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Mens et Mensa: A Philosophico - Theological Reflection

Chit Chat Club

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Human beings have been eating and drinking together from the origins of the species: the anthropological evidences of earliest human habitation always includes the remnants of primitive repasts, animal bones around burnt out fires, surrounded by crude tools, presumably the cutlery of the cavemen. Remarkably, the evidence of philosophizing are also present, as in the caves of Lasceaux and Altamira, where mystic animals are pursued by magical men - images that we may presume lifted up the minds of primitive humans from the real dangers and urgent necessities of their lives to the imagination of its possibilities, which is, of course, the activity of philosophy. This juncture of eating together and philosophizing together or, to be less pretentious, talking seriously together at table is the theme of this essay.

I will develop my theme by inviting you to three dinner parties, each of them occuring at dominant epochs of our culture, and then reflecting with you upon the different forms and styles of the setting and the conversation. It is impossible to draw any firm conclusions from this tour of tables, but, by being briefly a guest at them, we may gleam some general appreciation of the way in which our culture has conceived the relation between eating and talking, between nutrient of body and soul, - or, to be a bit flippant - between vittles and values - and, really in the long run, how our

culture has conceived the relation between each of us to each other.

I first invite you to join me, in the company of a certain Aristodemus and his better known friend, Socrates, as they stroll to the house of Agathon for a supper and an evening of conversation.

[Read from Plato, Symposium, sections 174-177, 211-212, 223]

We have been guests, although only intermittant ones, at the most famous "drinking party" in the history of our culture. We know now that the drinking was restrained, but more because of hangovers than temperance, and that, while restrained, it went on throughout the night, until the wonderous Socrates was discoursing to a room of sleeping and drowsy companions. However, at the apogee of his great discourse on love, all were certainly alert and attentive: they were hearing, if not understanding, the most sublime of speeches. That speech mentions food and drink only in passing, yet even that brief mention illuminates the Greek philosopher's point--and it is a point that has persevered in our culture. Recall that the seer Diotima tells Socrates that, if he were living the "life above all others, the contemplation of beauty absolute," he would be content "to converse with fair maids and boys without meat and drink, if that were possible."

What is the philosopher's meaning? Scholars have long sought to explicate it, indeed, one modern philosopher said, "all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato." This, then, is my footnote

to that sentence from Plato's Symposium. He was telling his contemporaries, and us, that all love, all appreciation, is a striving to perceive the perfect, a perfect which is always beyond the present and the immediate. The handsome youth, the lovely girl, the faithful friend, the amusing companion, the delicious dinner, the elegant wine are but mental glimpses of the absolute and perfect ideal, the Beautiful and the Good. If that were not so, Plato suggests, we could never know better from worse, good from bad. Thus, when we enjoy or appreciate, we necessarily see beyond the present and the immediate. Indeed, we look beyond the singular and the particular, for all single and particular enjoyments and pleasures are caught up, brought together, untied in the Universal Perfect and Good.

Even if we turn from the sublime subject of Socrates' discourse, the nature of love, to the nature of the food and drink served at Agathon's table, the same truth must be told. Undoubtedly, the table bore a delecately seasoned lamb, perfectly spiced eggplant and lentils, stuffed grapeleaves, and many flasks of retsina were poured. The guests might have exclaimed, "o telaie fagate", "perfect dinner," but, of course, it was not and even their own Greek language betrayed them, for the word "telaios" "perfect," comes from telos, the goal, the ideal, the ultimate, to be striven for, rarely reached and never reached by the many but only by the few.

This philosophy is perennial in us. We seek and, in seeking, pass through many pleasures and enjoyments and amusements, all of them real, but none of them final. We can relish a fine meal, but

the relishing is but a taste of the ideal; we can savor a rich Bordeaux or a fresh Chardonnay, but, in savoring, we catch the fleeting palate of Perfection beyond all partially perfect. Even the common acts of taking nutrition and fluids needed to sustain bodily vitality are, in their essence, glimpses of the Ideal. This is the message of Plato's Symposium for this symposium.

But note, at the end of the Symposium, only Socrates is wide awake. His companions have dropped into sleep, their minds lulled by the wine, of course, but even more, their minds surpassed by the soaring of Socrates' mind. For remember, despite his own reticence to admit it, he was held, by his disciples, to have reached the vision of the Perfect and the Good. His ability to reveal every answer to every question as but partial and unfinished, was the proof that he had, alone among his contemporaries, made the voyage into the realm of the Ideal and returned with a wisdom that, as his friend Alcibiades said during the symposium, "amazes and possesses the souls of every man, woman and child who comes within hearing of your words."

I invite you now to a very different meal. We traverse the centuries, from Athens, in the fifth before the Common Era, to a great Benedictine monastery near Aosta, in the most northern reaches of the Piedmont, in the middle of the 14th century of the Christian Era. This monastery, unnamed because of the terrible events which Dom Adso of Melk saw there when only a novice, will stand for all the monasteries, great and small, that grew on

European soil and made that soil fertile during the Middle Ages. We enter the Great Refectory of the Monastery.

[Read from Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose, pp 93-94]

How far we have come from Agathon's house; there the guests reclined at table, heads crowned with garlands, conversing about love and beauty; here the monks sit on long wooden benches, their heads hidden under drawn cowls. They sit in silence, although the Abbott's table dispenses itself liberally from the Rule, and listen to a brother read from a holy book, while they eat their meal "not effete, but substantial." A dinner of roast pork is served and a wine, perhaps the crude ancestor of today's Barolo, best wine of the region, is poured. But we cannot tell the real difference between the portico of Agathon and the refectory of this Benedictine Monastery unless we listen to the reading from the pulpit

[Read from Augustine, City of God, Book XXII, ch. xxx]

In those sublime words from another of the greatest figures of our civilization, St. Augustine, we hear of the attainment of perfection, but now perfection has a name, God, and personal attributes, loving, compassionate, merciful, just. However, an incredible revolution has taken place—a literal revolution, "a turning around", for this Perfect Being, All Merciful, All Loving, Ever Just, gives self to human creatures, enobles these creatures

by the gift of divine salvation, even of divine being. This is the Christian doctrine of Grace: Almighty God freely gives to all humans love and mercy and justice. Grace comes literally from the Latin, "gratia" and the Greek "charis" which means a favor, a gift freely given, as well as the gratitude of the one who receives it.

So, we have heard the Abbott begin the monastic meal with "grace." "Benedicite," he says, "Let us bless," and the monks, respond with a verse from Psalm 22, "edent pauperes et tu das illis escam in tempore opportuno, "The poor shall eat and you shall give them food at the opportune time." The monks' dinner—whether coarse bread fresh baked, legumes, barley soup and beer on most occasions and the roast pork, vegetables with olive oil and wine on the occasion of the visit of William of Baskerville and Adso, was received as gratia, a favor, a gift of the God who bestows food at the opportune time. Indeed, all the world was a gift of the All Powerful and humans live/ in this gift as those who must use it rightly and cherish it deeply; they must always give thanks, say "grace." They live under the motto of St Paul, "whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, you do all for the glory of God."

A revolution, indeed: in the Greek world, the good things of the earth were reflections of the Perfect, the Ideal: they revealed it in part, but were to be transcended, the mind must move beyond them to see beauty, "without meat and drink," as Diotima said to Socrates. Very few humans, the few true philosophers, were able to pass through the images of present reality to the Beauty beyond all particular beauties. The world of the Greek philosophers was a world of ideals and of elites. The common mind lived in the

darkness of the cave, as Plato described in his great dialogue, The Republic; only the rare mind lived in the light of Truth and Beauty.

In the Christian world, much of this is still true. Creation is but a reflection of the Beauty of the Creator; men dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. But the Perfect Goodness, Mercy and Justice is Grace, given freely to all, regardless of sharpness of intellect—the common mind need only acknowledge and recieve the Goodness of God. Thus, the cowelled monks, sitting in the drafty refectory of the great abbey, came from peasant huts, shepherds' hovels, merchants' town houses and dukes' castles. It made no difference: all were equal before their Lord and all heard and believed in the Gospel of Grace. Thus, they sat in silence, listening to the Holy Word, which spoke to them, while the Greek symposiasts engaged in vigorous debate; yet out of the silence of the monks came the ability to converse with each other as free and equal humans; out of the debate of the Greeks emerged the rare mind that could outdistance all others. How different the lessons from these two dinners.

I invite you to a third dinner. We shall visit it very briefly and only to note how the world of the Greeks and the world of the medieval Christians has evolved into our own. The transition came in that period called the Renaissance; our invitation takes us into the great hall of a duke ruling in that same part of Italy where the monastery we have just visited was located. The dinner is described for us by the Italian author and patriot, Alessandro Manzoni, in his novel of the 17th century, The Betrothed. He

describes the visit of the good friar,Fra Christoforo, to the Castle of Duke Rodrigo, to plead the cause of two of the Duke's subjects.

[read from Manzoni, The Betrothed, p.57]

This dinner is a show of power. The Duke sits in his panelled hall, hung with rich tapestries, roasts of pork and lamb and beef, platters of the delicious San Pietro fish from Lago di Como, uccelli, spitted little birds, rice newly imported from the East, and the array of oriental spices, the pastas, now thoroughly Italian, but brought not many years hence from China, perhaps even the novel tomatos and potatos from the New World,all this rich food and the attendant splendid wines, have created, as says the doctor, a banquet better than those of Helioglabus, gourmand unparalled of Rome. Yet note that each guest is carefully placed in order of power and servitude, each speaks only in the words of servility proper to his place. The good Friar sits quietly in the corner, awaiting his turn to address the Duke.

We are present at a show of power and prestige. No longer do humans strive with the Greeks toward the Perfect and the Ideal; they sit in ranks, servile and obedient. No longer is their food gift from the All Generous God, but the Duke's provender displayed and dispensed to engender obedient servility. No longer are all equal in worth, but distinct in position and power. This third dinner also reveals a revolution: it is in the show, not the reality, that value lies. He who presents himself most

magnificently is indeed the best. It is not what he is in himself, not how closely he realizes the ideal being, not what he is as he comes from the beneficent hand of the creator: it is what he shows himself to be, how he appears to the world, that constitutes his being.

I think of this as the transition to our age, for we no longer attend to the reality of things but to their appearances, as if they were the reality. We no longer strive after the Ideal and the Perfect, as we glimpse it in the particular. We no longer revere the world and all its creatures as gift for which grace is to be given. Rather, the good and the desirable is what appears so or what advertising and publicity can make so. The food and drink at Agathon's table and on the refectory board were real, because they were participations in Being Itself, as Plato would say, or gifts of God, who is Existence Itself, as Augustine would say. But food and drink in our culture has been debased by the Renaissance show: it is never for itself, for its own sake, but always for something else:

In conclusion, I call your attention to three other dinners, to which I would not think of inviting you. These three reveal how far we have come from Greek Ideal and Christian Grace, how througly appearance and show has shruken reality. First, think of grabbing a Big Mac at the new McDonalds in the Piazza d'Espagna, across from the Spanish Steps, beneath the towering Trinita di Monte, adjacent to the house in which John Keats died. In the Eternal City now stands the symbol of disponability. Regardless of what we think of fast food, its metaphysical defect is how totally it repudiates any

striving after the ideal: all is produced according to formula, the faster the better. It is a fiction of true food; it is the appearance of eating, indeed, it is designed to be ingested while walking, rather than reclining or sitting, in discourse or in silence. It is neither Ideal nor Grace, nor gracious. Another dinner to which I would not dare to invite you would be one of those innumerable "political" or "benefit" or "fundraising" dinners, attended by unwilling diners, dining on inedible food. Here we play at dining, for we are not there to eat and converse, not to appreciate and think deeply, but for an entirely different purpose, to raise money or cull votes. While not ignoble purposes, why disguise them as a "banquet"? Why serve a menu of spurious elegance? Why substitute stilted speeches for eloquent words and subtle dialectic? This is all appearance, not reality. Finally, I would certainly not invite you to the ghoulish feeding in many a nursing home, where debilitated, comotose persons having fats and lipids and protein supplements instilled into them by tube. These substances sustain organic life, but will never be the substratum for ideas and ideals. Their recipients will never say grace or give thanks or appreciate graciousness. What favor are we doing them, what grace bestowing? Is it not unreality to even describe this as "feeding the patient"?

Are not these all mere show, sheer appearance, in which the food and drink has no human meaning, contributes not to any vision, reveals no divine generosity? The purpose of our club, as we and my predecessors conceive it is to share food and drink as food for thought, nourishment for body and soul together, to understand the reality and the ideality of

the acts of eating and drinking and thinking and talking together. Mens and mensa, the mind and the table, are together on these Monday nights: the reflection and the refreshment of soul and body. We meet and dine in the philosophical and theological company of our friends, the spirits of our past colleagues and under the shadow of Plato and Augustine and so many others, like Sam Johnson, who sat down to table and lifted up their mind.