

FROM THE EDITORS

ENCOUNTERS AT THE TABLE

It would be difficult to imagine experiencing joy together with others without meeting them at the table, without food, emotions, and thoughts sharing, in a word, without a feast. In human culture (perhaps through all the ages and among all the peoples of the earth¹), the concept of a banquet is so closely connected to that of happiness shared by a community that the former has become the center of religious life. The life of Christians revolves around the Eucharistic table, while the feast, a symbol of eternal beatitude and the Messianic Age, is an expression not only of the beatitude in which human beings have been promised to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven, but also of the joy—which transcends the limits of our sensitivity and imagination—of God inviting us to the banquet; since in Christianity, the host of the feast of the blessed is ultimately God himself who desires community with man (see Lk 22:15).

In the first place, however, a shared meal is a vital part of daily life, of our ordinary relationships, and reveals satisfaction (or, at times, dissatisfaction and difficulties) in our being together. Meals are elements of a “network” created by repeating (one might say: forever) the gestures and activities which support human, and thus contingent, beings through their existence in time. As long as such activities are possible, it seems that “all is well.” To refer again to the images drawn from the Gospel, one might say that after the overwhelming moments of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection, the meal shared by Jesus with the apostles was a sign of the return to normality. When meeting his disciples in Galilee, at the Lake of Tiberias, Jesus prepared breakfast for them (“When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread”; Jn 21:9), encouraged them to eat (see Jn 21:12), handed them bread and fish (see Jn 21:13), as if reestablishing the rituals of the everyday life they once shared, and helped them rebuild strained relationships (see Jn 21:15).

Meals, especially these eaten together with others, may be considered as situations particularly revealing about the human ontological condition, the

¹ See Dorothea F O r s t n e r, *Die Welt der christlichen Symbole*, s.v. “Das Mahl der Seligen” (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1986), 309.

human mode of existence as living, sentient and, at the same time, rational beings, able to create—on the basis of what is natural—a complex system of relationships and meanings, i.e., capable of creating communities and cultures. At the table, it appears, this ability is expressed by actual sustaining our “biological” existence, shared meals being also a source of various, sensual and, at the same time, intellectual pleasures.²

Actually, despite being both sources and expressions of joy, our encounters at the table, whether we share a simple meal or attend a sumptuous feast, make us acutely aware of the fact that our time is not the Messianic time—when “the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid” (Is 11:6). So the description, well known from *The Nicomachean Ethics*, of a temperate man who is guided by reason (“such pleasures as conduce to health and fitness he will try to obtain in a moderate and right degree”³ and “only cares for them as right principle enjoins”⁴) remains but a characterization of an ideal; however respected such an ideal might be, it seems undisputed that Western civilization is dominated by immoderate consumption. In addition, instead of signifying the joy of encounter and celebration of the gifts of nature and creations of culture, meals may be manifestations of human hubris, insensitivity, or even cruelty and cynicism. It is from history that we learn about incidents when the food served was deliberately poisoned, about blatant abuses of the good inherent both in the concept of food as such and in the gesture of food offering or meal sharing.

Nowadays, different aspects of food have become objects of an increased interest in both public debate and scholarly reflection, while universities include multidisciplinary food studies (combining research in such areas as philosophy, social science, psychology, history and history of art, cultural anthropology, and economics) in their curricula. In the context of the discussions that currently seem to gain momentum, it is the ethical themes that stand out as particularly significant. Occasionally, the recognition of the importance of food-related issues is even considered as an opportunity for a cultural—or moral—awakening. “Our ‘Eureka’ moment arrives with this question: can we, will we, start eating as if our world depends on it? If you doubt it, just pick

² In this context, the following observation by Aristotle appears interesting: “Men erring on the side of deficiency as regards pleasures and taking less than a proper amount of enjoyment in them, scarcely occur; such insensibility is not human. Indeed, even the lower animals discriminate in food, and like some kinds and not others; and if there be a creature that finds nothing pleasant, and sees no difference between one thing and another, it must be very far removed from humanity.” Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3, 1119 a, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1956), 181f.

³ Ibidem, 182.

⁴ Ibidem.

up a newspaper. Many of society's most profound challenges could benefit from a better understanding of our food ways, from how we select it, grow it, distribute it, eat it, and ruminate on it to, ultimately, how we assign meaning to it."⁵

The above quotation comes from the foreword by Odessa Piper (who, incidentally, is a chef and a restaurant owner) to the book *Food and Philosophy: Eat, Think, and Be Merry*. The editors of the book have set themselves a goal to encourage the public not only to eat well, but also to engage in philosophical reflection over food⁶, and may have well succeeded as the book delights the reader with its lightness, a playful (and sometimes ironic) tone, and a diversity and abundance of compelling ideas. The intention of the editors seems, however, serious; the process of philosophical thinking they hope to initiate can lead to a discovery of truth and the good. In fact, *Food and Philosophy* brings to mind Plato's *Symposium*, where the most exalted ideas, which have proved also the most foundational to European culture, were expressed with irony and humor by the participants of a long and lavish banquet.⁷ Piper, who believes that "an abundant accumulation of countless small solutions could demonstrate how humanity might yet sustain its place within the Earth's communities of life,"⁸ seems to confirm this serious intention.

Numerous publications on food issues, however, do not have so cheerful a character and instead evoke the horror of the situation in which the human beings (together with their environment, and particularly with the animals around them) have found themselves, driven by their lust which they satisfy in sophisticated ways using their reason and creativity. Evidence of the dramatic condition of the modern times can be found even in encyclopedia entries, such as Tyler Doggett's article "Moral Vegetarianism", published in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which opens with an unsettling, if laconic, explanation why some vegetarians believe the latter practice is morally wrong.⁹ Similarly, Lori Gruen and Robert C. Jones, in their paper *Veganism as an Aspiration*, state explicitly: "Despite wanting it to be otherwise, vegan or not, we cannot live and avoid killing,"¹⁰ adding that "human beings are always

⁵ Odessa Piper, "Foreword," in *Food and Philosophy: Eat, Think, and Be Merry*, edited by Fritz Allhoff and Dave More (Malden–Oxford–Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), viii.

⁶ See Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe, *Setting the Table: An Introduction to Food & Philosophy*, in *Food and Philosophy*, 3, 10.

⁷ See Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by M. C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ Piper, "Foreword," ix.

⁹ See Tyler Doggett, "Moral Vegetarianism", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), edited by E. N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=vegetarianism>.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 157.

entangled in violence and killing, but there are different responses to these complex entanglements.”¹¹ As one of possible positive responses the authors indicate a morally motivated veganism, understood as an aspiration or a goal; this is the attitude of a person who adopts “a type of practice, a process of doing the best ... to minimize violence, domination, and exploitation.”¹² They distinguish such an attitude from veganism seen as a lifestyle or identity, which they assess critically (and somewhat ironically): “Often the idea of veganism is accompanied by a sense that those practicing it have achieved a kind of ethical purity. Once one adopts a vegan lifestyle, she then has ‘clean hands’ and may carry on her consumerism with a clear conscience, since no animals were harmed in the production of her vegan consumer goods.”¹³ In contrast, the practice Gruen and Jones advocate does not lead to this kind of complacency or moral myopia, but makes it possible for humans to better understand their place in reality (and act upon that understanding): “To aspire to be vegan is not to deny ecological entanglement, but to suggest a reconceptualization of animals in their living bodies as fellow creatures with whom we can be in empathetic relationship and for whom we must have deeper respect”¹⁴.

Having argued for aspirational veganism, Gruen and Jones oppose the view that, given the global and systemic character of evil related to the production and consumption of animal products, following such a practice is pointless. In this context, the authors refer to what may seem obvious, namely, to the power of example, by citing the phenomenon of social contagion which consists in that “an action of a particular type makes another action of that type more likely.”¹⁵

It seems that the arguments offered by the American philosophers are universal. In a matter-of-fact manner and without referring to any particular philosophical or theological tradition, make the reader face their *conditio humana* in which doing the good one wants (or preventing evil) not infrequently proves impossible. Through these arguments they not only recommend a particular form of practice (actually, by minimizing violence, domination, and exploitation, the practice of veganism is supposed to include concern also for human beings and their relationships), but also make a general plea for an individual, and yet shared, moral effort, undertaken in defiance of the inevitability of evil.

¹¹ Ibidem, 164.

¹² Ibidem, 156. Gruen and Jones do not address the issue of abstaining from meat and other animal products consumption on the ground of health (which, however, may also have an ethical aspect).

¹³ Ibidem, 155. The authors briefly mention other types of veganism, yet they do not describe them in detail or engage in a discussion about them (see ibidem, note 2).

¹⁴ Ibidem, 163.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 168.

The essence of that effort was once expressed by an ancient Greek tragedian in the words of his probably most famous character: “My nature’s not to join in hate but to join in love.”¹⁶ Perhaps if we persist in the effort, our encounters at the table, our small and great feasts, shall be transformed into joyous celebration of our being together.

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¹⁶ S o p h o c l e s, *Antigone*, translated by Reginald Gibbons and Charles Segal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 76.