaken, say, because one is between appointments and has no other time to eat—displays in fact precisely such lack of self-control: It betokens enslavement to the belly. Hunger must be sated now; it cannot wait. Though the walking street eater still moves in the direction of his vision, he shows himself as a being led by his appetites. Lacking utensils for cutting and lifting to mouth, he will often be seen using his teeth for tearing off chewable portions, just like any animal. Eating on the run does not even allow the human way of enjoying one's food, for it is more like simple fueling; it is hard to savor or even to know what one is eating when the main point is to hurriedly fill the belly, now running on empty. This doglike feeding, if one must engage in it, ought to be kept from public view, where, even if *we* feel no shame, others are compelled to witness our shameful behavior.

To a lesser extent the same problem sometimes arises even with civilized dining in designated public places, say at sidewalk cafés or even for those eating at a window table in a restaurant—a truth recognizable when we consider our discomfort when a passerby presses his face to the window to see who's there or what they are eating. Beyond our annoyance at the uninvited intrusion into "our space," we are uneasy lifting food to mouth when we are stared at. The gaze of any stranger makes us self-conscious; putting our eating before his eyes makes him self-conscious. Uninvited to share our food, he is forced into one-way, voyeuristic "participation,"

in which he sees not human eating but animal feeding. At best we share nothing but embarrassment at this involuntary meeting over intimate things.*

"Let Mirth Be with Thee"

Also out of place at table is the display of emotions or conduct that would interfere with the enjoyment of the meal. Erasmus's very first rule regarding manners at table concerns the matter of mood and its display: "At table let mirth be with thee, let ribaldry be exiled. . . . When thou wipest thy hands put forth of thy mind all grief, for at table it becometh not to be sad nor to make others sad. (W)" Similarly, one ought to govern one's tongue: "Nothing should be blurted out at table that might diminish mirth. It is wrong to defame the character of those not present; nor should one's personal sorrow be unburdened to another on such an occasion." It is also antisocial to retreat into oneself, for whatever reason:

> It is impolite to sit at table rapt in thought. You may, however, observe some people so withdrawn into their private thoughts that they neither hear what others are saying nor are aware that they are eating, and if you call them by name they give the appearance of being roused from sleep—so completely absorbed are they in the dishes.

Any conduct that arouses fear or worry, sadness or pity, anger or disgrace, or even any conduct that conspicuously draws attention to itself, "diminishes mirth" and threatens the merriment of the meal.

Yet precisely because there is oft merriment at table, especially when men's tongues are loosened with drink, there is need for forbearance and discretion: "It is bad taste for anyone, but much

*Even seemingly innocent public eating and drinking can violate tacit social relations, if they are out of joint with time, place, or the spirit of the occasion. I was brought to self-consciousness in these matters some twenty years ago by the late Simon Kaplan, a much-beloved, kind, gentle, witty, and deeply wise Russian-born-and-bred tutor at St. John's College. As I was taking a cookie and cup of coffee from the brief reception into the Conversation Room for the question period that followed the weekly Friday-night formal lecture (many students and tutors did as I did), Mr. Kaplan stopped me and asked: "Mister Kass, do you think it right, when a man who comes to us from out of town to present a lecture based upon many years of study, that we should sit in front of him and eat and drink in his face?" I stopped the practice on the spot. On similar grounds I do not allow eating or drinking in my classes (all roundtable discussion seminars), save for reasons of medical necessity or when, on a rare occasion, students want to celebrate the end of a class by distributing cookies or brownies to the entire class. Why should those who come to the sanctuary of the classroom, a place governed by shared speech in search of truth, be compelled to participate in their colleagues' ingestions and chewings? (The reader may now discover for himself why as youngsters we were admonished not to chew gum in class.)

more so for a boy, to gossip about an indiscretion of word or deed someone has committed when in his cups." The intimacy of the meal and the shame that protects exposure extend not only to the activity of feeding but to everything that arises around it. Because the occasion is free and open, because guards are down, because speech is tentative and playful, because what is said is tied to the occasion and to those present, the entire meal is like a sacred rite, wrapped in mystery and guarded in secrecy: "It is a reproach, as Horace said, to blow abroad what someone lets slip at dinner, without thinking. Whatsoever be done or said there should be lapped up in the cloth. (W)" What is said at table stays at table.

Though one should be most exacting regarding one's own conduct, one must be tolerant and liberal regarding the faults of others: "Finally, if someone through inexperience commit some *faux pas*, it should be politely passed over rather than mocked [other translation: "It should be dissimulated rather than had in derision" (W)]. One should feel at ease during a party." It is more unmannerly than unmannerly eating to shame a fellow eater.

The Why of Table Manners

The basic civilizing manners propounded by Erasmus more than 450 years ago are, needless to say, hardly the last word in table manners—though few if any of his teachings have been rendered passé. Indeed the additional refinements added over the centuries are by and large further elaborations of the basic goals and principles that inform the rules we have so far surveyed.

True, part of the purpose of at least some of the rules is good health. One might choke if one speaks or drinks while chewing food. One can scald one's esophagus by hastily gulping hot food. But we should distinguish, as Erasmus does, between what is unwholesome and what is unmannerly, between what is healthy and what is seemly

and proper.* What, then, is the point and purpose of the seemly and the mannerly?

To begin with, good table manners show consideration for the comfort and pleasure of one's fellow diners. Slovenly and noisy eating are annoying; greasy chins and filthy hands are painful to see; belching and spitting are revolting; obscene speech and raucous laughter are disturbing; most generally, all forms of animal-like *fressen* inspire disgust. Dis*gust*ing speech or behavior, quite literally, causes others to lose their taste (Latin *gustus*) for food; in the extreme case it causes them even to feel nausea at the sight of food. Table manners, in the first instance, function to prevent disgust in others, to avoid every occurrence that could interfere with their delight in the meal. This goal can be simply formulated: to repeat, No involuntary participation in someone else's digestion.

Manners not only prevent disgust. Along with the other customs of the table—including what is eaten, where, when, and with whom—manners also promote community. In shared rituals of eating, as in all its other customs, the community defines itself and sets forth its own peculiar way. Because the taking of meals is the most common and regular social occasion, the manners of eating, though observed quietly and without fanfare, are among the most powerful communal forms. Tacitly but deeply, subtly but surely, they mark us and make us feel at home among our own, producing also the considerable pleasures of familiarity and repetition. Though superficial in fact, they are deep in meaning. As symbols, they carry our group's sensibilities and attitudes—about life, necessity, violence, dignity, and our human place in the world. Amending slightly Brillat-Savarin's famous aphorism, "Tell me what [*and how*] you eat: I will tell you what [*and who*] you are."[20]

Table manners also serve the individual diners. To begin with they facilitate eating, despite the demands they make upon our actions and appetites. They render habitual the entire process of taking food, thus routinizing what would otherwise be a matter for repeated conscious yet unguided decision. Should we find ourselves at table in a strange land, with vastly different customs, our enjoyment

*Here is one clear instance of such a distinction: "To begin a meal with drinking is the hallmark of a drunkard who drinks not from need but from habit. Such a practice is not only *morally degrading* but also *injurious to bodily health*." (italics added).

of the meal will be compromised because we do not know how to behave, because we must consciously attend to matters that, at home, have become second nature. Yet even at home there can be embarrassments when the reliable forms fail: Consider, for example, the dilemma we face when our food cannot be cut because we lack a sharp-enough knife. The removal of the need for decision making regarding the process permits each diner the freedom to enjoy both his food and his companions. His mind, freed from self-attention and the business of getting food properly to mouth, can be given over to savoring tastes, swapping stories, and enjoying the occasion.

Table manners, like civility in general, far from constraining the immediacy and intimacy of life, help make them possible. For the human meal is an intimate gathering. Though we sit at table face to face and are, in a sense, on view to others, we neither feel nor act the way we do in public. In the public sphere, we perform a specified role and display ourselves accordingly, always (at least tacitly) with a view to how we will be regarded. But our intimate person remains concealed by our public figure, and others participate in our lives only as observers or fellow performers—nonmutually, noncommittally, nonimmediately. Only in nonpublic being together do we get a respite from public performance, an opportunity to become who we are on our way to becoming, a chance to open and reveal ourselves to others because they too seek mutual and immediate participation. The family meal especially is such an intimate gathering, but so generally are meals shared with friends. On these occasions mannerly eating, though it constitutes "good behavior," is in fact a shield against corrosive self-attention and objectification. Manners, having become second nature, keep both us and our companions from becoming so self-conscious about our behavior that we objectify ourselves (or them) and our surroundings. If we eat unobtrusively, and our partners do too, no one will even notice that food is being cut, lifted to mouth, chewed, or swallowed. No one will notice that he or she is in the midst of a conversation. No one will notice that he or she is immediately and directly enjoying a genuine experience of real life and the world. Such open and participatory relations with the world and with others depend absolutely on a kind of self-forgetting that civility, including mannerly eating, makes possible.

Yet manners are not only useful for life, they are also ennobling. Despite differences from one culture to the next, table manners

everywhere effect a certain beautification of the eater, as he displays himself to be above enslavement to his appetites. An activity that is inherently ugly is beautified by graceful deed and tactful speech. An activity that is violent and destructive is tamed by gentle manner that keeps its destructive character mostly out of sight. An activity that deforms and dissolves living forms is given a form-ality of its own by the work of the human intellect. Given psychic distance from animal *fressen* by the work of manners, intellect and aesthetic imagination are free to play. Ever mindful of discrete and different forms, human reason flourishes especially in the making and the appreciating of distinctions. The pleasures that accompany observing and discriminating—of flavors, spices, aromas, textures, appearances, implements, courses, gestures, speeches, stories, and manners—are themselves no small part of the higher pleasures of the table. Both aesthetically and intellectually satisfying, mannerly eating—like the habit of hospitality—is our peculiarly human way of dignifying and gracing necessity, and also ourselves. These civilizing customs are tailor made to fit and reveal the human form and to nourish the hungry soul.

The Virtue of Eating

The foregoing remarks suggest that mannerly eating is not only socially useful, say, in expressing communal norms and promoting group identity or in protecting the immediacy of communal experience. It can also be an expression of our personal humanity, indeed, of excellence or virtue. As in other matters the social setting becomes a stage on which individuals display their characters, virtuous or not. The common meal is such a stage, and the relevant virtues and vices are well known, even if little discussed these days. The first and cardinal virtue of the table is temperance or moderation.

In Benjamin Franklin's list of virtues, a list he prepared for his "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection," the first virtue mentioned altogether is temperance. Franklin's precept for temperance: "Eat not to dullness, drink not to elevation." Temperance tempers appetites mainly by limiting quantity. Counseling against excess, Franklin urges moderation in food and drink, but not, it seems, as an end in itself. Excess eating makes the mind dull,

whereas too much to drink lifts one altogether out of one's right mind. As he does with all the moral virtues, Franklin gives temperance a purely utilitarian defense. Temperance stands first among the virtues because "it tends to procure that Coolness and Clearness of Head, which is so necessary where constant Vigilance was to be kept up, and Guard maintained, against the unremitting Attraction of ancient Habits, and the Force of perpetual Temptations."[21] Temperance helps keep the mind sharp while the body is being tended. Though of primary importance, it is not desirable or attractive in itself.*

If we look, however, to premodern thinkers, the virtue regarding eating and drinking is seen not only as useful but also as good in itself. For example, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, it is part of moderation (*sophrosyne*)—the keynote, as it were, of all of Aristotle's ethical teaching; for Aristotle everywhere treats moral virtue as a mean between two vices and regards virtue as the habit of finding and taking the mean or the fitting, the just right thing to do here and now. The virtue of moderation, according to Aristotle, is displayed most prominently with respect to certain bodily pleasures, namely those tactile pleasures man shares with the animals, the pleasures of eating, drinking, and sex.

> Moderation, then, and profligacy [or "self-indulgence"; *akolasia*, literally, "unrestrainedness," "unchastenedness"] are about such pleasures in which also the other animals share, whence they [the pleasures] seem slavish and bestial, and these are touch and taste. But they seem to involve taste slightly or not at all; for judging flavors is the concern of taste, which the wine-tasters do and those who prepare savoury foods. But they do not rejoice exactly in these things [flavors], or at least not the self-indulgent ones, but in the enjoyment of the object, all of which comes from touch, both in food and drink and in the things called aphrodisiac. Wherefore someone, who was a gourmand, prayed for his throat to be longer than a crane's, as taking pleasure in touch. . . . To rejoice in such things and to love them most of all is beast-like.[22]

*The utility of temperance is made even clearer by the sequel: "This [that is, temperance] being acquir'd and establish'd, *Silence* would be more easy, and my Desire being to gain Knowledge at the same time that I improv'd in Virtue, and considering that in Conversation it was obtain'd rather by the use of the Ears than of the Tongue, and therefore wishing to break a Habit I was getting into of Prattling, Punning, and Joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling Company, I gave *Silence* the second Place."

As necessitous animals human beings share in the urgent animal needs and desires and enjoy the pleasures that accompany their satisfaction. But as human beings our excellence and its opposite turn on the question: Will the human being rule or be ruled by his basic animal desires?

The desire for nourishment is natural (both inborn and fitting), necessary, and, universal; the desire for this or that particular food is usually acquired, gratuitous, and particular—in some cases, even idiosyncratic. It is a rare fellow who puts chocolate sauce on his vegetables or ketchup in his cereal. Regarding the common, natural desire for nourishment, Aristotle observes, the usual error is toward excess in quantity: "For to eat whatever happens to be around or to drink until one is overfull is to exceed the natural in amount; for natural desire is for filling-up the need [or "lack"]. Therefore these are called 'greedy-bellies' [gluttons], since they fill it beyond what is right [or "necessary"]. The overly slavish become like these." But regarding the peculiar pleasures and desires, "Many err and in many ways; for when people are called lovers-of-such-and-such, it is either for delighting in what one ought not, or by rejoicing more than or as the many do, or not as one ought." The self-indulgent man is led by his bodily desires, preferring these to all other pleasures, and experiencing pain when he does not promptly get what he desires.

Opposite to the self-indulgent man would be the man who takes no pleasure in his food. But, as Aristotle observes, such a type barely occurs, "for such insensibility (*anaisthesia*) is not human. . . . [I]f for someone there is nothing pleasant, and one thing does not differ from another, he would be far from being a human being."

The moderate or virtuous man is, as the name implies, neither profligate nor ascetic, neither self-indulgent nor self-denying. The necessary pleasures he enjoys measuredly and as one ought, and the nonnecessary ones similarly, if they are not unhealthy, ignoble, or extravagant:

> Insofar as there are pleasures that conduce toward health and fitness, these he reaches for moderately and as one ought; and he reaches for the other pleasures if they do not impede health and fitness or *are not contrary to the noble* or beyond his means. . . . For he loves such pleasures not more than their worth and as right reason would say.[23]

Aristotle's moderate man is concerned with health and fitness, and also with his purse, both threatened by self-indulgence. But he is, unlike Benjamin Franklin or the merely calculating man, centrally concerned with *nobility*: "Thus, it is necessary in the moderate man for the desiring-power to harmonize (*symphonein*) with reason (*logos*). For the *target of both is the noble*; and the moderate man desires what one ought and as one ought and when, and thus also as *logos* directs."[24] Unlike the calculatingly measured man, who curbs his appetites only to stay trim or to save money, the virtuously moderate man will not be a boor at table. He will avoid forcing his digestive processes on others and will not display a lack of self-control over his appetites. Understanding the difference between eating and feeding, he desires and displays in manner the human way of meeting bodily necessity. He eats and drinks at the proper place and time—for example, not at the theater or in the law courts or in the classroom, or, for that matter, walking down the street. These things he will do or avoid not only or mainly in order to avoid giving offense to others; rather he is moved by a desire to attain or share in "the noble" for himself.

The word translated "noble" is, in Greek, *kalon*—beautiful, fine, splendid, noble—in German, *schön*. It is, to begin with, an aesthetic notion; as captured for ethics it implies a beautiful outward display in deed of a beautiful or well ordered soul within. This display is no mere appearance; neither is the conduct merely *in external conformity* with what is seemly. As with any manifestation of genuine excellence, it is done willingly and knowingly, not gritting one's teeth but with pleasure, and precisely in order to do what is beautiful because one loves it. Connoisseurs of nobility can tell the real thing when they see it.

An example may convince the skeptic. Have you ever watched a gracious and tactful hostess with a handicapped guest? It is relatively easy to describe the principle that should guide her conduct: Be helpful without causing embarrassment. But it is extraordinarily difficult to put the principle into beautiful practice. Yet if you have seen it done, you immediately recognize both the beauty of the deed and, at the same time, the grace, tact, sensitivity, perspicacity, and love of the gracious in the doer herself. Without the last, the deed itself could not be flawlessly done.

What, then, would it mean to attain and manifest nobility in the rather lowly matter of eating?

Possible answers have already been given: Negatively, eat so as to display that you are not a slave to your appetites; positively, eat like a human being, not like an animal. Freedom and distance seem centrally involved. An animal in the grip of hunger is entirely focused on the object promising satisfaction. It is incapable of taking other relations into account. With the important exception of parents feeding the young, there is no animal analogue of civility regarding eating: It is, so to speak, every "man" (dog) for himself, or, better, every desire for itself. Only after hunger is satisfied are certain social rituals (for example, grooming) restored, only after eating is the social order reestablished. Human beings, in contrast, because they are self-conscious of the power and meaning of hunger, do not—except in extreme circumstances—simply yield to it. While eating we maintain some at least partial distance between our desire and its objects, enough so that we do not become solely absorbed in them. We remain open to fellow feeders, to conversation, to a larger horizon. We maintain our sense of community through habits of civility; our conduct reveals that we remain simultaneously aware of ourselves as intellectual and social, not merely physical, beings. Moderation keeps us free from enslavement to desire and free for receptivity and responsiveness.

It is tempting to suggest that nobility consists in "rising above" or "transcending" our animality, through acts of what one might call "self-levitation." Like the ballerina who "defies" gravity, so the graceful eater "defies" neediness and eats as if he were not compelled to do so. But the ballerina does not so much defy as exploit gravity. Similarly, also, the moderate and graceful human eater exploits animal necessity. He shapes a virtue out of necessity. The animal need to eat and the animal processes of eating become material for the display and enhancement of the human form.

Everything that is ours due to our animality is nevertheless different in us (than in animals) precisely because we are not merely or simply animals, incapable of understanding animal necessity, incapable of departing however slightly from fixed instinct. Our peculiarly human form of animality thus always provides an arena in which we can display our difference. "Nobility" is not so much a

transcendence of animality as it is the turning of animality into its peculiarly human and regulated form. "Beautiful" eating shows off the human difference: Violence done to the food is banished or suppressed; bodily attitude is regulated; appetite is controlled and in harmony with what is reasonable; tastes are savored; eyes and mind are not wholly submerged in putting food into mouth and remain open to the world around us; order and form preside at table; consideration for others is strictly observed; and, at best, a certain grace adorns all our movements. We show off the human difference—we manifest what it means to be upright.

However, while a perfection of our nature, mannerly eating is not, in another sense, natural to us. That is, it is neither inborn nor automatically acquired. On the contrary, it must be taught, by precept and example, and it must be learned through habituation. Moreover, the shaping of the appetites for food and drink requires instruction that often seems to go against the grain—unlike, say, teaching children to speak or young birds to fly. Many a reprimand—for example, "Chew with your mouth closed," "Use your napkin," "Don't reach," or "Don't stare"—is needed before the little human animals are fit company at the dinner table:

> For little children also [that is, in addition to the self-indulgent ones] live according to desire and especially large in them is the appetite for pleasure. If, then, it will not be obedient and beneath the ruler, it will grow great. For the appetite for the pleasant is insatiable and indiscriminate in a mindless being, and the *activity* of desire increases the inborn tendency. If the desires grow great and strong, they can even knock out the power of reasoning.[25]

However, being in themselves indiscriminate and unformed, the desires take direction. If given proper direction—*no* direction being, of course, also a direction, namely, toward self-indulgence—the desires can become focused, pruned, reasonable, and even amenable to seeking satisfaction in a gracious manner, and all without great turbulence in the soul: "Therefore it is necessary for them [the appetites] to be measured and few, and never opposed to *logos*—for such we call obedient and restrained—and, just as the child should live according to the command of his tutor, so all the desiring-power should live according to *logos*."[26] Though chastisement and restraint

are necessary adjuncts in the habituation of appetite and the cultivation of manners, the image of tutor educating child strongly suggests that violence is not being done to human nature. On the contrary, as growing up means movement from childishness to maturity, from (relative) mindlessness to (greater) reasonableness, so our infantile and childish desires grow up, under tutelage and through habituation, to bear the form of what is reasonable. In the best case, reason and desire will sound with one voice, and the conduct displayed—even in eating—will partake of harmony and grace.

Such beauty need not require the eye of a beholder. The gentleman or lady who is fully self-conscious takes aesthetic pleasure in enacting and appreciating his or her own nobility. Even when dining alone, and—let me push the point—even were he or she the last human being on earth eating the last meal, the virtuous human being would cover and set the table, use the implements properly, and would chew noiselessly with mouth closed. He or she would announce, by such self-presentation, that nobility, though it had to be acquired, is nonetheless the natural garb of the truly upright animal.

5

Freedom, Friendship, and Philosophy

From Eating to Dining

Beasts feed: man eats: the man of intellect alone knows how to eat.

—Brillat-Savarin

salt (found, won, collected and efficiently transported) together cover the field: they represent man as Farmer, patiently and wisely nurturing his crops, but also as Hunter, Scientist, Adventurer, and Organizer."

16. *The Bacchae* of Euripides is the classic treatment of this problem.

Chapter 4. Enhancing Uprightness: Civilized Eating

1. Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).
2. Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, p. 132.
3. Ibid., pp. 132–133.
4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b1–5.
5. For a superb exploration of the history of this process, rich in concrete detail, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, especially vol. 1, *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
6. It is dedicated to an eleven-year-old boy of high birth, "The Most Noble Henry of Burgundy, Youth of Outstanding Promise and Son of Adolph, Prince of Veere."
7. The book was an instant success, with at least twelve editions in 1530 alone. English, German, French, and Czech translations appeared within the decade. As early as 1534, it was being introduced in England as a schoolbook for the education of boys. At least until the nineteenth century, it was the most widely read of Erasmus's works; more than 130 editions are known. A modern English translation by Brian McGregor is in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 25 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).
8. This passage is quoted from the 16th-century Whittington English translation, in order to give the more graphic flavor of the original. Hereafter I will quote mainly from the McGregor translation, except in a few places where the more archaic usage captures the point better (marked [W]).
9. See the discussions in Elias, *The History of Manners* and Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, to which my own presentation is indebted.
10. From Antoine de Courtin, *Nouveau traité de civilité* (1672), quoted in Elias, *The History of Manners*, p. 92; italics added.
11. Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, p. 189.
12. Ibid., p. 187.
13. Elias, *The History of Manners*, p. 123.
14. Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, p. 186.
15. Elias, *The History of Manners*, p. 118.
16. Ibid., p. 120.
17. Erwin Straus, "Shame as a Historiological Problem," in *Phenomenological Psychology*, pp. 217–223; quotation at 219. This profound little paper makes clear how shame is natural to man, central to human existence, and indispensable for happiness.
18. Ibid., pp. 222–223.

19. Ibid., p. 220.
20. Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, aphorism 4, p. 1.
21. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, introduction and notes by R. Jackson Wilson (New York: Modern Library, 1981), p. 106.
22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1118a23–b5.
23. Ibid., 1119a11–21; italics added.
24. Ibid., 1119b15–18; italics added.
25. Ibid., 1119b6–11.
26. Ibid., 1119b11–15.

Chapter 5. Freedom, Friendship, and Philosophy: From Eating to Dining

1. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 102.
2. Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (New York: Warner, 1983), p. 492.
3. See, for example, Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101:61–81, 1972. See also such works of Claude Lévi-Strauss as *The Raw and the Cooked* and *The Origin of Table Manners*.
4. Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide*, p. 481.
5. Ibid., pp. 165–166. Miss Manners clearly disapproves of such practices.
6. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, pp. 10–11. As Franklin makes clear in many other passages in *The Autobiography*, he was in fact hardly indifferent to what he ate. See, for example, the famous story about how he abandoned vegetarianism, pp. 41–42.
7. Aristides, "Merely Anecdotal," *American Scholar*, Spring 1992, pp. 167–176, at p. 170. This essay—written by a master story-teller and conversationalist—is altogether a marvelous appreciation of the nature and worth of anecdotes.
8. Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage books, 1988), p. 16.
9. Ibid., p. 23.
10. Ibid., p. 25.
11. Ibid., pp. 26–27.
12. Ibid., p. 6.
13. Ibid., p. 33.
14. Ibid., pp. 30–31.
15. Ibid., p. 35.
16. Ibid., p. 36.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 38.
19. Ibid., p. 39.
20. Ibid., pp. 40–41.
21. Ibid., p. 41.